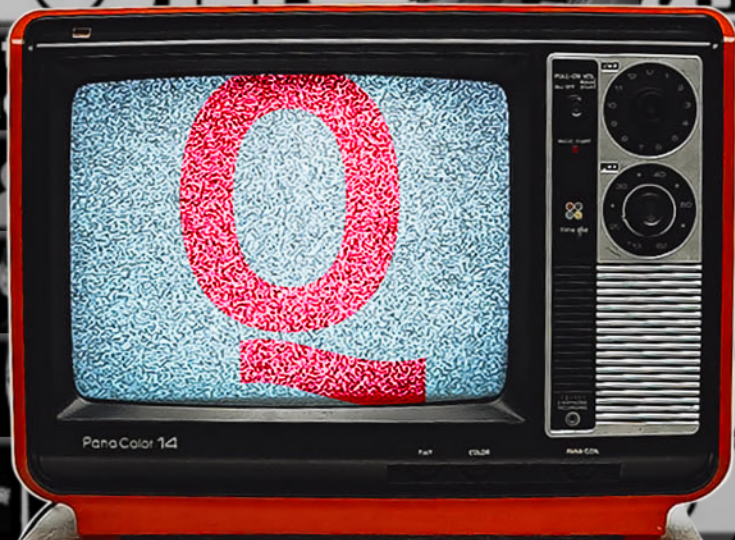


# SYNOPTIQUE

*An Online Journal of Film and Moving Image Studies*



**EDITION 7**  
**2005**



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ARCHIVES**Synoptique :: THE JOURNAL OF FILM AND FILM STUDIES**

- SPECIAL FEATURE:** **Susan Sontag:** *Readers remember, respond, re-read.* Featuring original essays and reflections by: **Melissa Anderson, Dudley Andrews, Jean Bruce, Marcie Frank, John Locke, Adrian Martin, E. Ann Kaplan, James O. Naremore, Carl Rollyson, Jonathan Rosenbaum, Robert Sklar, Greg Taylor, and Jerry White.**
- INTERPRETATIONS:** To mark its 50th Anniversary we present 4 separate interpretations, by 7 first time viewers, of Jean Renoir's FRENCH CANGAN (1955).
- FEATURE:** The Synoptique Style Forum Part 1: Contexts and Confessions. A roundtable discussion with Colin Burnett, Brian Crane, Adam Rosadiuk, and Dr. William Beard.
- ESSAY:** Jodi Ramer reconsiders her approach to MARNIE (1964) in "The Actress as Model: Tippi Hedren in Hitchcock".
- ESSAY:** "Nostalgia for you, dear geek" by Lysandra Woods.
- BOOK REVIEW:** "A ménage à trois gone wrong: Craig Seligman's *Sontag & Kael: Opposites Attract Me*" reviewed by Catherine Russell.
- ESSAY:** "Lured In: HBO's slick series flicks and tele-ellitism?" by Laurel Wypkema.
- 
- ESSAY:** "Packing up the Past, Packing for the Future: A personal response to THE TULSE LUPER SUITCASES" by Zoé Constantinides.
- REVIEW:** Tanya Boulanger and her big sister Andrea Ariano review LEMONY SNICKET'S A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS (2004).
- COLUMN:** "Squalid Infidelities" by Randolph Jordan. This installment considers EYES WIDE SHUT (1999).
- + Splinter reviews

+ 3 more 'Sontagesque' style moments  
in THE SYNOPTIQUE STYLE GALLERY  
+3 more to come by the end of the week.

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**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 Cornélius presents  
its summer-autumn 2004 edition on *Sexe, sexualité et nationalité*

**OFFSCREEN** unveils a new look this month, designed and built by *Synoptique* CTO P-A Despatis D. This edition features an article on Susan Sontag's criticism by *Synoptique* Senior Editor Colin Burnett.

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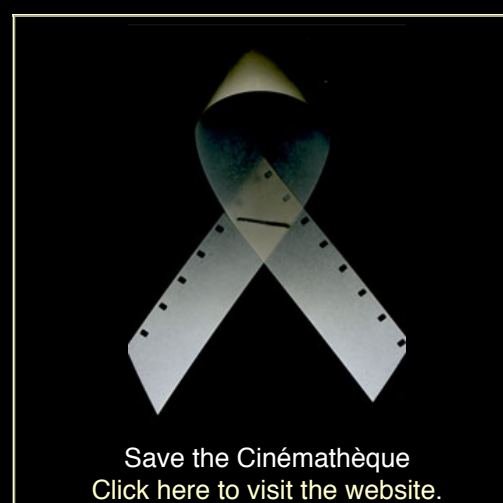
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**About Synoptique:**

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 cinéophiles 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 démolées. 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 constituant 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.

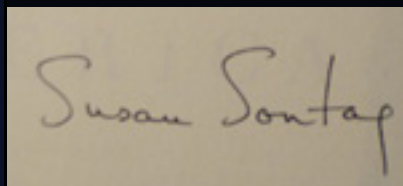


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how. What would criticism look like that would serve t

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## Susan Sontag's Readers Respond, Remember, Re-Read by Colin Burnett



14 February 2005

**Editor:**  
Colin Burnett

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Film" Bibliography and  
Filmography

Susan Sontag has left behind a cultural and intellectual legacy that requires a tribute of dynamic breadth and distinction. Towards that goal—in what I knew to be an ambitious gesture—I emailed a group of scholars and critics of distinction, asking them to use *Synoptique* as their forum to elaborate the importance of Susan Sontag to the study of film. I admit that I expected a handful of polite refusals. But to my amazement and delight, I received an outpouring of enthusiastic responses.

I asked the contributors to assess for *Synoptique's* readers Sontag's most lasting/significant/influential contribution to film criticism, whether it be a specific piece, a methodology, a style, or a particular value judgment. The dozen or so reflections here, I happily report, vary greatly in length and approach. There is, however, one constant: the firm belief that Sontag, in her guises as essayist, tastemaker, filmmaker, mentor and regular moviegoer, stands as a significant figure in cinema's first century, and this, if nothing else, because she crusaded like none before her for serious engagement with the art. As befitting its subject, the dialogue created here is an intimate yet critical one, demonstrating that ideological and professional obstacles serve as no serious impediment to the genuine, which is to say serious, exchange of ideas.

I learned an important and encouraging lesson in the pursuit of this remarkable range of personal statements: this world becomes a small and friendly place indeed when the right conversation is on the table. Thus, *Synoptique* presents this tribute: a stellar collection of investigations and musings on the complex manner in which Sontag's work has intersected with our popular and film culture, with our hearts and our minds. On behalf of the *Synoptique* staff, and all the good people who contributed (as well as those who expressed interest in contributing but were unfortunately unable to do so), I dedicate this collection of reflections, and this edition, to the singular, challenging, and incredibly wide-reaching voice of Susan Sontag.

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Colin Burnett, who holds his Master's in Film Studies from Concordia University, Montreal, has written on Bresson in recent editions of *Offscreen* and on Robert-Bresson.com, including an interview with L'Argent crew-member Jonathan Hourigan. He can be reached at colinburnett100@yahoo.ca.

