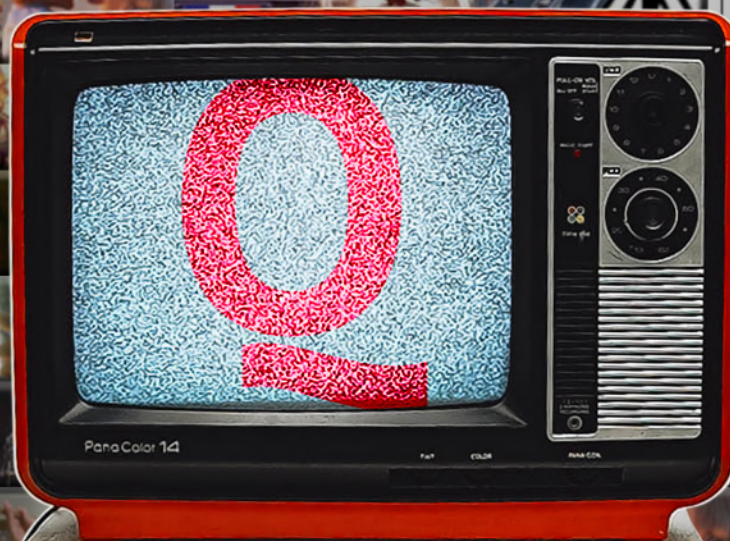


SYNOPTIQUE

An Online Journal of Film and Moving Image Studies



EDITION 5
2004

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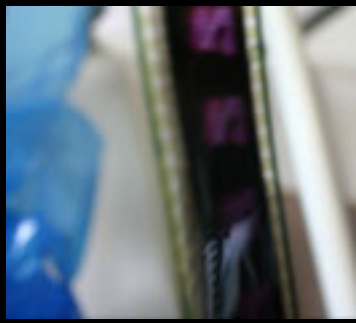
Synoptique 5 :: Published November 1st, 2004.

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Layout by Janos Sitar.

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ARCHIVES



SYNOPTIQUE : : The Journal of Film and Film Studies

This is a journal about film and its communities. It was founded in late 2003 by Masters students at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada. These two online journals are a part of *Synoptique's* immediate community:



Nouvelles vues sur le cinéma québécois
edited by Bruno Cornéliier presents
its summer-autumn 2004 edition on *Sexe, sexualité et nationalité*



OFFSCREEN is the English companion publication to the wildly successful French journal *Hors Champs*. It is heroically maintained by part-time Concordia Faculty member Donato Totaro. The latest edition is dedicated to Janet Leigh.

Synoptique is able to
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CONTACT US

If you have questions, or would like to submit material to *Synoptique* e-mail Shawna Plischke.

To send us press releases, publicity material, community postings, or any other relevant information, please contact our assignment editor Jon Doyle.

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About Synoptique:

We've been thinking about life and art and the education that links them. And the critic who sets the bait for the artist to rise to. And the artist inarticulate about his or her own work. The scholar lost in abstraction. The moviegoer re-circulating glib opinions. The filmmaker railing against bad films. The bad films. Film Studies—a name for an academic discipline—is already a self-reflexive past time. Let's extend Film Studies to include an entire range of activity related to film, of which our academic procedures are an important part, but not the only part, and in no way hermetic. It is our intention to make sensible to those looking that there are connections here—historical, personal, coincidental—and that these connections account for a film community, and it is only with the frame of a film community that we can think about film. And its education.

We wanted to create an online resource of student work at Concordia. For students at Concordia. To give expression to the intellectual character of M.A. Film Studies at this University by publishing what was rapidly becoming a lost history of ideas. Students work here for two years, take classes, write theses, go on their way, leave faint traces, might never take a stand or apportion an opinion. We wanted to discover what tradition we had inherited, what debates we were continuing, which debates we weren't inventing. But what began as a way to provide a continuity of ideas between years for Concordia M.A. Film Studies students, has been expanded to recognize the play of influence and the fluidity of thought as it accounts for a discourse that links our classrooms to Montreal, and Montreal to the world. So that we might recognize again these ideas if we should pass them by. So that we might see what we missed or took for granted when we thought they were ours.

To publish—to publish self-reflexively—work related to the theme of a University course, for example, to publish again on an old familiar topic, is not simply to revisit one more time New German Cinema or Canadian Documentary. It is to admit to one more defining characteristic of the ideas now in circulation. The good ideas and the bad. It is to think about those ideas now in play. It is to reveal historical tenor. As our online archive of such themes develops—as more is published from the active thinking communities in Concordia, Montreal, and the world—these ideas will cease to be clearly delimited, and will instead be reworked and re-imagined across all sorts of social and intellectual scapes. And it is in the acts of meeting these ideas again that we become responsive to the synoptic character of the intellectual games we play. Those lines of thought should be teased out. Film Studies, like any intellectual discipline, is reconsidered every moment. It is, by itself, an object of detailed study. We are endeavouring to make it our object of study. There are practical considerations when taking on such an investigation: a responsive world to discover and find place in.

We want to establish a context. We want to make sensible a context within which these ideas won't be lost, where they can be found, breached, and their physiognomies compared. So this task becomes once removed from archaeology. This is commentary on chains of insights, some familiar, some decaying, some life altering, some devastating. On a lifetime of education. Not a series of explicit investigations—not just that—but a resource where ideas influence ideas through clandestine channels. Ideas influence life and lives influence idea. It shows the chemical palettes where colours in proximity do not just mix to create new shades but are reactive, explosive, transformative: are not in service of any single picture, but are the spectacular elements of a long-standing community long-standing in flux. The professors, the experts, the professionals, the thinkers that have made decisions to teach certain things and in certain ways, the students that chose to follow leads, reject others, see some films and not others, read some books but not others, find their way, realize all of the myriad ways that their taste and sensibility has developed... this is education. This long process of education. We've been thinking about the polyphony of educations in these communities. The desire to get better. How art and life make sense.

en français:

Nous avons réfléchi à la vie, à l'art et à l'éducation qui les lie. À l'artiste ne sachant pas s'exprimer sur son propre travail, mordant à l'appât tendu par le critique. Au chercheur perdu dans l'abstrait, au cinéophile retransmettant des opinions trop faciles. Au cinéaste s'en prenant aux mauvais films. Aux mauvais films. Les études cinématographiques – désignation d'une discipline académique – est déjà un passe-temps auto réflexif. Étendons sa définition pour y inclure un éventail complet d'activités reliées au cinéma, dont nos méthodes académiques constituent une partie importante, mais pas la seule et ce, en aucune manière hermétique. Notre intention est de faire prendre conscience à nos lecteurs du fait qu'il existe des liens historiques, personnels et fortuits. Ces liens justifient une communauté de cinéphiles et c'est uniquement à l'intérieur du cadre de celle-ci que nous pouvons réfléchir sur le cinéma. Sur son apprentissage.

Nous avons voulu créer une ressource en ligne du travail étudiant à Concordia, pour les étudiants de Concordia. Pour laisser s'exprimer le caractère intellectuel des études cinématographiques au niveau de la maîtrise, en publiant ce qui devenait rapidement une histoire perdue des idées. Les étudiants travaillent au département depuis deux ans, suivent des cours, rédigent des mémoires, poursuivent leur chemin, mais laissent des traces minimes, ils pourraient même ne jamais prendre position ou partager une opinion. Nous avons voulu découvrir de quelle tradition nous avons héritée, quels débats nous poursuivons, quelles discussions ne venaient pas de nous. Mais ce qui semblait annoncer une manière d'assurer une continuité d'idées à travers les ans s'est étendu jusqu'à une reconnaissance du jeu d'influence et de la fluidité d'une pensée telle, qu'elle justifiait un discours liant nos classes à Montréal, et Montréal à l'univers. De sorte que nous puissions reconnaître encore ces idées, si nous devions les transmettre. De sorte que nous voyions ce que nous avions manqué ou pris pour acquis, lorsque nous pensions que ces idées étaient nôtres.

Publier – publier avec auto-réflexivité – un travail relié au thème d'un cours universitaire ou s'exprimer encore une fois sur un vieux sujet familier, ne consiste pas simplement à revisiter une fois de plus le nouveau cinéma allemand ou le documentaire canadien; c'est admettre une caractéristique définitoire de plus aux idées déjà en circulation. Les mauvaises idées et les bonnes. C'est penser aux idées présentement à l'œuvre. C'est révéler la teneur historique. Attendu que nos archives en ligne sur de tels thèmes se développent – proportionnellement aux nouvelles publications des communautés pensantes de l'Université de Concordia, de l'Université de Montréal et de partout dans le monde –, ces idées cesseront d'être clairement délimitées et seront plutôt retravaillées et réimaginées à travers toutes sortes de champs d'études sociales et intellectuelles. C'est dans le but de rencontrer à nouveau ces idées que nous devenons réceptifs au caractère synoptique des joutes intellectuelles auxquelles nous jouons. Ces lignes de pensées doivent être démêlées. Comme n'importe quelle discipline intellectuelle, les études cinématographiques se doivent d'être constamment reconsidérées. Elles forment l'objet d'une étude détaillée sur laquelle nous aspirons à travailler. Des considérations d'ordre pratique se posent afin d'entreprendre de telles études : elles résident dans un univers réceptif à découvrir et dans lequel nous cherchons notre place.

Nous désirons établir un contexte. Nous désirons créer un contexte judicieux où ces idées ne seront pas perdues, où nous pourrions les trouver, où elles pourront être transgressées et leurs physiognomies comparées. De sorte qu'un jour cette tâche puisse s'évader du domaine de l'archéologie. Faire du commentaire sur des enchaînements d'idées, certaines familières ou en déclin, d'autres qui bouleversent la vie ou sont dévastatrices. Faire du commentaire sur une éducation qui s'étend à la vie entière. Non pas une série d'enquêtes explicites, mais une ressource où les idées influencent les idées à travers des canaux clandestins, où les idées influencent la vie et les vies influencent les idées. De là, faire naître des palettes de couleurs qui ne font pas seulement se mélanger pour créer de nouveaux tons, mais qui réagissent entre elles : explosions et transformations. Elles ne sont au service d'aucune image particulière, mais constituent les éléments spectaculaires d'une vieille communauté en constante évolution. Les professeurs, les experts, les professionnels et les penseurs qui ont pris la décision d'enseigner certaines choses d'une certaine façon. Les étudiants qui ont choisi de suivre ou de rejeter des exemples, de visionner ou de fermer les yeux sur certains films, de lire ou de ne pas lire certains livres, trouvent leur chemin, réalisent une myriade de manières dont leurs goûts et leur sensibilité se nourrissent... c'est en partie cela l'éducation. Le long processus de l'éducation. Nous avons réfléchi sur la polyphonie des différentes éducations dans ces communautés. Le désir d'être mieux. Comment l'art et la vie font sens.



The gallery can be found at <http://www.synoptique.ca/galleries/style>

This Link Opens a New Window

The following text can also be found at the above link.

The SYNOPTIQUE STYLE GALLERY springs from film lovers talking about film and realizing that whether they were arguing about films they loved, films they hated or films that just seemed unavoidably “important” most of their talk was about film style. But we (yes, this writer was among these talkers) also realized that the same aspects of film style were not equally important to each of us. We also began to suspect that our ideas of what style meant varied wildly. How to peg the concept down?

At first the task seemed daunting: as the conversation spread wider and more people became involved more films began to be cited, more differences seemed to creep in, and the talk tended to become more abstract and hypothetical.

This gallery became a way to capture this expanding conversation without closing it off or narrowing it down. It became a way to collect concrete examples from actual films that individuals were willing to stand behind and point to and say, “Yes, this is a moment of film style.” It became a way of helping us to see and to hear what the conversation is about and to give us hints of what still manages (somehow) to slip through the cracks. More importantly, it become a way to expand the conversation into new territory.

The Gallery you see is composed of people’s responses to a prompt : we asked people to identify and describe a moment of film style. That moment could be anything and was. A raised eyebrow, a sequence, a motif recurring throughout the film, all of these and more were potential style moments. Everyone approached the question differently and talk about what should be in the gallery quickly produced a variety of alternate prompts:

1. Free associate on film style: what example keeps coming back to you? Do you have an acid test moment you compare all other style moments to?
2. Do you have a favorite film moment? Would you call it “stylish”?
3. What was the first moment where you remember watching a film and thought of its “stylishness”?
4. If you were a teacher and someone asked you to explain film style, what example would you use to do so?

But The Gallery is not finished and the conversation about style has barely begun. We want more examples of films style, more descriptions of what makes them valuable, more arguments about why style matters and how. We want this so we can begin to see films better. This gallery is full of moments chosen for one of the best possible reasons: they moved us emotionally, mentally, aesthetically, etc. Let’s speak about style in these moments and see what sense we can make of them.

Please use the link at the top of this page to visit the gallery.

COMMENTS:

Dear Synoptique editors: I think your Style Gallery is a fantastic idea and applaud your choices and comments. I am afraid you are going to be inundated with follow-up suggestions. May I be so bold to offer two: The opening montage in End of The Road (1970) directed by Aram Avakian, the legendary sixties film editor of Jazz for A Summer’s Day, The Miracle Worker, Lilith, and Mickey One. The montage intercuts newsreel footage, rostrum camera work, and dramatic footage to depict the childhood and formative years of the burn out college graduate played by Stacy Keach. The sequence is edited to Billie Holliday’s “Don’t Worry ‘Bout Me” and concludes with Keach’s character standing in a catatonic state on a New England railway station platform. I have also been haunted by the sequence in Alan Pakula’s Klute (1972), when Jane Fonda as the call-girl Bree Daniels visits her elderly client at his garment district office. As part of a recurring fantasy of the client’s, she plays a European sophisticate. Set to a haunting and far too brief piece of music by Michael Small, the sequence reminds us that Daniels is also playing out a fantasy - of the beautiful and talented actress she has failed to become - and that her interaction with the client is one of affection rather than the contempt or alienation she feels for many of her other clients. ...a great site by the way which I will be recommending to other friends and colleagues. Best, Lee Hill

By Lee Hill on 2004 11 06

Style is the point a film is built through. But to talk about a film director’s style, i don’t all the way understand the question. Which is maybe what we’re all looking to define in here. A clear question to answer. Because what is wes anderson’s style is most easily answered, wes anderson’s style (or whatever director.) To extrapolate from there it is too easy to mistake his concrete, elaborately detailed sets, quirky wardrobe, soft humor, awkward beats but all to what end, where’s the point. Where’s the end obviously within in him. We have to go too deep to find it. We may have to ruin it to find it. Because our style could be a collection of insecurities or vanity. But it could be a collection of hopes, aspirations and imitations. Because whatever we do or why we do it can’t be broken into degrees. How much of our doing was imitation of our idols, how much was spite, how much was instinct? In this case Wes Anderson made a sweet sad visual interpretation of the modern fiction set in new york that he loved as a teenager. That’s what he made but a style in which it was made is faceted to the point of blinding. What makes a person fill a house top to bottom with surreality? Why is he attempting to create a believable unreality? Why does he leave out: graphic sex, human deformity, bowel movements. Why are his movies safe and classy? Because of his style. So I don’t know what we’re trying to get at here. His style is everything within him, everything he’ll tell us on the bonus features is just the part of what he knows about his style that he’s comfortable to share. What he has in his head and heart that he doesn’t tell us or know about is probably what we’re trying to get at. Or else we can repeat the following ad infinitum adlibbing all along. ____ spends his time on ____, placing ____ into his films. Most of the time to the benefit of his _____. The _____ is an interpretation of the ____ we imagine when _____ ing about it. And so on. What’s interesting is that this is the first comment on either of wes anderson’s movies. All the other eight or so clips have comments. Is that an effect of his style? Is it in admiration for the guy or being too cool for him or what. My generation, born in the late seventies, sees in his movies a contemporary artist that has come the closest to painting a true emblem of our spirit. A sad optimism. We’ve been hurt, all of us along the way. And we delight in a combination of self-pity and having endured. And also of our potential as underachievers.

By Jayson Rahmlow on 2004 11 06

I believe you may look to Kenneth Burke’s definition of form , the creation of a desire and then fulfilling that desire. My first experience noticing style was in 1979 when my parents took me to see Apocalypse Now. Three scenes created and fulfilled a desire for me, the surfing scene with Robert Duvall and Timothy Bottoms, he played Bush in Thats My Bush, The scene at the last base before Kurtz, and the ending Napalming of Kurtz’s compound. The Scene in Ran with the Telephoto view of the Samurai spilling onto the battle field though is the most beautiful. The opening scene of Patton is as well.

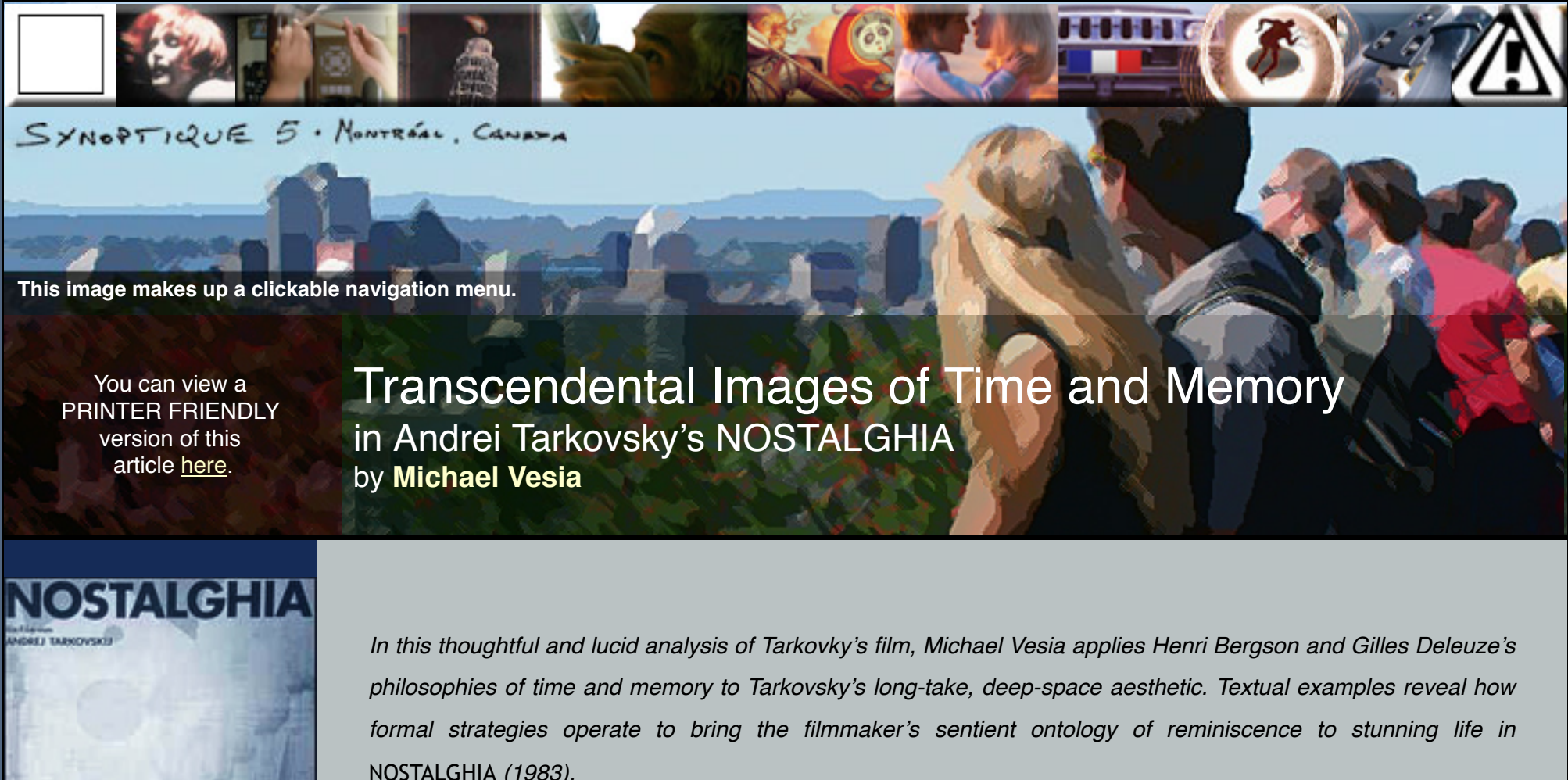
By Jason Garrett Hitzert on 2004 11 15

http://articles.synoptique.ca/style_gallery/

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Transcendental Images of Time and Memory in Andrei Tarkovsky's NOSTALGHIA by Michael Vesia



SYNOPTIQUE [HOME]

01 Nov 2004
4206 words

Written by :
Michael Vesia

Editor :
Zoé Constantides

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In this thoughtful and lucid analysis of Tarkovsky's film, Michael Vesia applies Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze's philosophies of time and memory to Tarkovsky's long-take, deep-space aesthetic. Textual examples reveal how formal strategies operate to bring the filmmaker's sentient ontology of reminiscence to stunning life in NOSTALGHIA (1983).

NOSTALGHIA (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1983) is a melancholic journey through a Russian poet's personal history and his feelings of nostalgia for his homeland. The protagonist, Andrei Gorchakov (Oleg Yankovsky), is a poet undertaking research in Italy on the life of an eighteenth-century Russian composer. During his stay in Italy, Gorchakov feels increasingly alienated and he develops an inner conflict in which he is overwhelmed by memories of his past life in Russia. Gorchakov effectively embodies the close emotional attachment that most Russians feel towards their native land. As Andrei Tarkovsky writes:

I wanted the film to be about the fatal attachment of Russians to their national roots, their past, their culture, their native places, their families and friends; an attachment which they carry with them all their lives, regardless of where destiny may find them. [1]

Accordingly, the film is structured around the protagonist's internal and immeasurable personal time. This onerific structure creates a continual sense of temporal instability throughout the film that is exemplified through smooth, seamless transitions between the protagonist's different states of consciousness and temporality. Most importantly, Tarkovsky employs a long-take aesthetic to express constant durational shifts between the "exterior" world and Gorchakov's "inner" world.

French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859-1941) believed that our past experiences in life, collected and preserved in our minds as memories, are never forgotten. According to Bergson, there are two kinds of memory: habitual memory (*motor mechanisms*) and pure recollection (*independent recollections*). [2] The difference between the two is that habitual memories are stored in the brain (resulting in routinized behaviour) [3], whereas pure recollections are stored within consciousness. Bergsonian scholar David Gross further differentiates between these two types of memory by stating that independent recollections are "based not on automatic responses but on separate, individual acts of recollection whereby some singular image from the past is brought to mind." [4] Bergson saw independent recollections as being superior to habitual memories because the formation of independent recollections allows for creativity and individuality, while habitual memories do not. [5] Moreover, Bergson suggested the possibility of a third kind of memory (left unnamed) that Gross describes as being "unsolicited by the needs of perception." [6] Gross believes that the notion of "involuntary memory," developed in the work of French novelist Marcel Proust, is the equivalent of Bergson's unnamed third memory. According to Gross, Proust believed that both habitual memory and pure recollection are part of voluntary memory, "a type of memory initiated by the mind which summons up images from the past in order to apply them to an immediate situation." [7] A voluntary memory is summoned by a situation in the present, whereas involuntary memory is more distant; it is unbound from the pragmatic necessities of everyday life and triggered by specific sensations. Gross remarks that involuntary memory is not intentionally called up by the conscious mind:

A sensation, in other words, activates forgotten memories. It helps recall not only an antecedent sensation but, more importantly, the entire ambience surrounding the sensation: the feelings, thoughts, impressions, and mood of the self that experienced these things long ago. [8]

As I shall demonstrate, the concept of involuntary memory is prominent in much of Tarkovsky's work and central to the cinematic style of NOSTALGHIA, in which the character's present reality is seamlessly merged with his memory.

