



SYNOPTIQUE

An Online Journal of Film and Moving Image Studies



EDITION 3
2004



SYNOPTIQUE

An Online Journal of Film and Moving Image Studies

Originally Published in 2004

ISSN: 1715-7641

Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema, Concordia University
1250 Guy St., Montreal
Quebec, Canada

©2021

This full issue has been assembled in 2021 to unify the formatting of the older journal editions.

The cover and individual articles have been reformatted from their original HTML dependent forms. Some reference images have been lost due to the age of the site.

Contents

Introduction	4
Nadine Asswad	
A Talk with the Artist: Abbas Kiarostami in Conversation	5
Shahin Parhami	
Festival de TriBeCa : Compte Rendu Partie #1 : Les Documentaires	9
P-A Despatis D	
Picturing the Primitive	16
Santiago Hidalgo	
Les DVD qu'on peut ne pas acheter	19
Michel Gatignol	
The Why and the How of Movie Trailers	21
Brian Crane	
The Provocateur Auteur - Paul Verhoeven and the Reception of Starship Troopers (1997)	28
Owen Livermore	
KILL BILL : VOLUME 2 The 2nd Inter-Review	33
Owen Livermore	
The Last Samurai Confused About American-Japanese Relations?	36
Martin Lefebvre	
Troy D'oh! The Iliad Redux: Some Notes on Adaptation in Troy	38
Janos Sitar	
+ Splinter Reviews II	40
Multiple Contributors	
Doctor Vornoff's Corner #2 : Paracinema	43
Dr. Eric Vornoff	

Introduction

Nadine Asswad

Juin ! Mois qui signifie liberté pour certains,
Parce que les cours sont terminés,
Que les vacances, si elles ne sont pas arrivées,
Ne tarderont pas à venir.

Renaissance ! Parce que la chaleur nous fait dévêtir,
Pour le plus grand plaisir des yeux,
Parce que la lumière, plus longue,
Nous fait oublier la dépression de l'hiver,
Qui nous a encore paru trop long cette année.

Synoptique en est déjà à sa troisième publication en ligne. Cette édition de juin reflète un peu cet état d'esprit de la fin et du recommencement. Nous vous offrons ce mois-ci, ce qui nous plaît d'appeler pot pourri, dans lequel se retrouvent textes, articles et analyses rigoureux sur des films sérieux mélangés à des films considérés moins sérieux. Ceci n'est peut-être pas un hasard, car si juin signifie la fin du dur labeur de l'année scolaire, il marque aussi le début de la saison des blockbusters hollywoodiens.

L'été est également un moment où nous avons tous plus de temps. Plus de temps pour lire les livres et voir les films que nous nous promettons depuis des mois. Synoptique ne fera pas relâche durant l'été. Alors, nous invitons tous ceux et celles, qui n'ont pas eu le temps durant l'année, à écrire pour la revue.

Nous n'insisterons jamais assez de dire que notre porte est grande ouverte. Il se passe tellement d'événements cinématographiques à Montréal qui méritent d'être découverts, discutés et disputés. Nous ne nous fatiguerons jamais de répéter que Synoptique

est l'occasion pour nous tous de créer un forum de discussions où tout écrit est bienvenu, sur quel que sujet filmique qu'il soit.

Vos commentaires nous sont aussi précieux. Toute critique constructive sert à améliorer ce qui a déjà été fait. Vos bons comme vos « moins » bons commentaires sont importants mais surtout nécessaires à la progression de cette revue. Ainsi, c'est dans l'intérêt de tous de vous écouter.

Pour tous commentaires et propositions de textes, veuillez les faire parvenir à l'adresse officielle de Synoptique : editor@synoptique.ca.

Bonne lecture,
Nadine Asswad

A Talk with the Artist: Abbas Kiarostami in Conversation

Shahin Parhami

Iranian-Canadian filmmaker Shahin Parhami was born in Shiraz, Iran. After his arrival in Canada in 1988, along with contributions of his poetry and essays to local Persian and English cultural/art journals, he pursued film studies and production, first at Ottawa's Carleton University and later at Concordia University in Montreal. He has directed several award-winning short films and videos— among them are *Your Absence* (1995) and *Nessian* (2002)— which have been screened in festivals, art galleries and universities. Since 1997 he has been working on a trilogy: *Nasoot* (1997); *Laboot* (1998); and *Jabaroot* (2003). The last part of the trilogy is a 60-minute unconventional poetic documentary on Iranian classical music. It has been selected by many prestigious international film festivals such as Thessaloniki, Hot Docs, and Montreal International Festival of New Media and New Cinema.

Shahin Parhami: Let's begin with your first experiences in the field of filmmaking, for instance, your title design for the Iranian new wave film, *Quesar* (1969). Was it your intention to make your way up to directing films?

Abbas Kiarostami: No, not at all. Back then I was involved in painting and later on graphic design for ads and commercials. In those days title design was very fashionable and Saul Bass' work in particular was very much in style. His titles influenced many graphic artists and filmmakers of the time. I already had some experience working with a 35mm camera through some commercials that I had made prior to that. From the perspective of a graphic artist it was an attractive

challenge. *Quesar* was my second film and I believe I worked on four or five other titles after that until I started directing films. So I can say that title design was a bridge between graphic art and cinema in my case. These days I prefer that others make titles for my films since I don't have the patience and also I believe that that particular style and approach to title design is very much passé.

S.P.: Can we say that your first film, *Bread And Alley* (1970), demonstrates your technical and aesthetic approach to filmmaking? And the script of this short film, which was written by your brother, did it in any way contribute to the structure of the film?

Kiarostami: Yes, the writer was my brother. (I used past tense since he lives in North America!) During the time that I was working for the Institution of Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults in late 60s, I read many scripts, but this in particular caught my eye. Particularly the unified timeline was attractive to me. The story itself is only twelve minutes long, so there was not much need to break up the time. But I was also aware that breaking up a time frame in order to show the passage of time makes filmmakers submit to clichés and conventions. Therefore it was an interesting challenge for me to bring cinematic time and real time close to each other as much as possible without employing those conventions.

Bread And Alley was my first experience in cinema and I must say a very difficult one. I had to work with a very young child, a dog and an unprofessional crew, except for the cinematographer, who was nagging and complaining all the time. Well, the cinematographer in a sense was right because I did not follow the conventions of filmmaking that he had become accustomed to. He

insisted that we break up the scenes. For instance, he wanted to get a long shot of the kid approaching, a close up of the kid's hand and then when the kid enters the house and closes the door, a shot of the dog as he goes and sleeps at the door, etc. But I believed that if we could get both of them (the kid and the dog) in one take, that is, walking into the frame, the kid entering the home and the dog going off to sleep at the door, then it could have deeper impact.

I think that was the most difficult long take that I have ever shot in my life. For that particular shot we had to wait forty days; three times we changed the dog (one of them even had rabies). Despite all the problems that we faced it finally happened or clicked. In a way this film is due in large part to my lack of knowledge when it comes to cinematic conventions. Now, when I think about it, I come to the conclusion that I made the right decision. I believe that breaking the scenes—although it can contribute to the rhythm of the film—can easily harm the reality and the content of the film.

S.P.: How have your distinct style of narrative, cinematic gaze and sense of rhythm evolved over time?

Kiarostami: Well, I really don't know. This is a kind of question that requires a great deal of contemplation and I don't think we have enough time for that. But I think all of these are produced by fear: the fear of incompetence when you are on the set with a camera and the whole crew, when you are questioning your technical knowledge and ability. In such moments of doubt and fear you challenge yourself and that makes you grow and mature.

After making your film you can sit back, watch it as a spectator, and judge your ability in expressing your story or its content. It takes a while for one's gaze to become a style, however. I don't think anyone can predetermine a specific style before actually experiencing an artistic medium. As for my sense of rhythm, I've never been a fan of commercial cinema with its fast pace and its excitement. My own life doesn't have a very fast rhythm, I live slowly and my films reflect my life's pace and rhythm.

S.P.: Throughout the production and post-production of your films, at what point do you finalize the use of sound elements, like music? Is it during the editing stage or is it all predetermined beforehand?

Kiarostami: I never think of sound during the editing stage. There might be some minor changes during the editing, but sounds are finalized before that stage.

S.P.: Even the music?

Kiarostami: Definitely music. I never have a musical soundtrack on my films. If I use music it is at the end and in those cases I even know what instrument needs to be used. If I choose a piece or elect to commission a musician, then I must have total control. I never dare to give my film to musicians and tell them "now compose a soundtrack for it." This is more dangerous than mail-order marriages. When you edit out the slightest of sounds, like a fly or a bird hovering over your microphone, how can you let someone else impose a whole soundtrack on your film?

S.P.: One of the characteristics of your cinema—present even in early films like *The Traveler* (1974)—is the effective use of non-diegetic and off-screen sounds, particularly monologues and dialogues. I personally believe that in *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999) in particular that you use the technique rather extravagantly. Is it possible to go even farther than that in employing such a device to convey your narrative?

Kiarostami: Of course, I certainly intend to do so. I believe that when we don't see things in their full details that their impact is stronger; their impressions last longer. It also gives the audience an opportunity to use their imagination: by just hearing the sound they can see the images in their creative mind without actually seeing them on the screen. This is actually an invitation for the spectators to participate in the creation of a work.