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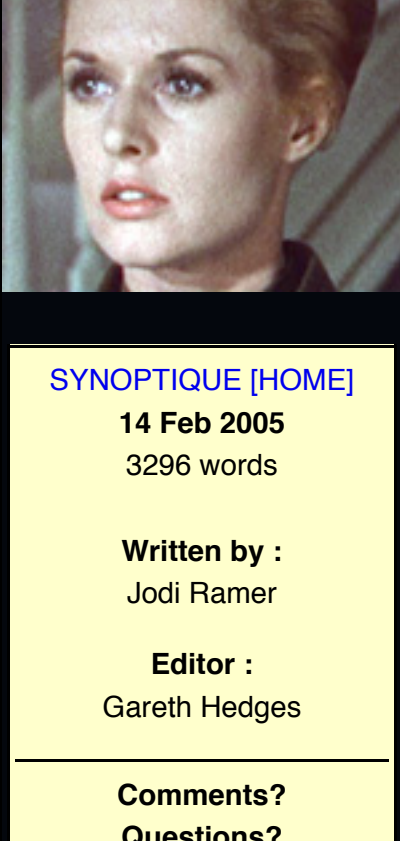
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**SYNOPTIQUE [HOME]**  
14 Feb 2005  
3296 words

**Written by :**  
Jodi Ramer

**Editor :**  
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Hitchcock's female stars—particularly his blondes—are all about forehead. Usually coiffed with styles swept back or up off the brow, the women's faces, not their smartly dressed bodies, are the focus of attention. Given little adornment in the way of jewellery and accessories, and made-up with a clean artfulness (in which sophisticated polish and naturalness blend on the countenance), the face emerges as pristine, the forehead a vista of unfussy feminine beauty. In REAR WINDOW, Grace Kelly's visage is elevated to the cinematic equivalent of an epiphany when she leans into soft-focus close-up for a kiss from James Stewart. Eve Marie Saint's frosted white eye-shadow made her an ivory vision from cheekbone to hair-tip in NORTH BY NORTHWEST. And Kim Novak never looked so sublime as in VERTIGO's Madeleine moments, her somewhat porcine face dramatically attenuated by sleek styling. Most prominent, however, is the Tippi Hedren forehead, with a hairline so high as to be directly above the hinge of the jaw, her teased bangs curving up high before billowing back. Clearly, Hedren is meant to encourage a cerebral response, not animal lust; appreciation of her is best rarefied and spiritualised—her grand forehead should deflect any baser drive. Her hairdo reaches for the clouds, invites an airiness and clarity of manner. She is diminutive, with a very slender neck and a piquant tilt to her head; in THE BIRDS, her chartreuse suit amongst the meadow colour scheme of grays, blues and homey yellows marks her as exotic, elegant but strange—the bird of paradise amongst the seagulls and swallows of Bodega Bay.

Yet she doesn't strut or preen. Hedren has a sensible carriage; she wears her well-tailored suits as if she had been paid nicely to model them, and she's pragmatic about the expectations she must fulfill while working in this capacity. She makes her way through the world with an economy of movement. Her bearing suggests that she knows just what's appropriate, and can be relied upon not to give more or less. As the black-haired mystery woman in the opening of MARNIE, Hedren clutches her vivid yellow purse to her side; the purse is puckered suggestively and bulging with lubricious promise, yet, as the camera pulls out, Hedren's backside isn't seen to comply with such possibilities. It barely wiggles: this lady is no-nonsense: she travels with measured and determined steps down the platform.

THE BIRDS casts Hedren as a scandalous society girl. We see her go to great lengths to one-up a trivial prank—even if she is developing a torch for Mitch, the gesture *is* frivolous. Has she nothing better to do than to tease potential beaux with extravagant indirection? Certainly Mitch's mother makes pointed remarks—might Melanie be irresponsible, or worse, loose? Yet even before Melanie explains away her past scandals as products of media sensationalism, and as part of a disaffected lifestyle that now wears her, we know that she simply can't be reckless or shockingly uninhibited. Not because Hedren exudes the fundamental integrity that makes Ingrid Bergman so obviously trustworthy in NOTORIOUS. It's just that Hedren really seems like a practical girl. Sure, she can be playful, even mischievous, but she's not arch, nor faux-demure, nor complicated enough to be leading an extravagant life. Grace Kelly could be: she's pure Park Avenue; she could jump naked in fountains and be very Brett Ashley about it, charming and breezy and suitably jaded—we know she could run off and marry princes. Hedren feels like the working woman that she was: a single mother doing commercials on TV and anxious for financial stability until Hitchcock swept in with offers of stardom. The anxiety of her position we don't see, the eager desire to make good and keep everything together despite the impossible pressures of being Hitchcock's new Galatea. These anxieties *could* show. They could be culled for the challenge of playing hysterical women. But Hedren is no method actor; she's a professional. She understands the professional impetus for a woman to present herself in a seemly manner, without excess. With a grace that should appear neither studied, nor so natural as to cast into question the woman's sense of her place [1].

Marnie, too, knows how to affect this stance. Though without references she apparently manages to convince her employers that she's the very model of competency. Certainly, her looks have something to do with it. The policemen smirk at Mr. Strutt because within his righteous outrage is a suspiciously clear picture of the perpetrator. They probably think he's sweet on her, but his attraction has been reformulated now that such a sweet thing has transgressed her role as eye candy. Now, Strutt's anger hinges upon Marnie's habit of "pulling her skirt down over her knees as if they were a national treasure." Though Marnie has to do her fair share of manoeuvring simply as a woman in the work force—we think of Hedren's management of Hitchcock's outrageous expectations and untoward advances—she cannot be said to exploit her allure. She dresses conservatively. She behaves with modesty, civility and businesslike poise. She keeps to herself. If Mark Rutland (Sean Connery) wants to take her to horse races and kiss her in the stables, she'll comply, because it's a new development of her job and she might, in fact, find it pleasant enough. After all, she's got a bigger job that all this is working towards. She is consummately professional.

For a woman, such professionalism, MARNIE tells us, is indivisible from mendacity. Marnie and the other Rutland "office girl" have a perfectly good rapport. They both understand the terms on which they relate, the chipper vague pleasantness they're meant to maintain, the indulgences that must be made toward their superiors. You can bet that whatever else her response, Marnie's co-worker wouldn't seethe with righteous indignation if the theft were to be discovered. Because, though Marnie's robberies may be an extreme response to the humiliations suffered in the work force, in a sense robbery is the logical outcome: an understandable lashing-out, a grab for agency. These women are underappreciated, patronized and petted, made to feign agreeableness no matter what, trusted with trade secrets under the implicit belief that girls wouldn't mess with men's business, wouldn't dare or wouldn't know how. Both PSYCHO and MARNIE suggest an inevitability of transgression within this paradigm—Janet Leigh's Marion Crane must put up with similar frustrations. Of course neither Marnie nor Marion turn criminal from work pressures alone, but these indignities trigger a broader frustration, a core disenfranchisement. Greed isn't the motive, here, but revenge. Avenging the circumscribed mobility, the meanness of possibility: running with the money is seizing access. The difference between Marion and Marnie is that the former wants this one opportunity to make her life work, the latter is a career criminal.

Lying as vocation (and without love as a motive) is what sets Marnie apart from other Hitchcock women—not surprisingly, her thieving and identity-shifting come to be explicitly linked with sexual pathology. Marnie takes her duplicity to an extreme such that it defines her life, but prevarication itself is nothing new to the Hitchcock heroine. Most of them make a point of it. As Melanie, Hedren is part of a long line of society women who have the luxury of lying. Grace Kelly is always dissimulating in her films with Hitchcock, and she does it with aplomb. For women of breeding, then, lying constitutes a form of play, of flirtation, of indulgence and self-preservation. Melanie lies (or withholds information) so that she needn't go too much away, to better control circumstances as they develop. Melanie lies to amuse herself. We may believe that Melanie will get her comeuppance for so liberally embracing deception, but her little stunts *do* work to charm the man she's making a play for. And they serve a facilitative function. Her flirtations are coy enough to preserve pride in the midst of a rather outlandish seduction play. Her ruses won't force either player to reveal themselves unduly. Melanie is not upfront with Annie Hayworth or Mitch's mother because she is aware of the tensions she arouses. Melanie's ease of evasion signals an adeptness—the ability to bridge social awkwardness.

Marnie's falsehoods are also serviceable. She lies to smooth the fraught relationship with her mother; she lies with an earnestness that reads as parodic to anyone who's been put through an interview like Marnie's at Rutland's (and Mark Rutland is plenty amused, himself); at the horse races she lies with an icy insistence in order to deflect a creepy character's suspicious advances. Though Marnie's untruths form a web of deceit that, the film will tell us, traps Marnie in the center, it's undeniable that she smoothly executes handy fabrications that many of us would be proud to master. We want her to keep lying because she does it so well.