In order to better understand the manner in which Tarkovsky expresses time and involuntary memory in NOSTALGHIA, a brief description of Gilles Deleuze's concept of time-image cinema is needed. [9] As is well known, Deleuze (1925-1995) established two types of cinema: the movement-image and the time-image. The former is mainly associated with classical cinema, which organizes itself through movement and action as opposed to time and duration. The latter refers to a film aesthetic that is dependent on the duration of an image, not on a rational continuity of action and movement.

In the movement-image, time is subservient to character action, whereas in the time-image, movement is subservient to time and duration. For example, Deleuze associates the movement-image with the traditional visual style of Hollywood narrative films made before the Second World War. He also considers the Russian "montage" films created by Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein to be movement-image cinema. To varying degrees, these types of films share a common aesthetic that is constructed according to a close visual interrelationship between specific graphic and kinetic elements within the shots that compose each film. In classic Hollywood films, character movement and action are usually determined by events that shape narrative organization. Shot-reverse-shot compositions, establishing shots/close-ups, and conventional point-of-view structures are all employed to maintain coherent sensory-motor links between the characters, their actions, and cinematic space. In the Russian "montage" films, however, the approach to cinematic spatialization is more complex and not completely contingent upon narrative action. Instead, the films are structured according to a system of sensory-motor variations that form "the cinema as machine assemblage of matter-images." [10] Deleuze explains Vertov's cinema as follows:

[A]ll of the images vary as a function of each other, on all their faces and in all their parts [...] everything is at the service of variation and interaction: slow or high speed shots, superimpositions, fragmentation, deceleration *démultiplication*, micro-shooting *micro-prise de vue*. [11]

Conversely, in the time-image cinema shots are no longer linked through a balanced sensory-motor system. The time-image is best exemplified in the modernist style of European art films that emerged after the Second World War. The images in many of these films form illogical connections that create temporal gaps through a montage and/or long-take style that is not subservient to movement. In his book *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine*, scholar D.N. Rodowick describes the Deleuzian time-image as follows:

Since the linking of images is no longer motivated by action, space changes in nature, becoming a disconnected or emptied space. Acts of seeing and hearing replace the linking of images through motor actions; pure description replaces referential anchoring. [12]

Rodowick notes that with the time-image "[t]he interval no longer disappears into the seam between movements and actions. Rather, it becomes a ceaseless opening of time – a space of becoming – where unforeseen and unpredictable events may occur." [13] In NOSTALGHIA, for instance, the camera often moves independently of character action within the frame, thus allowing the spectator to witness the passing of time as duration. Also, character movement often does not signal a cut, therefore, when a character leaves the frame the shot usually continues along with the camera movement. This seemingly unmotivated montage style creates temporal "intervals" that allow for the surfacing of images from Gorchakov's past and memories, taking him beyond the "actual" (present) world and into a "virtual" (past, memory) world.

Furthermore, Deleuze argues that through its ability to have different visual planes exist simultaneously within an image, depth-of-field can serve as a device for expressing time and memory within cinematic space. Deleuze uses the term "sheets of past" to describe the use of depth in a shot that provides a visualization of a space where a virtual memory of the past is evoked from an actual present. [14] As Deleuze notes, "[depth] gives rise to all kinds of adventures of the memory, which are not so much psychological accidents as misadventures of time, disturbances of its constitution." [15] Therefore, the different planes of an image (foreground, mid-ground, and background) operate as regions or "slices" of the past; they become "sheets of past." This Deleuzian approach to cinematic space functions as a visualization of Bergson's notion that memory does not exist within us, but that we reside within a world-memory in which there is simultaneity of past, present, and future.

The organization of memory-images in NOSTALGHIA, in which visual depth is used as a device to represent memory and consciousness, closely relates to Deleuze's connection of depth-of-field and memory. A good example of this occurs after Gorchakov's Italian interpreter, Eugenia (Domiziana Giordano), witnesses a sacred ceremony unfolding in an Italian country-side chapel. This scene ends with a straight-cut from Piero della Francesca's painting *Madonna del Parto* (Madonna of the Fields) to a medium close-up in black-and-white of Gorchakov with a sullen expression on his face. This sudden shift to monochromatic imagery creates a puzzling effect for the viewer because the film has been in colour up until this point. Gorchakov is outdoors, looking up towards the sky as a feather falls from above. This image is then followed by a shot of his hand lifting the feather out of a muddy puddle at his feet. His hand exits the top of the frame and the camera then slowly lifts up and frames him in a medium-shot, with the background out of focus. He then turns his head and glances at the space behind him. At this point, the camera tracks right, leaving him offscreen, and the background comes into focus to reveal a house in the distance (see fig. 1).

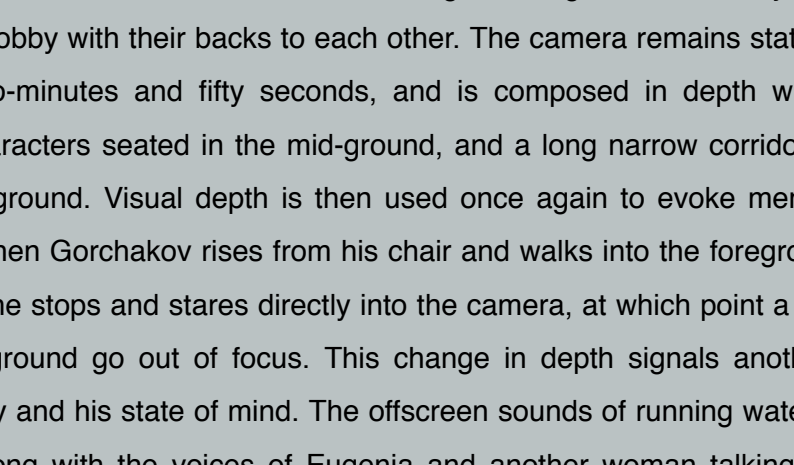


fig. 1

For viewers familiar with Tarkovsky's work, the presence of the house coupled with the contemplative tone and mood of this scene – achieved through the subtle use of sound and slow-motion – indicates the recalling of a memory (often from childhood). A Deleuzian sense of depth within this shot establishes the house as a womb of stored memories, a "sheet of past." Moreover, Tarkovsky employs a long-take aesthetic to create a continuity of duration in which the presence of the adult Gorchakov (at the beginning of the shot) is combined with a shift in depth that allows images of the past and present to co-exist in a single shot. The camera movement prevents Gorchakov (who is in the foreground) and the house (which is in the background) from coming into visual contact with each other. Instead, Gorchakov and the house are linked through the uninterrupted duration of the long-take, which transforms the Russian countryside and the house into a "sheet of past" of stored memories.

This sequence is followed by a scene in the lobby of a hotel (the location is actually not revealed until the end of the scene), where Gorchakov and Eugenia are having a conversation about the uselessness of translated poetry and the need to abolish state boundaries. Without an establishing shot, the scene opens with a close-up of Gorchakov's back to the camera (this shot directly follows the previously described black-and-white long-take in the Russian countryside), while Eugenia's voice can be heard on the soundtrack. The second shot, a 90-second close-up of Eugenia, is followed by another shot of Gorchakov that is composed in the same manner as the opening image of the scene. Although both characters glance off screen, Tarkovsky avoids the conventional eye-line match cuts used in the movement-image cinema. By prolonging the establishing shot and avoiding the use of eye-line match cuts, Tarkovsky challenges the viewer's understanding of the spatial orientation of the characters. Near the end of the third shot, Gorchakov looks over his shoulder and the sound of running water and a dog barking are heard on the soundtrack. Then, there is a cut to Gorchakov's wife (in black-and-white), who is seen from behind as she stands outdoors wiping a wine glass (see fig. 2).

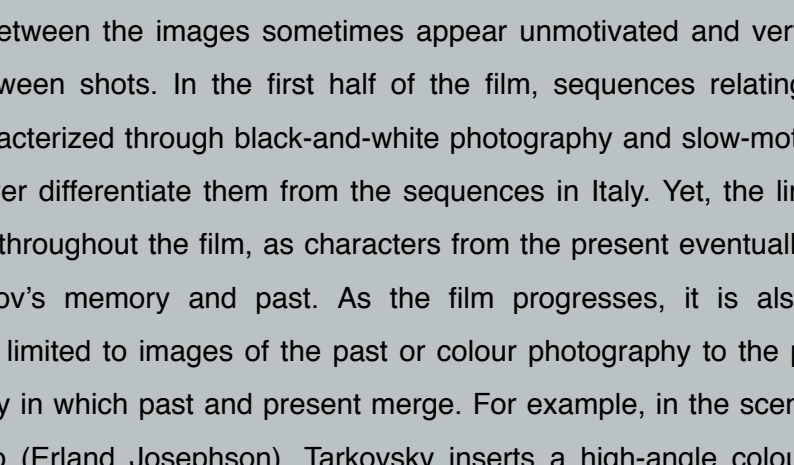


fig. 2

This shot only lasts about two seconds before it is interrupted by an abrupt cut to Eugenia (in colour) flipping her long mane of curly hair (this shot also runs approximately two seconds). This shot of Eugenia functions to retroactively suggest that Eugenia's movement evoked a sensation from Gorchakov's involuntary memory, and in turn, triggered the brief memory-image of his spouse on the image track. For a short moment, therefore, the virtual image (memory) of his wife absorbed the actual image (present) of Eugenia. Essentially, this cut between the two women is an excellent example of how the time-image can sometimes use techniques of the movement-image (i.e. a cut on movement) to underscore temporal and ontological uncertainty.

What is more, these two brief shots are then followed by a medium-shot of a woman walking her dog through a corridor in the hotel. It then becomes clear that it was her dog that the viewer previously heard barking on the soundtrack, thus further mixing elements from Gorchakov's memory with those of the present. Without a cut, the camera then dollies back from the woman and her dog to a long-shot that finally reveals Gorchakov and Eugenia sitting in the hotel lobby with their backs to each other. The camera remains static for the remainder of this shot, which runs for two-minutes and fifty seconds, and is composed in depth with the foreground shrouded in darkness, both characters seated in the mid-ground, and a long narrow corridor leading into a brightly-lit room visible in the background. Visual depth is then used once again to evoke memory and a sense of Deleuzian "sheets of past," when Gorchakov rises from his chair and walks into the foreground carrying his luggage. Once in the foreground, he stops and stares directly into the camera, at which point a slow zoom-in flattens the image and lets the background go out of focus. This change in depth signals another shift in connection with the character's memory and his state of mind. The offscreen sounds of running water and a dog barking return onto the soundtrack, along with the voices of Eugenia and another woman talking in the background. There is a sudden cut to a medium close-up of Gorchakov's wife (in black-and-white and slow-motion) standing in a position similar to her husband during the first memory-image. She smiles into the camera – as if acknowledging Gorchakov's glance from the previous shot – and turns to look over her shoulder, where the background comes into focus as the camera slowly tracks right, leaving her offscreen to reveal a house (the same one seen earlier) in the distance. The camera movement continues as a young boy and a dog run from the house towards a large puddle of water in the foreground (see fig. 3).



fig. 3

The voices of Eugenia and the woman are heard on the soundtrack, creating a simultaneous temporality in which present and past co-exist, as the virtual (past, memory) absorbs the image track and the actual (present) exists on the soundtrack.

The recurrent surfacing of these involuntary memories from Gorchakov's past has an unsettling effect upon him that seemingly alienates him from his exterior environment in the present. In effect, Italy acts as a doorway from the present through which Gorchakov can recall his past. At times his memory-images of the past are experienced through dreams, while others surface without warning as involuntary memories that emerge from his subconscious. Traditionally, independent recollections in cinema are represented through the use of conventional devices such as flashbacks. However, as my analysis reveals, Gorchakov's memories are not presented as mere recollections or flashbacks; instead, they take on an onerific quality that is closer to hallucinations or dreams. They are not memories of specific events from his past, but the visualization of fragments and sensations from dreams and memories that exist within his psyche. Tarkovsky describes his cinematic approach to dreams as follows:

We need to know the actual, material facts of the dream: to see all the elements of reality which were refracted in that layer of the consciousness which kept vigil through the night (or with which a person functions when he sees some picture in his imagination). And we need to convey all of that on screen precisely, not misting it over and not using elaborate devices. [16]

The viewer can see this approach in NOSTALGHIA when the physical world (present, Italy) and mental world (memories, Russia) of Gorchakov begin to merge. At times it is difficult to know whether a scene did in fact occur or not. The links between the images sometimes appear unmotivated and very often there are immeasurable temporal gaps between shots. In the first half of the film, sequences relating to the protagonist's past and memories are characterized through black-and-white photography and slow-motion, giving them a lyrical quality that helps the viewer differentiate them from the sequences in Italy. Yet, the line between past and present is continually blurred throughout the film, as characters from the present eventually begin to appear in sequences depicting Gorchakov's memory and past. As the film progresses, it is also evident that black-and-white photography is not limited to images of the past or colour photography to the present, thus creating a level of temporal complexity in which past and present merge. For example, in the scene in which Gorchakov visits the home of Domenico (Erfand Josephson), Tarkovsky inserts a high-angle colour shot of Domenico's son (the young age of the boy suggests that it is an image from the past) looking up into the camera (presumably Domenico's point-of-view) and asking, "Dad, is this the end of the world?" The temporal placement of this shot is further complicated by the fact that it follows several memory-images from Domenico's past, which are all rendered through slow-motion and black-and-white photography.

Another Deleuzian concept that is central to the representation of involuntary memory in NOSTALGHIA is the crystal-image. According to Donato Totaro, "[t]he cornerstone of Deleuze's time-image is the crystal-image, an indivisible unity of the virtual image and the actual image. The virtual image is subjective, in the past, and recollected... [t]he actual image is objective, in the present, and perceived." [17] The crystal-image is directly connected to the manner in which an exchange between past and present is required in our perception of the world. Deleuze understood that "time has to split itself in two at each moment as present and past." [18] The present is continually changing and splitting into two directions: one moving towards the future and the other back into the past. In the crystal-image, the past becomes the mirror image of the present. Deleuze writes: "[t]he past does not follow the present that it is no longer, it co-exists with the present it was. The present is the actual image, and its contemporary past is the virtual image, the image in a mirror." [19]

There is a three-minute long-take in NOSTALGHIA that provides an excellent visualization of the concept of the crystal-image. It occurs during a scene in Domenico's house that is one of the most temporally and spatially disorienting scenes in the entire film. In one long-take, Tarkovsky manages to denote Domenico's confused state of mind and Gorchakov's complex inner experience. The long-take begins with Domenico entering his room to "come forward." The camera remains static as Gorchakov carefully walks into frame and urges his guest to Domenico's home. The camera then dollies back slightly and Gorchakov exits frame left as a musical piece by Beethoven comes onto the soundtrack. The camera is static for a couple of seconds, until it slowly tracks left across the room, revealing a ladder and an open window with curtains ballooning in the wind. Gorchakov is then seen standing near a corner, looking at his reflection in a mirror that hangs on a wall in front of him. The camera slowly dollies in to a medium close-up of him as he leans on the wall and stares pensively at the ground, while part of his reflection is still visible in the mirror to his left (see fig. 4).



fig. 4

He then looks to his right (screen left) and the camera follows his gaze, tracking across a shelf cluttered with various objects (a clock, a picture frame, herbs, etc.). As the camera reaches the end of the shelf, his shoulder enters frame left and the camera continues tracking to reveal him standing with his back to the camera (see fig. 5).

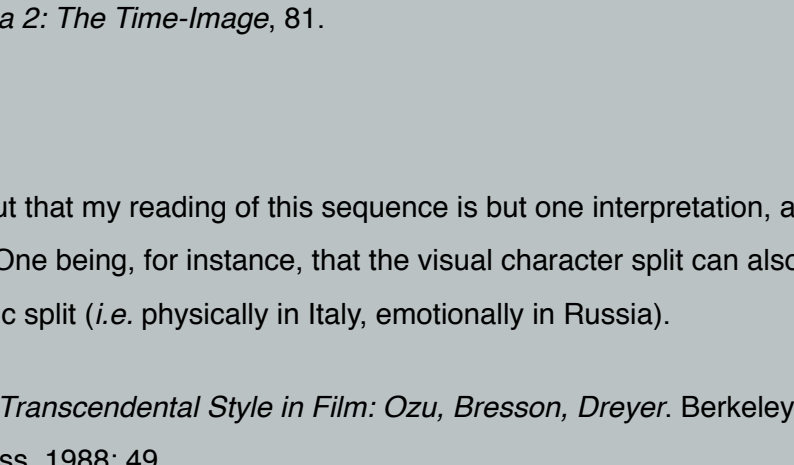


fig. 5

giving the impression that he is in two separate spaces at once. He turns his head to the left and stares out into a dark area of the frame as the camera track remains uninterrupted. The music on the soundtrack comes to an abrupt halt and Gorchakov turns his head in response, then he walks out frame left. The camera lingers for while, until it begins a slow dolly in on a painting that hangs in a darkened area of the frame. The lighting changes subtly and renders the painting increasingly visible (it looks like the image of a baby or a fetus) as the camera moves in closer and finally ends with a straight cut. In this sequence, the protagonist's reflection in the mirror can be read as a visualization of the crystal-image, which conveys the virtual as a mirror image of the actual to represent the continual split of time into two directions: future and past. Effectively, Gorchakov's initial position near the mirror suggests time's split into the past, while his later position with his back to the camera expresses a split into the future. The impression that he is in two separate spaces at once occurs within the duration of an uninterrupted long-take to express the simultaneity of past, present, and future. [20] This concept is further elaborated upon in a later scene, in which Domenico pours two drops of olive oil into the palm of his hand and explains, "One drop plus one drop makes a bigger drop, not two." His comment reflects the Bergsonian idea that the past, present, and future are indivisible, for they must co-exist in order for each to exist at all. Duration changes constantly because it is comprised of instances that build on each other, and like a drop of olive oil, duration cannot be divided into fragments or instances.

The final shot of NOSTALGHIA consists of a long-take, shot in depth and in black-and-white, with a very slow crane movement backwards that shows Gorchakov and his dog seated in the Russian countryside. As the camera cranes back the viewer also sees that the Russian countryside is miraculously contained within an old Italian cathedral, visually suggesting the melding of virtual and actual space, past (Russia) and present (Italy) (see fig. 6).

fig. 6

There is practically no movement within the frame, except for the appearance of shoes in the foreground and background that adds to the emotion and atmosphere of the image. The shot achieves a sense of contemplative stillness that can be equated with what critic/filmmaker Paul Schrader terms "stasis," or the achievement of a "stasis" means. "As Schrader notes, "[c]omplete stasis, or frozen motion, is the trademark of a second religious art in culture." It establishes an image of a second reality which can stand beside the ordinary reality; it represents the Wholly Other." [21] The last shot in NOSTALGHIA is not the expression of a spiritual reality in the religious or sacred sense, but one that is part of time and memory. Tarkovsky describes time and memory as spiritual states:

Time is a state, the phase in which there lives the salamander of the human soul [...]. It is obvious enough that without Time, memory cannot exist either. But, memory is something so complex that no list of all its attributes could define the totality of the impressions through which it affects us. Memory is a spiritual concept! [22]

Schrader explains that transcendental style in film must contain three spaces (Everyday, Disparity, and Stasis) in order to complete the journey from the "abundant means" to the "sparse means." Although NOSTALGHIA does not contain all three of these steps, its last shot does appear to achieve a level of sparseness and a moment of "stasis." This shot represents Gorchakov's transcendental inner reality and it elevates his experiences of death (physical and emotional) and memory to a sacred level. In describing this closing image of NOSTALGHIA, Tarkovsky writes, "I trust that it is free of vulgar symbolism; the conclusion seems to me fairly complex in form and meaning, and to be a figurative expression of what is happening to the hero, not a symbol of something outside him which has to be deciphered." [23] Within this closing image, time and memory dissolve into each other to create a moment of pure transcendence. [24] Whereby the protagonist passes from a practical reality (abundant) to one less encumbered by matter (sparse). Tarkovsky attempts to convey a sense of spiritual reality that goes beyond the limits of religious experience. He uses cinema to express an experience of time and memory that is beyond complete human comprehension and knowledge.

It is understandable that an essay of such brevity cannot do complete justice to all of the philosophical concepts to which I have referred. Also, it can sometimes be an exercise in futility to apply Deleuzian-Bergsonian theories in whole to filmic interpretation because Bergson and Deleuze mainly employed cinema to support their philosophical interests and not to elucidate or explicate film. Yet, the fact that several of their philosophical theories can be applied, at least in part, to an interpretation of NOSTALGHIA demonstrates the complexity of Tarkovsky's work and its resistance to any single ordered interpretation. The film embodies many of the qualities that are central to Tarkovsky's vision of cinema as a form of high art infused with spiritual and philosophical richness. As the above analysis demonstrates, Tarkovsky's aesthetics in NOSTALGHIA challenge the viewer's perceptions and elevate cinema to a level beyond the simple act of storytelling. Tarkovsky places the abstract elements of time, space, and memory at the center of his film, for they are the basis of his belief that "the cinema image is essentially the observation of a phenomenon passing through time." [25]

¹ Tarkovsky, *Andrey, Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*. 1986. Trans. Kitty Hunter-Blair. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998: 202.

² Bergson, Henri. *Matter and Memory*. 1911. Trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer. London: George and Unwin Ltd., 1978: 87.

³ As an illustration of habitual memory, Bergson uses the example of studying a school lesson through repetition in order to commit it to memory and learn the material by heart. According to Bergson, this use of repetition creates a cerebral mechanism composed of a "closed system of automatic movements," whereby "to learn by heart is to create a habitual mechanism, a habit of the body" (Ibid., 90).

⁴ Gross, David. "Bergson, Proust and the Revaluation of Memory." *International Philosophical Quarterly* 25.4, 1985: 370.

⁵ See Bergson, Henri. *Morality and Religion*. Trans. R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton. London: Macmillan and Co., 1935: 9-12; and Bergson, Henri. *Creative Evolution*. Trans. Arthur Mitchell. New York: Modern Library, 1944: 140-141.

⁶ Gross, "Bergson, Proust and the Revaluation of Memory," 377.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 378.

⁹ For an in-depth theoretical discussion of Gilles Deleuze's Bergsonian account of the movement-image and theory, see Totaro, Donato. "Gilles Deleuze's Bergsonian Film Project: Part 1: Cinema 1: The Movement-Image." *Offscreen*. Mar. 31, 1999; and Totaro, Donato. "Gilles Deleuze's Bergsonian Film Project: Part 2: Cinema 2: The Time-Image." *Offscreen*. Mar. 31, 1999.

¹⁰ Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. 1983. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2001: 85.

¹¹ Ibid., 80-81.

¹² Rodowick, D.N. *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997: 13.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Roberta Galeta. 1989. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001: 98-125.

¹⁵ Ibid., 110.

¹⁶ Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*, 72.

¹⁷ Totaro, Donato. "The Puppetmaster: A Bergsonian Personal Journey into History." *Offscreen*. Mar. 14, 1998.

¹⁸ Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, 81.

¹⁹ Ibid., 79.

²⁰ I wish to point out that my reading of this sequence is but one interpretation, and it does not preclude other possible readings. One being, for instance, that the visual character split can also be seen as an indication of Gorchakov's psychic split (i.e. physically in Italy, emotionally in Russia).

²¹ Schrader, Paul. *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972. Da Capo Press, 1988: 49.