I envy people who read novels since they have much more freedom to use their imagination than a film audience. If a film could be structured like the layout of a book it would be ideal. For example, the last four lines of a chapter could end at the top of a page with the rest of the page blank and the following page sitting next to it. The new chapter then starts with a short title. This kind of format gives you an opportunity to pause and think. It often surprises me when people say, "I picked up a book and I couldn't put down until I finished it." How can one see that as a positive quality for an artwork? It's the same superficial excitement that the mainstream cinema imposes on their audiences. Sometimes, as I'm editing my films, I like to insert a black leader instead of an image (like that blank page of the novel) and say, "that's it for now!"

Cinema should be able to provide this kind of a freedom both for artist and the audience. While making *The Wind Will Carry Us*, I was aware of how boring it could be seeing the same man climbing up a hill repeatedly. But what I found challenging was figuring out how to express the fact that I want that boredom—I want to bore you. Characters in the film are also bored. Nothing

is happening, just some mundane activities and some scenery. Even the main character in the film—all he does is wait for something to happen. The very fact that nothing is happening creates some sort of expectation. Therefore, a small incident like the well's landslide becomes a big deal in this narrative. Sometimes you need those empty spaces to make your audience more receptive and sensitive. This is perhaps like those different chapters in novels.

One who writes a novel might write it from the very first letter to the end but later he or she divides them into different chapters in order to create desired moods and atmospheres. But conventional cinema doesn't do that since its legacy is to take the audience hostage and dictate to them. In other words, it gives them a pre-packaged deal with determined message and a closed ending. That is why it cannot tolerate open, simple and uneventful moments. And audiences are conditioned by this kind of a cinema! They get lost and confused when they face an open-end. Sometimes you hear them say, "I could understand the film until the end, but I could not understand that very last scene." But I believe even if for some reason you can't watch the film to the end (for instance because of a black out) you should feel content. A sequence should be self-contained. Back in the days when I used to watch films, after an impressive or moving scene or sequence I would leave the theatre. Those particular moments could make my day and I felt no urge to see the ending. I didn't expect any conclusion or judgment on the characters, whether good or bad.

S.P.: I don't think you believe in a cinema that contains a particular message.

Kiarostami: Exactly, cinema is not a place for propagating messages. An artist designs and creates a piece hoping to materialize some thoughts, concepts or feelings through his or her medium. The credibility of great Persian poets like Rumi and Hafiz comes from the very fact that they are composed in such a way that they are fresh and meaningful regardless of the time, place and conditions in which you read them—and this means reading them while doing divination or simply as literature. This is also true in the case of some of our contemporary poets like Forough Farokhzad. When we are in front of an abstract painting, we have the license to interpret in any way we want. Or music—music is a medium that we might not understand, but that we feel and enjoy. But in the case of cinema many expect to receive a clear and unified message, but what I'm suggesting is that a film could be experienced as a poem, a painting, or a piece of music.

S.P.: As an author, how open are you to different interpretations of your own work? For instance, one can read the opening sequence of *Taste Of Cherry* (1997) as containing homoerotic overtones. What would be your thoughts on that?

Kiarostami: I know people who have read the entire film with a queer subtext. I believe anyone has the right to read my film in any way they understand or like to understand. I remember after making *Where Is The Friend's Home?* (1987) someone told a friend of mine that this film is very political. When my friend asked him why, he said because of the name of the character, Mohamad Reza Nematzadeh. He added that his first name is the name of the last Iranian king, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, and that his family name is Nematzadeh, which means roughly "God's gift." Later on, I found out that this man used to work for Iranian National TV and he was fired after the revolution. A film should be multidimensional with many layers that any spectator from any orientation and background could be able to relate to it. Who has the right to say "no" and deprive them of the way they like to see or read the film?

S.P.: Now when you look at your old films, how do you feel about them? Let's say *The Traveler*, which is your first feature.

Kiarostami: A few years ago, twenty years after I made it, I watched *The Traveler* at some festival in Japan. I found it still fresh and that the audience can still get along with it. But, no, my films are never perfect: they always have problems. And I should say that this is not only the case for my earlier films. But these flaws are unavoidable, and it is not because you do not know your job. Especially when you working with non-actors and in their everyday environment you cannot have absolute control over everything.

These imperfections can be counted as flaws or as virtues of the film. If I were to have made *The Traveler* today, I might have been able to correct some moments, but, for sure, the film would have lost some great moments, too. These films were made in the past and they belong to those moments.

S.P.: How much art, philosophy, sociology, and political theory are involved in your creative process?

Kiarostami: Whatever theories had to offer me, they should have offered it long before I stood behind the camera. One should already have digested what he or she has read or learned before starting an artistic project. If one has really understood some theories, concepts or philosophy, they will appear in his/ her work in a subtle way. A fast and emotional reaction against social

and political issues reduces the film to newspaper with an expiry date. And when those particular social intricacies change or end, the film becomes worthless. If the filmmaker creates a work with some raw and undigested ideas in his agenda, the film becomes an animated slogan.

I believe true art should be timeless. In a country like Iran, where social and political issues are constantly shifting, the artist should focus beyond these mundane issues, on more fundamental realities like humanity itself, which is more universal.

S.P.: So an artist unconsciously lives ahead of his/her time?

Kiarostami: It must be that way. It's the journalist's job to collect news until 4 a.m. in order to print it in their newspapers the following day. But for an artist, that news should have been received months and years before.

This interview took place in the August 2000 during the Montreal World Film Festival.

Festival de TriBeCa : Compte Rendu

Partie #1 : Les Documentaires

P-A Despatis D

Le festival du film de TriBeCa a été fondé par Robert DeNiro, Jane Rosenthal et Craig Hatkoff suite aux attentats du 11 septembre afin de raviver le quartier qui a été fermé plusieurs mois. Le cinéma dans lequel se déroulait la majorité des projections se trouve d'ailleurs à quelques mètres à peine de Ground Zero. En 2003, le festival a attiré plus de 350 000 personnes et a généré près de cinquante millions de revenus pour la région du sud de Manhattan. Des quelques 3300 soumissions de films reçues cette année par le festival, près de 150 films ont été acceptés et inclus dans les diverses catégories du festival. De ce nombre, près de cinquante premières nord-américaines ou mondiales attendaient les cinéphiles et les quelques mille cinéastes présents sur place.

La première réaction des gens à qui j'ai dit que j'allais couvrir un festival de cinéma à New York était bien évidemment de me dire que j'étais chanceux et que mon séjour à New York serait des plus agréables. Mais non! Comme les réalisateurs s'entendent pour la plupart pour dire que faire des films n'est pas agréable du tout, aller à un festival de cinéma ne l'est pas non plus. Diantre! Un festival signifie pour tout critique ou pour tout cinéophile assidu une suite de dix jours infernaux. Visionnement de presse tôt le matin, dernier film tard le soir, manque de nourriture et de sommeil, etc. C'est pénible! (Eh oui!)

Pendant dix jours, alors que le soleil illumine la ville, nous sommes condamnés à voir trois, quatre, cinq ou même six films par jour dans une salle obscure sur des bancs de cinéma plus ou moins confortables—à l'exception bien entendue des luxueux fauteuils en cuir du TriBeCa Film Center où se sont déroulés quelques visionnements de presse. Un festival de cinéma représente également bien souvent une période bien

stressante où l'on a 5 minutes entre deux films pour se rendre d'un cinéma à l'autre, alors qu'ils sont à 10 minutes de marche l'un de l'autre. Les festivals sont également souvent très décevants, puisque le nombre de films que l'on veut voir est largement supérieur au nombre de film que l'on peut et que l'on réussit à voir. Durant la période d'un festival, on se doit d'oublier amis, famille, actualités et nouvelles locales. Durant ces dix jours, on est donc coupé de tout le reste du monde et notre vie demeure centrée sur le festival. Après tout, quatre à six films par jours nous y attendent!

Un manque de sommeil s'en suit donc, sans compter les nombreuses fois où l'on n'a pas le temps de manger entre deux films, le stress et les déceptions ! Malgré tout, en dépit de toutes ces contraintes et de ces désagréments, l'on retourne bon an mal an aux festivals, car, comme une drogue, on ne peut s'en passer.

Bien évidemment, plus l'on vieillit, plus l'on regarde de films et par conséquent plus notre culture filmique s'accroît, moins le nombre de bons films que l'on voit est élevé. Plus notre parcours de cinéophile assidu avance, plus l'on devient biaisé envers cet étrange médium qu'est le cinéma. Donc, plus l'on voit de films, moins l'effet de surprise sera élevé et moins le risque d'être ébahi par une découverte extraordinaire, une perle rare, se fera sentir. Malgré tout, indubitablement à chaque festival, on regarde trente, quarante ou même cinquante films en dix jours dans l'espoir de trouver les quelques joyaux ensevelis sous cet amalgame de films.