Hitchcock's films suggest that subterfuge is a necessary component of the feminine position. A woman simply has to be cagey to get by in the world. This condition is made literal when our identification and sympathies are with female criminals and spies (MARNIE, PSYCHO, and NOTORIOUS, NORTH BY NORTHWEST, respectively, to give just a few examples). We value their shrewdness, and we're made to see that it's absolutely necessary. In PSYCHO, Marion Crane

frustrates us because she's a very bad liar. She can't properly give herself over to the needed acceptance of her deception. Furtive meetings with her lover have not prepared Marion for the rigours of criminality; she is already tiring of her double life before she goes on the lam. She attracts suspicion wherever she goes, she puts herself in danger, and she gets caught—but for the wrong reasons, by the wrong guy. Marion's fate—her punishment—is hysterically dire and in no way warranted, especially considering her resolve to confess and finally rid herself of this cumbersome duplicity. In a sense, Marion is doomed because she can neither find fulfillment in the straight and narrow, nor fully give herself over to her transgressions.

Judy's plight in VERTIGO follows a similar logic. She is too emotional, too sincere, too desperate. If only she could realize that being loved for yourself doesn't work in Hitchcock's oeuvre: the men love you because of the mystifying allure you concoct. Madeleine is the exemplary case, but almost any Hitchcock heroine shows us that men fall for a construction, for the right combination of timing, locale, mystery and glamour. Mark loves Marnie not despite but *for* her web of lies—otherwise how could he embark upon his perverse project of rehabilitating her? Judy's tragedy is perhaps that her only hope is actually to become Madeleine, not for Scottie's sake, but in order to better control her impact on the world, and its on her. As Judy she will only be used, but she cannot reconcile her desires for authentic love with the posturing that would protect her. Judy succumbs to the makeover that Scottie is obsessively engineering, but she can't find any pleasure in it. She wants to maintain her un-Madeleine self; she longs for Scottie to love her *for who she really is*. Her fall off the tower is the ironic culmination of this fear of her own annihilation.

The capacity for shrewdness in Hitchcock films is assigned to a particular kind of woman. The kind of woman that Hitchcock admires—not the demure homemaker, but the assured, self-contained, girl-on-the-go. This woman, like Hedren, is cool, sophisticated, collected: she belongs to the public sphere, not the private. Hitchcock's predilections, however, are hardly about celebrating an emancipated woman. His attachment to remote femininity is concomitant with a fear of sensuality, of intimacy. His capable public woman is the *mind*; the less steely, more emotionally or morally driven woman, the *body*. Hitchcock, one guesses, is like Scottie when he notices the Carlotta pendant around Judy's neck: of course, in terms of narrative, Scottie only now realizes her involvement in the scheme against him, but it's as though the necklace draws attention to Judy/Madeleine's bosom and reminds Scottie that she'll never just be his sublime construction—he's made aware of her body and he panics. Both Kim Novak and Janet Leigh are sensual types. Is this why their characters pay for their crimes in death? Because we're introduced to Leigh in her lingerie at an erotic "extended lunch"? Because, without Madeleine's severe suits, Novak's flesh strains voluptuously against her garments? These women are an affront because they too obviously bring their sensuality into the public arena. Their domesticity (i.e. sexuality, emotional needs) is predominant, instead of held in check by self-mastery. Hitchcock, it seems, appreciated mind games.

But what appealed to Hitchcock was also subject to his ambivalence. We know that Tippi Hedren was the one who Hitchcock really went crazy about, the one he courted and ruthlessly controlled, the one he menaced. Tellingly, he cast her as the most intractable female within his films, the one who most flagrantly turns the rules of the public (male) sphere to her advantage, who most needs to be brought into line. Hitchcock described MARNIE as a film about a "cock-teaser." Now, Hitchcock was known to make cute, disingenuous comments, but this statement has an undeniable force. It's easy to imagine that the evident aggression here was targeted at Ms. Hedren herself. Curious to note, though, is how MARNIE plays out, indeed, as the product of a frustrated sexuality, but not an eager one, for even though the narrative is all about sexual pathology vs. healthy, "normal" sexuality, the film seems to be on the side of frigidity. Female sexuality is at issue, but, curiously, it isn't sharp out with or upon Hedren's body. Her clothes are far from revealing—her evening gown a glacial tint and cut sharp above the collarbone, her nightgowns downright sturdy. Hedren's manner is *crisp*, and the treatment of her person in MARNIE emphasizes this brittle quality, always sensualising her. Even when Mark, deciding finally to take what he believes is owed to him, rips off her nightdress, we see only her shocked face, and her naked legs not much above the knee. After all this modesty, even her feet look truly vulnerable, exposed: it would be a gross violation to see more. Strangely, though Mark continues to force himself upon Marnie he does not proceed until he's covered her up again—significantly in *his* robe: his gesture of protection is really an act of claiming. He changes his tactics, now gently kissing and caressing her face and neck, all of which is shot in close-up, effectively cutting off Hedren's body. Thus, even for a sex scene (granted, a particularly loaded sex scene: for Mark it's

tenderness, for Marnie it's rape). Hedren is maintained as a cerebral force, as a woman whose body doesn't even come into the picture, as it were. Her sexual problems are "in her head," and it would seem—directorial intentions aside—that Hitchcock could only bear to represent them as such.

Amn without wanting to be so flippant as to ignore the stylistic/practical considerations of this sublimated portrayal, I am inclined to believe that such elisions of the female body *are* due to Hitchcock's sexual squeamishness [2]. Nevertheless, the chaste treatment actually serves MARNIE, and Hedren, well. It's humorous, and sad, to think that Hitchcock's conception of a cock-tease might be a woman who scrupulously avoids encouraging desire. But if he had been better able to frankly depict a sexualized body, MARNIE might have been a demoralizing film; it would have been smut rather than a pristine investigation of twisted psychological motivation; it would have been a Brian DePalma movie. For Marnie patently is not a cock-tease. She has good reason to stay away from men (including the repressed knowledge of her mother's past abjection), and good reason to object to sexual congress with a man who happens to be her husband only because he's blackmailing her. What Mark wants from her is prostitution. His self-congratulatory efforts to help her always manifest in his domination of her. Thus the "happy" ending is especially hard to reconcile, since the proof of Marnie's recovery will be her finally giving in sexually to Mark. The systems of surveillance and administration that convert woman into commodity—and that Marnie, with her criminality, actively subverted—have caught up to her. Marriage, MARNIE tells us, inscribes her fully inside these institutions.

Even allowing that Mark might be a sympathetic character, true-hearted in his own misguided way, his macho insistence that Marnie is a "wild animal" that he has the right to "tame" is disturbing, partially because if Hedren is any animal it's a bird, and a delicate one at that. If, say, Ingrid Bergman had played Marnie (admittedly hard to imagine), her earthy strength would have given Mark something to fight against. One would recognize that she's holding back in willful defiance; the film would have had sexual punch, and less social critique. Crucially, Hedren as Marnie really is frozen through, her dread of intimacy systemic. Much of why neither MARNIE nor THE BIRDS feels exploitive, though both narratives depend on an increasing violation of the heroine, is that Hedren, an untrained actor, doesn't transcend her commercial-model background. She is in no way inadequate in her adequacy is crystallized in the moment when Melanie—in heels and long dove-grey mink, lovebird cage in hand—steps with precision and assurance into a shaky little boat. Hedren does just what she needs to do, and she does it just right. She comports herself appropriately in any given moment, even if the moment is counterintuitive—much as Hitchcock can be counted on to skillfully execute any given scene. What this later-Hitchcock style (most pronounced in MARNIE) eschews is a sense of organic connection between such arguably counterintuitive moments and scenes; there is no interstitial fluid, no emotional bleed over. Therefore, it is fitting that Hedren's performances do not invite us to contemplate her interiority. In both THE BIRDS and MARNIE, Hedren is attacked out of nowhere, without the natural build-up of tension. The assaults on her are unmotivated, traumatic episodes as knee-jerk responses triggered by random signifiers, the connections tenuous, the referents unknown or unknowable. Thus, the breakdowns of Melanie and Marnie aren't progressive, but instrumental. The emotional duress is stylized, never raw, never naked. This is spectacle as spectacle. Authenticity, here, doesn't get in the way.