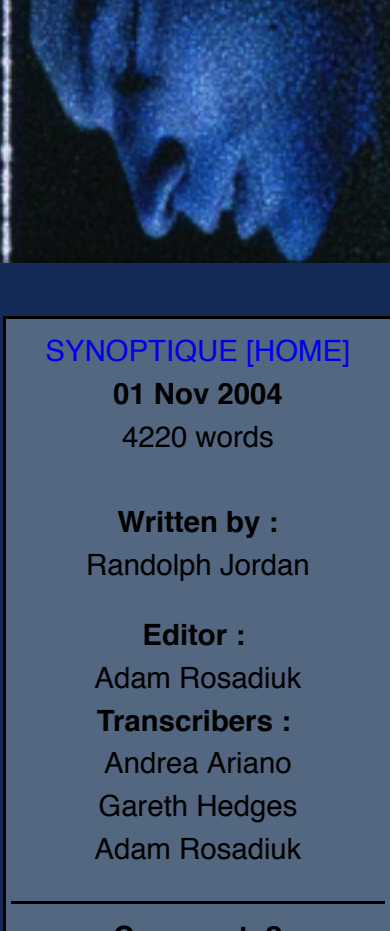
²² Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*, 57.

²³ Ibid., 216.

²⁴ For an informative study on the "transcendental" philosophy of Bergson and Deleuze, see Boundas, Constantin V. "Deleuze-Bergson: An Ontology of the Virtual." *Deleuze: a Critical Reader*. Ed. Paul Patton. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996: 81-106.

²⁵ Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*, 67.

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SYNOPTIQUE [HOME]
01 Nov 2004
4220 words

Written by :
Randolph Jordan

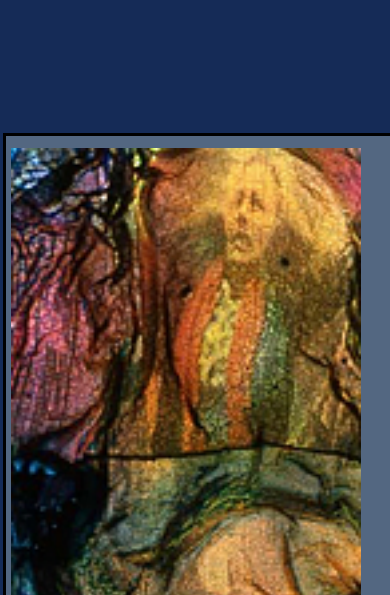
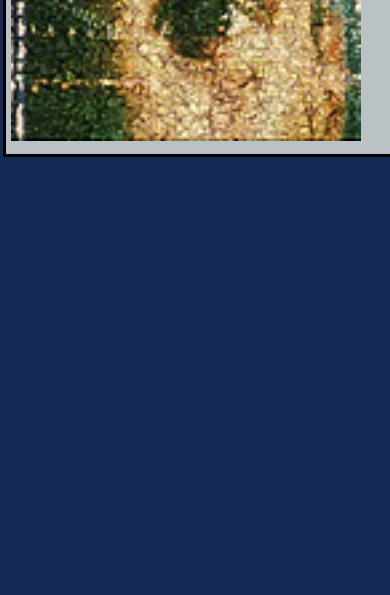
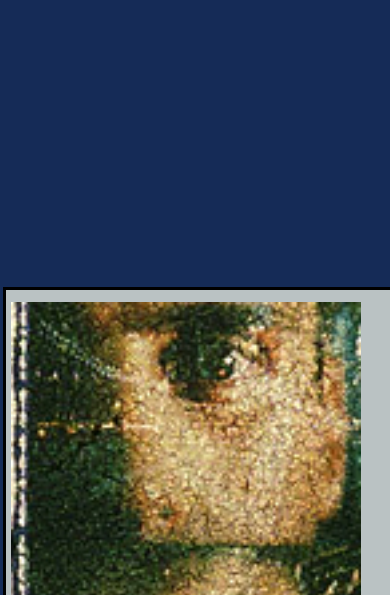
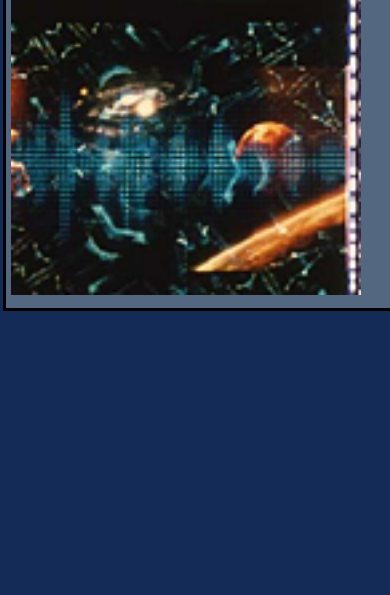
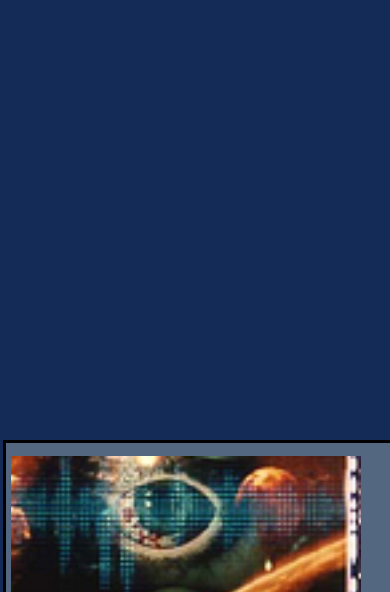
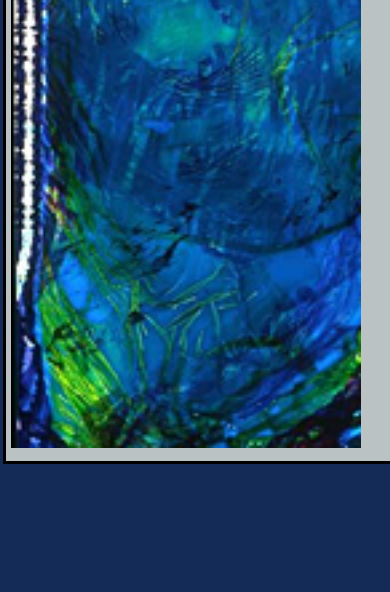
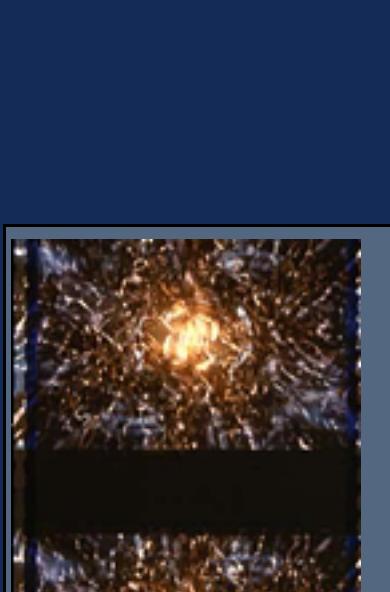
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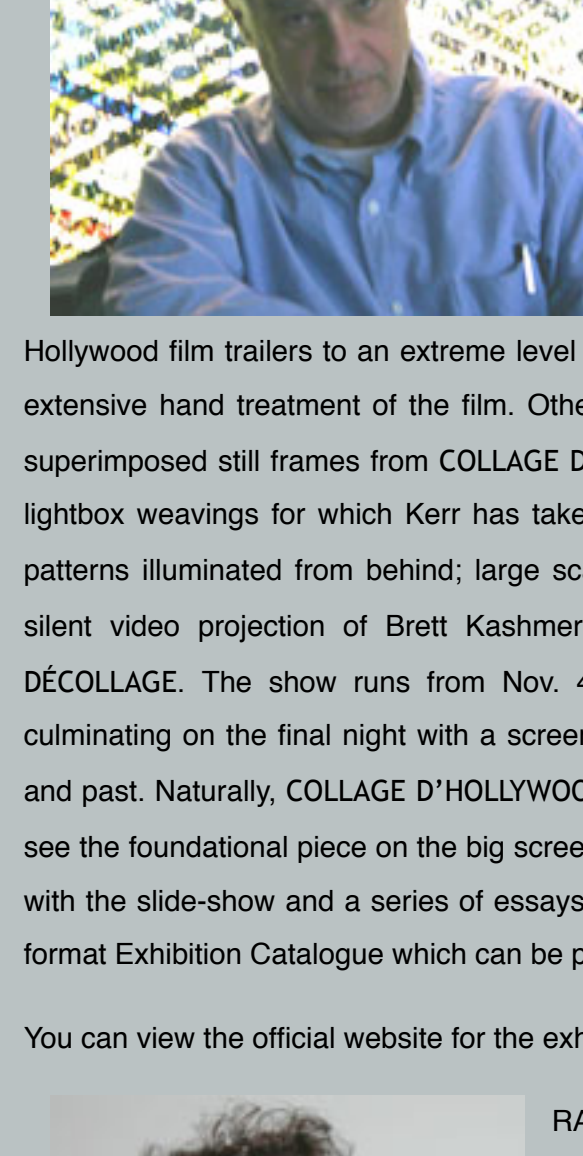


INDUSTRY

An Interview with Richard Kerr

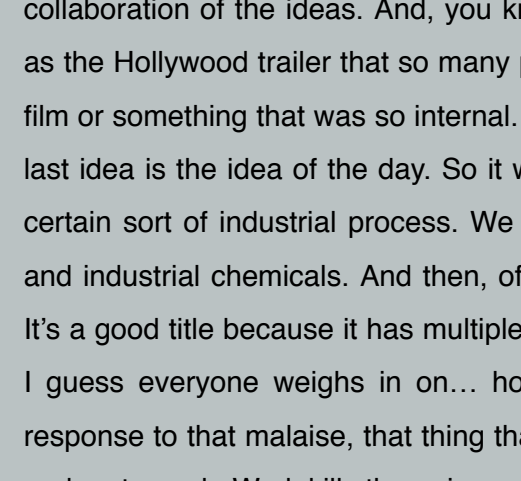
by **Randolph Jordan**

Randolph Jordan interviews Richard Kerr about his experimental filmmaking/installation project Industry/Industry: a subversion of the Hollywood trailer, and a metaphor for an energetic community of artists and their materials. Randolph Jordan spoke with Richard Kerr at Concordia University on October 18th, 2004.



Richard Kerr has been on Canada's avant-garde film scene since the early 70s and has produced a large body of work in a variety of different experimental genres. Kerr's interest turned towards multi-media installations in the 90s with works such as **OVERLAPPING ENTRIES** and **THE AFTER MOTION PICTURE SERIES**. The *Industry* show expands on his recent interest in exploring cinema beyond the confines of the motion picture screen. Having acquired a box of 40 Hollywood film trailers on 35 mm film, Kerr began his *Industry* project with an idea for a short film that would heavily re-work these materials. With the luxury of a new studio at Concordia University's Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema, he set to work with collaborators Brett Kashmere and Mike Rollo on what became a three-year process. Originally referred to as **THE ÜBER-TRAILER**, the eight-minute film at the centre of the *Industry* show became known as **COLLAGE D'HOLLYWOOD**. The film pushes the aesthetics of Hollywood film trailers to an extreme level through high speed montage, multiple layers of superimposition, and extensive hand treatment of the film. Other pieces in the show include a dual projector slide show combining superimposed still frames from **COLLAGE D'HOLLYWOOD** and the original trailers from which the film was made; lightbox weavings for which Kerr has taken strands of treated film trailers and weaved them into symmetrical patterns illuminated from behind; large scale Cibachrome prints of stills from **COLLAGE D'HOLLYWOOD**; and a silent video projection of Brett Kashmere's digital remix of **COLLAGE D'HOLLYWOOD** entitled **HOLLYWOOD DÉCOLLAGE**. The show runs from Nov. 4th through January 23rd 2005 at the Cinémaèque québécoise, culminating on the final night with a screening of the very finest in found footage filmmaking from years recent and past. Naturally, **COLLAGE D'HOLLYWOOD** rounds out the program and will be the only time visitors will get to see the foundational piece on the big screen. Both **COLLAGE D'HOLLYWOOD** and **HOLLYWOOD DÉCOLLAGE**, along with the slide-show and a series of essays, production notes, and other materials will be available on the DVD-format Exhibition Catalogue which can be purchased on site.

You can view the official website for the exhibition at : <http://cinema.concordia.ca/industry/>



RANDOLPH JORDAN: Can you describe or explain what this idea of "industry" is? And why this is an "industry" project? What is your role in this industrial machine or industrial process?

RICHARD KERR: *Industry* was a title that was brought up three years ago when we started this project, Brett Kashmere, Mike Rollo and myself (being the principles). And then the team expanded to fellows like yourself. It wasn't until the end of the three years, when we had a naming session, that we realized what it was gonna be. We went through a lot of French titles. Partly out of a respect for the language and culture and partly to identify where these pieces were made, because inevitably I will move on from here. None of the titles were working. So we rediscovered the simple word "industry." And then, we went to the dictionaries to break down the meanings. And of course, in French it has a singular meaning and in English it has multiple meanings. And beyond that, it was sort of a zeitgeist title. Meaning that it sort of wrapped up what we were doing here. The project was industrious; we were working with industrial materials. And being a filmmaker of the experimental avant-garde variety, you live in opposition to this thing called The Industry, which is an oxygen-sucking-wildebeest that allows no room for anything I am interested in, other than titillation and escapism. So... I don't have much use for The Industry. It gets in the way of my teaching, it gets in the way of everything, but it's there so I might as well not complain. So, it became a title that we could live with. We were following a bit of an industrial model in the sense that the more experienced person—moi—went out and got the money, defined the project, led the team, and was so fortunate to have collaborators. Collaborators who I've known for a long time, from Saskatchewan. It was a very industrial process. The title was a manifestation of the daily practice. We worked in different areas and towards a common goal. The sense of team work, and just in the sheer collaboration of the ideas. And, you know, it's probably exactly because it's wrapped around something so tight as the Hollywood trailer that so many people could input and move it forward. As opposed to if it was a personal film or something that was so internal. But, you know, this is public material. So any idea that was better than the last idea is the idea of the day. So it was kind of egocless in that sense. And the materials lend themselves to a certain sort of industrial process. We were using the old 35mm editing benches, Steenbecks, contact printers, and industrial chemicals. And then, of course, the last leg of it: it's spit-and-polished through digital technology. It's a good title because it has multiple meanings. And, yeah, there is a more metaphorical quality to the title that I guess everyone weighs in on... how they feel post-9/11. For me, way in the background is some sort of response to that malaise, that thing that everyone went though and had to question. And, for me, it's just: get up and go to work. Work kills the pain.

JORDAN: So, it really has been a long process. Let's talk about living with it for the three years, getting up and going to work. I mean, you had that box of trailers, and what was the first thing you did to jump into the work?

KERR: Well, the first thing that you do is that you look at the trailers on a Steenbeck and you start to listen. I mean it's like that with any material, not just this. You just listen to your materials and you respond to it, you know. It's that simple. The first project was **THE ÜBER-TRAILER**, which is now known as **COLLAGE D'HOLLYWOOD**. And it's through working that out with its a, b, c, rolls and on the bench and all that. The first inclination was to go Po-Mo crazy, because that's what a lot of the material was: Adam Sandler type comedies, and all these buffoons and whatnot. The inclination was to make something funny, sardonic, cynical... too easy though. Out of that same box of trailers I could have made an encyclopedia of Hollywood joke films, all which would have been funny to look at one night... and then put away. Another person would have done that or another person will do that. My interest is in perception and acceleration and the physicality of cinema. So, I passed by most of the comedies and the Warren Beatty love movies. I went straight for the rock' n' roll, or the soul of Hollywood: the explosions, the gender bends, the darker sides.

Again, it's just a case of working with materials: ideas will pop up. Well, I just happened to have a 35mm slide holder in my hand one day and two frames of the trailer fit perfectly in there. Well, that's all I needed: you got another medium here, you know. You put them in a slide projector, project them and they look great: they're sharp, they're loaded, there is two frames. Once again it is responding to the materials. So it was a short hop to the slide show and then there is no hop to the motion picture weavings, because that has now become a staple of my practice. From there it seemed natural to decide on the three elements of *Industry*. One is very static and sculptural (the weavings). The second, the slide show, the *Demi Monde*, is another type of Hollywood spectacle: big images, hand manipulated, slowed right down, stilled cinema (as Bart Testa defines it). And then the third chamber, the third room is an accelerated reworking of **COLLAGE D'HOLLYWOOD** which is now called **HOLLYWOOD DÉCOLLAGE**. It's a pretty tight unit.

But I must say, I ran through prototypes of probably seven other objects and ideas. Most of them were eliminated simply because I could not afford them. This project will continue, things will keep being made because there is an image bank there to draw from. And, I can invite other people in and they can make another generation of materials from this archive bank of Hollywood images. I am not tired of working with it; it's really cartoon material. It doesn't bite you back like autobiography or social intervention. I mean, George Clooney is pretty harmless on a light table. But it is beautiful material that is formally very strong, and there is lots you can do with it. The idea came together pretty quickly. It was labor intensive and that's why it took three years.

JORDAN: Do you think that your move away from thinking in terms of a single screening—moving your work off the screen—is related to your interest in trailers, which are objects that surround the films they are supposed to represent?

KERR: I don't think it's quite that tight. I mean, first, there was my waning interest in working in 16mm optical sound. I think it's fair to say that I've *done* my work in that medium. That ended in the early 90s, and then it's really been about opening up in pursuit of other forms of presentation, other issues of perception. And then, of course, there was the juggernaut of the digital evolution (not revolution). That took some time to think about, and I made some work just to find out what that material and technology was about. The trailers were purely a matter of practical function. After relocating to Montreal, I had no big money to make a project. I had a new studio here at school and this mythical box of fifty trailers. So, in the spirit of working with the material at hand, and what you have before you, it just kicks in there, and then the definition of what you're doing sort of follows. I mean you're working with trailers: that's very specific. What can be done with them? And so you do the big shakedown, and see what happens. In this case, it expanded from one 35mm film **COLLAGE D'HOLLYWOOD**, which was kind of a natural place to start this exercise in meta-cinema.

JORDAN: So do you think of it in terms of commentary on cinema? You're drawing mostly from Hollywood sources. Are you trying to offer some comment on Hollywood film or are you engaging in more of a participation with them?

KERR: Well, I'm not starting out with a set agenda. Though, I think that inherently in this material there's a certain politic, a certain reading of gender and those things. Therefore, as a collagist, I could only steer and shape, turn inside-out. I let the material speak. There is a rarefied commercial language in Hollywood cinema, especially trailers. It's a fairly limited perceptual language. Thinking of screen directions, its physicality, shot lengths, frame lengths, rhythms—it's fairly limited, but very intense. It needs to be torn apart. Pretty high-octane stuff.

JORDAN: You're feeding off that. When Cornell made **ROSE HOBART**, he drastically changed the feel of the original film, but you seem like you're more interested in amplifying the intensity that already exists.

KERR: Yeah, it did collide with a pre-existing interest I had in "accelerated cinema." This is the Age of Slow, so they tell me. My interest is in the giddyup of cinema. How fast and how physical? That's always been my experience and what I respond to. The earliest stuff I experienced and shaped me was by Paul Sharits, which was just full-frontal attack, but to me *that* was cinema. Tactile. You can feel it on your face.

JORDAN: Also, you're very consciously materialistic: interested in the materials and very consciously non-digital. In fact, you mentioned a few minutes ago that you were interested in figuring out the digital thing, but you're sort of defiantly not using that technology. In terms of the image there was no digital processing whatsoever. Did you make a decision to commit to the materiality of film itself in opposition to digital?

KERR: That would be my first response to any act of creation: what are the materials? I wouldn't understand how to start any other place. I mean, whether I was building a fence or baking a pie, it would be the first consideration. Am I working with good materials? What inherently do these materials have that makes them unique? And then, you work from there. It seems anything else is swimming upstream. I'm interested in the formal properties. I'm interested in the materials. I'm less interested in grandiose, indulgent statements. It's about the materials, it's about the process, and it's about making things. I have no great insights about the world, no more than anyone else. But the objects I make, I think, resonate with something that I'm unaware of and it lies in its material and its physicality somewhere.

JORDAN: The first section is very disaster film oriented, right? Were you thinking at all in terms of the materiality of the film in relation to the materiality of maybe even the Earth, or just life and its constant process of destruction?

KERR: No. I mean you keep trying to give me credit for being a thinker about this material, and I'm not. I just go at the materials. I mean the way that the narrative shape of **COLLAGE D'HOLLYWOOD** came to be, is I tried like fifty different combinations of fifty different things, of A, B, C... but at the end of the day, it's what works. I can't make something work that doesn't work. What works is when you put all the space stuff together, all the psychodramas together, all the genres, and you lay them one, two, three, A, B, C, on top of each other. Because they have the same rhythms and pulse, right? A space movie has a totally different rhythm than a psychodrama or than a cop movie. So, it's their physical properties that defined it and then that made more sense narratively, too.

JORDAN: But at the very least, you thought about the form of its three sections, which are fairly distinct. You've got the space stuff and the disaster stuff, you've got the psychodrama stuff, and then you've got the really abstract, mostly hand-painted, hand-treated section at the end. This must have been a conscious move, from outer space to inner space maybe?

KERR: Mario Falsetto saw it in its early stage and his first observation was "from outer space to inner space", ha, ha, ha, right? I really have to reiterate, that with this kind of work—especially the stuff in the last twelve years or so—I've quit thinking, and just started reacting. Of course, I *think*; I have lots of notes in my sketchbook. There's a difference between crediting yourself as a great thinker and just being realistically open to the material and being sensitive enough to let the stuff respond and happen, and then recognize it, and not fuck with it.

JORDAN: And it's very much also a way of responding to and interacting with something which Hollywood doesn't really want you to respond to, any further than looking at the trailer and buying a ticket for the movie based on what they've shown to you.

KERR: Well, we'll see. I mean I have every intention of trying to get this to the States, and specifically Los Angeles and Hollywood. We're going to approach certain institutions down there. And it'll be interesting to see what the read is. Will they dig the intellectual play of it, or will they see it as a copyright threat? It all depends, it all depends. But I think it should be seen. It's a good take on Hollywood. It's a fair take.

JORDAN: Yeah, I see it as a simultaneous critique and homage. I like the way the two can work together and not really contradict each other. If you like the experience of sensory overload that you get from watching film trailers, then I'd think you'd also like to watch **COLLAGE D'HOLLYWOOD**. But at the same time there is a conscious pushing it to absurd limits. And these limits may end up becoming a test case for copyright issues.

KERR: Early in the stages of this I signed with a dealer in Toronto, and they were going to do a show with the motion picture weavings, and some photography. And they backed down on the copyright issue as. They just got too afraid. So it may be a problem getting it exhibited. We'll have to see. I'll push the issue as much as I can.

JORDAN: So you are going to expand on the *Industry* project and hopefully tour around with it and keep adding things as they come up?

KERR: This show, conceptually, can be broken down and reconfigured many ways. So the idea of shipping it around and touring it seemed rather natural. We'll see how that goes. Like everything else it takes money and hustle. And yeah, there are more things to be made. Sculptural things—all sorts of mutations of photography. There's another slide show based on **PEARL HARBOR** that's never been shown. There are a couple unfinished films hanging in the trim bins that never got realized. The idea would be to build a studio around this idea, and bring in other people who work the same way. Because we have a great setup here at Concordia, where we've saved all these great analog machines, from stop motion cameras to Oxberries to optical printers. We didn't throw the analog out in anticipation of the digital, so I really like the way we sit in North America as a cinema school. Maybe we can build a studio around this concept and widen this circle. Certainly the most rewarding aspect of this show was when I saw it was going to get away from me, and Brett came in and collaborated at such a high level that if he wanted to call this project his own he could, and you came in [and submitted essays], and Adam [Rosadiuk] did the website, and everyone took an aspect and made something out of it. I still have lots of energy, but I definitely need the energy of the people I work with. I need the contact. So, yeah, I'd like to carry this forward at a community level. And there are some curious things that I'd like to do, I'd like to make. So as long as there is that core of energy, the work will continue. I'm seeing an incredible energy from this new generation about working with the materials again. And I'm very encouraged by it. We're not living in a total digital world, which I may have feared 15 years ago. Now that, that digital revolution stuff was a bust—it was the biggest con that ever happened to young practitioners. And the ones that were smart enough to hang on to their old cameras, and learn how to hand-process film...it's just that the 100% totally digital world, to me, has an evil aspect to it. It all backs up to M.I.T. somewhere and some sense of military R&D. Yeah, I think there's a political point to doing this sort of work, this handmade work. So I hope that the *Industry* project can continue and involve more people, and expand, and get beyond me. That's for sure.