Malheureusement, ce type de joyaux ne s'est pas manifesté outre mesure cette année au festival de

TriBeCa. Seuls deux films de fictions se sont réellement démarqués de la masse. *Love Collage* (恋愛寫) du Japonais Yukihiro Tsutsumi et *The Green Hat* première réalisation de Fendou Liu qui a écrit le scénario pour *Shower* (mon intérêt marqué pour les films asiatiques se trouve ici démasqué! hic). Outre ces deux films, plusieurs valaient bien évidemment le détour, mais aucun autre ne s'est réellement démarqué autant que ces deux chefs-d'oeuvre qui pénétreront sûrement le sol montréalais dans l'un ou l'autre des festivals dans les prochains mois.

LES FILMS

Les sujets des documentaires présentés cette année étaient des plus variés; la politique américaine (*Bush's Brain*), le mariage gai (*Tying The Knot*), Hiroshima (*Original Child Bomb*) et la beauté (*Beauty Academy Of Kabul*) pour ne nommer que ceux là.

Du côté des documentaires, c'est *Every Mother's Son* réalisé par Kelly Anderson et Tami Gold qui s'est le plus démarqué, et qui a d'ailleurs remporté le prix du public. Le festival a offert une multitude de documentaires sur des sujets d'autant plus variés. La sélection de certains documentaires semble cependant très douteuse. C'est notamment le film *Crazy Legs Conti*. Très similaire au film très attendu (sic!) *Supersize Me*, ce documentaire montre la carrière de Crazy Legs Conti, champion américain dans les concours de mangeur professionnels. Le film débute lors d'un concours de vitesse où les compétiteurs doivent manger le plus de hot-dogs possibles en douze minutes. Le gagnant en a mangé cinquante! Alors spectateur à ce concours, Crazy Legs Conti commence à s'entraîner et joins par la suite les rangs d'une association de mangeurs professionnels en espérant pouvoir se qualifier pour ce concours un an plus tard. Le film le suit lors de diverses rencontres locales et de qualifications d'états menant à cette compétition très réputée de Coney Island qui est considérée comme le Super Bowl des concours de mangeurs professionnels. Afin de promouvoir la première de ce film, Crazy Legs Conti, ne reculant devant rien, a d'ailleurs décidé de manger l'équivalent de son poids en popcorn. En près de huit heures, il a mangé près de cinquante pieds cubes de pop-corn!

Le documentaire est bien fait et vaut la peine d'être vu, surtout pour découvrir les « prouesses » du corps humain. Malgré tout, et malgré le fait qu'il est parfois drôle—par exemple lorsque Crazy Legs Conti pose nu pour un cours d'art ou lorsqu'il ingère trois livres de beurre en quelques minutes à peine pour se pratiquer—

la sélection d'un tel documentaire à un festival d'un tel calibre est quelque peu étrange, surtout si l'on prend en considération la qualité des autres documentaires présentés. Il est quelque peu difficile de croire que les programmeurs de la section documentaires n'ont pas reçu de meilleurs films sur des sujets disons, plus pertinents.

C'est d'ailleurs l'un des problèmes de quelques autres films. Dans certaines sections, des chefs d'oeuvres internationaux sont présentés à côté de films légers ou commerciaux qui n'ont aucune profondeur. Ceci n'est pas pour dire que ces films plus légers ne valent pas la peine d'être vus, au contraire! Cependant, leur place prédominante au festival prive les spectateurs de plusieurs autres films potentiellement meilleurs. Cette division schizophrénique du festival semble mettre l'accent sur le fait que le festival, afin d'être viable, se doit d'attirer un public plus large et de masse qui s'intéresse à ce genre de film.

À l'opposé de *Crazy Legs Conti*, dans la même section pourtant, on a pu voir l'excellent documentaire *A Letter To True*. Bien que la prémisse du film puisse sembler quelque peu loufoque (un homme qui écrit une lettre à ses chiens qu'il adore) le film est des plus évocateur sur la société moderne. Ce film explore la relation qu'on a avec les animaux et il explore l'apport positif qu'ils ont sur nos vies. Lors d'une journée typique des cinq chiens du réalisateur, la caméra (vérité) suit ces chiens dans leurs activités typiques et leurs périples quotidiens. Très vite, de nombreux thèmes s'enchevêtrent à l'histoire des chiens. Dès le début du film, les chiens et leur amour inconditionnel envers leur maître, leur loyauté et leur amitié mutuelle deviennent une métaphore pour la paix et l'espoir dans le monde.

À travers un montage de musique, de nombreuses séquences où l'on voit les chiens de Bruce Weber s'amuser, une série d'images d'archives, des séquences de films et des photos que Bruce Weber a prises, ressort une très belle histoire sur l'esprit humain qui est rehaussée par une narration des plus lyriques. La narration de Weber transporte le spectateur à travers un poème visuel qui tente d'explorer la fragilité de la vie et sa beauté parfois obstruée par divers événements que l'on voudrait pouvoir éviter.

Entrecoupés avec des plans magnifiques des chiens jouant innocemment sur la plage avec une musique des plus enivrantes, des thèmes aussi dramatiques que les attentats du 11 septembre, la guerre en Irak, la guerre du Vietnam, et le statut des immigrants illégaux

sont abordés en parallèle. Sans forcer ces sujets aux spectateurs, le réalisateur leur laisse une certaine latitude et leur permet de s'asseoir, de relaxer et de regarder tout bonnement un montage d'images majestueuses sans se casser la tête outre mesure. L'équilibre entre le lyrisme des séquences où l'on voit les chiens par rapport à la dureté des thèmes abordés est des plus efficaces. Les nombreuses séquences sans narration permettent aux spectateurs de prendre un certain recul par rapport au récit et leur permettent littéralement méditer sur les questions épineuses qui sont soulevées tout au long du film. Alors que nous, pauvres humains, avons toutes ces préoccupations, ces contraintes et ces problèmes, ces chiens peuvent se permettre d'aller jouer sur la plage et même de jouer avec des éléphants... qui a dit qu'une vie de chien n'était pas intéressante?

Original Child Bomb est né lui aussi suite aux événements du 11 septembre et a une esthétique très similaire à celle de *A Letter To True*. Pour sa part *Original Child Bomb* se concentre sur la bombe tombée sur Hiroshima. Inspiré du poème hyponyme et combinant lui aussi images d'archives, photos, animations et dessins, ce film se veut une contemplation de la genèse de la bombe et de ses impacts sur la vie humaine et il propose une réinvention du largage de la bombe sous la perspective des victimes.

Les gens ordinaires y sont le point central, et non les experts ou les scientifiques. Le film utilise à la fois des témoignages de gens présents lors des événements, tant les soldats que les mères et les victimes qui ont vu l'atrocité de la bombe. L'approche du documentaire est aussi très intéressante, car celui-ci apporte une nouvelle perspective en donnant la parole à de jeunes enfants et adolescents qui relatent leurs souvenirs des événements à travers la mémoire collective de leur entourage. Ce choix est d'autant plus astucieux puisque la plupart des survivants de l'époque qui sont encore en vie aujourd'hui étaient de jeunes enfants lorsque les événements se sont produits. « En août 1945, j'avais quatre ans et mon père était à la guerre dans la région du pacifique. Je me rappelle son retour et la parade sur Main Street. Je me souviens aussi avoir entendu quelque chose à propos d'une grosse bombe qui avait arrêté la guerre. Mais, mes parents n'ont jamais parlé de la guerre et la bombe était seulement une ombre dans mon esprit » (Mary Becker, productrice exécutive). C'est en lisant le poème *original child bomb* que ses souvenirs de la prise de conscience de la bombe se sont ravivés.

Becker continue en affirmant que « les autres images que je n'oublierai jamais sont celles des avions percutant les deux tours et les gens tombant des édifices lors

du 11 septembre. Je me demandais comment nous aurions vécu les événements s'il n'y avait pas eu de photographes à Manhattan ce jour-là. Est-ce que les événements du 11 septembre auraient été aussi une simple ombre hantant nos esprits ? ». Cette absence d'évidence photographique est très marquée pour le bombardement d'Hiroshima, et c'est l'une des problématiques abordées dans le film. Quels auraient été les impacts de la bombe si les événements avaient autant été filmés que ceux du 11 septembre ?

Ce film propose un regard nouveau sur les événements d'Hiroshima tout en les plaçant dans une nouvelle perspective. Les entrevues de gens âgés qui ont survécu aux événements conjuguées aux visions enfantines de jeunes enfants contemporains qui n'ont pas vécu les événements, mais qui ironiquement en gardent un certain souvenir dans leur mémoire collective, forment un film très profond et touchant. Visuellement le film est également très beau et conjugue parfois l'atrocité de la guerre avec des dessins enfantins, ce qui ajoute une dimension supplémentaire au bombardement d'Hiroshima, une dimension dont les livres d'Histoire ne parlent pas!

Soulevant des problématiques similaires avec une toute autre approche, le documentaire *Bush's Brain* aborde un sujet très vif actuellement: les politiques de George W. Bush. Basé sur le livre *bush's brain: how karl rove made george w. bush presidential* des journalistes James Moore et Wayne Slater, *Bush's Brain* relate la carrière de Karl Rove et de son ascension au pouvoir américain. L'homme politique le plus influent au monde est pourtant le moins connu ! Alors que les gens pensent que Bush prend lui-même les décisions et écrit lui-même ses discours, il n'en est point. Rove est la personne qui a construit la carrière de Bush et qui est son conseiller le plus proche. D'ailleurs, leur cohésion atteint un niveau jamais vu selon plusieurs observateurs politiques.