Sometimes it can: Grace Kelly is utterly convincing as an appealingly manipulative aristocrat in DIAL M FOR MURDER, but the film falters when we're to believe that she has been locked away on Death Row—she carries with her such an essence of unassailable quality that her predicament, on an affective level, must be dismissed (even if the narrative still carries us along). Hedren doesn't create such complications. She acts as if she were modeling emotions; she's opaque. When she is meant to be vulnerable and troubled, Hedren doesn't give us modulated responses, but immediate regression. She simply projects "child": her husky-adenoidal voice clinging to a shrill register, her placid face, already with the finely etched and evenly assembled features of a doll, turning wide-eyed and gap-mouthed. Or she becomes helpless, listless, shocked and still. Hedren's semblances of distress simultaneously evoke sympathy *and* deconstruct the whole cliché of a woman coming apart under the guiding hand of the male genius. Kim Novak as Marnie would just be morbid—she'd be brooding and wounded, her corporeality tragically at odds with her frigid stance: the film would be lugubrious rather than a heart. But Hedren refuses to be utterly broken down that she may be built back up. She doesn't offer a clinical that might ultimately be touched, a soul ultimately restored. She only offers a bright shiny coating, the better to reflect Hitchcock's projections, or ours.

Jodi Ramer wrote about MARNIE in Synoptique 6.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> To witness an uncomfortable instance of this grace under pressure, see the footage of Tippi Hedren's screen test, included as an extra feature on Universal's collector's edition DVD of THE BIRDS. Hedren, acquitting herself nicely though obviously strained, is made to endure—with a smile and determined poise, and the self-satisfied, patronizing presence of actor Martin Balsam. Not to mention the occasional sleazy joke. These interactions, while undoubtedly not the worst examples of what actresses have been made to undergo, are undeniably creepy. Improving on a scene, Hedren at one point complains, in response to Balsam's insistence that he should be able to determine her look since he pays for her upkeep: "You are trying to just *completely* run my life." It is difficult to resist reading this remark as a foreshadowing of Hedren's deflections, polite but necessarily growing in insistence, of Hitchcock's advances. With this in mind, the tone of the screen test, and what is to come (Hitch's increasingly inappropriate, controlling behaviour), is particularly chilling: Hedren has little choice but to contain her evident unease and act like a pro.

<sup>2</sup> One might cite FRENZY to argue that Hitchcock could get dirty when the material demanded it. Certainly FRENZY is a complicated case (in terms of the debates it invites over violent sexual representation), but it does not feature any "Hitchcock women" proper. None of them are treated affectionately or as icons of feminine allure, and therefore they do not represent the same libidinal structure at work.

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## Nostalgia for You, Dear Geek

by Lysandra Woods



[SYNOPTIQUE \[HOME\]](#)

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Written by :  
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Damn, I loved the geeks in high school. Indeed, they were my true, unrequited love, though I would have undergone antiquated forms of torture before admitting it to anyone. I had problems of my own. Like many, I look back at high school as three years of unyielding trauma, and when I finally got to leave, I left—for good. I maintained no contacts, never felt the urge to attend a reunion, and after years of self-imposed mind control I have basically forgotten the whole thing. But I remember the geeks.

The geeks arouse my curiosity; the others do not. I wonder what those geeks are doing now. The rest of them, well, you just sort of know: The bright popular kids are now Intellectual Property Rights lawyers; the dumb popular kids are now making good use of their education degrees; and the jocks are now chubby and effectively still in high school. But with the geeks no such foregone conclusion exists, for I went to high school in the mid-80s before 'geek' became affectionate slang for the computer gods of today. Now, all the signs are in place: NHL Hockey is dead, and beautiful people celebrity culture has imploded into a tacky, cheesy, gooey mess. The most startling aspect of the whole Brad Pitt-Jennifer Aniston-Angelina Jolie triangle is how much none of us could give a rat's ass as to who's smooching whom. *Wired* magazine is in ascension; Seth Cohen is the new sex symbol; geekT-shirt.org is style's new frontier; *Halo* is at critical mass. The geeks have inherited the earth, and perhaps, to everyone's surprise, their world order is pretty cool.

But trouble is afoot in geek-land, and for the sake of convenience let's blame it on Bill Gates. Gates has ruined the geek, in part because his specter of goofy, spectacle-wearing world domination stands in for the geek in popular vernacular. But Gates is no geek. His talent is that he can manage geeks. Not an easy task, as geeks are not inherently responsive to the usual lures of money and benefit packages; nor do they answer to scare-tactics, as most geeks are inoculated to fear by the daily threats they endured and lived through in high school. Geeks know no fear, not out of a misplaced courage, but instinctually, due to an internal defense mechanism that has long ago relegated and reduced fear to the quotidian. The rest of us see fear in bold strokes, as a colossus to be conquered by grand gestures of bravery and heroism. The geek sees no such large scale; the geek has slept with it, woken up to it and tapped out its rhythm as he brushes his teeth. Fear and the geek are old friends. In contrast, the nerd does respond to fear, and, correspondingly, has a greater desire to please: a nerd does well in school, a geek may not. Back to Gates though, the true geeks may still have the last laugh, for while Gates was built by geeks, the same sort of fearless, trailblazing geeks are mounting challenges to Microsoft which may one day, not in the close future, but one day, dislodge Gate's monopoly. Live by the sword; die by the sword.

So, with Gates leading the charge, mainstream success and crossover appeal have found the geek, but I wonder if the geek ever wanted to be found. Have geeks made the world more interesting at the expense of making themselves less so? Is brilliant success not somehow antithetical to the entire philosophy of geekdom? Has the computer age ruined the geeks of yore?



My one consolation is that I am not alone in my nostalgia. NAPOLEON DYNAMITE (2004) and TV's FREAKS AND GEEKS, significantly both set in the 80s, are high school love letters to the 'old-skool' geek. The geeks who go about their business and their projects with a single-minded vision that leaves them unscarred regardless of how many jock beatings may come their way. And the beauty of it all is their total disregard for the use value of their projects, for any sort of upward mobility, for any validation outside of their own tight circle. Throughout the course of the eponymous film, Napoleon is the subject of a dodgy time travel experiment, learns a dance, and buys a corduroy suit at the thrift shop, all with the total innocence of

pure selfish devotion to his own vision, a vision not of himself in relation to others, but of himself for himself. Another word for this selfishness would be, of course, childhood. In high school while the rest of us were desperately trying to mimic adults with our messy sex lives and substance addictions, the geeks made no such overtures to growing up. They remained essentially kids and reveled in their play.

Of the three "geeks" in FREAKS AND GEEKS, Sam, Neal and Bill, only Bill is a true geek, and he is my favourite geek of all—ahhhhhh, how I do love you Bill Haverchuck. Like Napoleon, Bill likes what he likes cause he likes it—comedy, rockets, science fiction. He does not degrade his loves by ascribing to them any usefulness or future career plans. Bill lives in the moment and finds the fun. The best Bill snippet, one that reveals Bill's particular charm and unwavering insight, occurs as Bill and Neal are about to enter the rec-room basement hell of the popular kids spin-the-bottle party:

**Neal:** You know that scene in *Animal House* where Jim Belushi is pledging to the fraternity, and he goes to the party and ends up in the room with the blind guy and the Indian. I feel that's about to happen to us.

**Bill:** Blind guys are cool. They have supersonic hearing.

**Neal:** Yeah, you're right. (Now reassured, he looks admiringly at Bill). Blind guys are cool.

As always, Neal receives Bill's transmissions as utterances from an oracle, interpreting them as figurative words of wisdom to be decoded. To Max, Bill's words mean that they will be fine, will persevere regardless of their treatment by the populars. But Bill never intends them that way. His is a stubbornly literal mind. As far as he is concerned, he is just telling Neal the facts: Blind guys are cool. Rooted in a literal world but with the imagination to dress up as Lindsey Wagner/Bionic Woman for Halloween, Bill is the epitome of the geek, taking up a curious positioning towards the literal and the figurative, a positioning that eschews the metaphorical understanding through which most of us live.