Randolph Jordan writes about "Squalid Infallibilities" in this same edition.

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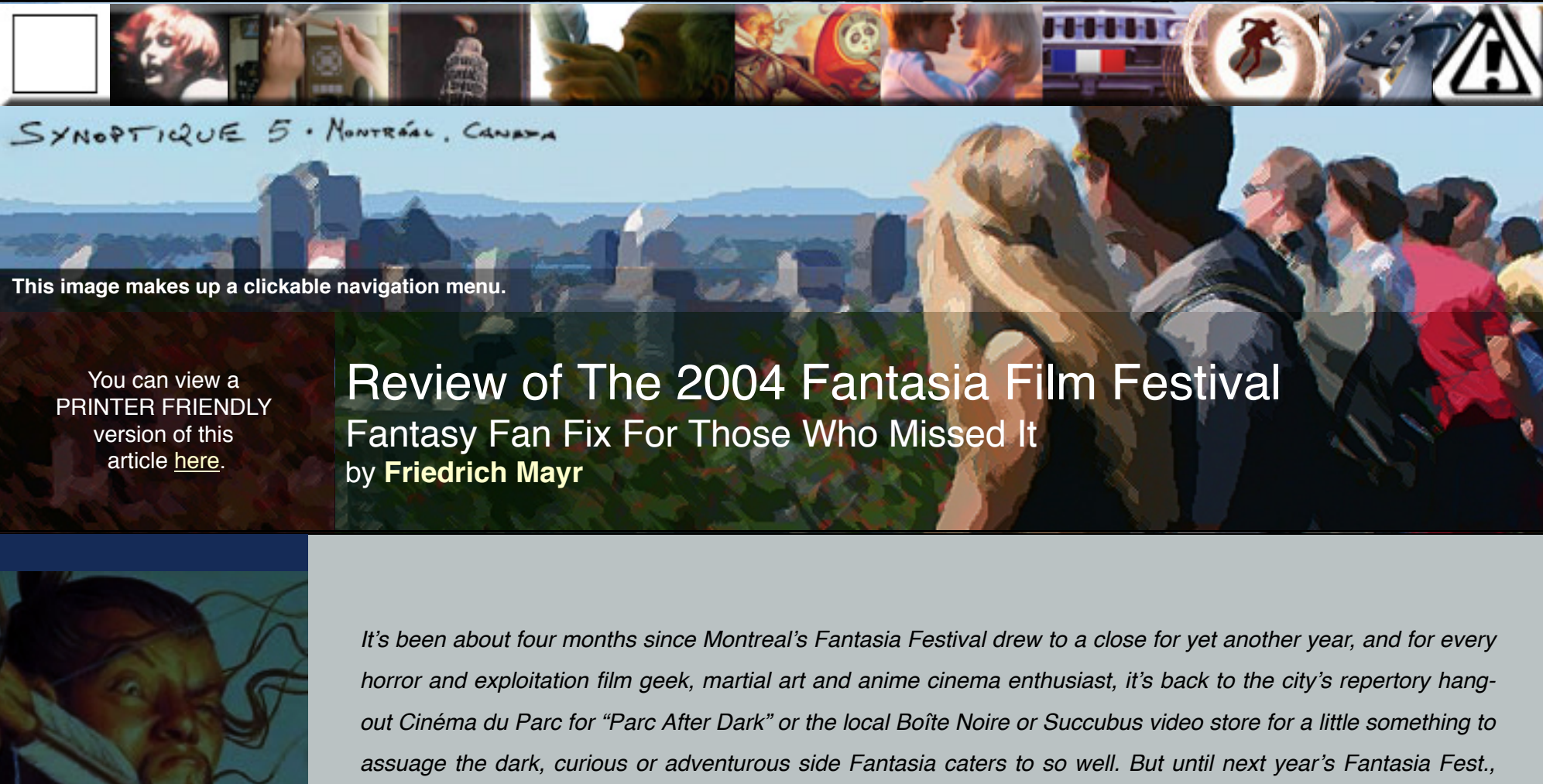
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SYNOPTIQUE (HOME)

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It's been about four months since Montreal's Fantasia Festival drew to a close for yet another year, and for every horror and exploitation film geek, martial art and anime cinema enthusiast, it's back to the city's repertory hang-out Cinéma du Parc for "Parc After Dark" or the local Boite Noire or Succubus video store for a little something to assuage the dark, curious or adventurous side Fantasia caters to so well. But until next year's Fantasia Fest., here is a short collection of reviews and comments on some of the films enjoyed this summer written in the format of the daily journal, taking you all the way back to July and August for those of us inclined to visit the immediate past of Montreal's premiere showcase for genre cinema just one more time.

This year's films cut across all genres, styles and themes; from Spanish horror to 60s freeze-frame anime; school kids with a sadistic edge to pugnaucious seafood. Some of them worked and others didn't, but all were evidence of extraordinary imaginations willing to skip outside rather than goose-step behind the usual parade of Hollywood insipidity. They evinced an international cultural fecundity and the simple, enduringly human need to tell a story, albeit ones with a bit more viscera, manga and slashing katana than normal film fare.

Enjoy.

RITUAL (Hideaki Anno, 2000)

A film like RITUAL is just one reason why Fantasia carves out its own distinct territory in the Montreal Film Festival scene. It is one of those marginal East-Asian films that seems quirky and is under promoted, but succeeds in finding a new audience at a venue such as this.

RITUAL is a delicately rendered art-film (as loaded and richly as that term is) that attempts to manifest on the screen an eccentric, middle-class woman's attempts at assessing and treating her own spiralling madness. The physical setting is composed of the train tracks and abandoned warehouses of a hyper-industrialized Japan, with the lives of the Woman (Ayako Fujitani) and a man known only as Director (Shunji Iwai) intersecting. Once together, they navigate urbanity as a pair in an effort to make sense of their own lives, their immediate fates trapped in alienating environs.

If my description seems vague, it is because the film chooses to present, simply, a collection of daily episodes that demonstrate the peculiarities of two humans traversing modern space. Each sequence is limited to a single day, and each day is counted down by inter-title towards an unknown event, possibly the Woman's suicide or birthday. Consequently, the film functions as a collection of vignettes that ostensibly do no more than present her attempts to flesh out and understand her own anguish; whether she is sitting on train tracks, curled fetal-like in a bathtub in a flooded basement or playing with her life on the roof of her warehouse home. Despite the monotonous quality of the Woman's daily ritual of attempted suicide (every morning she contemplates whether or not she should jump off her seven-story roof hanging onto a guardrail), the act does take on a more endearing tone – as her trust in the Director grows, she eventually allows the guardrail she clutches to be replaced by the out-stretched hands of the Director. He won't stop her from playing with her life, but he can at least hold her hands as she decides.

Actor Ayako Fujitani has surely had enough of being saddled with the moniker of "Steven Seagal's Daughter," which is how she was introduced at her Thursday night appearance, only a few days into the festival. She has come into her own for her recent accomplishments, presumably without Seagal's direct involvement. With three novels under her belt, one of which RITUAL is based upon, what has demonstrated that she is not only an accomplished actor, but also an inspiring novelist. In the Q/A following the film, Fujitani described the book, and the film, as an autobiography of sorts.

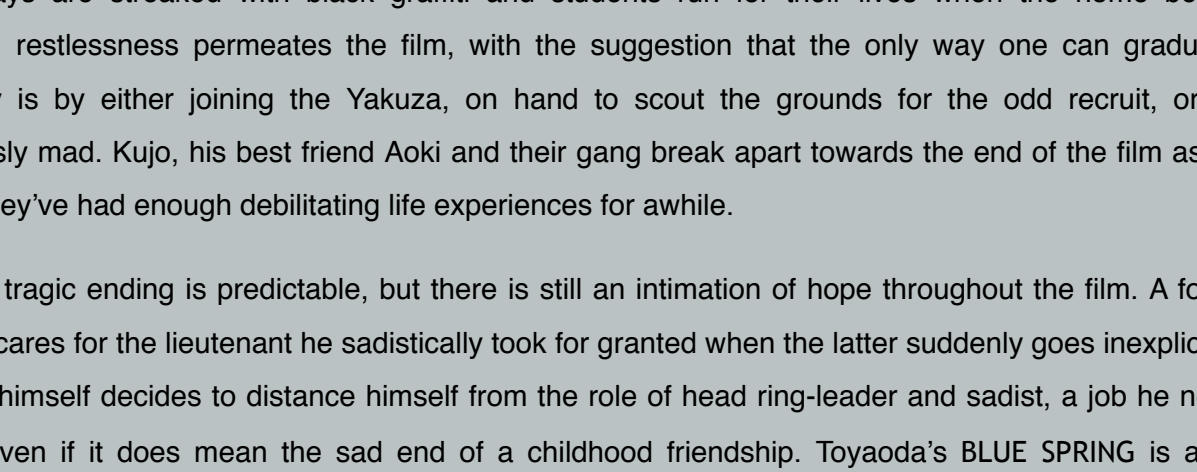
In turn, producer Amagi Omro likened the film to a live-action form of anime, asserting that this is at least how the Japanese public received the film and digested it conceptually. Omro insisted on describing RITUAL with two words that are loaded in any cinematic context, regardless the country or culture: Art Film. RITUAL does, in fact exhibit a number of the common characteristics of the "art-film," for example, existential angst and a narrative-structure up for grabs. The film only played in a Photography Museum when it was released in Japan, and it was never intended to be distributed in commercial theatres. When it played in Japan in 2000 (the year it was originally released), about 50,000 people in only three theatres saw the film. It was only when the film was released on DVD that word of mouth among fans brought the film to the attention of distributors.

The use of real-life Japanese director Shunji Iwai as the character of the Director may be an obvious, if painfully ossified, nod at cinephilic self-referentiality, but this nevertheless works well despite its flirtation with cliché. Because of Fujitani's over the top, unrestrained portrayal of the Woman as a hysterical eccentric, Iwai's presence functions as a desperately needed life preserver of rationality. This said, the archaic gender stereotypes represented by the Woman and the Director are perhaps too obviously Freudian.

Stunning imagery of an industrialised Japan abounds throughout the film. Director Anno frequently employs wide-angle shots that lend a distorted, surreal vision of Japan in the 21st Century, and plays, in scene after scene, with the lattice work of innumerable train tracks that grid the world of the Woman and the Director. Anno's images initially look navigable but they represent a metaphorical labyrinth that leads both the characters and the viewer to a more uncertain place. Adding to the film's surrealism is the set design in the Woman's warehouse. cavernous, stripped down, mono-coloured office spaces filled with red and white umbrellas, phones, refrigerators, mannequins, candles, all set against blindingly white walls further disorient the viewer. In terms of imagery, Anno achieves sparkling moments of poetic grandeur in his rendering of the city and the actors' navigation through different milieus (shopping thoroughfares, roadways and antique train-cars). One inspired moment has the Woman guiding the Director through each floor space of her warehouse home; Anno shoots this in fast-motion, lending the film an isolated incident of playfulness.

The interplay between digital video and film (played out as a visualized metaphor for memory and immediate reality), and the restrained performance by the Director, offered the deeply meditative film this could have been had Anno not fallen for the clichés associated with the art-house film.

BLUE SPRING (Toshiaki Toyoda, 2001) and DAD'S DEAD (Chris Shepherd, 2003)



On a Saturday night a small quiet crowd was privy to cinema that cast away any stereotypical notions one might have of modern Japanese youth groomed for, and content with, a complacent role in Japan's reputation as an ultra-capitalist country. If Toshiaki Toyoda's BLUE SPRING has any say, the cultural and social potency that drives Japan into the 21st Century is fuelled by bitter teenage nihilism. One of the trends in contemporary Japanese cinema about Japanese youth is the notion of dystopic future for the next generation, as exemplified by Takashi Miike's FUDOH: THE NEW GENERATION. BLUE SPRING continues along this theme in the harrowing depiction of teenage angst in Japan.

Kujo, played by GOHATTO's androgynous Ryuei Matsuda, is the ring-leader of a busted-down, secondary school; the hallways are streaked with black graffiti and students run for their lives when the home bell rings. A despairing restlessness permeates the film, with the suggestion that the only way one can graduate out of secondary is by either joining the Yakuza, on hand to scout the grounds for the odd recruit, or by going murderously mad. Kujo, his best friend Aoki and their gang break apart towards the end of the film, as everyone decides they've had enough debilitating life experiences for awhile.

The film's tragic ending is predictable, but there is still an intimation of hope throughout the film. A former bully earnestly cares for the lieutenant he sadistically took for granted when the latter suddenly goes inexplicably blind. And Kujo himself decides to distance himself from the role of ring-leader and sadist, a job he never really wanted, even if it does mean the sad end of a childhood friendship. Toyoda's BLUE SPRING is a scouring, unapologetic film that hints at the barest of promise for the future of Japanese youth. While the film periodically glamorizes thuggery and criminals-in-waiting, it nonetheless addresses the problem of a distressed generation with candour and sympathy.

DAD'S DEAD, a short by Englishman Chris Shepherd that opened just before BLUE SPRING, set up the rather distressed tone for the evening while it carved out a distinct seven minute niche all its own. The film presaged the frustration of the teenage youths in BLUE SPRING with creepy live-action combined with rotoscopic digital animation. This combination found its most disturbing realization in the distorted face of a sociopathic teen named Johnno who represents at least one disturbing demographic of the modern Englishman in Liverpool, England. Again, like BLUE SPRING, this is leagues beyond the idyllic, if marginally realistic, world of Degraasi Junior High. DAD'S DEAD is Liverpoolian working class environs with a horror film flavour that chronicles a degenerating friendship between two lads; one, a possible criminal with a conscience, the other, a criminal with a growing penchant for killing animals and "caring" for the ignorant and easily duped. What makes this film so provocative is how it is related through the eyes of the protagonist whose reliability is suspect; the viewer is not entirely sure how much of the tale is a fabrication of the protagonist's own morbid desire to relate a story about his nasty best friend or the actual truth as seen through his own admittedly unreliable point of view.

CUTIE HONEY (Hideaki Anno, 2004) and THE EXORCIST IN 30 SECONDS (Jennifer Shiman)



I vowed to myself that being relegated to the back of the line and, consequently, nose-bleeder seating at the rear of the Hall Theatre was unacceptable for a cinematic event hyped as being akin to Guazzoni's QUO VADIS? I queued up exactly one hour early for Hideaki Anno's CUTIE HONEY, arguably the fan favourite of this year's Fantasia festival – remember the still, which was easily the most circulated image in the press, of the demure little girl in a purple and pink S & M outfit with the sword on the cover of *Mirror*? Thought so. This was easily the most anticipated event for anime-devotees at Fantasia no doubt due to its live-action depiction of a popular, 70s manga comic. The film features manga-nymph Cutie Honey who typically practises calisthenics in a bra and panties, and transforms into superhero fighting form with an exultant, "Honey-Flash!"

Young Honey Kisaragi, an android superhero, saves the world with her trusty Honey boomerang, eats rice cakes in order to activate her "Honey-Flash" (which, I think, is her unique "i-system" energy signature) and battles evil with her 70s-style hipster N.S.A. agent-buddy and a really cute, hard-nosed female detective who dresses exclusively in black suits. The soundtrack is a kaleidoscope la la la, late-60s swinger music cooed by adolescent teenage girls, whom I can only naively dream are the intended demographic for a movie like CUTIE HONEY. Regardless of whether or not manga come-to-life is your particular cup of tea (with honey), the film exudes an appealing frantic energy. Director Hideaki Anno pays rapt attention to detail in translating the spirit of the comic to the screen, and Eriko Satoh embodies Cutie with as much Honey-Flash as humanly possible. When Cutie does battle with an Alice Cooperesque Madame Tiger-Claw, who brandishes Wolverine blades and a wrist-mounted, multiple rocket launcher, the fight choreography and montage, combined with the computer-generated devastation and Satoh's irrepressible characterization, is, admittedly, spectacular.

Everyone, including myself, was tickled pink (which, incidentally, is the predominate colour-scheme of Cutie Honey's superhero outfit) by how much this film brings GO NAGAI to dazzling life.

P.S. Before CUTIE HONEY, one of the shorts was an animated film called THE EXORCIST IN 30 SECONDS by Jennifer Shiman. I f@%\$*8 loved this film. It was exactly what the title said it would be: Friedenkin's treatise on the dangers of lapsed Catholicism played out in thirty seconds. The only twist is that it is re-enacted by a cast of playfully rendered, animated rabbits. One would be at pains (I hope) to describe the last time one saw an exorcism adhering to 16th century Roman-Catholic doctrine, but just try to imagine one that enlisted a pair of green-faced bunny version of Regan. Shiman expertly replicates scenes from Friedenkin's film shot-for-shot. The most memorable one has to be the over-the-shoulder, two-shot of one Catholic priest lamenting, "I think I've lost my faith Tom," to another Priest, with the two of them sporting two prominent buck teeth, white fur and floppy ears.

THE EXORCIST IN 30 SECONDS and other bunny shorts can be found at <http://www.angryalien.com>

Fantasia Festival's Paul Naschy Retrospective

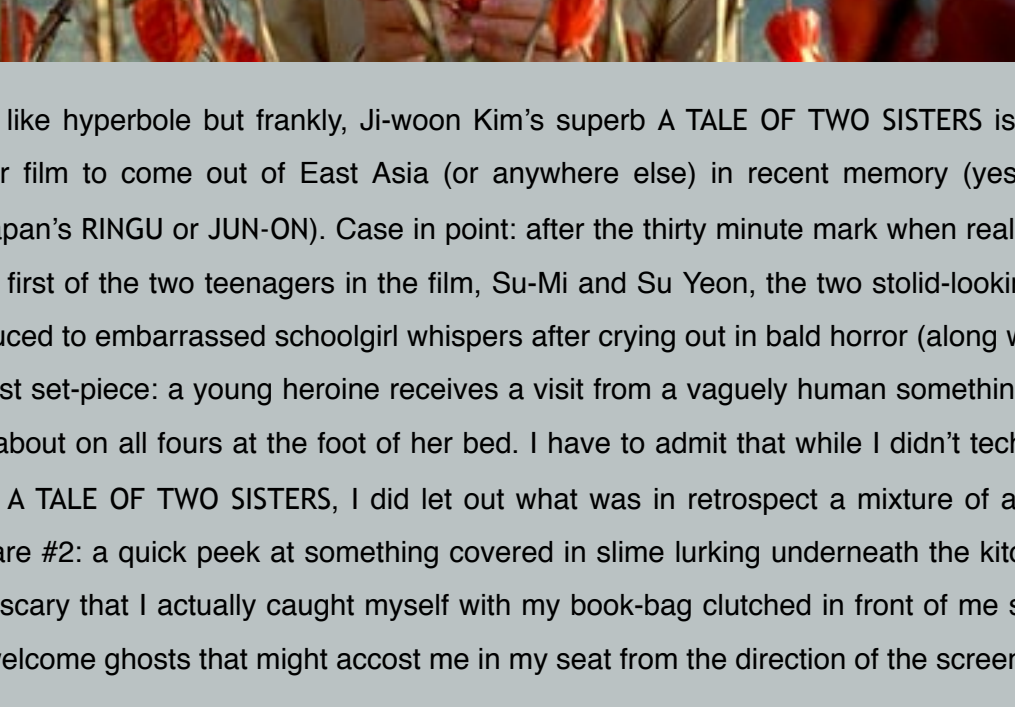
The fact that I, a student of horror cinema, had never heard of Paul Naschy, King of Spanish Horror, before this festival, now makes me blush. He is an actor who has been honoured with Spain's Gold Medal Award ("Senor Excelentissimo") as a result of having acted in, directed and written close to one hundred and thirty films ever since he first appeared as an extra in a biblical drama back in 1961. Virtually all the films he's been associated with in any capacity are fixed firmly within the horror genre and throughout them all, he's managed to refresh in his own singular way over-represented stocky juggernauts such as Dracula, Jack the Ripper, even Jekyll and Hyde. His most vaunted creation is the doomed, melancholic figure of the Wolfman named Count Wladimir Daninsky in human form. A recurrent character throughout Naschy's filmography, Daninsky has been crafted to resemble the typical tragic hero, albeit one cursed with lycanthropy in the same tradition as Lon Chaney, Jr., that is, dressed in slicks and fashionable long-sleeved shirts, with the requisite fangs and hirsute make-up. Naschy's only edge over Chaney is his ability to drool, he can fill buckets with the stuff once he really gets going.

Naschy was on hand to answer questions prior to the unveiling of his newest vehicle ROJO SANGRE, which he also wrote. The film is vigorously autobiographical in its telling of an aged, once great actor forced to compete with vapid young Turks and Hollywood silicone (he eventually decides the best way to deal with the competition is to murder it). Behind the film's rather high-gloss technical veneer, courtesy of director Christian Molina, there was a depressive, and at times satirical, cynicism woven within Naschy's onscreen embodiment, Pablo Thevenet. Thevenet understands he is a washed up thespian no one will touch. When they do dare to sully their manicured hands, it is to offer him humiliatingly base roles, that in his heyday, he never would have dreamed of entertaining. By film's end, Thevenet's decision to forgo his soul for revenge and his eventual re-emergence on top of the Hollywood game at the price of eternal damnation, obviously hints at Naschy's own Faustian thoughts of his role as a fading horror icon and the possible resting place of his falling star.

It wasn't until the Saturday night's double bill THE WEREWOLF VS. THE VAMPIRE WOMAN and DRACULA'S GREAT LOVE, that it was clear why Naschy has drawn so much praise for his work over the years. Naschy had an ability throughout the sixties and seventies to invigorate the tired and cliché conventions and characters inextricably associated with the horror film genre until then. Naschy's films are by no means lofty pieces of cinematic artistry. They mostly plumb the depths of exploitation with sadomasochism and apathetic soft-core pornography, but there were moments that were pleasures in the poetical, especially the slow-motion, midnight hunts by the two female vampires in DRACULA'S GREAT LOVE. While these films are enterprises in salacious exploitation, Naschy's screen presence as Dracula and the Wolfman manages to elevate itself far above the material, lending his characters an unlikely but communicable gravitas tragic to behold.