Le documentaire tente de soulever plusieurs questions sur le rôle de Rove dans l'univers politique américain. Est-il le premier coprésident des États-Unis ? Alors qu'il n'est que très peu connu, plusieurs se demandent l'ampleur de son influence sur les politiques nationales et internationales de Bush. L'homme qui ne défait pas ses ennemis, mais qui les détruit, est présenté à travers une série d'entrevues avec ses anciens proches collaborateurs et certains de ses anciens opposants qui lui ont fait face et qui ont bien souvent amèrement goûté à sa médecine féroce et parfois douteuse.

Le sujet qui est en somme très intéressant n'est pas

représenté à sa juste valeur à l'écran. *Bush's Brain* devient très vite répétitif et on se lasse rapidement des entrevues qui semblent toutes dire la même chose et qui n'apportent pas toujours d'éléments nouveaux. Le montage est aussi quelque peu déficient. Alors que le film est déjà très long, vers la fin, on nous propose un long détour vers le témoignage d'un père de famille qui a perdu son fils l'année dernière lorsqu'il combattait pour les forces américaines en Irak. Son témoignage est certes intéressant et est des plus poignants, cependant il n'apporte absolument rien au sujet principal et ne fait qu'étirer le documentaire déjà trop long. Le documentaire, et les problématiques qu'il soulève, risquent donc de passer pratiquement inaperçus alors que le sujet mériterait sans doute une meilleure couverture afin de présenter de façon plus adéquate Karl Rove au peuple américain. Le livre reste sans doute le meilleur choix afin de découvrir qui gouverne vraiment les États-Unis.

Un autre sujet délicat abordé par un des documentaires est le SIDA dans *LES ORIGINES DU SIDA* de la firme montréalaise Galafilm. Alors que certains aficionados de théories conspiratrices affirment que les services secrets américains auraient créé le SIDA, ce documentaire affirme plutôt que des scientifiques auraient causé la crise accidentellement. Sujet tabou au sein de la communauté scientifique, les personnes faisant de telles affirmations se font très vite rabrouer par celle-ci qui nie bien évidemment le tout. Et si c'était vrai ?

La majeure partie du film se concentre étroitement sur les recherches du docteur Hilary Koprowski qui a été l'un des pionniers de la vaccination en créant un vaccin contre la polio dans les années cinquante. Durant la décennie qui suit, le vaccin a été donné à plus d'un million d'Africains dans des colonies belges. Étrangement, les lieux où le vaccin a été testé sur les gens sont sensiblement les mêmes lieux où le VIH a tout d'abord fait son apparition. Plusieurs pensent que le vaccin provenant de tissus de singes était contaminé par le SIVcpz, ancêtre du VIH.

Le film, qui est basé en partie sur le livre *the river—journey to the source of aids* de Edward Hooper, dresse un portrait de la crise et des diverses recherches scientifiques de l'époque qui aurait pu contribuer à la propagation du VIH chez l'humain. Sans porter d'accusations non fondées, le documentaire présente les faits aux spectateurs qui seront libres d'en tirer leurs propres conclusions. Au niveau technique, le documentaire est très bien fait et montre les divers faces de la médaille

sans avoir de partis pris biaisés. Plusieurs questions chaudes sont soulevées. Par exemple, pourquoi la communauté scientifique a-t-elle tant de réticences à faire des recherches sur les vaccins de Koprowski qui sont encore conservés ? Est-ce parce qu'ils ont peur d'apprendre la vérité et d'éclabousser la réputation d'un des pionniers de la vaccination ? Est-ce que le VIH provient réellement du vaccin de la polio ? Le débat risque de se poursuivre puisque, comme la citation de Hubert Cauberghe en exergue du film l'affirme, « *victories have many fathers, catastrophes are orphans* ».

Alors que les événements entourant le SIDA de nos jours fusent de part et d'autre et que les campagnes de sensibilisations se font de plus en plus agressives, alors que les nouveaux cas de SIDA ne cessent de grimper exponentiellement, le SIDA fait maintenant partie intégrante de nos vies. À preuve, il y a quelques semaines un cas d'infection du VIH sur un plateau de tournage d'un film porno a provoqué une crise majeure sans précédent dans l'industrie américaine du film porno et a forcé un moratoire de deux mois sur le tournage de nouveaux films. *LES ORIGINES DU SIDA* nous permet de prendre un certain recul face à tous ces événements et tente de mettre en lumière les sources de cette crise.

Un autre sujet très controversé par les temps qui courent est le mariage gai. *TYING THE KNOT* débute avec des séquences d'archives de 1971 dans lesquelles un groupe activiste gai envahi de façon humoristique le Manhattan's marriage bureau pour revendiquer le droit de se marier. C'est donc dire que les choses n'ont guère changé presque 25 ans plus tard. Bien que certains Américains fassent preuve d'une récente ouverture face au mariage entre personnes du même sexe, il serait faux de dire que la situation a bien changée!

En 1991, Mickie Mashburn mariait la policière Lois Marrero. Récemment, Lois fut tuée alors qu'elle était en patrouille. Évidemment, Mickie tente d'obtenir sa pension, qui reviendrait au conjoint. Cependant, ce droit lui est refusé alors que, pourtant, les deux femmes se sont mariées en bon éduforme près de dix ans auparavant. Aucun des 1049 droits fédéraux américains qui sont accordés aux couples hétérosexuels ne sont accordés aux couples homosexuels. Se faisant, plusieurs veufs et veuves gais et lesbiennes, incluant plusieurs qui ont perdu l'être cher lors des attentats du 11 septembre, n'ont aucun droit de parole et n'ont aucun recours en ce qui a trait à leur défunt conjoint puisqu'ils ne sont pas reconnus comme conjoint. Cette sorte d'intolérance à laquelle font faces des millions de citoyens n'est pas

sans rappeler les discriminations légales de 1958 qui questionnaient la légalité du mariage interracial de Richard Loving et de Mildred Jeter.

Ravivé après les attentats du 11 septembre, ce débat fait couler beaucoup d'encre tant au Canada qu'aux États-Unis. Le documentaire est bien réalisé et réussit à maintenir notre intérêt du début à la fin. Les raisons en faveur du mariage gai sont bien présentées et les entrevues nous proposent non pas des vues de militants gais typiques que l'on a l'habitude de voir dans les médias, mais donnent plutôt la parole à des gens normaux qui revendiquent le droit de se marier comme les couples normaux, bref, des gens qui revendiquent une vie normale.

Un autre documentaire, qui a également pour thème la recherche de la vérité, est l'excellent film *The Man Who Stole My Mother's Face*. Deux jours avant Noël en 1988, une femme de 59 ans est violée par un jeune en Afrique du Sud. « *This child turned into a monster in front of my eyes* » se souvient la victime. Quatorze ans plus tard, alors que la victime ne s'en est toujours pas remise, la fille de cette dernière décide de faire rouvrir l'enquête afin que des accusations soient enfin portées. Puisqu'il était clair pour elle que, sans accusation, sa mère ne s'en remettrait jamais. La police accepte de rouvrir l'enquête, mais se verra très vite confrontée à de nombreux obstacles—dont la disparition mystérieuse du dossier d'enquête de l'époque. Comme la nouvelle enquête allait trop lentement selon la fille de la victime, après tout son cas n'était qu'un cas parmi les 1800 autres cas de viol présentement ouvert à la police de Johannesburg, elle décide d'engager un détective privé. Les enjeux soulevés par le documentaire deviennent très vite plus larges que ceux de la mère et porte à réflexion. *The Man Who Stole My Mother's Face* est l'un de ces films qui ne s'oublie pas de si tôt.

Les abus policiers sont quant à eux abordés dans le documentaire EVERY MOTHER'S SON. Ce documentaire très touchant relate les histoires de trois mères ayant perdu leur fils suite à des abus de violences physiques de la part du corps policier. Alliant des entrevues de gens impliqués dans les services à la communauté, des services policiers, et même avec les mères des victimes, le film dresse le portrait de leur union pour vaincre la brutalité policière et enfin faire inculper les coupables protégés par leur statut de policier.

Les événements du 11 septembre ont contraint les cinéastes à repenser le sujet du documentaire. Avant,

il traitait de la brutalité policière de façon générique, mais suite à ces événements ils ont décidé de faire des mères les sujets principaux en leur donnant la parole. « Le film n'est pas simplement le fait de se plaindre contre quelques mauvais policiers. Le problème de la brutalité policière est un problème beaucoup plus large ... et nous avons l'impression qu'il n'aurait pas été suffisant de faire un documentaire strictement centré sur la brutalité policière. Nous voulions approcher le sujet de façon objective et critique, mais nous voulions y ajouter un aspect humain ».

C'est donc selon leurs perspectives et leurs propres expériences que l'on les suit dans leur lutte tant personnelle que sociale afin que justice règne. C'est donc de façon bien méritée que ce documentaire a remporté le prix du public au festival de TriBeCa.