The literal is sacred to the geek, and in this awe it takes an unexpected direction, bypassing the figurative and landing smack in the middle of extreme imagination—the geek can soar with the eagles while wearing cement boots. The geek and the computer were thus destined for each other: The computer is a physical manifestation of these same odd co-ordinates on the material/imagination matrix. But before the computer, *Dungeons and Dragons* reigned, and those are the days I miss.



Here's to you geeks, you've done on a mass scale what I always admired about you in high school. For the shock of high school is the sudden and brutal narrowing of vision—and yet the geeks seemed to keep alive the wide range of life's possibilities. They practiced a mode of friendship and solidarity that was alien to the rest of us dealing with the cruel Byzantine rituals of the high school court. The geeks were self-contained somehow, mercilessly out of the loop. They understood that they were opposed to the popular kids for the simple reason that the geeks knew at a subconscious level that high school would one day be over, whereas the populars believed it would last forever. And in knowing it would end, the geeks filled their days with heady play and eccentric projects. With no eye towards cool or use-value or future gains, the geeks offered a radical alternative for, not only high school life, but for life in general. As Papa Geek Walter Benjamin said, we understand something only in its disappearance. Now that the 80s model of geekdom is outmoded, we see in its traces what it meant, and what we have lost. I salute your success geeks, but don't let it change you—at least not too much.

Lys Woods wrote about BASIC INSTINCT in Synoptique 6.

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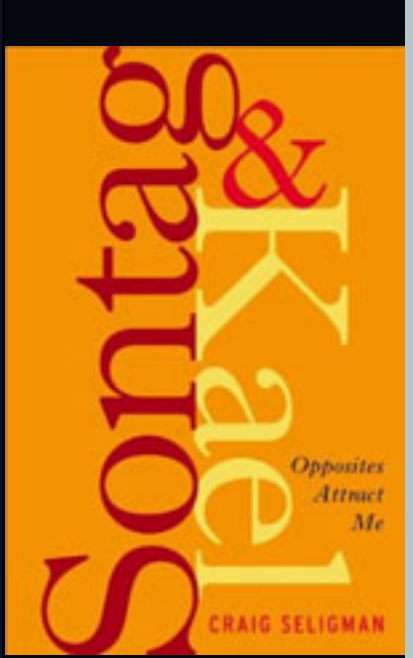


how. What would criticism look like that would serve t

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## A Ménage à trois Gone Wrong

Book Review of *Sontag & Kael: Opposites Attract Me* by Craig Seligman by **Catherine Russell**



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What do Susan Sontag and Pauline Kael have in common? They both wrote about film, they both lived and worked in New York in the 60s through to the 1990s, and oh yes, they are both women. For Craig Seligman, they also represented some kind of opposition, but ultimately the dialectical relationship that he sets up in this book has much more to do with his own agenda than with theirs. A journeyman film critic and journalist, Seligman got to know Kael quite well, and even sat by her beside in the last years of her life talking movies. Seligman has the utmost respect for Kael, whose hard-headedness and ability to “call them like she sees them” without catering to any kind of doctrine he tries desperately to emulate in his own writing. Unfortunately, he gets hopelessly bogged down in his attempts to write Sontag into the picture. Although he claims not to hate her, but in fact to “adore” her, “warts and all,” he can’t seem to get beyond a fairly superficial image.

Sontag is cool, if not supercool, the kind of lofty intellectual that “Kael refers to as inhuman.” But, Seligman immediately corrects himself: “In truth, Kael’s unerring wisdom and her unerring clarity of vision seem more inhuman. Sontag, for all her self-assurance and her maddening pride, has crashed through the world blindly, tripping and falling.” He acknowledges that both women deal in ideas, but he’s more interested in “what’s left over after their ideas,” a strategy that might work for Kael, but tends to belittle Sontag’s scholarship. He criticizes Sontag’s “self-righteousness,” her “harshness towards others,” her “snootiness” and “humourlessness,” and her refusal to embrace her bisexuality and fully out herself. As a gay man, Seligman’s attraction to Kael and Sontag is more of a distorted form of identification. For him, to write like Sontag is to adopt a certain kind of messy ambivalence. Certainly Sontag is a writer who changed and altered her positions over time, tuned to the vicissitudes of shifts in the culture, usually in order to find the counter argument, to find the appropriate critique. Seligman fails to appreciate the subtleties of Sontag’s activism, preferring to dismiss some of her interventions on the question of taste as “twaddle.” As a portrait of Sontag, she comes out looking just a little smudged.

Neither Kael nor Sontag could be described as feminists in any activist sense of the term, and as Seligman notes, both were well embarked on their careers before the movement caught up with them. They might not have needed feminism, but they certainly didn’t take it for granted. Never shying away from addressing the sexual politics of the movies, Kael wrote more often from a specifically gendered point-of-view than did Sontag, who Seligman claims often wrote in a depersonalized neutered voice. After a fair job of summarizing their various statements on the feminist question, Seligman sums up by saying that neither woman had any tolerance for the pious platitude of 70s-era feminism. He quotes Sontag saying “Like all capital moral truths, feminism is a bit simple minded,” despite her contributions to the debate. She just wasn’t passionate about it. Kael, on the other hand, preferred the “naive politics” of a film like THE LAST PICTURE SHOW, because “her feelers for grassroots attitudes helped make her a master psychopathologist of American society.” In her review of the Bogdanovich film she remarks that the young girls are seen “only from the boy’s point of view,” an admittedly prescient observation for 1971, if somewhat superficial.

Seligman has definitely done his homework, meticulously referring to obscure passages in the complete works of both Kael and Sontag. Towards the end of the book he even goes so far as to recall the exact times and places that he read his favourite books and essays over the course of his young and rambling life. These women seem to have been his closest female companions during his formative years, but that doesn’t mean he has anything interesting to say about either one of them. On Sontag’s novel *Death Kit*, for example, he says “it’s surprisingly engaging for such a self-consciously modernist work. It even has flashes of humour... But I couldn’t recommend it to a friend.” What kind of criticism is this? Early in the book he tries to get a handle on Sontag’s theoretical orientation and critical agenda, but because of his preoccupation with Kael, he never gets very far. Where Sontag is oblique, Kael is direct; where Kael is polemical, Sontag is analytical. Her passion doesn’t scorch; she always steps back; she could be “acute” on pop culture, but she wrote far too little about it.



One section of the book is devoted to Kael and Sontag’s critics, or rather to Seligman defending his heroines from their critics, of which they had many. Sontag may have had to “eat more crow” than Kael over the years, but that’s because she was a polemicist. Seligman argues somewhat convincingly that both women tended to take the blame for “the decline of culture” due to their lack of respect for the canons of high art and art cinema. He shows in some detail how thoroughly they enraged people, although rather than showing exactly how and why they championed popular culture, Seligman gets bogged down in the pettiest details of who misquoted who, and whose anti-intellectualism is the most annoying. One has to wonder by the end of this rehashing of diatribes whether there are any critics out there, besides Seligman himself, who actually appreciated and endorsed the work of these two women.

Despite their enormous differences in taste, in readers and in critical objectives, it’s true that both Kael and Sontag pissed people off. But on such different levels! You have to wonder to what extent their orbits even overlapped. Kael annoyed the “young men of Movie” in 1963 with her famous “Circles and Squares” essay on the auteur theory, a theory that she describes as an “attempt by adult males to justify staying inside the small range of experience of their boyhood and adolescence...” Sontag’s bombshell was dropped on Feb. 6, 1982 at Town Hall in Manhattan, during a talk in which she denounced communism as a species of fascism. She intended it to be a critique of the left, but she badly misjudged her audience, who were looking for new strategies of left-wing solidarity in the face of the crisis in Poland. She seemed only to leave herself open to challenges of historical ignorance, and was accused of selling out the left altogether. Seligman defends her by saying that it was a very personal renunciation of cherished ideals, and “they probably didn’t know how deeply she had dug herself in with Cuba and North Vietnam.” Seligman also relates how virulent was the response to her *New Yorker* editorial following the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001. As the first prominent intellectual to advocate reason over passion, she gained the respect of many, although Seligman chooses to focus on her right-wing attackers.