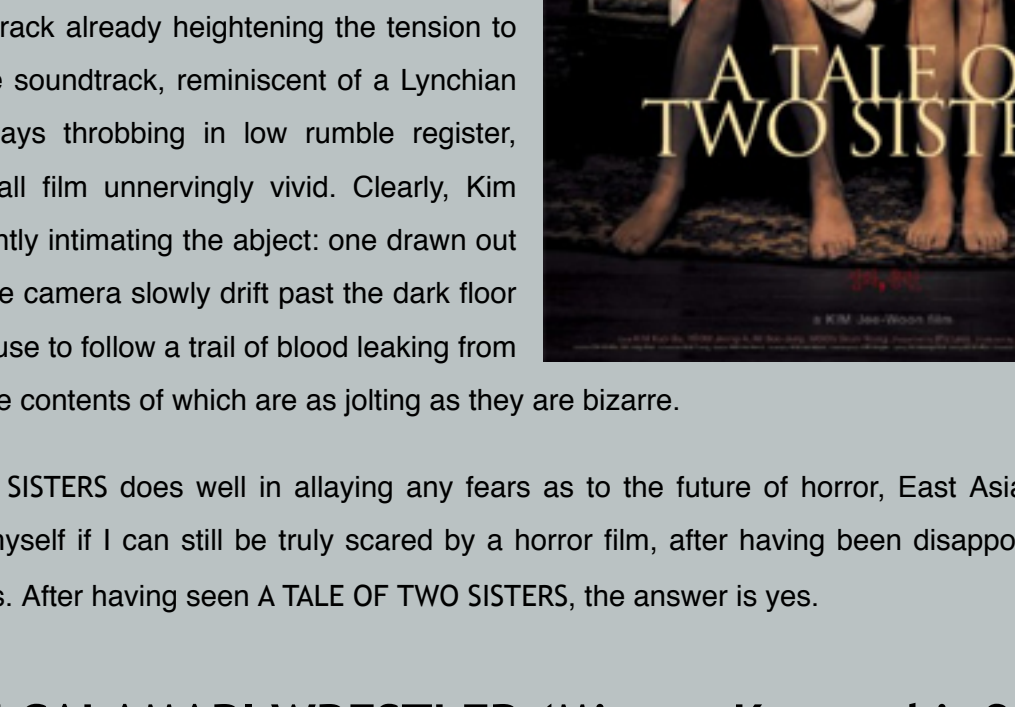
BAND OF NINJA (Nagisa Oshima, 1967)

Being an avid fan of anime goes the proverbial long way at Fantasia, especially with films such as Moon-Saeng Kim's WONDERFUL DAYS, which made its Canadian premiere at Fantasia. But there was nothing like Nagisa Oshima's BAND OF NINJA to call the weak-willed from the strong, really testing the fortitude of even the most devout of anime cultists this side of the Atlantic. The reason was this: BAND OF NINJA is composed entirely of fixed anime cells (it was inspired by the manga "Ninja Bugaicho") that are brought to life by camera pans and scans, which imbue the admittedly beautifully drawn images with the dynamism necessary to tell a particularly brutal and fantasy-driven tale of 16th century feudal Japan. True enough, some of the images in BAND OF NINJA were arresting as certain depictions of the aftermath of Samurai battle clearly evoked Goya's LOS DESASTRES DE LA GUERRA. But for non-anime fans, the film could be a trying two hour experience of static anime. This was distressingly – and at times comically – evident when in the first minutes of the film, the arresting (and arrested) quality of Samurai and Ninja characters flash-frozen in action stances, swords slashing through the air, were presented in proto, black-ink rendered, black and white images that made one feel as if one were reading a comic book.



If this weren't enough to make a few in the audience wish they had read the Fantasia program a little more closely (like me), the flood of fervent Japanese that made up the soundtrack added to the confusion because of the lack of subtitles. After a few minutes of nervous audience giggling, a slick 60s American voice-over with all the authoritative drawl of a "Duck and Cover" atom bomb propaganda reel began to relate the both the story and dialogue. It became apparent the problem was that unless one knew fluent Japanese, the film was tough to follow because of the convoluted plot, multiple characters and inadequate translation. You know you are in trouble when it takes a translated voice-over ten seconds to relate three to four minutes of constantly changing scene, dialogue and narration. The two people who accompanied me to BAND OF NINJA left after about 15 minutes, along with about ten others in the audience, but the theatre as a whole still remained full, perhaps just out of a curiosity to witness Oshima's take on the medium of anime. This kind of dedication is no surprise considering he has demonstrated his mercurial skill with films such as MERRY CHRISTMAS, MR. LAWRENCE, IN THE REALM OF THE SENSES, and GOHATTO, all three of which attest to his mastering of cinematic craft and storytelling.

PRAYER BEADS (Masahiro Okano and others, 2004)



PRAYER BEADS, a horror/occult television series imported for sampling at Fantasia, could be described as Japanese horror cinema's interpretation of EC Comic's TALES FROM THE CRYPT. But such a comparison oversimplifies the individuality of this imaginatively singular work. Created by Masahiro Okano (who has garnered an industry reputation for accomplished stx work), the series comes across as exercises that traverse both the subtle and the out and out graphically horrific, at least in the three installments I had the chance to see. As is the sometime trend with the presentation of episodic television work presented at film festivals, the audience was limited in the De Seve theatre to thirty or so patrons. But by their presence alone, the festival-goers who did attend the screening of the three episodes from PRAYER BEADS: ECHOES, CAT'S PAW and APARTMENT, demonstrated the desire for Japanese horror in any media.

Each episode begins with the series' opening credits, a disorienting, invasive, spiral view of someone's large intestine that could also very well be a vertiginous descent into Hell. Episode 7, ECHOES, begins by occupying a space outside the common modalities of horror (these familiar settings replaced by the bucolic world of a geriatrics' Japan), but the genre's topography finally peeks through when a small child discovers a severed arm while on a fishing expedition and an elderly couple revive their long-dormant sixth sense/telekinesis when they discover a young relative of theirs has been murdered. The episode taps, if perhaps symbolically, the potentially aggravated WW2 generation gap between the elderly and the young in a disturbing grand-daughter belittling the horrific. In one sequence, a grandmother and grandfather searching for their murdered grand-daughter meet an upstart with a possible role in the murder in an alley. It is to director/writer Naoki Kusumoto's credit, that through a display of heavily nuanced direction, the couple are imbued with only the slightest hint of the diabolical as they educate the young hoodlum in the consequences of crossing their path.

CAT'S PAW, Episode 8, is just as much a stripped-down tale of revenge and comeuppance as ECHOES, except it shifts its focus from the vengeful elderly to a young boy who just wants to live a better life (i.e. no bullies, no abusive fathers and everyone in happy spirit). This is accomplished through the unsolicited help of a computer-anime pussycat named Ryanta in the boy's home po, but, predictably, problems never seem to be solved as easily in the real world as they are in anime ones. When a sadistic pig is dismembered and reassembled in Ryanta's cartoon world at the request of the bespectacled protagonist, the real world properly translates this gesture with disturbingly gruesome results.

The final episode APARTMENT is a wicked little thriller that is, again, deceptively simple, but still sufficiently nightmarish. It is a dramatised study in patriarchal abuse as a teenage brother, sister and mother ride on the edge of emotional collapse when forced to endure the tirades of an abusive father. When a tense family dinner finally reaches its explosive apex, the reality of the family's situation leaves the viewer speechless.

Certainly, when browsing a film festival program, one doesn't immediately feel drawn towards watching grainy television episodes blowing up on the big screen but PRAYER BEADS challenges the stereotype of television as the lesser sibling of the two media.

A TALE OF TWO SISTERS (Ji -woon Kim, 2003)



This may sound like hyperbole but frankly, Ji-woon Kim's superb A TALE OF TWO SISTERS is, by far, the most frightening horror film to come out of East Asia (or anywhere else) in recent memory (yes, it is even more shocking than Japan's RINGU or JUN-ON). Case in point: after the thirty minute mark when really bad things start to happen to the first of the two teenagers in the film, Su-Mi and Su Yeon, the two stolid-looking guys seated to my left were reduced to embarrassed schoolgirl whimpers after crying out in bald horror (along with the story and dialogue) at the first set-piece: a young heroine receives a visit from a vaguely human something in a young girl's theatre, creeping about on all fours at the foot of her bed. I have to admit that while I didn't technically scream at any point during A TALE OF TWO SISTERS, I did let out what was in retrospect a mixture of a bark and a yelp, prompted by Scare #2: a quick peek at something covered in slime lurking underneath the kitchen sink cabinet. The film was so scary that I actually caught myself with my back-bag clutched in the form of shield-like, as if to ward off any unwelcome ghosts that might accost me in my seat from the direction of the screen.

A TALE OF TWO SISTERS was as uncanny as Freud ever intended. The first half-hour establishes an utterly fractured familial dynamic (one sister hates the father, the other sister is too scared to choose sides, the father exists somewhere inside his own emotionally distraught world and the step-mother is a haridan who only wants the father to herself, etc.) sequestered inside an old country house that becomes more and more unheimlich as the plot progresses. South Korean horror cinema became well-known with MEMENTO MORI back in 1999, proving that Korea was more than capable of taking on Japan with its own brand of horror (Japan's RINGU series crept onto the screens in 1998 garnering a then unforeseeable amount of popularity). The resultant East Asian buzz has prompted more of the cinematic same over the years and fuelled in part the fission surrounding the premiere of A TALE OF TWO SISTERS. I arrived one hour prior to showtime but was still significantly waaaaaay back in line with hundreds camped out in front of me.

One could argue that with A TALE OF TWO SISTERS, director Kim establishes bit by bit the generic boundaries of a Gothic imaginary. With sensual cinematography that teases out the subdued palette of a haunted home, something as simple as the manse in A TALE OF TWO SISTERS seems to strike a barely restrained malice, never mind the seethingly photographed horrors themselves that coax home all the grotesque ingredients perfect for an unnerving film such as this wicked in dark wood and bitter malevolence. Is the house itself evil or is the evil fuelled by a malevolent girl in a funeral dress? With the image-track already heightening the tension to a crescendo, the soundtrack, reminiscent of a Lynchian soundscape always throbbing in low rumble register, makes the overall film unnervingly vivid. Clearly, Kim excels at constantly intimating the abject: one drawn out sequence has the camera slowly drift past the dark floor boards of the house to follow a trail of blood leaking from a burp sack, the contents of which are as jolting as they are bizarre.

A TALE OF TWO SISTERS does well in allaying any fears as to the future of horror, East Asian or otherwise. I constantly ask myself if I can still be truly scared by a horror film, after having been disappointed by so many uninspired efforts. After having seen A TALE OF TWO SISTERS, the answer is yes.

THE CALAMARI WRESTLER (Minoru Kawasaki, 2004)

It may have been the lamentable fact that the end of Fantasia 2004 was close to final curtain, but the euphoria shown by the crowd on July 30th in the Hall theatre was surprising to say the least. But then again, when an audience is about to witness a spectacle entitled THE CALAMARI WRESTLER with the director in attendance, presence to provide a clue as to where he got the idea for a film about a wrestler who happens to be a squid, it's no surprise the audience seemed unusually excited. Yes, Minoru Kawasaki's THE CALAMARI WRESTLER is about a WWF-style Japanese wrestler who happens to be a bipedal cephalopod in calf-high wrestling boots. And yes, this squid pits his grappling acumen and four-corner stylin' from Kawasaki's private imagination and on to screen. Surpassing its own considerable hype, THE CALAMARI WRESTLER is as enjoyable as Kawasaki promised, with a self-reflexive, satirical sensibility throughout.

Plot-wise, it turns out that the Calamari Wrestler is in fact a reincarnation of a famous wrestler who has come back as a squid after he purges all desire through a rigorous Zen satori ritual. Eventually he rediscovers true love, finds out who his father and brother really are, and becomes the proud father of a healthy, baby squid. What is especially amusing about the film, besides the Calamari Wrestler himself and the vaguely disturbing day-glow sex sequences involving said Calamari and his girlfriend are repeated sequences that have wrestling pundits, businessmen and aficionados in the film complaining about the degeneration of the sport of Japanese professional wrestling due to the participation of a cephalopod. For all the characters in the movie, the simple fact is that yes, this squid's a good wrestler, BUT HE'S A SQUID! The character's consternation is portrayed in such a straight-faced manner that it is obvious that Kawasaki has a superb understanding of farce and satire. Shot on digital video, THE CALAMARI WRESTLER looks cheap because it is cheap. In this case cheap doesn't mean bad, because Kawasaki lifts farce to the level of the sublime with his insistent for what makes entertaining film.

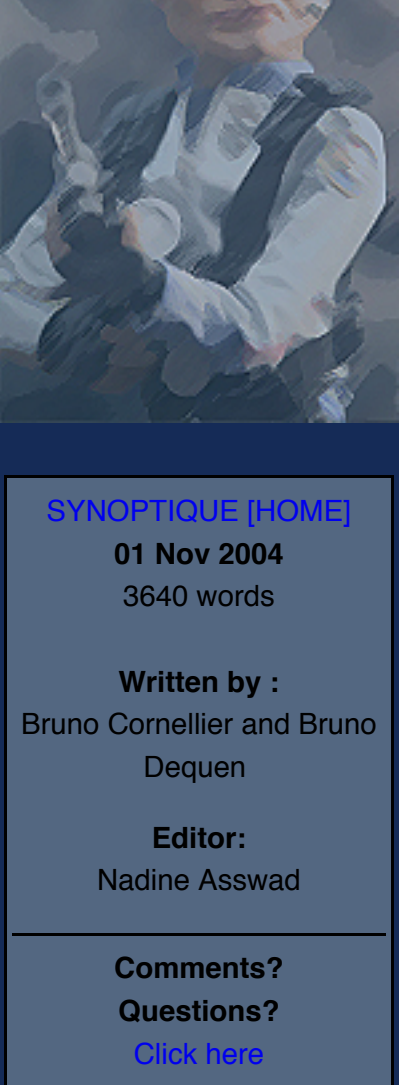
Friedrich Mayr reviewed DAY OF THE DEAD in Synoptique 1.

<http://articles.synoptique.ca/fantasia/>

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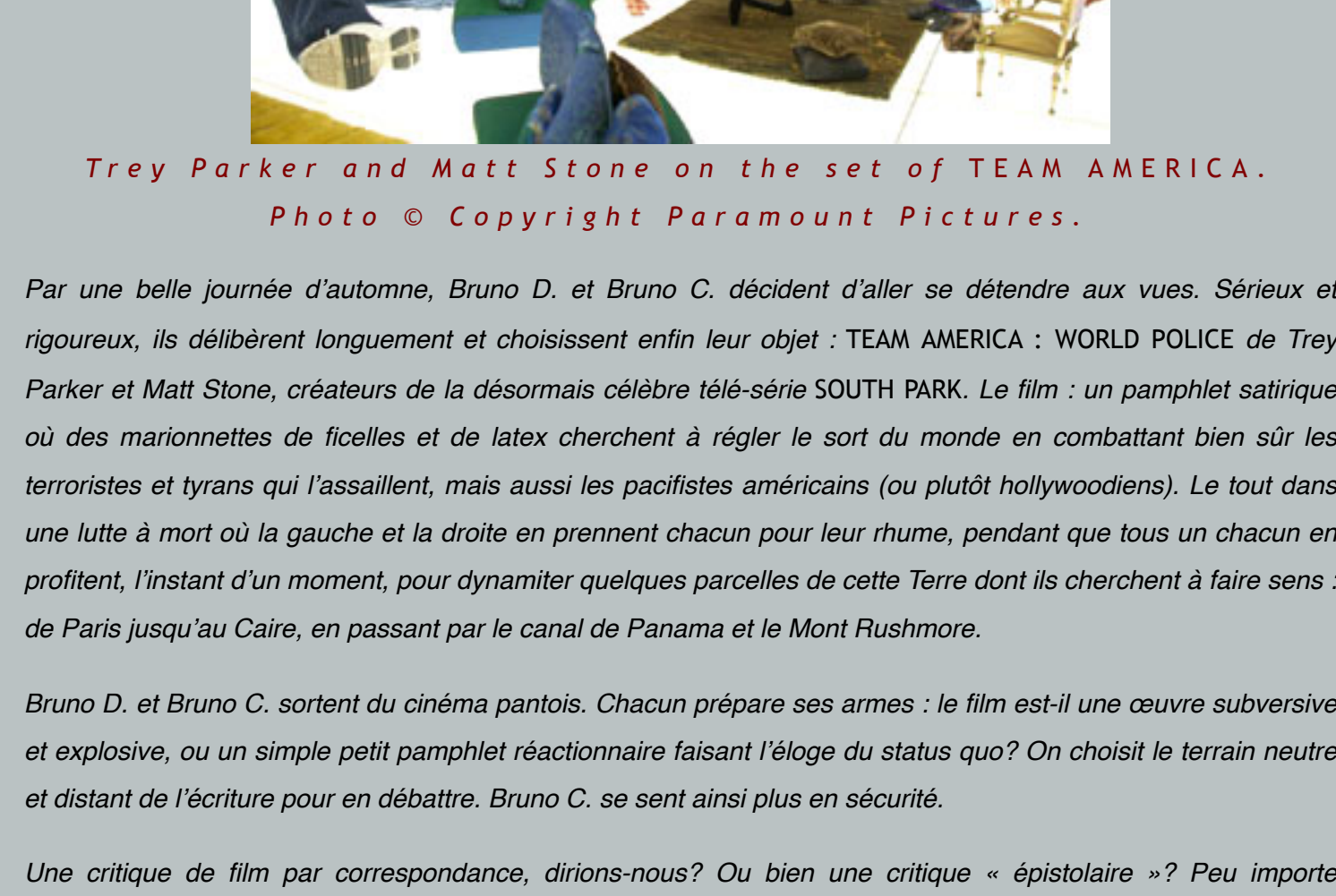
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TEAM AMERICA

by Bruno Cornellier and Bruno Dequen



Trey Parker and Matt Stone on the set of TEAM AMERICA. Photo © Copyright Paramount Pictures.

Par une belle journée d'automne, Bruno D. et Bruno C. décident d'aller se détendre aux vues. Sérieux et rigoureux, ils délibèrent longuement et choisissent enfin leur objet : TEAM AMERICA : WORLD POLICE de Trey Parker et Matt Stone, créateurs de la désormais célèbre télé-série SOUTH PARK. Le film : un pamphlet satirique où des marionnettes de ficelles et de latex cherchent à régler le sort du monde en combattant bien sûr les terroristes et tyrans qui l'assailent, mais aussi les pacifistes américains (ou plutôt hollywoodiens). Le tout dans une lutte à mort où la gauche et la droite en prennent chacun pour leur rhume, pendant que tous un chacun en profite, l'instant d'un moment, pour dynamiter quelques parcelles de cette Terre dont ils cherchent à faire sens : de Paris jusqu'au Caire, en passant par le canal de Panama et le Mont Rushmore.

Bruno D. et Bruno C. sortent du cinéma pantois. Chacun prépare ses armes : le film est-il une œuvre subversive et explosive, ou un simple petit pamphlet réactionnaire faisant l'éloge du status quo? On choisit le terrain neutre et distant de l'écriture pour en débattre. Bruno C. se sent ainsi plus en sécurité.

Une critique de film par correspondance, dirions-nous? Ou bien une critique « épistolaire »? Peu importe l'épithète. Faisons-en plutôt l'expérience. Ces « Siskel and Ebert » montréalais arriveront-ils un jour à s'entendre?

Commentons :

Cher Bruno C,

Je t'écis aujourd'hui en tant qu'ami et confrère. Car à la suite de notre visionnement de la dernière et Ô combien subtile comédie des créateurs de SOUTH PARK, j'ai senti chez toi un certain malaise. Il est dès lors de mon devoir d'amorcer avec toi une thérapie par l'écriture qui te permettra d'exposer avec calme et retenue académique les problèmes que te pose le film.

Comme tu le sais déjà, j'ai apprécié le film. J'admets que ce type d'humour n'est pas pour tous les goûts. Or je n'avais pas autant ri au cinéma depuis un bon moment! J'ai de plus remarqué que tu as toi-même pleuré de rire à plusieurs reprises... Selon moi, le film fonctionne assez bien en tant que satire des discours médiatiques et politiques actuels. Représenter tous les débats politiques actuels aux États-Unis sous la forme d'une lutte entre acteurs de cinéma est une façon intéressante de critiquer le simplisme et l'ineptie de ces discours, Michael Moore étant selon moi aussi didactique et manipulateur que le clan Bush. La séquence finale du film, dans laquelle deux discours aussi stupides l'un que l'autre s'affrontent, est une satire pertinente d'un univers politique dans lequel le pouvoir de conviction et l'apparence extérieure l'emportent sur le contenu du discours. Après tout, le personnage principal du film est tout aussi abruti que l'est Alec Baldwin, son alter ego.

Ceci étant dit, le film me pose quelques problèmes. Je me pose de nombreuses questions quant à l'efficacité réelle de la satire/parodie. En effet, le film, même s'il se moque ouvertement des productions hollywoodiennes à la Jerry Bruckheimer, en reproduit toutes les stratégies narratives. Ce choix a deux conséquences troublantes. D'une part, le spectateur, tout en étant conscient du jeu parodique, continue de jouir de l'efficacité du spectacle présenté. La scène de sexe ou bien les nombreuses et impressionnantes scènes d'action sont de bons exemples de cette ambiguïté discursive. Bref, reproduire, mimer les procédés de films que l'on veut critiquer, est-ce une méthode critique efficace?

D'autre part, les procédés narratifs classiques du cinéma hollywoodien suscitent l'identification au personnage principal. Cette reconnaissance relance, je le sais, un débat qui n'est pas récent. Hitchcock démontrait déjà il y a cinquante ans l'efficacité sournoise de ces processus d'identification. Dans le cas de TEAM AMERICA, cette identification aux personnages principaux a, je pense, des conséquences importantes lorsque vient le moment d'interpréter le film. En effet, ces stratégies cherchent à provoquer l'identification aux membres de l'équipe Team America. Ainsi, bien que les créateurs du film prétendent n'adhérer à aucune des orientations politiques qu'ils représentent, le film suscite malgré tout une identification envers les personnages représentant la droite américaine. Est-il possible de réaliser une satire sans parti pris en utilisant les procédés narratifs hollywoodiens?

J'attends avec grande impatience tes réflexions sur ce sujet.

Bruno D.

Cher Bruno D,

Je le reconnais (car de toute façon tu en étais témoin), le film m'a fait rire. Pleurer de rire même. Ceci dit, après avoir rendu à ma rate endolorie un repos bien mérité, et après avoir laissé au film le temps de germer et d'évoluer en moi, un certain arrière-goût persiste et me remonte en bouche. TEAM AMERICA : WORLD POLICE est certes, par son humour éclaté et grinçant, un film séduisant. Mais il s'impose en fin de compte, malgré son vernis instestpestif et subversif, comme un véritable petit cheval de Troie. Tu l'auras déjà noté, et je pourraisival ta réflexion : peut-on réellement subvertir un système de valeur ou de pensée en répétant ou en calquant sa forme, sa structure? Peut-on essuyer de la fange avec de la vase, et espérer en bout de ligne des draps immaculés?

Il me semble en effet qu'au-delà des questions formelles, l'inefficacité ou la faillite du film appartient aussi et surtout à la structure ou à la stature idéologique qu'il prend (ou du moins qu'il feint de ne pas prendre) : celle de l'antinomie, du manichéisme, de l'opposition binaire et exclusive entre le discours belligérant et irrationnel de la droite républicaine, et celui, pacifiste et béat, de la gauche libérale. On crucifie les acteurs politiques, l'utopisme et le manque de nuance de leurs discours en exagérant leur opposition, en dynamitant pour le rendre insondable le gouffre qui les oppose ou le terrain où ils auraient pu se rejoindre. « Exit » tout troisième terme, toute zone d'ombre qui pourrait survivre en dehors de la bêtise des polarités. On fait plutôt de la bêtise un veau d'or! Les cinéastes se gointrent de cette simplification abusive du monde et des idées qui le gouvernent, du refus (appartenant autant à George W. Bush qu'à Michael Moore) de reconnaître la complexité de la situation actuelle, et s'effondrent dans la facilité du cynisme, du pessimisme, du nihilisme. Leur satire fait voler les idoles en éclat sans jamais poser ou diriger notre regard ailleurs. Plutôt, on tire partout, à gauche et à droite, violemment, radicalement, sadiquement, mais pour se ré-ancrer nulle part. Pointer vers le vide. On semble vouloir dire que si le monde est dicté par la bêtise de ces discours exclusifs et aveugles, autant démissionner et rire un bon coup! Bref, TEAM AMERICA ne m'apparaît pas comme une parodie de la simplicité des dogmes qui ramènerait à la surface du monde la complexité qu'ont besoin de dissimuler ces dogmes pour survivre. Il s'agit plutôt d'une comédie qui récupère les dogmes pour son propre profit, les tourne en dérision pour n'offrir rien d'autre en échange qu'un abandon du monde, un absentéisme politique. Du cynisme, rien de plus. Volonté de néant, nihilisme, anarchisme bête et populiste, réactionnaire et rétrograde. On ne critique pas la dichotomie, on en jouit! La critique n'est rien d'autre qu'un simple mécanisme d'abjection des acteurs politiques afin de nous épargner l'angoisse de voir en eux le Même, d'y voir un peu de nous. Des boucs émissaires, sans plus! La seule alternative au monde selon Bush (ou à celui de Marx) devient la démission du monde. Aussi bien en rire? Mais peut-on, compte tenu de la gravité de la situation politique présente, se permettre un tel cynisme? Peut-on ne pas prendre la situation au sérieux?