Les deux derniers documentaires qui seront abordés ici sont sur une note beaucoup plus légère, c'est-à-dire la beauté. BEAUTY ACADEMY OF KABUL et CINDERELLA OF THE CAPE FLATS sont deux films très intéressants pour des raisons différentes par contre. De la série Ten Years of Freedom: Films from the New South Africa qui commémore les dix premières années de liberté de l'Afrique du Sud suivant l'élection de Nelson Mandela et la fin de l'apartheid ^[1]. CINDERELLA OF THE CAPE FLATS est un film léger sur un concours de beauté qui se tient annuellement en Afrique du Sud.

Ce concours n'est pas un concours de top modèle comme les autres, mais il s'agit plutôt un concours organisé par le syndicat des travailleuses du textile. Les femmes qui travaillent dans les usines de textile de la région peuvent porter une fois par année les robes luxueuses qu'elles confectionnent à longueur d'année. Ce film montre un contraste intéressant entre ces femmes qui ne gagnent qu'un petit salaire par rapport à la société de consommation beaucoup plus riche qui coexiste en Afrique du Sud.

On suit les personnages des premières qualifications dans une usine locale jusqu'à la finale du concours quelques mois plus tard. Les personnages sont drôles et touchants, et maintiennent notre intérêt jusqu'à la fin du film où une seule femme pourra se qualifier pour le titre tant convoité de tous!

Tandis que le film précédent aborde le concours de beauté de façon très légère, mais certes réussie, BEAUTY ACADEMY OF KABUL traite du même sujet, mais en englobant pour sa part des problématiques

beaucoup plus complexes. Alors que Liz Mermin était critique de l'administration Bush dans son précédent documentaire sur l'avortement *BEAUTY ACADEMY OF KABUL* laisse voir d'un bon oeil son intervention en Afghanistan après les attentats du 11 septembre.

Plusieurs femmes afghanes sont reconnaissantes envers l'administration Bush pour leur libération des talibans; « *we're happy the Americans took over and the talibans left* ». Une des femmes affirme d'ailleurs que sous le régime des talibans, la position des femmes est retournée cent ans en arrière. Faisant fit des anciennes politiques du régime taliban, un groupe de femmes américaines, trois Américaines et trois Afghanes ayant fui Kaboul il y a plusieurs années, décident d'ouvrir une école de beauté à Kaboul afin d'enseigner aux femmes l'art de la coiffure et du maquillage. Beauté sans frontières!

La beauté et l'école de beauté ne sont qu'accessoires, car les vrais enjeux du film sont ceux concernant la libération des femmes suite à la chute du régime taliban. Plusieurs entrevues avec des élèves du salon de coiffure nous expliquent comment ces femmes ont vécu la crise et comment plusieurs ont continué d'avoir leurs propres salons de coiffure en secret.

Bien que la prémisse du documentaire laisse quelque peu à désirer (il est fort à parier que les femmes afghanes ont d'autres besoins plus urgents que des écoles de beauté), le documentaire est très bien fait et est très bien réalisé. Il n'est pas parfait certes : plusieurs interventions femmes américaines laissent grandement à désirer et montre leur manque de jugement flagrant. Outre ces scènes qui auraient dû être coupées au montage, le documentaire reste très intéressant et nous permet de voir la situation des femmes en Afghanistan à travers un autre regard.

L'école est très américaine et les techniques de coiffures enseignées sont pratiquement les mêmes que celles enseignées en Amérique. L'école et sa philosophie sont donc très américaines. À l'inverse, aussitôt que l'on sort de l'école pour suivre les élèves à leur domicile, c'est un contraste énorme qui est présenté. C'est à la fois l'Est versus l'Ouest, mais aussi le passé versus le présent.

Le film cherche à répondre à plusieurs questions ou du moins, dans l'incapacité à fournir ces réponses, en soulève plusieurs. Pourquoi ces femmes ont gardé leurs salons ouverts durant le régime taliban malgré les risques d'emprisonnement ou même de mort ? Pourquoi est-ce que les femmes afghanes continuaient à aller dans les salons de beauté avant les mariages et les processions

religieuses alors que le burqa leur était imposée? Et finalement, est-ce que l'école impose le matérialisme américain ou est-ce plutôt une façon de supporter les femmes et de les laisser s'exprimer comme dans une démocratie ?

LE FESTIVAL, ET APRÈS ?

Évidemment, malgré le fait que la plupart de ces quelques documentaires abordés soient très bien réalisés, ils ne risquent pas d'avoir aucune diffusion massive en dehors du circuit des festivals. À moins d'avoir une touche de propagande commerciale à la Michael Moore, très rare sont les documentaires à avoir une diffusion massive sur nos écrans. Il est tout de même dommage que ces documentaires n'aient que comme seule diffusion la projections à quelques festivals et quelques diffusions à la télévision, alors que d'autres documentaires tel *SUPERSIZE ME* (un documentaire sur la stupidité humaine) sans but et et plus léger ont quant à eux une diffusion plus large. Comme l'affirme Liz Mermin dans une entrevue en parlant de son film sur l'avortement *ON HOSTILE GROUND*, « *this topic was really controversial; it's a really hard sell on television, advertisers don't want to come near it, and that's true of a lot of great topics* »^[2].

Outre les besoins de revenus publicitaires et les réseaux de diffusion nord-américains, les gouvernements en sont bien évidemment la cause. Alors que dans plusieurs pays européens dans lesquels les gouvernements se sont impliqués dans la diffusion numérique, le HD notamment, la place accordée au documentaire et au contenu spécialisé atteint même une proportion de six pour cent sur les écrans commerciaux. Ces projets se sont révélés de vifs succès. Non seulement ce quota de six pour cent est respecté, mais le taux d'occupation des sièges de cinéma, qui était d'environ quatre heures et demie par jour de douze heures, s'est vu considérablement augmenté. Alors que plusieurs initiatives positives sont prises pour aider la diffusion du documentaire en Europe, très peu semblent être prises au Canada pour élargir la diffusion du documentaire [3]. Alors que les grandes chaînes américaines prennent des risques avec certains films—la chaîne AMC a diffusé l'excellent film canadien d'horreur à petit budget *RHINOCEROS EYES* dans plusieurs cinémas, dont le non moins visité de Time Square—l'industrie canadienne traîne largement de la patte à cet égard. D'ailleurs, ce film de fiction n'a fait l'objet d'aucune sortie au Québec à ce jour.

Les traces des attentats du 11 septembre sont encore très présentes dans les documentaires américains.

Évidemment, comme un documentaire prend généralement plusieurs années à être complété, trois voire parfois six ans, les attentats se sont produits durant la production de plusieurs des films présentés au festival cette année. Les documentaires qui ont été affectés par les attentats et ceux qui ont été conçus et produits suite aux attentats créent donc une certaine masse commune alors qu'en surface ils sont très différents. Cette masse commune laisse entrevoir le besoin d'expressions qu'ont eu les Américains après les attentats et fait foi d'une certaine cicatrice laissée sur la production de documentaires américains, cicatrice qui restera sûrement visible pour bien des années encore.

Étrangement, les films de fictions semblent être épargnés de cette marque et n'abordent pratiquement pas les attentats. Un des seuls films de fiction qui en parle est LOVE COLLAGE, un film japonais! C'est donc dire que les deux modes de production sont très différents et réagissent différemment aux intempéries socioculturelles. Les films de fictions feront d'ailleurs l'objet de la suite de ce compte rendu du festival de TriBeCa qui sera présenté dans la prochaine édition de Synoptique.

FOOTNOTES

1 <http://www.tenyearsoffreedom.org/about.html>

2 http://www.indiewire.com/people/int_Raskin_Jenny_010409.html

3 Pour de plus amples informations sur le sujet, veuillez consulter <http://cinema-quebécois.net/evenement.html>.

Picturing the Primitive

Santiago Hidalgo

Picturing The Primitive: Visual Culture, Ethnography, And Early German Cinema

Assenka Oksiloff

New York: Palgrave, 2001. 240pp

In her book *Picturing the Primitive: Visual Culture, Ethnography, and Early German Cinema*, Assenka Oksiloff untangles the different discourses, historical contexts and “observational modes” that intersect with a “mythical first contact” between the primitive body and early cinema. In the historical narrative that Oksiloff recounts, the primitive is not “an object with any empirical legitimacy or ontological essence,” but rather a myth that serves as a foundational tale for several discourses, theories and disciplines. The use of the primitive by German physical anthropologists tended to denote the inferior technological and evolutionary status that smaller non-Western societies held in relation to the West. Since this asymmetrical relationship posited the Western observer as the privileged site of knowledge, power, and moral principles, the primitive also disguised an implicit colonialist justification. When understood as essential, the primitive produces a naturalized worldview grounded in universal beliefs of a single reality and human nature. A non-essential view encourages a rigorous questioning of these foundations, an approach that exposes the contingent and relative attitudes that people take toward the world. Since it is the latter philosophy of language that Oksiloff espouses, she is able to open an important discursive space within a complex historical moment, a gamble that produces a fascinating investigation of the

primitive myth and its relationship to early theorizations of culture, people and cinema.