Seligman admits that the scope and sweep of Sontag’s literary output was significantly more vast than Kael’s, who never deviated from her chosen medium of the cinema. Kael may have attempted to take the nation’s pulse through its movie screens, but her diagnoses always seem rather reductive. Sontag looked to photography and AIDs, cancer and genocide, for her pronouncements on the state not only of the nation, but of the human race. Yes, both women took the cinema seriously and provided foundational texts for its serious study, but Seligman is no help in assessing what their contribution really was. Perhaps there is another book yet to be written about these two remarkable writers, maybe by a writer who can leave his own persona at the door and stop worrying who he likes better, and if, because he really likes Kael better, that makes him slightly stupid.

Who really cares how cool Sontag is? Who cares how smart Kael is? Towards the end of the book, Seligman suggests that it may be about writing and style, and he poses the question of whether criticism might be art, slyly pointing to his own stylized prose. But Seligman’s writing is extremely frustrating, as he says nothing without immediately qualifying it or completely contradicting himself in the next paragraph—or changing the subject to Pauline Kael—and it is hardly a model for critical artistry. In the end, his book does make you appreciate how Kael and Sontag managed to carve out such prominent places in the world of cultural criticism. They understood popular culture and the movies so differently though, that it hardly seems fair to push them together simply because of their gender. They were by no means the first or only women to write about film and popular culture; and yet their careers tended to coincide with the emergence of intellectuals as celebrities, and precisely because they were among the very few women who were not easily dismissed as “feminists,” they ranked fairly highly in that culture of celebrity. It will take another kind of study to assess their contributions within the context of arts journalism since the 1960s.

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*Her books include Narrative Mortality: Death, Closure and New Wave Cinemas (1995) and Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video (1999).*

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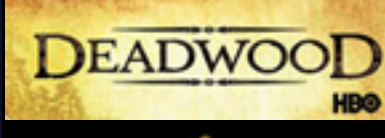
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## Lured In

HBO's slick series flicks and tele-elitism?  
by Laurel Wypkema



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There's no keeping up. As an only recently initiated member of HBO's fiercely loyal entourage of over-involved intellectuals and steadfast fans, I attribute my prior ignorance to silent protest of the idea of HBO and its pay cable cousins since my first introduction in 1999 to its violent, stylish programming for the financially able. To my mind, the AOL Time Warner-owned pay cable cluster of channels was part of a soulless conglomerate pandering to a well-heeled, discerning and implicitly more deserving audience. But my non-involvement wasn't so much a principled objection to exclusive elitist television as much as my inability to pay for the channel (or a Canadian equivalent that simulcast its featured programming).

Wonder of wonders, though, the television section at my local video store—previously perused only for dusty TWIN PEAKS, SEINFELD and MARY TYLER MOORE covers—has boomed in recent months, making most of these formerly unavailable series deliciously accessible to me and the rest of the section faithfuls who earnestly pick the TV shelves clean every weekend of all the best volumes of FREAKS AND GEEKS, THE OFFICE, THE L WORD, SIX FEET UNDER, THE WIRE, CURB YOUR ENTHUSIASM, SEX AND THE CITY, CARNIVALE—the latter five being HBO series. I have a feeling this is all part of the plan. DVD sales, domestic syndication and series merchandise owe their success to the HBO shtick of letting their terrifyingly well-written, slick shows speak for themselves. Word-of-mouth creates demand based on merit and relative quality so that a dedicated and faithful audience follows behind to eagerly sop up hundred-dollar box sets and contribute to a sprawling online community of forums and message boards. Of course, dozens of network television shows are also available for rent, brightly packaged with their own slew of makings-of and behind the scenes features—ALIAS, FUTURAMA, and GILMORE GIRLS to name a few—following in the footsteps of their HBO and Showtime counterparts. Somehow—although it is admittedly not all that opaque—the series behind the HBO brand are the standards by which the mere mortals of network television measure themselves against and at the epicenter of which is the notion of quality. And with all the inherent advantages at pay cable's disposal it's no wonder specialty channels define the television industry's cutting edge—and perhaps always will.

American communications scholar Deborah L. Jaramillo, in her examination of the pay cable channel's construction of a "quality brand" explains that HBO has more leeway in the area of explicit content and no commercial interruptions:

...[It] does not have to fill an entire weeklong primetime schedule with programming [...] HBO's original series producers are not bound by the broadcast standard of a season of twenty to twenty-five episodes; one season on HBO is thirteen episodes [...] Fewer episodes ordered means more money to spend and more production time in which to spend it... Without the financial constraints under which the networks function, HBO can target narrowly segmented niche markets, a concept essential to its branding. (63)

With all these advantages building towards HBO's current roster of completely compelling, beautifully executed series engaging HBO and HBO On Demand audiences, as well as a growing crowd of "second run" viewers who rent or purchase the DVDs and struggle weekly just to keep up, it's no wonder these shows have found their way into my DVD player, all but erasing my previous ill-founded boycott of the entertainment behemoth and its cluster of life-changing television series. It was just a matter of time before I realized my place (as a film student) within their niche market. Now that I am deeply embroiled in this game of catch up, 2005 has become the year of the Johnny-come-lately and these expanded—and usually ransacked—rental shelves in the TV section tell me that I am not alone. Ever since discussions of CARNIVALE and the fourth season of SIX FEET UNDER became the standard subject of small talk on the subway platform after class, it has been dawning on me that there's something going on here. How else to explain the relative neglect of movies among certain committed cinephiles in favor of what are, after all, "only" television series?



It's not TV, it's HBO.

Two of HBO's newest series—and its only two shows not set in contemporary (usually urban) America —DEADWOOD and CARNIVALE, take as their subject real-life characters plucked from American history and mixed in with fictional characters in plots that center, respectively, on an illegal settlement in the West in the mid-1800s and a traveling carnival snaking its way through the Dustbowl in the South during the Depression. These are series for television that appropriate cinematic language and genres and are backed by an interconnected group of mostly male, often ivy-league educated writing and producing geniuses with long lists of accolades for their work in both television and film. David Milch left his post as a lecturer in English Literature at Yale to create NYPD BLUE before masterminding DEADWOOD for HBO. One of the show's producers and sometimes-director, Davis Guggenheim, received the Peabody Award—broadcast television's embodiment of prestige—in 2002 for his documentary THE FIRST YEAR. CARNIVALE's team of writers and directors are a Rubik's Cube of Writer's Guild award winners and independent filmmakers. All of this is to say that at the innovative core of these series is a long list of industry notables participating in creative webs for the production of single episodes and within ingenious combinations of people the likes of which single films never have at their disposal. To date, seven people have directed episodes for DEADWOOD; eleven for CARNIVALE. The result of this unique creative arena is a thematically similar duo of brilliant shows.

I single out DEADWOOD and CARNIVALE because of their break with HBO's traditional line-up as, shall we say, period pieces. Both center on burgeoning American nation building within autonomous, lawless communities with their own codes of hierarchy and procedures of ritualized justice and discipline. Dusty, often squalid transient life provide the backdrop to both shows as themes of decadence, lawlessness, sexual tension and religious alienation play out among the paradigm of good and evil. These shows, particularly CARNIVALE, portray themselves as epic and the realization of destiny, fate and identity within the community loom large among a cast of characters whose players are providing the best performances of the year, in film or television. Ian McShane as Al Swearngen and Robin Weigert as Calamity Jane in DEADWOOD, and Clancy Brown as



Brother Justin Crowe in CARNIVALE are completely captivating in their respective roles. McShane and Brown are DEADWOOD and CARNIVALE's villains and, as villains are wont to do, provide each series with its most riveting dialogue. On the brighter side of the morality spectrum—or at least hovering somewhere in between—Michael J. Anderson's role as carnie ringleader, Samson, is filling out in subtle and fascinating ways in season two where his unfortunately vacuous dialogue left off in season one. Sudden plot twists in the opening few weeks of CARNIVALE's sophomore season hint at an onslaught of female character development, guaranteeing my continued dedication to the show if for nothing more than my anticipation of the reveal played out between Clea Duval, Adrienne Barbeau and the ever-creepy Diane Salinger.