Malgré sa satire agressive de l'esprit belligérant états-unien, ce film est peut-être le film le plus républicain qui ait été projeté sur nos écrans cette année! Car en s'appuyant sur la structure de pensée profondément manichéenne dont l'idéologie politique de l'équipe Bush dépend, TEAM AMERICA, même s'il dynamite « également » tout le monde, reste beaucoup plus aisément récupérable par la droite « va-t-en-guerre » que par la gauche pacifiste (dont le discours « moutonne » se fait littéralement *enclavé* en conclusion du film). C'est là que les structures filmiques du cinéma classique hollywoodien dont tu parlais redevenaient plus qu'intéressantes. Car malgré leur idiotie, qui sont les héros de ce film? Quel point de vue le film et sa mise en scène adoptent-ils pendant près de deux heures? Ou pire : quels sont les seuls personnages générant la moindre sympathie dans ce film? Sûrement pas les pacifistes : tous des « fags », des « pussies », des « tapettes »! Un film neutre, désengagé, non-aligné? J'en doute...

Bruno C.

Cher Bruno C,

Où est donc passée ta célèbre retenue académique? N'oublie pas que ta rage peut te faire sombrer dans le côté obscur de la Force...

Comme toi, je ne pense pas que le film soit neutre et désengagé. Néanmoins, je n'ai pas jusqu'à dire que cette farce grossière est le film le plus réactionnaire et républicain de l'année. Tout d'abord, la critique de la politique belligérante américaine que propose le film est beaucoup trop importante pour pouvoir être « aisément récupérable par la droite ». Après tout, au-delà de la bêtise des personnages principaux et de leur incapacité flagrante de compréhension et d'infiltration des autres cultures (souviens-toi du maquillage arabisant du héros-...), le film soumet toutes les actions guerrières du film aux décisions manifestement très peu fondées et souvent erronées d'un ordinateur. Même si le pastiche récupérateur du discours manichéen de la droite américaine empêche, il me semble, la critique de fonctionner à fond, je te trouve un peu excessif dans ton jugement. Il est quand même indéniable que la droite en prend pour son grade. De plus, penses-tu vraiment qu'il faille prendre le discours final sur les « dicks, pussies and assholes » au sérieux? Selon toi, est-ce en fait le véritable discours des créateurs du film? Étant donné que le film baigne constamment dans un humour à plusieurs degrés (degrés qui ne sont, je te l'accorde, pas nécessairement subtils), je ne pense pas qu'il soit possible d'interpréter les propos des personnages littéralement. Les éléments problématiques du film me semblent davantage liés au fait que cette œuvre est un pastiche humoristique. Or tout pastiche crée malgré lui un discours contradictoire. Ce que tu soulignes avec justesse dans ton texte : TEAM AMERICA, tout en prétendant moquer les dogmes, renforce paradoxalement le discours manichéen et stéréotypé de la scène politique et culturelle actuelle. Est-ce une raison pour nier l'impact de la critique dans le film? S'il-te-plait, Bruno, ne soit pas si excessif. Tu ne veux quand même pas devenir une nouvelle Laura Mulvey...

Si le film a une orientation politique (ou morale), celle-ci se situe probablement plus du côté du cynisme anarchiste, comme tu l'as noté toi-même. Ceci étant dit, je poursuivrai tes réflexions sur la portée ou l'utilité d'une telle démarche.

La réponse à cette question dépend en fait du rôle que l'on attribue à la satire. Bien sûr, tu as raison, les réalisateurs tirent sur tout le monde sans proposer d'alternative. Selon toi, en adoptant une attitude aussi universellement critique envers les discours actuels, ils ont la responsabilité de présenter un « troisième terme ». Je n'en suis pas si sûr. Certaines satires peuvent effectivement critiquer tout en apportant un point de vue nouveau, mais je ne pense pas que ce soit absolument nécessaire. La satire est un outil discursif que l'artiste peut utiliser afin de mettre à jour les problèmes qu'il perçoit dans le monde. Néanmoins, l'artiste n'est ni homme politique, ni spécialiste en relations étrangères. Son point de vue sur ces questions peut parfois être plus que pertinent, mais la présentation d'une idée novatrice ou alternative ne doit pas être un devoir précédant le droit d'expression. Bref, ces petits cons peuvent, selon moi, chier sur tout le monde, même s'ils n'ont rien de mieux à proposer.

Enfin, je ne crois pas que le film propose au spectateur une « démission du monde ». Bien au contraire, la critique des discours médiatiques dans le film invite le public à ne plus écouter passivement les débats actuels. Que le film n'expose pas une nouvelle forme d'engagement politique ou intellectuel ne signifie pas qu'il prône pour autant le nihilisme et l'absentéisme.

Bruno D.

Cher Bruno D,

Je ne nie pas le droit « de ces petits cons », comme tu les appelles, de défection sur tout le monde. Mais je pose mon droit de critiquer la mauvaise foi flagrante de leur démarche. En fait, je crois que ton raisonnement est contestable là où tu parles de « critique ». Car justement, il me semble erroné, dans ce cas-ci du moins, de poser le pastiche des cinéastes comme « critique » (des médias, des politiques dogmatiques, du patriotisme belliqueux). Mais d'abord, permets-moi une nuance. Quand je parle d'absence d'un « troisième terme », je n'implique pas que les cinéastes aient le devoir, après avoir détruit la bêtise des pôles exclusifs du débat, de nous proposer une « réponse », une « alternative viable ». Mais du moins d'en reconnaître la *possibilité*. En effet, l'efficacité de la critique, il me semble, *dépend d'une distance* à partir de laquelle le « problème » (et non sa « réponse ») peut se poser. En présence d'un tiers qui viendrait ancrer ou observer l'insuffisance des discours antinomiques, le film, déjà, ouvrirait la voix à la découverte que le monde ne peut pas être réduit à l'idiotie dogmatique – que ce soit celle d'un activisme gauchisant utopique ou celle d'un patriotisme ethnocentrique et belliqueux. Reconnaitre que le monde n'est pas ou n'a pas à être ce que veulent ces acteurs politiques dogmatiques. Concéder que le monde, justement, échappe au dogme. En d'autres termes, la *critique* (sociale ou autre) repose sur la distance qui permet de remettre en cause les structures à partir desquelles l'opinion est posée comme « vérité » ou comme modèle.

Or Trey Parker et Matt Stone ne s'attaquent ici qu'aux faits, à l'événementiel, et non à leur insuffisance dans une perspective d'ensemble. Ils ne posent pas le problème de l'incohérence de ces discours exclusifs et pensée par ces discours eux-mêmes. En se complaisant dans l'outrance et la mesure de ces deux discours irréconciliables, ils construisent un monde binaire et manichéen qui est autosuffisant, qui est *cohérent*, plutôt que de poser un troisième terme, le point de vue d'un tiers, qui viendrait en souligner l'*incohérence*. Là résiderait la critique. Sans cette distance, celle de la critique, le film ne fait en réalité que poursuivre et amplifier le cercle vicieux qu'entretient le discours des positions noire et blanche qu'il prétend « critiquer ».

Quant à la question de l'allégorie sexuelle entretenue par le film, ce n'est pas me recycler en nouveau puritain du XXIème siècle que d'en poser le problème. De fait, que les cinéastes adoptent ou pas l'opinion de leurs protagonistes m'importe bien peu. À la limite, ce n'est tout simplement plus pertinent. L'aspect ludique et parodique du film ne viendrait que bien lâchement et facilement excuser ou justifier la misogynie de leur humour. C'est le problème du « troisième terme », encore une fois. Car parodie ou non, le film et sa structure n'existent et ne sont fondés qu'en vertu de cette allégorisation sexuelle phallosocratique qui n'est jamais *critiquée* mais plutôt *justifiée* et même *légitimée* par la parodie! Éloge machiste que ce petit pamphlet rétrograde, où « those who have balls », les « dicks », occupent et génèrent l'action, contre les « pussies », les « fags » (ces « faux-hommes ») associés à l'inaction, à la *réaction*. Qui sont les personnages les plus vils, les plus méprisables, les plus pathétiques du film? Les « fags ». Qui sont les seuls personnages générant la moindre sympathie dans ce film, et ceux dont la perspective et le point de vue dirigent la mise en scène du film? Team America et son jeune acteur, transformé en machine à tuer, qui profère le discours final et cathartique du film – son éloge du phallus comme allégorie militaire à la FULL METAL JACKET – sous les yeux éblouis de sa concubine, le « pussy » qu'il baise allègrement et vigoureusement plus tôt dans le film. Jouissance du status quo sous le fallaciaux prétexte de la de la subversion « southparkienne » du « politically correct ». La subversion et l'espace de la parodie comme caution pour pouvoir se complaire dans un humour machiste primaire et belliqueux; la subversion servant à s'enlever la culpabilité de jouir du status quo et de la misogynie. Pure démagogie! Mauvaise foi! Et encore, je n'ai pas parlé de l'anti-intellectualisme flagrant de ces deux héros de l'animation bon marché. Un anti-intellectualisme qui, comme toutes les antinomies – anti-américanisme, anti-sémitisme, anti-capitalisme, etc. – illustrent bien la pensée simpliste et dogmatique de ses auteurs. Comment établir une critique basée sur une schématisation binaire et exclusiviste du monde? Où le monde n'est représentable qu'à l'intérieur de cette *dichotomie*?

Allez, perspicace Bruno D! Je te renvoie la balle. À ton tour de passer du côté obscur de la Force. (Une autre belle antinomie...).

Bruno C.

Cher Bruno C,

Manifestement, nous ne pourrions nous mettre d'accord quant à la portée idéologique de ce film. En fait, je pense que nos opinions respectives sont plus proches que tu ne sembles le croire. Comme toi, je pense que le film pose problème. Comme toi, je pense que la récupération sous forme de pastiche des modèles narratifs et discours préétablis encourage et renforce dans une certaine mesure ces modèles. Notre conflit semble vraiment se situer au niveau de la portée critique du pastiche. Je ne suis toujours pas convaincu que le renforcement paradoxal des modes de pensée dominants détruise toute la portée satirique ou critique du film, comme tu sembles le penser. Tu as raison d'affirmer qu'un troisième terme ou recul critique permettrait d'établir une véritable critique des discours dogmatiques actuels. L'absence de cette perspective est certes dommage, mais elle ne m'invite pourtant pas à nier en bloc le discours critique du film. Bruno, suis-je en train de tomber dans la mauvaise foi?

La suite de mon propos s'inspire de ta remarque sur l'anti-intellectualisme radical des créateurs du film. Je me suis soudainement rappelé l'essai d'Alain Finkielkraut intitulé *La défaite de la pensée*. Selon ce cher Alain : « Décrispé, 'cool', foncièrement allergique à tous les projets totalitaires, le sujet postmoderne n'est pas non plus disposé à les combattre. » En conclusion de l'ouvrage, il écrit : « Et la vie avec la pensée cède la place au face-à-face triste et dérisoire du fatigué et du zombie. » Ces mots me semblent bien résumer les problèmes que tu soulignes dans le film. Selon Alain, notre monde postmoderne aurait rejeté tous les acquis de la pensée des Lumières pour se complaire dans une société dans laquelle tout est culturel et rien ne doit être intellectuel. Nous évoluons ainsi dans un univers sans pensée, dans lequel les plaisirs et les goûts adolescents prédominent.

Il me semble que ces propos sont une façon intéressante d'élever notre débat à un tout autre niveau. Plutôt que de continuer à argumenter sur la valeur critique du film, nous pourrions ainsi réfléchir sur TEAM AMERICA dans le contexte culturel global décrit par Finkielkraut. Notre problème ne serait plus de comprendre comment le film fonctionne, mais plutôt pourquoi? En fin de compte, le problème du film serait-il qu'il a été fait par des « zombies », contre des « fanatiques »?

Bruno D.

Cher Bruno D,

De toute évidence, notre « joute de Titans » tire à sa fin. Dommage. Car plusieurs autres éléments de débats me brûlent les lèvres (ou plutôt le bout des doigts – forme épistolaire oblige!). D'ailleurs, j'aime bien l'image sur laquelle tu conclus ta dernière intervention : celle de cette lutte entre « zombies » et « fanatiques ». Bien sûr, il faudra (ou plutôt il *faudrait*, si le temps et l'espace nous en offraient le luxe) relativiser les ambitions de Finkielkraut. Le concept de « postmodernité » est certes riche lorsqu'on veut aborder et comprendre la mouvance et l'éclectisme dans la pensée contemporaine, mais il ne faudrait pas non plus tomber dans le diagnostique passéiste et prescriptif, dans le « jeunisme » ou dans une nostalgie « intellectualisante » toute académique. Mais ici je m'égare. Revenons donc à l'objet de notre débat : le film.

En effet, il semble que nos opinions ne s'excluent pas tant que ça. Ce ne serait donc pas les prémisses du notre argument qui divergeraient, mais bien nos conclusions (ou du moins le degré de notre « désamourment »). Je résume ma position : Peut-on opérer une véritable critique d'un état de pensée sans d'abord diriger tout regard sur le langage et les dogmes qui le rendent possible? S'attaquer aux *symptômes* du problème tout en laissant intact le sol ou la mentalité qui l'autorise? En d'autres termes, si les cinéastes s'approprient les symptômes du racisme, du sexisme et du patriotisme belliqueux pour en souligner par l'humour les excès, ils le font sans jamais postuler la « défaite » de ce langage. On se donne plutôt un espace où, lâchement, il redévoit possible d'en jouir. L'humour, une arme politique à deux tranchants : souvent libérateur, parfois « fascisant »... Mais soyons de « bonne foi » et reconnaissons tout de même que, indépendamment de ses qualités esthétiques ou de sa faillite politique, TEAM AMERICA, de par la controverse qu'il suscite et l'espace qu'il occupe dans la situation politique présente, constitue un fascinant objet de débat. Parfois malsain, certes, mais toujours provocateur. C'est toujours bien ça de gagné...

Bruno C.

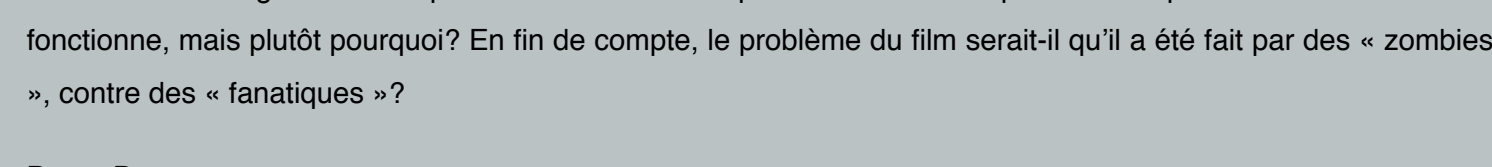


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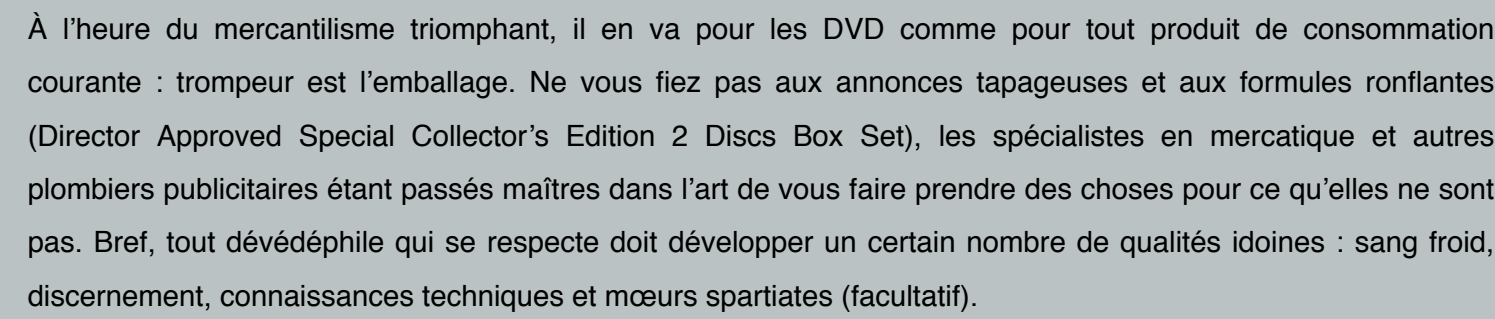


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by Michel Gagnon



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Ce petit rappel en guise d'introduction m'a semblé nécessaire avant d'aborder le sujet qui nous préoccupe aujourd'hui : les suppléments. Première constatation (merci à Colin Burnett, notre critique littéraire) : en règle générale, les bonis des films réalisés depuis que l'usage du DVD s'est répandu sont d'un intérêt moindre, pour ne pas dire nul. Malgré la valeur ajoutée qu'induit le mot même de supplément, il faut bien reconnaître que la plupart du temps nous nous voyons offrir un répétitif exercice d'auto-glorification, au cours duquel metteur en scène, acteurs, producteurs et responsables des effets spéciaux nous expliquent, confortablement installés dans un décor de circonstance, combien le film, le metteur en scène, les acteurs et les effets spéciaux sont formidables. Bref, de la fausse représentation. Un exemple, parmi tant d'autres, FIGHT CLUB (divertissement fascinant pour mâle trentenaire occidental à enfance traumatisée par absence du père), dont le DVD comprend un disque entier d'interminables suppléments qui nous exposent par le menu tout le génie mis à contribution pour produire cette chose qui a la prétention d'être cinématographique. Même certaines *extra features* d'œuvres plus anciennes n'échappent pas à ce regrettable travers : à preuve celle de PULP FICTION qui n'est qu'un fastidieux panégyrique de Tarantino, cinéaste qui n'en n'a pourtant pas besoin. Fort heureusement, existent des suppléments dignes de ce nom qui nous informent pertinemment sur le film qu'ils accompagnent. En voici quelques-uns qui, à mon humble avis, appartiennent à cette catégorie.

VERTIGO (Universal) : Les films d'Hitchcock sont plutôt bien lotis au chapitre des suppléments : que ce soit Universal, Warner ou Criterion, les éditeurs DVD de sir Alfred ont bien fait leur travail. Je retiens VERTIGO pour son très riche documentaire qui, en seulement trente minutes, est un panorama très complet sur cette œuvre merveilleusement inaltérable, de ses origines littéraires jusqu'à sa récente restauration (avec Kim Novak et Scorsese en prime).

CITIZEN KANE (Warner) : Les extra sont à la hauteur du monument, puisqu'un disque est réservé à l'exceptionnel *The battle over Citizen Kane*, un incontournable numéro de la très sérieuse série *The american experience* produite par PBS et qui aurait pu s'intituler Comment Citizen Kane a trucidé Orson Welles. Deux heures de pur régali...

CLEOPATRA (20th Century Fox) : Cas intéressant où le supplément est meilleur que le film lui-même. Le coffret consacré à l'obèse et bancal opus de l'infortuné Manckiewicz (qui a fini le film sous amphétamines), contient deux disques pour le seul film et un troisième pour l'édifiant *making of* qui relate deux heures durant le comment et le pourquoi de ce ratage colossal qui accula la Fox à une quasi-faillite. Bush aurait été bien inspiré de le visionner avant d'envahir l'Irak.

COUP DE TORCHON (Criterion) : L'entrevue exclusive accordée par Tavernier pour l'édition DVD nord-américaine de son film le plus cynique (et le plus réussi en ce qui me concerne), vaut à elle seule la location, sinon l'achat dudit produit. Un vrai cinéaste parlant de son film avec plaisir, simplicité et humour, voilà qui fait du bien.

THE TREASURE OF THE SIERRA MADRE (Warner) : D'une facture plutôt conventionnelle et présentée par un Robert Mitchum limite caco-chyme, la biographie de John Huston, qui occupe le disque 2 du DVD, contient tout de même quelques perles rares (notamment d'excellents extraits d'entrevue du Monsieur). Pour 24\$, si vous ajoutez le film (chef d'œuvre quasi-biblique), vous en avez amplement pour votre argent.

MISSION (Warner) : Ce DVD souffre du syndrome Cleopatra : le disque 2 (les suppléments) est meilleur que le disque 1 (le film). Mission n'est pas franchement mauvais, mais le peu subtil Roland Joffé a vraiment gâché un sujet en or. En revanche, parmi les bonis, le reportage que la BBC a effectué sur le tournage est tout ce qu'il y a de plus intéressant puisqu'il se penche plus particulièrement sur le cas de cette petite communauté d'autochtones amazoniens qui, pour les besoins du film, fut entièrement transplantée à des milliers de kilomètres de chez elle. Au passage, Joffé enfonce Werner Herzog pour la façon dont il a traité les figurants amérindiens lors du tournage de Fitzcarraldo.

LE NOTTI DI CABIRIA *Nights of Cabiria* (Criterion) : L'essentiel des suppléments de ce film sublime est constitué d'une captivante entrevue exclusive avec Dominique Delouche, improbable et éphémère assistant-réalisateur de Fellini, dont l'expérience auprès du maître est singulièrement émouvante. On y apprend beaucoup sur sa façon de travailler et son état d'esprit de l'époque (1955).

TAXI DRIVER (Columbia) : L'exemple parfait du *making of* instructif. Le genre qui vous fait encore plus aimer le film, ce qui n'est pas une mince affaire dans ce cas-ci. Sobriété dans le ton, clarté dans la présentation, intelligence du propos. Bref, Martin Scorsese.