On the whole, Oksiloff’s reading of the primitive myth is justifiably negative. However, she also recontextualizes the primitive within postcolonial discourse, a strategy that inverts the concept’s negative connotations and finds within them a site of resistance against the myth of Western progress and rationalism. As a rhetorical move, it pays off; within a postcolonial context, the primitive myth functions as a counter-discourse to the naïve realism espoused by early cinema and German physical anthropology. As embodied knowledge, the primitive body emerges as an important discursive field that stratifies many of the conceptual binaries that postcolonialism is interested in exploring (and debunking), such as the difference between universal/local knowledge, dominant/marginal ways of seeing, and culture/cultures. The primitive myth destabilizes the first term of many such binaries; in doing so, it becomes a useful analytical tool for unravelling the theoretical tensions that underlie several of Oksiloff’s case studies. The introduction of opposing points of views into her narrative is an uneasy gesture that leaves as many questions open as answered. In this sense, her strategy of recontextualization comes with certain conditions that some readers may find uncomfortable. Given that the primitive myth acquires contradictory meanings within different contexts (either discursive or historical), it is always on the verge of losing its integrity as a meaningful trope. But Oksiloff’s uncanny ability to speak with a single, unbroken voice, tying her project together via an examination of nineteenth and twentieth century German history, while simultaneously

shifting from one discursive context to another render her book a brilliant illustration of interdisciplinary academic scholarship.

Picturing the Primitive unfolds as a series of case studies that converge on the primitive myth. In this sense, Oksiloff is not interested in presenting a “linked” argument that leads to definite and final conclusions. Instead, each meticulously detailed case study provides a unique and vivid historical image that carefully outlines the permeation of the primitive myth within a specific community of practitioners, such as anthropologists, film theorists, and filmmakers. In this sense, the primitive myth is never maintained as holding a single overarching meaning that transcends all historical and discursive contexts. Taken as a whole, this approach contributes to a *synoptique* view of the complex relations that existed between both diverse senses of the primitive and of cinema. The juxtaposition of these images, not unlike a well-conceived montage, produces a textured range of effects, ideas and interconnections.

In order to help contextualize her case studies, Oksiloff charts some of the more obvious relations that exist between the primitive and cinema. In the first instance, a relation between the two exists, quite literally, in the material image of early German films, either in the “research films” made by anthropologists or in “colonialist and adventure films” produced by the state. The most predominant and overdetermined image to be found in these films is the primitive body. From the point of view of contemporary film history, there is also an aesthetic moment often referred to as “primitive” cinema. Not surprisingly, the thesis that primitive cinema teleologically evolved into a more sophisticated film form is shot through with the same epistemological assumptions that underpinned anthropology’s approach to non-Western cultures:

Similar in significant ways to the myth of the primitive ethnographic body, the myth of primitive cinema functioned as a point of origin and a basis for the self-identity of a new phenomenon in mass culture. It satisfied the desire to trace an evolution of the medium and to situate oneself upon a line of aesthetic and technological progression.

A third relation between the primitive and cinema exists at the level of spectatorship. The myth of a naïve, credulous and gullible film viewer unable to differentiate between representation and reality recalls the same stereotyping that appears in the primitive myth. Both the primitive and the early film spectator are

presumably linked by a shared mimetic impulse, which, according to Oksiloff is an imitative and emotional reaction toward human phenomena, a kind of liminal moment that prefigures rational thought. This theory is clearly represented in the early film *Uncle Josh At The Moving Picture Show* (1902) in which a country spectator unconsciously “mimics” the dancer he sees on screen. As it plays out in this context, the primitive myth posits a clear point of origin from which both the modern spectator and the rational thinker conceive themselves to have evolved.

Another important trope Oksiloff examines in her work is the way these different relations—the primitive and cinema, the primitive and spectator, the primitive and anthropology—partake in the construction of a naïve cinematic and ethnographic mode of observation, of which the primitive body is the intersecting point. By mode of observation, I take Oksiloff to mean the epistemological assumptions that determine a person’s knowledge of reality. In its primitive stage, film was thought to provide a direct and unmediated view of reality, an illusion that “primitive” spectators, anthropological audience included, were willing to accept. As film technology began to circulate, so too did this correlate mode of observation, eventually leading to the mistaken belief that the image stood in for “an absent reality by isolating one segment in the object world.” By drawing on André Bazin’s notion of substitution, Oksiloff presses the argument even further by inverting the place of “representation” and “referent” within a discourse of authenticity: “substitution suggests a displacement, whereby the image takes the place of material reality as a more perfect, seamless specimen.” Eventually this leads to the illogical, yet plausible, conclusion that “screened images of primitive bodies were in many ways more real than actual bodies, even the ones displayed in the popular live spectacles of fairs, exhibitions, and human ‘zoos.’” Nonetheless, Oksiloff engages this very naïveness through an oppositional reading of the primitive, pushing it against the grain of modernity.

Picturing the Primitive is far from being simply an intelligent incursion into cultural theory. It’s also a fascinating historical narrative that highlights the lives of several intriguing characters. Theoretical books often tend to forget the importance of description, detail and spectacle. Here again, Oksiloff proves to be singularly talented, displaying an aptitude for telling a captivating story. Though she is careful to emphasize the tentative nature of historical facts and the dangers of presenting them in causal order, Oksiloff is also

wise enough to know that the reader will not tolerate too many episodes of ‘data interrupted.’ Despite the complicated discourses that she brings to bear on her project, *Picturing the Primitive* is an accessible historical investigation that skilfully offers a significant amount of original research to prospective readers interested in early anthropology, German history, and cinema.

One case study I particularly enjoyed was the story of Rudolf Pöch and his film *Bushman Speaking Into The Phonograph* (1908). A Viennese medical doctor and anthropologist, Pöch had already shot several “research films” (basically, unedited footage) during his fieldwork in New Guinea between 1902 and 1906. Motivated by the prospect of filming what he believed to be “the oldest and most primitive surviving south African race,” the Bushmen of the Kalahari, Pöch embarked on another research expedition through British Botswana and the German colony of South West Africa in 1907. In filming the Bushman, Pöch was essentially interested in finding a “pure” example of culture from which he could abstract scientific information and posit a “point of origin.” At the time, German physical anthropology had a disturbing fascination with measuring the most minute details of the human body, particularly the cranium (for which they had 240 different kinds of measurements), in order to compile racial typologies. Fuelled by evolutionism, this hard evidence was meant to legitimate the supremacy of particular physical types (Caucasians) while relegating the remainder to earlier stages of evolution. As it turned out, after the devastating human crisis of World War I, “purity” would take on a different meaning. The West would look back to the primitive as a “paradise lost,” an attitude also reflected in people today that are fearful of living in a technocratic world.

In *Bushman Speaking Into The Phonograph*, one of the Bushmen, Kubi, is filmed narrating a seemingly fragmented story into a phonograph. Pöch was therefore able to synchronize the sound with the image producing a highly realistic representation relative to that historical period. A common trope within ethnography, Oksiloff reads this encounter between Kubi and the phonograph as the staging of a “first contact” between the primitive body and modern technology. However, Kubi displays several qualities that were difficult for Pöch’s ethnographic mode of observation to quantify. For instance, Kubi’s performance was based on improvisation, an attitude that emphasizes his status within a “lived culture” rather than a dead one. Because it is always in a state of transformation, lived phenomena is not particularly suited to archaeological

type studies. Secondly, this is Kubi’s performance, not those of the many other Bushman. In his enactment, he displays a uniqueness that is not easily generalized to the behaviours of all members of his culture. Thirdly, his narrative does not “produce a singular statement about the subjects identity, either that of Kubi or of the Bushmen in general.” In each instance, Kubi refuses to be included in Pöch’s grand narrative, destabilizing the evidence at the moment it threatens to become fixed.

The primitive myth is therefore related to spontaneous performance (think of Method actors going “primal”), dance and to a sensual way of experiencing the world. Gradually, each case study that Oksiloff presents—early German research films, “colonialist and adventure films,” the “kino-vision” of eccentric anthropologist Leo Frobenius, early film spectatorship essays by Georg Lukács and Bela Balázs, F.W. Murnau’s “paradise lost” film, *Tabu* (1930)—offers a new understanding of the primitive myth and how it works to destabilize a modern view of culture, knowledge and perception. While much of her book grapples with complex discourses, the tangible, descriptive analysis of these case studies brings her argument to life. Her movement between the tangible and the conceptual, between discourse and practice, between historical contexts and a present postmodern perspective are sophisticated turns both for their clarity and at times for the pointed slippage Oksiloff allows; in either case, she values opening, rather than closing, the discussion, and her material is inspiring and inventive for all of the disciplines it touches upon.

I have to admit though that Kubi left the most lasting impression. Oksiloff describes his story as consisting of a number of different strands— “a suggestion of drought after a period of sufficient rain, a reference to the activities of nearby elephants and their interaction with the tribe, the personal ‘adventure’ of Kubi with the elephant.” I like to imagine that he was telling Pöch to go away, far away; yet I admire Kubi for having the sense to explain what mattered to his life at that moment. Rudolph Pöch, and the rest of the peering eyes, be damned.