Perhaps it's no coincidence that these shows are so thematically alike, focusing in particular on destiny-fulfillment of their reluctant male leads and the roots of American national identity. CARNIVALE, in particular, enters territory in season two that teeters precariously between cheesy and brilliantly allegorical. With DEADWOOD's second season still in development, one can only hope the critical dynamic between McShane's Swearngen and Timothy Olyphant's noble Seth Bullock continues as intelligently as in its first season.

Investment in these two series demands a different kind of patience than movies require. But I live and die by the creep of character development and the ritualized hour I now devote to each show, so it's that much sweeter when the camera pans left every week across a big southern sky and the CARNIVALE caravan rides off into the frisculating dusklight. Movies, the end.



### Works Cited

Jaramillo, Deborah L. "The Family Racket: AOL Time Warner, HBO, the Sopranos and the Construction of a Quality Brand." *Journal of Communication Inquiry*. 26:1(January 2002): 59-75.

### COMMENTS:

Well done. It is clear that a forum operating outside much of the constraints which the Michael Powell-era FCC has imposed on basic cable has a distinct advantage. Citing immensely less original and less impressive shows like *Alias* and *Gilmore Girls* as the best examples of network shows with similar amounts of success relative to their HBO counterparts further shows the tremendous chasm in quality between the two forums. As you point out, HBO has effectually created a new type of artistic forum, a sort of moviemaking chain letter where the same cast with more resources than your average network show are tweaked by the influence of new directors on a sometimes week to week basis.

By JW on 2005 03 21

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## Packing up the Past, Packing for the Future

A Personal Response to TULSE LUPER SUITCASES

by Zoe Constantinides



[SYNOPTIQUE \[HOME\]](#)

14 Feb 2005  
1154 words

Written by :  
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Zoë Constantinides offers a personal (and anxious) response to Peter Greenaway's spacious TULSE LUPER SUITCASES. Her elegant and thoughtful analysis of Greenaway's unrestrained intertextual project struggles to come to terms with unanswerable questions of anxiety, megalomania, and (begrudgingly) post-modernity itself.

There's something seductive about megalomaniacs. Perhaps it's their total faith in their own vision, perhaps it's their seemingly unfettered access to the means to realize that vision. Mostly, I think, it's their sanctioned disregard for others. So I was seduced by the prospect of attending a screening of Peter Greenaway's THE TULSE LUPER SUITCASES (2003-2004,) a seven-hour cinematic instalment of the proposed multimedia opus, *The Tulse Luper Network*. The expansive project smacked of tantalizing hubris.

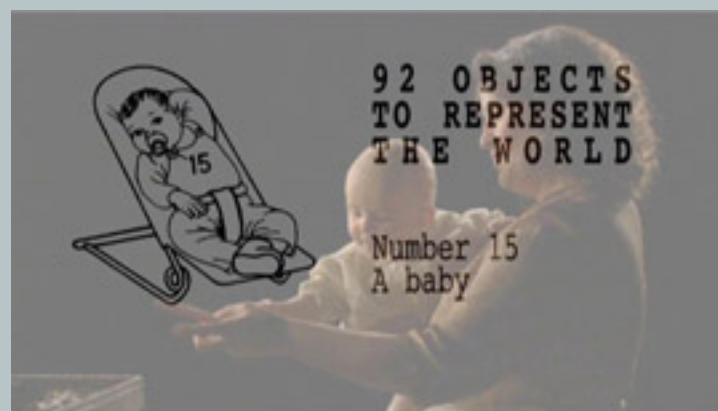
Like Greenaway's earlier epic experiment, THE FALLS (1980), THE TULSE LUPER SUITCASES is a film for the anxious soul. Anxiety, like visceral fear, can be an enjoyable experience under controlled conditions. These two films offer a little glimpse into the murky recesses of the psyche, where a repertoire of expectations waits to be processed and alternately fulfilled or unfulfilled [1].



In THE FALLS, the slow unravelling of the film's closed hermeneutic system gives the viewer an opportunity to binge and purge on all life's questions that will never be answered. With testimony and clues from 92 biographies, the viewer still can't help but fail to solve the film's central mystery: what is the VUE (Violent Unknown Event) that has afflicted 19 million people with a variety of bizarre symptoms? Tulse Luper's 92 suitcases will similarly renege on their promise to

reveal the secrets of our hero's life. But THE FALLS provides reassurance that is very much lacking from SUITCASES: the world of ornithology and directories is ruled by stable systems. Numeric, alphabetical, taxonomic systems. It may all be an elaborate, apocalyptic ruse but it's an impeccably organized one that conjures the warm fuzzies that only cold order can. The film's systems may be arbitrary, but in a tautological way, they work: they soothe anxiety.

The same cannot be said of SUITCASES. The film's infinitely pluralistic world defies containment in lists and albums. Although as hermeneutically lush as THE FALLS, SUITCASES is full of holes... The contents spill haphazardly throughout the narrative, and then onto websites, television and online games—virtual spin-offs of the film. The speed of the film is dizzying; combined with the frame saturation achieved by the indulgent use of split screen, and the layering of conflicting images, text and sound. The experience of watching the film is one of sensory overload. Here, the systems seem to be spiralling out of control. It's lovely to watch, but it's enough to make one feel a little...anxious.



THE TULSE LUPER SUITCASES made me think about post-modernity, which is something I had hoped never to think about again. Inescapably, however, this film screams post-modern. From its exploratory manipulations of the digital medium, to its exuberantly discontinuous narrative of the 20th century, to its G.K. Chesterton refrain, "There is no history. There are only historians," this is a film about These Post-modern Times. In fact, perhaps Greenaway's project can be seen as a parody of post-modernism/post-modernity itself.



Herein lies my anxiety. You see, I never quite came to terms with post-modernity. I can't celebrate shifting signifiers and lost referents the way that Greenaway can. In its flagrant cataloguing of textbook tropes, SUITCASES is a nostalgia film about post-modernity. Does SUITCASES then signal the end of post-modernity? For me, there's always been something too final about the *post*. And this irrevocability is literally doubled, while simultaneously trivialized by *post-post-modernity*. Because, really, what comes after the end of history?

While SUITCASES doesn't propose an answer, it seems to suggest that the troubling instability of reality can be assuaged by the joys of post-modern artifice. Greenaway places a premium on storytelling as a performative act. The auditioning of actors to play the various characters throughout the film reminds us that a good story requires a great storyteller. Historical fidelity is secondary to artistry. The film's best moments are those of exorbitant fabulation, when sheer narrative pleasure bursts the confines of Greenaway's encyclopaedic project.

One such moment occurs in the third hour when Cissie Colpitts (Valentina Cervi) takes over the announcer's post on a deserted platform of the Antwerp train station during World War II and proceeds to announce a long list of train destinations, all fictitious. Meanwhile, Tulse Luper, held prisoner somewhere in the bowels of the station, listens to Cissie through the ventilation system and, falling in love with the fanciful place names, crawls through the vents to reach her. It's a classically romantic move, but the *mise-en-scène* is stark, theatrical and haunting. The extended length of the scene allows for a tremendous heaviness to settle in. It is a momentary reprieve from the callous assault of images and words that have crowded the film up to that point. Cissie's slow, echoing list of imaginary lands evokes a strange beauty that intoxicates the viewer along with Tulse.

Tulse Luper, or Tulse as I feel inclined to call him, possesses a similar power to mesmerize. Tulse (JJ Field) is a drifter and prisoner, a man who seems to have little agency over his surroundings or fate. Yet,

despite his odd lack of defining characteristics, he manages to be disarmingly charismatic. His shy charm is enough to carry nearly six hours of the film (until he suddenly ages from a young man to middle age, now played by Stephen Billington). Perhaps it is only the work of fiction that can strike such a fine balance between humility and allure. Perhaps the best purveyor of human ardour is artifice.