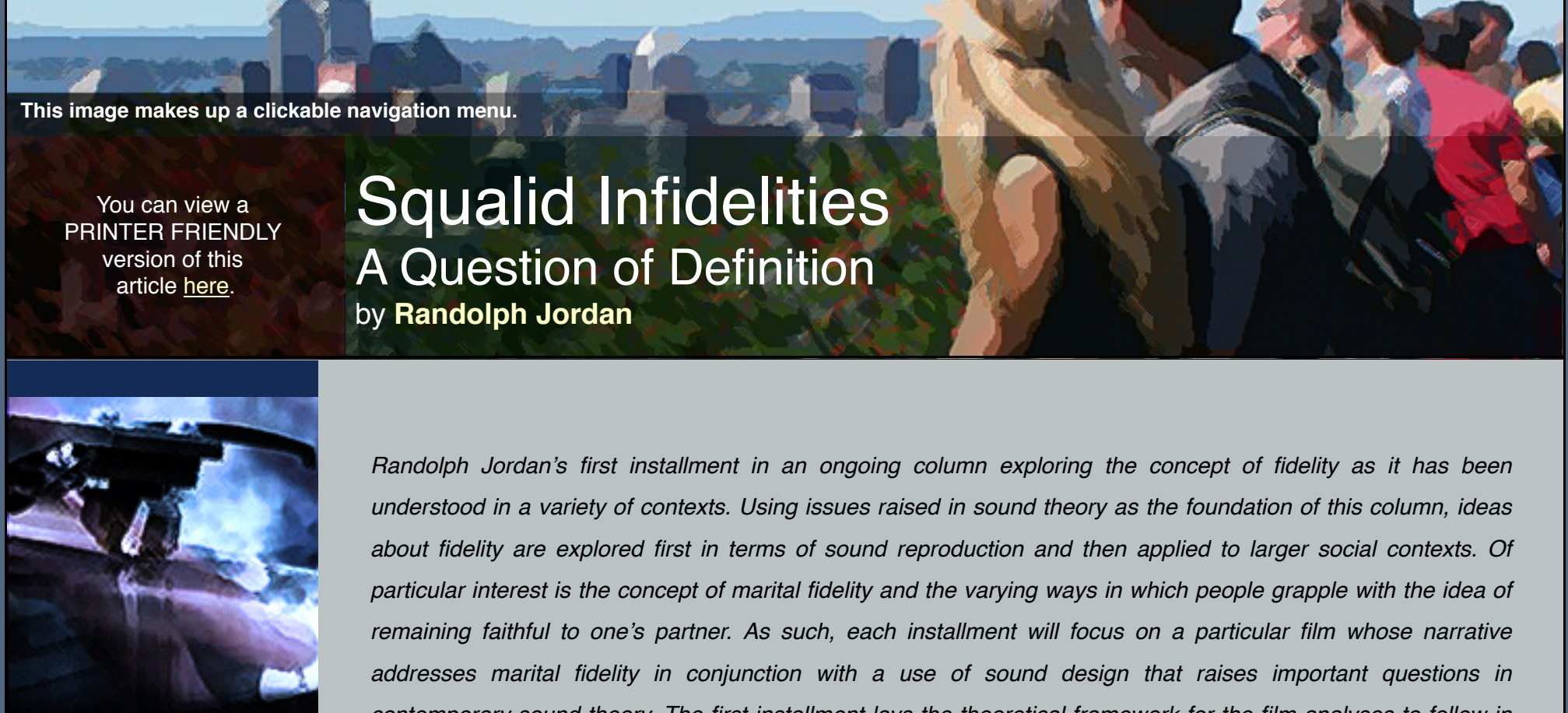
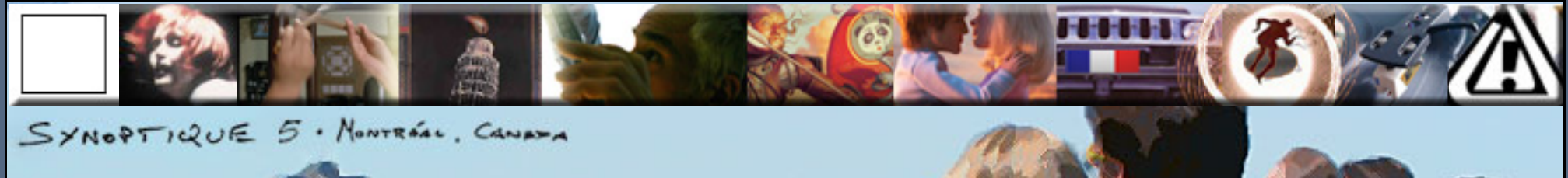
Je reviendrai sans aucun doute sur le même sujet, les parutions de DVD éditions spéciales de films précédemment sortis tout nus se succédant à un rythme effréné. Mais qui s'en plaindrait ?

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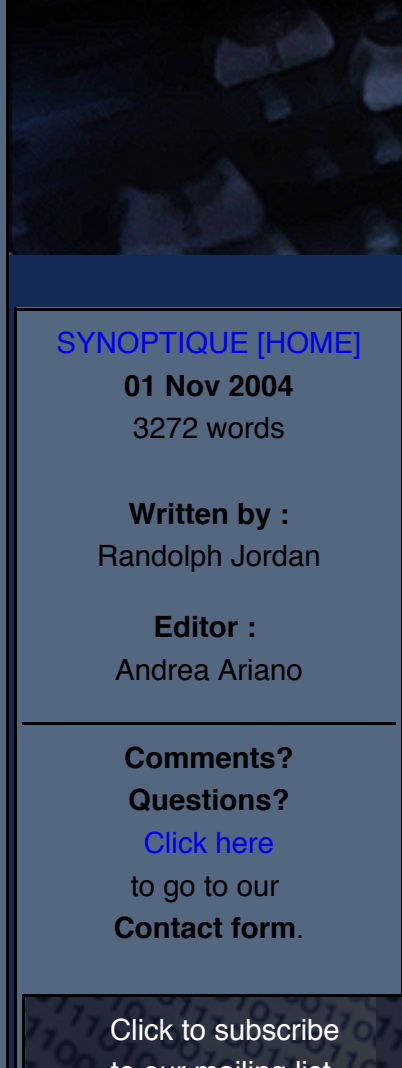
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Squalid Infidelities

A Question of Definition

by **Randolph Jordan**



SYNOPTIQUE [HOME]
01 Nov 2004
3272 words

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Randolph Jordan

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Randolph Jordan's first installment in an ongoing column exploring the concept of fidelity as it has been understood in a variety of contexts. Using issues raised in sound theory as the foundation of this column, ideas about fidelity are explored first in terms of sound reproduction and then applied to larger social contexts. Of particular interest is the concept of marital fidelity and the varying ways in which people grapple with the idea of remaining faithful to one's partner. As such, each installment will focus on a particular film whose narrative addresses marital fidelity in conjunction with a use of sound design that raises important questions in contemporary sound theory. The first installment lays the theoretical framework for the film analyses to follow in subsequent editions.

I've taken the title for this column from one of the most formidable on-screen marital confrontations in recent memory: Charlotte Rampling explaining to Stellan Skaarsgard in *SIGNS AND WONDERS* (Jonathan Nossiter, 2000) how he destroyed his family by taking off with home-wrecker Deborah Kara Unger. "First you betray me with your squalid infidelities," she says in a voice so scathing that I can feel it beneath the surface of my skin. "Then after I forgive you, because I'm still in love with you, you repay me by destroying the few things that you left unbroken. Have you any idea what we went through when you left?"

The question that she poses to her ex-husband here concerns the relationship between what's going on in his mind and the reality that exists outside of it. This is a questioning of the faithfulness of reality's representation within the mind of a human being. Or perhaps, it is a questioning of what we mean when we use words like "reality" in the first place. The look on Skaarsgard's face while on the receiving end of Rampling's brilliantly delivered wake-up call indicates that he's living on another planet: safe within his own perception of the way things are. Furthermore, his reality is one that he wishes to manipulate to his own ends. This is evident by his selective re-contextualization of the aforementioned conversation, which he accidentally recorded on a portable cassette machine. While sitting on the subway after leaving his ex-wife that night, and then later while out for a walk with his daughter, he isolates the words "I'm still in love with you" from the context of the rest of the sentence in which it was spoken; he hears what he wants to hear. The tape recording is an outward manifestation of his selective perception. He remains faithful only to an idea in his mind. And, the recording technology is at a loss to present him with anything further. So, to answer Rampling's question: no, he has no idea what they went through when he left.

We're all familiar with the weight the concept of marital fidelity carries with it. The fact that a transgression of fidelity can be described as "squalid" emphasizes the binary positive/negative relationship that our idea of fidelity has with its opposite. It is not surprising to find this concept within areas of human experience that would seem quite a distance from considerations of one's marital vows and always in use with similar connotations of grave importance. One such area is the idea of fidelity as it is found in the realm of the audiophile. Fidelity of the highest order is the Holy Grail for the culture of the Hi-Fi and its attendant enthusiasts. But the question that gets asked over and over is, to what are we trying to be faithful? And if there does exist something concrete to which we have decided to be faithful, what exactly constitutes this faithfulness?

Many have explored the different ideas of fidelity that have emerged in the world of sound recording, either from audiophile perspectives, or from film scholars wrestling with the place of sound in the domain of the moving image. This column will be an ongoing exploration of how the notion of fidelity has been understood and applied in the realm of sound recording and transmission. In each installment, I will be placing issues of fidelity and sound theory within the context of broader areas of human experience. To that end, each column will concentrate on the analysis of a specific film which makes productive use of our conflicting notions of fidelity within their forms and narratives (if anyone still finds this distinction palpable). Particular attention will be paid to films where sound design raises important issues in sound theory. Such films can be related to their treatment of the concept of marital fidelity within the stories they tell. My hope is that these films will be understood from a fresh perspective by focusing on their sound design. All the while, issues in sound theory will be better understood by relating them to more common realities of everyday thinking.

So, to begin our journey, a little tour of the ways in which the word "fidelity" has been applied over the years will prove useful to my purpose here. Before getting practical, however, let's take a conceptual detour. If we think about fidelity in the marital sense, what we have in many instances of squalid transgressions is a desire of the offending parties to have their cake and eat it too, do we not? Ideally, there is a sense that someone participating in an infidelity would want to enjoy the fruits of a deeply committed relationship, while pursuing interests outside of this relationship. The desire to have the best of multiple worlds often places these multiple worlds within a dichotomy: a contradiction that seems hard to embrace. But if we are to believe the postmodernists (whoever they really are), we must accept that contradictions are a necessary and unavoidable part of life. Therefore, the only way to deal with a contradiction is to embrace it (or so the story goes...).

Does this mean that it may, in fact, be possible to enjoy the experience of a live concert while sitting in our living rooms? Does this make any sense? No, of course it doesn't. The conflation of living room space with that of a concert venue is a contradiction. And yet, slogans like "Is it live or is it Memorex" tap into the idea that having a live band playing in our living-rooms through the magic of Hi-Fi media is something to strive for, if not expect. Even if we talk about sound, in and of itself, as the primary substance of our live music experience (which it really isn't), we still can't come close to recreating a live sound in our living rooms and we never will (for reasons that are more architectural than anything else). However, this doesn't mean that listening at home is inferior to "seeing" it live. The live music ideal has been so glorified that it's hard to imagine someone suggesting that they prefer to listen to music at home. But there are those who claim that listening at home may, in fact, sound better. There was a time when we might have been able to get away with the snobbery of the symphony-goer, given that this particular form of music lends itself well to being heard un-amplified within specially designed acoustic spaces. But we live in a world of many sounds, and many of these sounds are problematic for the symphonic ideal. The notion that Western Classical musical standards embody the Platonic forms, to which all of us must reach for but never grasp, is dying. Indeed, we now have music that actually cannot exist in a live context. What are we to make of that? And to what must our Hi-Fi units be faithful when representing these kinds of sounds?

Let's return to the notion of having one's cake and eating it too, or at least the problems of contradiction that this well known metaphor conjures up. The other day, I was walking along the street and I saw someone riding a bike in high-gear but moving very slowly. He was struggling hard to push the pedals, though the surface on which he was pedaling was flat. At the time this image struck me as bizarre. It seemed, in fact, to be happening in slow motion. His pedaling movements were clearly those of someone in high gear, yet his forward momentum was at a snail's pace. What do we mean when we say, "someone is in high gear"? We generally reserve this term for someone moving at a very fast pace. Here we have an example of someone who is literally in high gear, yet remains in the wrong context for this high gear to translate into fast motion. This results into a kind of visual paradox, even though the cause and effect of the cyclist's movements are nothing hard to understand. On a deeper philosophical level, this example illustrates that there are ways in which we can discover fastness within slowness, and vice-versa. Whether we're talking about music or quantum physics, perceptions can be adjusted to observe both the long and the short of our objects of analysis.

Consider the hand-painted films of Stan Brakhage, one of the world's greatest proponents of the power of perceptual awareness (beyond that which is taught by Renaissance perspective and the prison house of language). A recurring complaint about these films is that they move too quickly, that the detail of each exquisitely hand-painted frame is lost by their split-second existence in the spotlight. The result doesn't seem to flow smoothly, as we are bombarded with 24 paintings per second over the course of several minutes. What happens, though, is that this speed of movement creates an environment where we can see into other areas of the image. We find the underlying rhythmic structure and textural patterning, which depends on our inability to focus on any one of the motion's single elements. And so, slowness emerges from the fastness, creating simultaneity of experience. This may seem theoretically contradictory but, in practice, it is plain to behold.

The example of Brakhage's hand-painted films suggests our ability to experience simultaneities. Things can be both slow and fast at the same time, and each world can be a part of the other. Many would argue that similar things could be said about the idea of fidelity in the context of marital relations. Why must a commitment to one person exclude involvement with another? Why must a fast moving image negate the possibility for the experience of the slow? Isn't it just a matter of defining our terms and then shifting our focus to accommodate meaning? Does commitment in a relationship mean only one thing: abstinence from sexual encounters with other people? Surely not.

Commitment, like so many things, is open to interpretation depending on context. So, let's think about context for a moment. In "The Material Heterogeneity of Recorded Sound," Rick Altman spells out what has been one of the main problems with the theorization of film sound: "the apparent assumption that all film sounds have the nature of musical notes...[that] they are single phenomena, produced instantaneously, emitted from a point source, and perceived in an immediate and direct fashion."^[1] Discussing the problems inherent in applying Western music theory to examinations of sound in film, he continues: "musical notation diverts attention from sound's discursive dimensions, concealing the fact that sound is in reality multiple, complex, heterogeneous, and three-dimensional."^[2] Thus, for Altman, every sound is a unique narrative event that is not heard identically by any two listeners. Adding the level of recording to this understanding of sound, he then notes that "when we listen to recorded sound we are therefore always listening to a particular account of a specific event."^[3] Evoking the proverbial "tree falling in a forest," he continues: "By offering itself up to be heard, every sound event loses its autonomy, surrendering the power and meaning of its own structure to the various contexts in which it might be heard, to the varying narratives that it might construct."^[4] So, he brings the role of perception to the forefront of discussions on sound.

The narrative analysis of sound that Altman speaks about is an analysis of what he calls the sound's "spatial signature."^[5] He refers to the subjectivity of interpreting these narratives, based on the listener's spatial position with respect to the source of the sounds, as the *Flashman* phenomenon (in reference to the ubiquitous Kurosawa film – 1950 – and its play on the idea of subjective realities).^[6] To complicate matters, Altman notes that in addition to spatial signature, sound recordings also carry signatures of their own, "some record of the recording process, superimposed on the sound event itself."^[7] Given all these factors, Altman's main conclusion is that every sound is effectively a heterogeneous event that can never be heard by any two listeners in the same way. Thus, when analyzing sound, great care must be taken to pay attention to every little nuance. It is in these nuances that key information about the sound's production and propagation through space will be found.

In his chapter on sound theory in *Sound Technology and the American Cinema*, James Lastra lays out the theoretical foundations behind Altman's position and situates him in the context of the bigger picture. He finds that debates about "originals" versus "copies" are at the heart of discussions about sound's heterogeneous nature. He identifies the philosophical category of non-identity theorists (including the likes of Rick Altman, Alan Williams and Thomas Levin) whose basic premise is that "even the original itself is intrinsically multiple and internally differentiated – a fact we recognize every time we choose between 'good' and 'bad' seats in an auditorium."^[7] Wherein lies the coveted original sound at a concert consisting of multiple sources playing to potentially thousands of different points in the space of the hall? Given this lack of an identifiable original sound, he notes that Levin argues for a "critical analysis" of the sound apparatus to understand what transformations a sound undergoes in the act of reproduction. However, Lastra feels that it would be problematic to base such an analysis on the assumption that original sound can in fact exist and be measured against its reproduction, given the stance of non-identity theorists that no original can actually exist.^[9] So he asks the question: "Why, then, is the [idea of the] 'original sound' so persistent?"^[10]

He finds that the answer lies with Theodor Adorno's work in "The Radio Symphony" written in 1941. Adorno argues that the technological transformation of certain kinds of music—in this case, a Beethoven symphony—can serve to tamper with the structure of the piece itself and thus degrade its essence.^[11] The idea of this loss of essence in a mechanical reproduction (calling to mind Walter Benjamin's important essay on the subject)^[12] lingers to this day. It not surprising that this notion can be found in the questions posed about sound in relation to film. As Lastra suggests: "By defining sound recordings as partial, transformed, or to some degree absent with respect to the original, they present an almost Platonic theory of recording, where both truth and being decline as one moves toward the copy."^[13] However, he also notes that:

Non-identity theorists assume their own equally biased model of listening—one that universalizes the acutely sensitive symphony listener [...] Such sensitivity is not characteristic of the way we engage with most sounds [...] They are functions of a mode of listening appropriate to a particular situation, and need to be analyzed as such.^[14]

Lastra maintains that, for most people, not every nuance of a sound's characteristic is inherently meaningful. This also harkens back to Adorno's work, since for him some music is not as affected by electronic transmission or recording as others, and it depends on the particular nuances of the piece in question.^[15] Thus, the extreme attention to detail called for by non-identity theorists like Altman seems to detract from the more important task of analyzing how sound is being used in film to put forth meaningful information. Lastra suggests that this latter perspective is more in line with Christian Metz's ideas. Metz suggests that if the legibility of sound allows us to understand what it represents, then the difference between the experience of real or recorded sound is minimal^[16] In this model, the idea of an original sound is manageable if it is taken to refer to a sound's legibility as opposed to its minute details and possible variances based on the listener's spatial orientation.

Given the vagaries inherent in various arguments about original sounds and their copies, the final upshot of Lastra's argument lies in understanding sound recording as "representation" instead of "reproduction." With this distinction Lastra eliminates the onus of recording technology to actually reproduce a sound in favor of simply representing it.

As Lastra suggests, the conceptual difference between reproduction and representation is clearly articulated in the way that recording sound for film has brought together two contradictory, though not necessarily incompatible, traditions of representation: those of the phonographic industry, and those of the telephonic industry. For Lastra, the question of fidelity comes down to two main perspectives on the subject: the phonographic model, which emphasizes perceptual fidelity, and the telephonic model, which emphasizes intelligibility.^[17] Perceptual fidelity refers to the idea that the sound represented remains faithful to the sound as it might be heard if the listener were occupying the space represented. Telephonic intelligibility, as one might guess, gives prominence to the treatment of narrative elements, in particular the spoken word. Thus, the telephonic model of representation seeks to render the human voice as clearly as possible, most often at the expense of other noise that would ordinarily be heard in the space represented. Indeed, this removal of background noise, and the enhancement of the human voice, has become the holy grail of telephone designers in the age of digital transmission, hence the appropriateness of the term "telephonic."

If we think about these two modes of representation even for a moment, it becomes readily evident that one does not exclude the other in any given film. We regularly encounter films where one scene will make use of the telephonic model while another will emphasize perceptual fidelity. Moreover, surround sound technologies can actually give us both approaches simultaneously by using center channels to transmit intelligible dialogue, while the surround speakers deliver the immersive sound of the space represented on screen. Does this constitute a contradictory philosophy, or a stylistic incongruity on the part of the filmmakers? Or is it more a matter of understanding that the use of one mode, in any given place, doesn't necessarily undermine any other use of the alternative mode? Let's put it this way: does sleeping with one person necessarily undermine one's relationship with another person? Might a shift in expectation, by moving from reproduction to representation, somehow relate to a shift in our understanding of marital fidelity?

It comes down to defining the terms of a relationship within the context of that relationship's existence. In *Audio-Vision*, Michel Chion uses the term "definition" in the way that audiophiles use fidelity: the resolution of the sound in question. "Fidelity" implies a faithful representation to something; "definition" concerns the quality of the representation in and of itself. So, in the same way that Lastra moves from "reproduction" to "representation," Chion moves from "fidelity" to "definition." Both Chion and Lastra thus avoid the problems associated with the notion that something that has been recorded or transmitted can stand in for something that has not been mediated in these ways. I would suggest that the negotiators of any given relationship should move away from abstract notions of what it means to be faithful. Rather, they must concentrate on defining the terms of their particular relationship in order to clarify their situation within its singular context.

Armed with this backstory, our next installment will turn attention to the first of the films to be scrutinized in light of issues of fidelity: *EYES WIDE SHUT* (Stanley Kubrick, 1999). Here, Tom and Nicole have clearly experienced issues with the differences between the inner world of their thoughts, and the outer world of their actions. This all comes to a head in a mass orgy presided over by a choirmaster who manipulates synthesizers and samplers, the very technologies that lie at the heart of contemporary debates about originals versus their copies!

We'll have a field day. Stay tuned...

Randolph Jordan interviews Richard Kerr elsewhere in this edition.

>>>

¹ Altman, Rick. "The Material Heterogeneity of Recorded Sound." *Sound Theory, Sound Practice*. Rick Altman, ed. New York: Routledge, 1992. 15.

² *Ibid.*:16.

³ *Ibid.*:16.

⁴ *Ibid.*:19.

⁵ *Ibid.*:24.

⁶ *Ibid.*:24.

⁷ *Ibid.*:26.

⁸ Lastra 2001:125.

⁹ *Ibid.*:127.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*:127.

¹¹ Adorno, Theodor W. *THE RADIO SYMPHONY*. 1941. Reprinted in *Essays on Music*. Richard Leppert, ed. Susan H. Gillespie, trans. Berkeley: UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA Press, 2002:258.

¹² Benjamin, Walter. *THE WORK OF ART IN THE AGE OF MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION*. *Illuminations*. Hannah Arendt, ed. Harry Zohn, trans. New York: Schocken Brooks, 1968: 217-252.

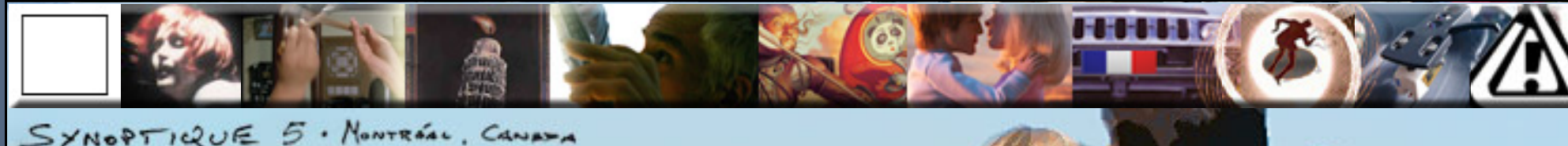
¹³ Lastra 2001:131.

¹⁴ Lastra 2001:132.

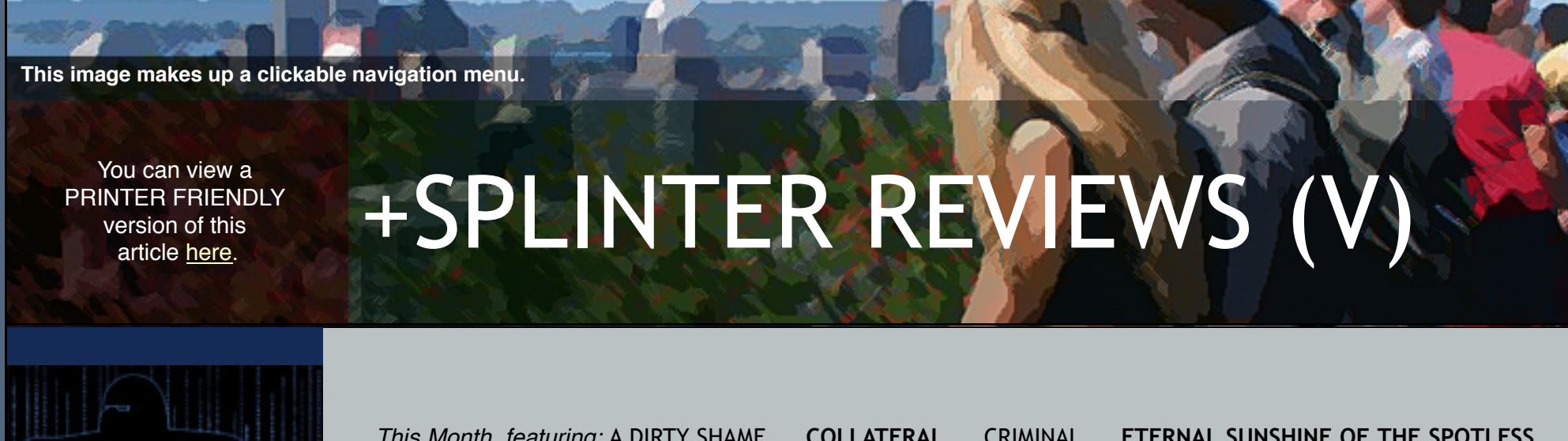
¹⁵ Adorno 2002: 252.