Les DVD qu'on peut ne pas acheter

Michel Gagnol

Vous êtes extatique ! Le classique dont vous attendiez la sortie sur DVD est enfin arrivé sur les étals de votre détaillant préféré. Fébrile, vous payez la rondelette somme généralement exigée pour ces DVD peu rentables, car destinés au public restreint dont vous vous targuez de faire partie ("Steven Seagal fera toujours commercialement mieux qu'Ingmar Bergman" aimez-vous à déplorer lors de vos conversations mondaines). Sur le chemin du retour, vous salivez à la seule pensée de revoir d'immortelles images dans le confort douillet et sécuritaire de votre domicile. Mais ô désastre ! C'est la déception qui est au rendez-vous : l'édition DVD n'est qu'une pâle réminiscence de votre film chéri et n'exploite que peu ou pas les possibilités permises par sa technologie. Alors vous fulminez contre les responsables de votre déconvenue vidéographique, des gens certainement incultes, cupides et numériquement ignares. Puis, constatant votre impuissance (le boîtier est ouvert, donc non retournable), vous décidez de noyer votre chagrin dans la location honteuse d'un film prétentieux qui flatte la rétine, mais encourage la paresse intellectuelle (*Punch Drunk Love*, *Adaptation*, etc...). Devant tant d'argent gaspillé pour dire si peu, vous déprimez absolument et vous allez vous coucher. Malheureusement, votre sommeil est agité par un horrible cauchemar : sanglé à votre siège de cinéma tel Alexander de Large dans *A Clockwork Orange*, vous êtes contraint de regarder *Forrest Gump* en boucle, pendant qu'un critique de cinéma du Journal de Montréal met des gouttes de solution saline dans vos yeux mécaniquement écarquillés.... Pour vous éviter ce genre de déboires, voici donc une liste (non-exhaustive) de DVD qu'on peut ne pas acheter :

DERSU UZALA (1975)
d'Akira Kurosawa (Kino Video)

Kurosawa au sommet de son art dans son seul film soviétique : trois ans de tournage, images somptueuses de l'immensité sibérienne, musique céleste, mise en scène impeccable d'une histoire simple et extraordinaire à la fois. Bref, un chef d'oeuvre. Le DVD est une véritable calamité : copie d'origine en piètre état, transfert douteux, son mono grelottant, image non optimisée 16:9, suppléments inexistantes et tout ça pour 60 \$!

YOJIMBO (1961) **SANJURO** (1962)
d'Akira Kurosawa (Criterion)

La courte mais ultra divertissante saga du samouraï errant qui inspira Sergio Leone. Un vrai délice. Mifune est impérial dans le rôle du justicier sans dieu ni maître qui cogne et embroche, mais avec discernement. Kurosawa fait ici la preuve que l'on peut faire du populaire sans niveler par le bas. Hélas, pour 46 \$ par film, Criterion nous passe un sapin : les copies utilisées n'ont pas été restaurées, les images sont neigeuses et la bande-son pluvieuse (surtout dans YOJIMBO). Peu ou pas de suppléments, les infos sont à chercher dans le livret d'accompagnement. Enfin, aucun des deux DVD n'est optimisé 16:9.

IL BIDONE (1955)
de Federico Fellini (Image Entertainment)

Deuxième de la trilogie de la solitude et caractéristique de la période néoréaliste du maître, "IL BIDONE"

est un film indélébile. Lamentables pérégrinations d'un escroc de ligue mineure à l'automne de sa vie, cette histoire atrocement humaine nous raconte des pauvres qui sont des loups pour leurs semblables. Le DVD est catastrophique à tous points de vue : image et son pourris, pas de suppléments. Une vraie honte pour laquelle il faut tout de même déboursier 40\$!

CYRANO DE BERGERAC (1990)
de Jean Paul Rappeneau (Crystal Films)

Crystal Films est une entreprise d'ici qui s'est spécialisée dans les transferts de mauvaise qualité à des prix abusifs (35\$). L'image magnifique de Rappeneau subit ici un massacre en règle. On en vient à regretter du VHS en pan & scan ! Enfin, oubliez les suppléments, Crystal ayant eu la bonne idée de ne pas en mettre.

Voilà. Si vous aussi avez des "DVD qu'on peut ne pas acheter" à suggérer, n'hésitez pas à me les communiquer.

The Why and the How of Movie Trailers

Brian Crane

An essay on trailers, new technologies that effect trailer viewing, and signs of emerging factors involved in our contemporary viewing of film narrative.

Throughout their exhibition history, trailers have been seen as advertisements selling films to the public. My goal is to show that this is not the only thing trailers do. By considering movie trailers in the light of recent developments in trailer viewing, specifically, the downloading of trailers from the internet, I hope to show that trailers also always provide the narrative information and genre contexts that attentive spectators can—and do—use to structure their viewings of films.

This may at first seem contrary to the lived experience of millions of trailer viewers: trailers, after all, seem to do nothing but sell their film. My goal is not to debunk this very real experience. Instead, by showing how this experience is linked to a particular site of exhibition and how, in turn, new experiences take its place when trailers are viewed in new places with new technologies, I hope to point out an emerging factor in our contemporary experience of film narrative.

CINEMA V. INTERNET TRAILERS

Cinema trailers have typically been viewed in theatres before the screening of the main attraction, and it is to this context that their appeal is pitched. When making a trailer, producers attempt to “[fill] the quadrant:” that is, [reach] out, in 150 seconds, to younger men, older men, younger women and older women ^[1]. But making a

trailer is just the beginning. Once the trailer is finished, it must be placed in a theatre and be seen. Although an object of intense negotiations between distributors, theatre owners, and even sometimes filmmakers, the placement of trailers is probably at best haphazard; in a best case scenario, the trailer will be correctly placed in front of its target audience and they will watch it. But even this audience includes only potential viewers for the film it advertises; of those who watch, only a few will be interested in what they see, and there is no guarantee that even these few potentially interested viewers will pay attention while the trailer plays. Trailers must compete after all with soda commercials, animated theatre logos, other trailers, and last minute runs to the concession stand. Within this context, it seems natural that trailer producers would devote most of their energy to capturing the attention of theatre-goers and that their product would be seen universally as an advertisement.

Potentially useful strategies—suggested by Gerard Genette’s discussion of sales pitches in book prefaces—include selling the value of the subject matter, the reputation of the author, and the novelty of the treatment ^[2]. Trailers clearly can and do employ all of these. They present their films, for example, as important, truthful treatments of lightning rod issues (*Dead Man Walking*, 1995). Or, they can present them as the product of established, popular, or important directors or stars (*Eyes Wide Shut*, 1999). Writers occasionally receive similar treatment, and producers too, though these last are usually billed as “the makers of” a previous film. Selling the novelty of the film’s treatment of its material is especially wide-spread. One

writer has noted for example, that “as years passed and studios keyed in on the importance of advertising, a distinct, hard-sell style of trailers emerged. Every movie coming down the pike was touted to be more ‘spectacular’ or ‘hilarious’ than anything seen before ^[3]”. This strategy has led to a general tendency in trailers to celebrate spectacle and excess, but novelty manifests in other guises as well: most often as notices that a film is the newest in a series (*Star Wars: Episode 1—The Phantom Menace*, 1999) or the product of new technology (*Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*, 2001).

In addition, trailers often sell films in terms of their likeness to other films or film forms. Thus comedy trailers will display the presence of gags and jokes; romantic comedies will establish love and impediments to it. In the same vein, successful predecessors can be identified. Thus the trailer to *Maid In Manhattan* (2002) consciously evokes the story of *Pretty Woman* (1990) while being shown before screenings of *Sweet Home Alabama* (2002) ^[4]. All of these together, comprise a repertory of strategies trailers use to tell viewers why they should watch their film. Given the difficulties inherent in the theatrical presentation of trailers and the styles they encourage, they can also reasonably be assumed to mark the limits of what viewers have typically expected of trailers. But the internet, with the new viewing contexts and behaviours it supports, seems to be changing that.

A recent study reported in *The New York Times* claims that “movie trailers are the most-watched video material on the Web ^[5]”. Likewise, a major ad campaign for Bell Canada presented in movie theatres and in mass-mailings in winter 2003 marketed high-speed internet service almost exclusively as a means of more easily downloading trailers. If the shift in trailer viewing indicated by this study and Bell Canada’s ad campaign is to be believed, several changes can be expected in the ways viewers regard movie trailers.

At its most basic level, the downloading of trailers transforms the trailer audience from a potentially interested target group into already interested, attentive viewers. Unlike cinema trailers, internet trailers are not encountered by chance ^[6]. Downloads must be sought out and take time to view even over high-speed connections. As a result, internet downloaders are more likely to view trailers for films that have already been pitched to them and that already interest them. Thus they likely view internet trailers seeking something other than a sales pitch. Given this new situation, I would suggest that internet trailers, no longer burdened

with selling a film, instead provide guidance for how best to watch the film, a supposition supported by the numerous web sites where fans, anticipating upcoming releases, pour over downloaded trailers to figure out what to expect from the upcoming release ^[7].

TRAILERS AS VIEWING GUIDES

In general, downloaders seem to turn to internet trailers to learn basic story information: an introduction to principle characters, the sense of the general setting including time period or region, and a basic story abstract. Characters and setting can be presented in a variety of ways: most simply a montage of images can show principle characters, iconic landscapes, or period clothing; but more typically, characters and setting are identified by name or described by a voice over or segments of film dialogue. In the same way, story abstracts vary greatly in detail, though in general they at least identify a narrative arc: characters will race to a goal (*Brewster’s Millions*, 1985), a little guy will overcome great odds (*Rocky*, 1976), a crime will be solved (*Seven*, 1995), two men will fight for the love of a woman (*The Talented Mr. Ripley*, 1999) or two lovers will find each other despite the obstacles in their path (*My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, 2002). These story abstracts naturally situate the film within appropriate genre contexts, and these contexts, like the basic story information that suggest them, are an important part of the viewer’s preparation to view the film. Once evoked genre expectations elicit the complex, variable viewing strategies that viewers will use to make sense of the film’s narrative and style.