I'm looking forward to seeing Tulse again in the online game, *The Tulse Luper Journey* [2]. It will be interesting to see if he retains his charm in a medium not particularly known for its capacity for compelling narrative and rich characterization. The trick will be to balance Greenaway's contradictory impulses: the playfully arbitrary archives of names, places and personal histories on the one hand, and the vivacious storytelling that threatens these systems and makes them interesting on the other. I worry that online, the film's moments of transcendent beauty and tragedy will stagnate. Without the poetry, the SUITCASES world is just a collection of post-modern clichés. If the viewer can control the time spent with each suitcase, each character, each story, the film's anxious abandon can easily slip into boring redundancy. The idea of the game is tempting: to investigate the strange systems until one has mastered their inner logic through repeated clicking (like repeated viewing,) until those systems feel as organized as those of THE FALLS. Perhaps this urge should be avoided. "After all, if one tames the nervous energy of post-modernity, then there's nowhere to go but further *post*."

I am also curious to see how the notion of multiple authorship will play out in *Journey*. The interplay of meaning making in the film is palpable, but ultimately overshadowed by Greenaway's eccentric vision. Will he actually cede some authorial responsibility to the gamer? Or will the participants be just that; pawns in a predetermined choose-your-own-adventure? Because, alas, we can't all be megalomaniacs...

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The comparison of these two films is not arbitrary. Although Greenaway's oeuvre abounds with self-referentiality and intertextuality, these films in particular seem to have a special connection. In addition to the usual recurrence of characters and themes, the films have a privileged position as Greenaway's masterworks. Not only do they share an epic scope, both films perform an inventory of cutting edge film techniques at their respective moments in cinematic history. The temporal distance that separates the two films is instructive in the development of Greenaway's thematic concerns, especially in relation to history and modernity.

<sup>2</sup> The online game, *The Tulse Luper Journey* is scheduled to go live at the end of this month (February 2005). The idea is that players will be able to interact with the characters and investigate the different storylines that were introduced in the film. Greenaway, who is intimately involved in the game's production, is apparently aiming to create a quintessential post-modern work of multiple authorship and shifting subjectivity. The website is located at <http://www.tulseluperjourney.com>.

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## SISTERLY REVIEWS

### LEMONY SNICKET'S: A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS

by **Andrea Ariano and Tanya Boulanger**



[SYNOPTIQUE \[HOME\]](#)

14 Feb 2005  
1124 words

Written by :  
Andrea Ariano and Tanya  
Boulanger

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*In this series of reviews, our resident sister act of Andrea Ariano (age 24) and Tanya Boulanger (age 11) offer a commentary of the same film, in this case, a current film: LEMONY SNICKET'S: A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS (2004). In later editions, the sisters will look both to the past and the future to investigate the ongoing process of cinephilia, shifting tastes, and memory.*

LEMONY SNICKET'S: A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS is Exactly That by Andrea Ariano

LEMONY SNICKET'S: A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS (2005, Brad Silberling), a film encompassing the first three books of the *Snicket* Series, is the latest in a series of children's literature adaptations à la *Harry Potter*. Even though J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books are not quite my cup of tea, Daniel Handler (a.k.a. Lemony Snicket, a.k.a. Jude Law) spins a tale of three orphaned children with a realistically dark tone that appeals to my cynical worldview. Needless to say, I am not a cotton-candy-children's-film kind of person. I prefer hard-candy tales by the likes of Tim Burton who creates outcast characters and extraordinarily dark worlds, to which his upcoming remake of CHARLIE AND THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY (2005) will almost certainly attest. In his best work, Burton's surreal characters achieve a sensibility and an emotionalism that is quite unique and touching. Brad Silberling's film manages to deliver all the fantastic design of a Tim Burton project; unfortunately, this is accomplished in a rather empty, paint-by-numbers context.

The plot is very simplistic, resembling a series of Scooby Doo-esque episodes in which the recently orphaned Baudelaire children must escape and unmask their cruel uncle, Count Olaf (Jim Carrey), an unsuccessful theater actor who takes the children in for the sole purpose of murdering them and pilfering their large inheritance. Olaf soon fails in this endeavor, subsequently losing custody of the children and forcing him to "act" his way back into their lives as they go from one eccentric guardian (a snake-collecting uncle played by Billy Connolly) to the other (an agoraphobic aunt played by Meryl Streep).



The ensemble's acting kept me interested throughout the often mundane plot. The Baudelaire children perfectly exhibit the talents that help them outsmart Count Olaf's egocentric and overstated acting skills (yes, I am speaking of Count Olaf, although Olaf and Jim Carrey are practically interchangeable in this regard). This is a film to see only if viewers are able to enjoy Carrey's extremely expressive acting, which I believe fits this character quite perfectly since it helps animate a solemn story. As for the children, Emily Browning, Liam Aiken, and Kara Hoffman hold their own as the innovative one, the bookworm, and the toddler with a biting habit, respectively. Bill Connolly and Meryl Streep offer their own distinctive versions of eccentricity, creating a noticeable contrast to the brainy sadness of the older children's acting. Although she does not speak a word throughout the film, Little Kara Hoffman is the film's scene-stealer as her facial expressions match every word of her humorously subtitled toddler gibberish.



The series-of-unfortunate-events is book-ended by two animated credit sequences that are worth mentioning. The opening credit sequence is a computer animated mock-teaser that lays the happiness and sunshine on very thick by introducing the story of a happy elf with a rainbow of pastel colors, birds chirping, and children singing... Until, Lemony Snicket interrupts to explain that the story we are about to see is not a happy one. Just as the actual film is to begin, Snicket adds that it is not too late to go into the next cinema to see a "happy film". This is perhaps the most self-reflexive gesture that I have ever seen in a children's film. Yet, I believe it says more about how the *Lemony Snicket* franchise operates than it does about the film itself. In book form, *Lemony Snicket* constantly plays with a pessimistic, if not fatalistic, tone that calls much attention to itself. Witness the opening paragraph at lemonsnicket.com: "If I were you, I would immediately turn your computer off rather than view any of the dreadful images, read any of the wretched information, play any of the unnerving games or examine the unpleasant books presented within this website". Warnings such as these mimic the book's narration verbatim. It is not surprising then, that the end credits are peppered with beautiful black-and-white cutouts of the Baudelaire children, running from their mean Uncle Olaf. These flat black-and-white characters resemble the bleak illustrations found in the series of books as they provide a perfectly stark contrast to the bubbly three-dimensional animation of the opening credits.

However coy in its treatment of fairy tale cruelty, Silberling's LEMONY SNICKET'S: A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS is a film too traumatizing for small children despite the cutaways to Snicket's voiceover when the violence becomes too intense for young minds. Adult minds may be aggravated by the film as well, especially if they have an aversion to Jim Carrey. For those who like him, it's probably worth noting that this particular role necessitates the portrayal of multiple characters in fairly interesting ways, though hardly in such a manner as to allow the level of satirical irony to be seen in Peter Sellers' performance(s) in Kubrick's subversive DR. STRANGELOVE (1964).

Though A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS is a children's tale, it presents a pessimistic view of the world that might only be appreciated by its adult viewers. Unfortunately, the repetitive plot tends to take away from its beautifully stylized and dreary world. As a Tim Burton enthusiast I am anxious to see whether this summer's CHARLIE AND THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY will strike a better balance between cynicism and adult/child spectatorship.

LEMONY SNICKET'S: A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS is a Must See! by Tanya Boulanger

LEMONY SNICKET'S: A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS (2004, Brad Silberling) is a movie that if you prefer ones like 13 GOING ON 30 and AUSTIN POWERS I don't think that you will like this movie. I don't have any preferences and that is why I liked this movie very much. It was very well written and the characters resembled very much to the ones in the book, especially Count Olaf (Jim Carey). I thought that there wouldn't have been any comedy (even if Jim Carey was in it) because it was a sad movie but it actually had a lot. Unless that is just me and my sister's bad sense of humor. Its really good but it doesn't really follow the book and it has some more parts like why the houses burnt on fire. I also think that you should read the books (in order...duh) and then see the movie because then it would make more sense to you. And if you like to stay and see the end credits its really worth it because they are amazing! I wish that I could tell you that it has a great screenplay or something like that but I can't because I don't know what that is 😊 (what? I'm only a kid). Anyways, this is just to say that I really really liked this movie and that I think that you should see this movie (kids, adults, teens and all the other kinds of ages) especially with family.

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