¹⁶ Lastra 2001: 126.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 138-39.



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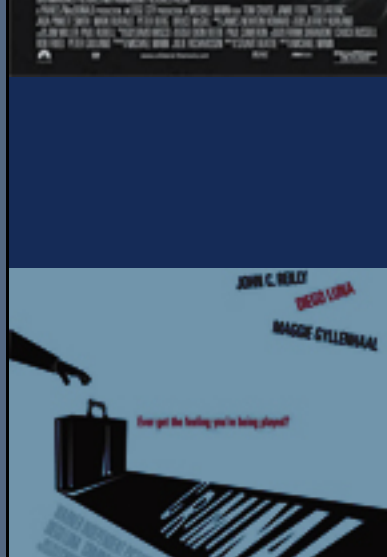
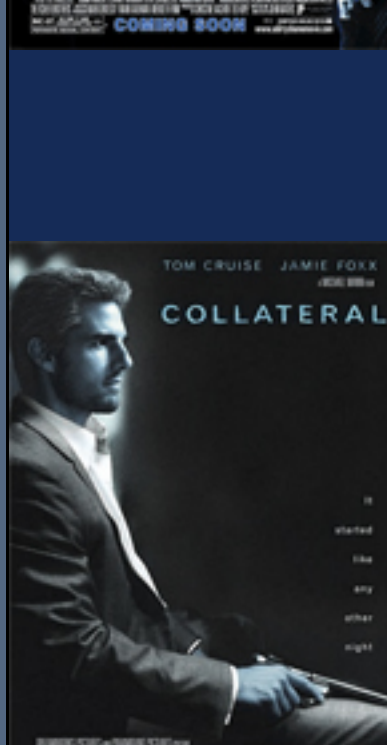
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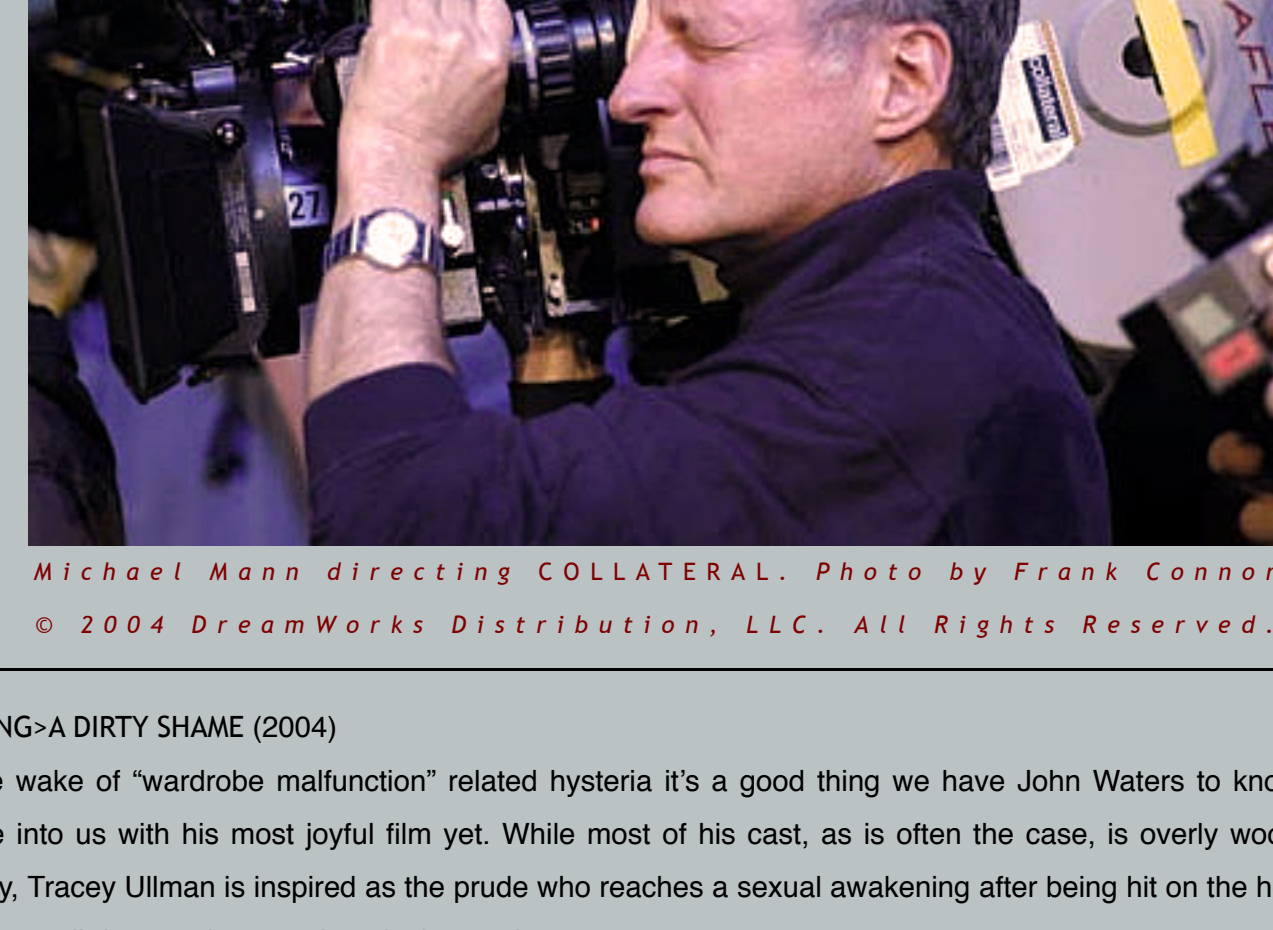
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This Month, featuring: A DIRTY SHAME, COLLATERAL, CRIMINAL, ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND, I HEART HUCKABEES, GARDEN STATE, THE GODS OF TIMES SQUARE, GOING UP RIVER, I, ROBOT, LADDER 49, LA MALA EDUCACIÓN, THE MANCHURIAN CANDIDATE, MEAN CREEK, ORCA: THE KILLER WHALE, OUTFOXED, PALINDROMES, SHARK TALE, SHAUN OF THE DEAD, SKY CAPTAIN AND THE WORLD OF TOMORROW, TEAM AMERICA: WORLD POLICE, THE TULSE LUPER SUITCASES, THE WORLD ACCORDING TO BUSH, and THE YES MEN.



Michael Mann directing COLLATERAL. Photo by Frank Connor
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STRONG-A DIRTY SHAME (2004)
In the wake of "wardrobe malfunction" related hysteria it's a good thing we have John Waters to knock some sense into us with his most joyful film yet. While most of his cast, as is often the case, is overly wooden and campy, Tracey Ullman is inspired as the prude who reaches a sexual awakening after being hit on the head. This film is a well deserved rap on America's noggin.
-Collin Smith

STRONG-A DIRTY SHAME (2004)
John Waters' NC-17 attempt to restore his gross-out street-cred is, in fact, one of his tamest films in years. Waters has a gift for making sexual perversion seem totally innocent. He also has a gift for making films that are completely frivolous, trivializing every issue they raise. This alone probably isn't grounds to dismiss A DIRTY SHAME but Waters is also guilty of shamefully recycling material from CECIL B. DEMENTED, SERIAL MOM and several of his other films, a sad admission that he's fresh out of ideas. At their best, Waters' films can be extremely charming. At their worst — and this is one of his worst — they're shallow and off-putting with characters so ridiculous that they barely seem human.
-Jon Doyle

STRONG-COLLATERAL (2004)
The very least we've come to expect from Michael Mann is carefully crafted formal austerity and there's plenty of that in COLLATERAL. But Mann's gift for characterization is almost entirely absent, replaced by half-baked plot complications and illogical action set-pieces. Add Mann to the list of Hollywood auteurs (ie. David Fincher) who, in an effort to re-establish their box office credibility, have been side-tracked by impersonal mainstream entertainment. Mission accomplished now here's hoping he attempts something a little more ambitious next time.
-Jon Doyle

STRONG-CRIMINAL (2004)
Working as a producer in recent years, Steven Soderbergh has used his clout in the film industry to enable several of his closest friends to become movie directors (ie. George Clooney with CONFESSIONS OF A DANGEROUS MIND, Don Cheadle with the upcoming TISHOMINGO BLUES, and OCEAN'S ELEVEN screenwriter Ted Griffin with the untitled Jennifer Aniston comedy that he was recently fired from). It would appear that Soderbergh has taken this practice to a new extreme with CRIMINAL. The film's co-writer/director Gregory Jacobs has been Soderbergh's assistant director for several years and doesn't appear to have any major qualifications to direct this American re-make of NINE QUEENS. But surprisingly, with Soderbergh's (pseudonymous) screenwriting assistance, Jacobs has crafted a modest but distinctive con movie that effectively avoids most of the genre's tired clichés.
-Jon Doyle

STRONG-ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND (2004)
How happy is the multi viewer's lot!
Watching Joel fight for his memory dots.
ETERNAL SUNSHINE burned a spot on my mind!
I would joyfully watch it eight more times.
-Shawna Plischke

STRONG-I HEART HUCKABEES (2004)
Five years after completing his impressive first trio of films (SPANKING THE MONKEY, FLIRTING WITH DISASTER, THREE KINGS), David O. Russell returns with a fascinating disappointment. While inferior to Russell's previous films, I HEART HUCKABEES features some truly inspired scenes, ideas, and characters. Playing a philosophically troubled, anti-petroleum, pro-bike-riding firefighter, Mark Wahlberg steals the film. He's one of many lively, original, and hilarious pieces in this chaotic puzzle but there's also several maddening pieces (Jude Law, Naomi Watts, Shania Twain!). The filmmaking is rough and wildly undisciplined but Russell's appealingly hopeful worldview is a pleasant change of pace, especially when dealing with dire issues of identity, mortality, and familial dysfunction. In the insane era we're living in, it's encouraging to see a film that makes an intelligent, heartfelt, and philosophical case for human compassion, even if that film is a total mess.
-Jon Doyle

STRONG-GARDEN STATE (2004)
Dear Miss Portman,

I don't normally write letters like this but I just saw your new movie and I think you are so pretty. You smile pretty and walk pretty and have pretty skin and clothes. And I really like you in your silly hat. I just wish you didn't cry so much. It's pretty too but you shouldn't be so sad all the time. Maybe it's because of the epilepsy. If you were bed sheets, I'd sleep without my pyjama shirt, that's how much I like you now. Make a new movie soon.

Your newest fan,
-Brian Crane

STRONG-GARDEN STATE (2004)
Yet another actor attempts to prove himself as a credible director by creating a hodgepodge of stylistic rip-offs. Although writer-director-star Zach Braff (from the TV show Scrubs) aspires to a stylized, Wes Anderson-like, re-interpretation of iconic American comedies from the 60s and 70s (ie. THE GRADUATE, HAROLD & MAUDE), he lacks Anderson's energetic originality and he has little affection for his film's easily ridiculed supporting cast. There's an irritating air of cynical superiority in the film's point-of-view, as Braff overloads his characters with obvious weaknesses then mocks them with the same simple-minded cynicism that the film pretends to critique. While GARDEN STATE has moments of genuine wit and formal invention, it's ultimately a sentimental, heavy-handed, and predictable look at the romance of depression.
-Jon Doyle

STRONG-ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND (2004)
Richard Sandler didn't set out to do anything more than record the manic street preachers, zealots and cranks in Times Square, and as THE GODS OF TIMES SQUARE shows, he barely did that. Completed over half a decade with a passion less befitting a documentary of this kind than a half-hearted homework assignment, it catalogues where it should probe, repeats itself ad nauseam, and allows queries like "so... (uhm) tell me about God" to stand in for deeper questions of faith, sanity and New York City.

Incidentally, Sandler caught the emergence of the new religion of Times Square, as Mickey Mouse moved in, which only serves to make his film seem—indeed like many of his subjects—schizophrenic, as he temporarily abandons his original mission. That mission—exploring people so desperately alone that they're a literally screaming in the streets—is one deserving of better a documentary than this.

(If you'd like to discuss it further, you'll find me out in the streets screaming at strangers until one of them makes that better film.)
-Gareth Hedges

STRONG-GOING UP RIVER: THE LONG WAR OF JOHN KERRY (2004)
GOING UP RIVER persuasively argues John Kerry's place as the logical successor to John F. Kennedy, one of America's most popular presidents. With his "ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country" ethic, Kerry is presented as the living embodiment of JFK's famous words. But this isn't simply a Kerry campaign advertisement. In fact, the film is most impressive while illustrating the rarely seen rebellion of Vietnam vets, trashing their war medals and dismissing their country's military and political leadership. More than thirty years later, this imagery remains powerful and it's a little rattling to see a realistic candidate for president lead the revolt. Just as liberals will applaud Kerry's anti-war activities, conservatives will (and have) label him unpatriotic. But, for those desperately seeking an alternative to George W. Bush, George Butler (PUMPEL IRON) reveals a John Kerry with dimensions not apparent in the more moderate image his campaign team has strategically devised.
-Jon Doyle

STRONG-I, ROBOT
Filled with predictable plot developments, cardboard characters, and overly familiar science fiction ideas, I, ROBOT should be totally unwatchable. Miraculously, it's not. I'm definitely not an expert on this topic but, by my judgment, I, ROBOT has some of the most impressive special effects ever created. Unlike Michael Bay and countless other CGI hacks, Alex Proyas (THE CROW, DARK CITY) knows how to bring a film to life with special effects. If you possess the absence of brain-power necessary to overcome shockingly stupid dialogue and one of Will Smith's most irritating performances, there's a lot to enjoy in this dopey effects extravaganza.
-Jon Doyle

STRONG-LADDER 49
Some of the fire-fighting scenes are mildly enjoyable and John Travolta has been worse...maybe. That's the best I can say about LADDER 49, a totally juvenile exercise in fire-fighter hero worship. I respect the sacrifices that fire-fighters make but, if they're really as simple-minded and obnoxious as these characters then I seriously fear for the well-being of anyone trapped in a burning building. Amazingly, the filmmakers seem to think these characters are endearing and likable. After twenty minutes of their "charming" frat-boy shenanigans, I was ready to see them burn. And, thankfully, some of them do. But seriously, this film's nightmarish sentimentality, FOR LOVE OF THE GAME-like flashback structure is painful to watch and unintentionally funny. Every scene is intended to make a single un-insightful point or introduce a single, run-of-the-mill, safety-oriented plot concern: a child is worried about his father's safety, a wife is worried about her husband's safety, etc. Okay, fire-fighting is dangerous. We get it. But why did they have to make this movie?
-Jon Doyle

STRONG-LA MALA EDUCACIÓN, LA (2004)
This is probably the most normal movie Almodóvar has ever made. In fact, it's even a little mundane. In the end, it's all about Gael García Bernal and whether he is more beautifully stunning as a man or as a woman.
-Collin Smith

STRONG-THE MANCHURIAN CANDIDATE (2004)
Hot on the heels of his widely loathed — but sadly under-rated — CHARADE re-make, THE TRUTH ABOUT CHARLIE, Jonathan Demme returns with his take on another beloved American classic from the early 60s, THE MANCHURIAN CANDIDATE. Un-like Demme's last re-make, this is pretty close to the original film in terms of content. However, Demme re-works the cold, detached, precision of the original and creates a film that is more emotionally involving and entertaining. It is also worth noting that Meryl Streep's wild performance as Raymond's domineering mother is in the same league as Angela Lansbury's. Still, Frankenhimer's version had an originality and visual inventiveness that this new film lacks and the original's ultra cynical ending was more satisfying and disturbing than the awkward variation that Demme's team has devised. It's a worthy re-make but not a replacement.
-Jon Doyle

STRONG-MEAN CREEK
Rarely does a good film collapse as completely in its second half as MEAN CREEK does. In its first half, there's an odd, ambivalent sense of anticipation, as a group of kids plans the (potentially violent) humiliation of a peer they've had problems with. These characters constantly contradict themselves and reveal surprising dimensions and complexity. The unreasonable turn diplomatic and the peacekeepers turn violent, all in the blink of an eye. It's rare to see such a complex and nuanced depiction of children in a modern American film. It's also rare to see such portrayals dramatically self-destruct with a single plot development. With nowhere to turn creatively, in the second half of the film, the filmmakers settle for all the moralizing, black-and-white clichés that were so pleasantly absent from the first half of the film and it quickly falls apart.
-Jon Doyle

STRONG-ORCA: THE KILLER WHALE (1977; DVD)
Far from just being JAWS meets Sea World, ORCA, released approximately a year after Spielberg's era-defining blockbuster, is a fascinating stew of mildly success creativity and artistic catastrophe. What the end result is, I'm not entirely sure, but I do know that by film's end I was drawn into the story's silly little drama. Not by Ennio Morricone's far-too-accomplished score, often matched with polished montage sequences of killer whales at sea, or by the presence of the ever-reliable (but not here!) Charlotte Rampling, whose band-aid voice-overs must have been commissioned to replace some blundering expository scenes left on the cutting room floor, but by Richard Harris—in one scene, one shot. "I'll fight you, you revengeful S.O.B.," growls Harris, the film's Quint, eyes like daggers, and from there we're hooked. Honorable mention goes to the film's opening Great White sequence that uses stunning file footage soooooo well integrated (by one of the film's three editors) that one's left wondering just why Spielberg ever built that phony fish!
-Collin Burnett

STRONG-OUTFOXED: RUPERT MURDOCH'S WAR ON JOURNALISM (2004)
Presumably, to outfox the Fox, one must be as narrow in focus and sloppy with research as the Fox. The Fox in question is the Fox News Channel, a right wing cable network that is right at home in George W. Bush's America. That the Fox News Channel is but one element of supervillain Murdoch's vast media empire doesn't matter much here; in fact, Outfoxed doesn't have much to say about Murdoch, news or journalism at all. Not surprising as it comes from moveon.org & Robert Greenwald, the producer/director of another triumph of low-risk earnestness-over-insight filmmaking. STEAL THIS MOVIE.

What emerges in OUTFOXED is an amusing clip reel interrupted by high and low profile talking heads—including Walter Cronkite and reformed neo-con hitman David Brock—who say much less here than they have said elsewhere (especially in the case of Mr. Brock), which would be fine if it wasn't so insufferably earnest (Don Henley's "Dirty Laundry" plays over the credits). As hollow polemics go, this film takes stating the obvious so seriously you may weep.

This only goes to show that fighting fire with fire only makes more fire and can never match fighting fire with pies (which would at least restore levity and introduce the much needed element of surprise).
-Gareth Hedges

STRONG-PALINDROMES (2004)
I have nothing against films being a forum for the discussion of ideas; in fact I hope that they will be. But after watching PALINDROMES, an astonishingly cynical rant on how nothing changes, I wish those ideas could have been accompanied by some sort of engaging narrative. Instead, Solondz views story as an obstacle to making his points and showing off his skill. While PALINDROMES provides us with some interesting ideas to chew on, there is little reason to want to.
-Collin Smith

STRONG-SHARK TALE (2004)
The folks at Dreamworks Animation and PDI seem more concerned with putting big stars in their movies than making endearing, enduring characters. Audiences never get a chance to forget they are watching Will Smith, Robert Deniro, Jack Black, etc. And why should we care? The story is the same boring morality tale that we have seen over and over again, but with "up to the moment" popculture jokes already past their due date. Finally, the animation style is so A.D.D. that you never get to appreciate all that you are seeing on screen. From anyone else this would have been a disappointment, but from these people it's business as usual.
-Collin Smith

STRONG-SHAUN OF THE DEAD
George A. Romero, the widely acknowledged master of the zombie film (NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD, DAWN OF THE DEAD, DAY OF THE DEAD), recently said that SHAUN OF THE DEAD is the only zombie movie he prefers to his own trilogy. I don't know if I agree with Romero but this is high praise and SHAUN OF THE DEAD is a worthy recipient. Like Romero's DAWN OF THE DEAD, SHAUN succeeds largely because of its hybrid of inventive comedy and characterful zombie hijinks and paradoxes. But even more than Romero's films, SHAUN OF THE DEAD uses suspenseful to great effect. Unlike the constantly able characters in DAWN OF THE DEAD with their military-like precision, SHAUN OF THE DEAD revolves around hung-over, incompetent twenty-somethings who'd rather play video games and deal with romantic entanglements than fight zombies. It's a unique take on the genre and, unlike this year's DAWN OF THE DEAD re-make, one that lives up to its legendary zombie predecessors.
-Jon Doyle

STRONG-SKY CAPTAIN AND THE WORLD OF TOMORROW (2004)
I felt like such a nerd watching this film. I spent the entire 107 minutes with a big grin on my face going, "Cool! Cool! Cool!" The film is too hyperstylized for the blockbuster crowd and its references will go over their head. However, for film geeks, this is a dream come true.
-Collin Smith

STRONG-SKY CAPTAIN AND THE WORLD OF TOMORROW (2004):
A decidedly personal and experimental piece of filmmaking that film culture simply isn't prepared to acknowledge as such.
-Colin Burnett

STRONG-TEAM AMERICA: WORLD POLICE (2004)
Fuck yeah.
-Brian Crane

STRONG-THE TULSE LUPER SUITCASES (2003-2004)
The world premiere of Peter Greenaway's seven-hour HD opus THE TULSE LUPER SUITCASES occurred in Montreal on October 20-22, 2004. I note the date because despite Greenaway's insistence on the mutability of History, this film is firmly lodged in a specific aesthetic moment. TLS is a catalogue of Greenaway's familiar formal and philosophical obsessions: the written word, bathtubs, theatre, vengeance, repetition, geography, and cataloguing itself. That said, this film is unlike anything Greenaway has done before, — it marks Greenaway's rejection of his own celluloid lineage. Referencing the past doesn't necessarily imply nostalgia and there's something exhilarating about TLS's gleeful abandonment of tradition.
-Zoe Constantinides

STRONG-THE WORLD ACCORDING TO BUSH (2004):
A feeble and obsequious Lefty diatribe. You know, it's a genuine shame: what's "left of the Left" is so Hell-bent on besmirching Bush and pleasing its own in the process that its members now regularly and unabashedly discard bare-minimum standards of critical thinking and self-scrutiny. In this case filmmaker William Karel establishes painfully tenuous links between Bush and crew and every Lefty boogeyman under the stars, from the Nazis to the Israelis. (I hasten to point out the glaring paradox of forcing these last two to play for the same team; reminds me of a silly little tag I once saw scribbled onto the side of a condemned building: Israel=(insert wastika).) First the appearance of articles and columns all over the place hoping for the U.S.'s failure in Iraq, then Moore's documentary, then Naomi Klein's call for jihad on NYC in *The Nation*, and now this. Clear! The Left will soon find something else to shock some life back into itself!

(Oh, and you might note that this film bears the signature of that prevaricating joker who helmed DARK SIDE OF THE MOON. This time the joke's on him.)
-Colin Burnett

STRONG-THE YES MEN
Put simply, this is a non-fiction film about fictional spokespersons for the World Trade Organization. By now, it's hard to believe that anyone could support the WTO and THE YES MEN's title characters prove that maybe nobody does. When they abruptly (and dishonestly) announce that the WTO is disbanding to a group of Australian economists, the economists actually seem to agree that this is a positive development. In the recent wave of political documentaries, THE YES MEN is the first (that I know of) to include a massive inflatable penis with a live surveillance feed of sweat-shop workers. Unfortunately, in adopting the WTO's identity, the yes men also adopt their bland speaking and performance style and this doesn't make for very effective punch-line delivery. While they take a moral and humane position on world trade, they are only intermittently effective as satirists. As a result, this well-intentioned (and dangerously self-congratulatory) documentary is only intermittently effective as entertainment.
-Jon Doyle

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