This information of course will also be provided by the film itself, and so in a sense, the preparation provided by the trailer is unnecessary. However, when the trailer does prepare viewers, its work is not without influence, especially since basic information and story abstracts are usually supplied by third person omniscient voice-overs that tend to become “the voice of the image maker ^[8]”. This natural authority of the voice-over is emphasized by its place at the center of the audience’s attention. As Jonathan Glenn, a trailer producer, has pointed out:

The big secret of movie trailers is that they are essentially long radio commercials with pictures. . . . Try closing your eyes during a trailer—you still know what’s going on with the story just by virtue of what you’re hearing ^[9].

Given the attention given to spoken elements in trailer production and the ease with which voice-over conveys

basic story information, it is not surprising that they “tend to voice the ideological and/or moral agenda behind the film” in the same way that similar voice-overs do in narrative film ^[10]. These statements, which seem to come from the image-maker and thus echo the function of prefaces’ statements of authorial intent, unavoidably frame viewer responses to the film text by forcing viewers “to take a position, positive or negative, in relation to [them]” ^[11].

Viewers of internet trailers pay similar attention to the image track, as the image stills on fan sites attest. Even imponderable aspects of the film are the object of speculation: one analysis of *Lord Of The Rings: The Two Towers* (2002) trailer asks whether a figure barely perceptible through smoke in one still might be a villain, while another reads several segments of the trailer as suggesting that Liv Tyler’s character might give Viggo Mortenson’s his sword. Questions such as these are obscure, but also, oddly, at the heart of narrative experience. Rightly or wrongly, they shape the way the people asking them will view the film. There is nothing new in this recognition that expectations shape narrative. What is new is that in this case, the questions are not provoked by the narrative. They are provoked by a particular method of trailer viewing that treats trailers as viewing guides rather than sales pitches. It is exactly this approach to trailers that is encouraged by internet downloading.

CINEMA TO INTERNET TRAILER

Of course, claiming that cinema trailers sell films and internet trailers prepare viewers to watch a film (even though they are the same text) is one thing; identifying what this implies about film viewership is another. To consider this question, I would like to take up the trailers for two films: *Natural Born Killers* (1994) and *Velvet Goldmine* (1998). Both of these films focus on controversial subject matter but were distributed nationally by major film companies. As a result, it is reasonable to suggest that special care was given to the sales pitch presented in the cinema trailer. By the same token, both of the films were produced by writer-directors who can lay legitimate claim to being film authors. Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that their treatment of the controversial material in their films is carefully constructed toward a particular end. By considering the trailers of these two films, it may be possible to ascertain to what extent cinematic trailers can effectively prepare viewers to produce a preferred reading of an authored text when viewed through the emphases encouraged by internet downloading.

Because of its ambivalent treatment of excessive violence, the trailer for *Natural Born Killers* was farmed out by Warner Brothers to Global Doghouse, a trailer production company generally known for its successful treatment of “difficult movies ^[12]”. The entire first half of the resultant trailer is comprised of shots of the American flag and news clips of events discussed in earlier Stone films. When images from the film finally appear, they unroll at a breakneck pace and, in accordance with Jonathon Glenn’s equation of radio ads and trailers, provide primarily tonal emphasis to the voiceover. This voice-over, spoken by one of the 10 to 15 paternal male voices that narrate all American trailers ^[13], reads as follows (ellipses mark points where pauses allow the noise or dialogue of the film images to be heard):

Platoon. Wall Street. Born On The Fourth Of July. JFK. Oliver Stone’s vision has changed the way we saw our past; now he takes a look at where we are and where we’re going. And you’ll be shocked at what he sees. Micky and Mallory. Feared by thousands... watched by millions... Woody Harrelson. Juliette Lewis. Robert Downey Jr. Tommy Lee Jones....Natural Born Killers. In the media circus of life, they were the main attraction.

The sales pitch of this voice-over is clear. People should watch this film because it has been made by a respected director and is part of an important series of films. Furthermore, it deals with an important issue; it is timely; and it is relevant to how we live our lives. This claim to importance is supported by the flag imagery, the integration of news footage, the list of celebrated actors, and the title card of simple white text on a black background that closes the trailer and reads “an Oliver Stone film.” Even the expressionist aesthetic of the selected film images and editing pattern of the closing montage support this claim, suggesting the film provides an artistic and intellectual (rather than popular) treatment of violence in the media. This trailer was considered a success and “helped cement [Global] Doghouse’s reputation ^[14]”. What’s more important for our concern is that it seems to hold up when subjected to the new expectations of the internet viewer.

When the question asked of the trailer is shifted from “Why should I watch this film?” to “How should I watch this film?” it quickly becomes clear that this trailer’s sales pitch is also a near perfect presentation of a preferred reading; this trailer sells Oliver Stone’s vision. All basic story information is clearly and directly provided by the trailer. Images of the two principle characters are shown repeatedly, and they are introduced by name

in both the voice over and in a brief moment of dialogue. Furthermore, all of the secondary characters are presented without names under the list of actors in the voice-over. Settings common to road movies and crime films are suggested through images of jail cells, car interiors, and the iconic desert Southwest. The story abstract is very weak, but the relatively extended view of Mickey and Mallory in the press mob that closes the trailer's violent imagery could perhaps be read as suggesting a serial killer chase film à la *Bonnie And Clyde* (1967) or *Badlands* (1973). Of course, the absence of a clear story abstract, though atypical, here serves to reinforce even further the "artistic" implications of the stylized imagery and the auteur focus of the sales pitch.

The violence of this artistic imagery likewise announces the key ambivalence of the film to viewers. The film and the trailer clearly elicit and maintain interest through their representations of extreme violence, a classic example of the spectacle encouraged by the pressure for novelty typical of film trailers. Yet, this use of violence is the object of the film's criticism. This paradoxical use of violent spectacle and simultaneous critique is likewise present in the voice-over. If the narrator suggests Stone's film will change the way we look at our world, he also pauses to let Mallory absurdly confess her love to Mickey in the midst of carnage and for Mickey to turn to the camera and say "You ain't seen nothing yet." Thus the trailer not only clearly states the overt moral agenda of the film (a critique of media's exploitation of violence), it also directly presents the moral failure of the film as it exploits violence for its own purposes. Thus, this cinema trailer prepares film viewers not only for the film's content and Stone's message, it prepares them for the ambivalence of the image-maker's paradoxical celebration of this content. And all of this while selling tickets to the film.

With *Velvet Goldmine* the situation is very different. In fact, the trailer for *Velvet Goldmine* is a perfect example of the relationship most people accuse trailers of having with their film: i.e. the trailer misrepresents the film in order to sell it. Todd Haynes's film is a complicated treatment of queer precedents for and responses to the sexual transgression of 70s glam rock, and at its release, posed a series of marketing problems for Miramax Films. The most obvious, of course, is the gay content in the narrative, which, unlike violent content, tends to limit rather than elicit viewers. Speaking in 1998, the director Bill Condon claims that gay films in national release generally make a maximum of three million dollars at the box office, an amount that, at the time, apparently marked the size of the gay market ^[15]. Thus,

any attempt to sell a preferred reading of the content of *Velvet Goldmine* posed the risk of limiting the potential profits of the release. But perhaps more importantly, any attempt to market gay material by Miramax in 1998 posed the risk of antagonizing its parent company, Disney.

In the months prior to the release of Haynes's film, Disney, because of its perceived support of homosexuality, became the target of a widely publicized boycott by the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest protestant denomination in the United States, a boycott which was subsequently endorsed by a number of high-profile, nationally active religious and political organizations. Miramax's films were considered particularly offensive in this regard and thus seemed ill-placed to market Haynes's film in terms of its content. (Miramax was one of only two subsidiaries mentioned by name in the resolution authorizing the boycott) ^[16]. Warner Brothers had marketed Stone's offensively violent imagery under the cover of its artistic merits; but Haynes lacked such celebrity. Worse, what celebrity he did have created more problems as it arose from the accusations of obscenity directed at his first feature, *Poison* (1991), accusations made by the same people now supporting the Disney boycott. Thus Miramax faced the awkward prospect of marketing an overtly queer film by an unknown or, worse, infamous director at exactly the moment when its films were being singled out and faulted for tarnishing an American institution (Disney). Apparently, the decision was made to skirt this issue entirely ^[17].

The trailer eventually released obscured the gay content at the film's center and sold the film as pure spectacle and nostalgia. The trailer's sales pitch was conveyed through a voice-over and was supported by images and dialogue fragments arranged to produce a "call and response" format. With these moments of interposed dialogue indicated by italics, the voice-over reads as follows:

It doesn't really matter much what a man does with his life. What matters is the legend that grows up around him. Brian Slade was the wildest rock star to come out of London. The biggest thing since slice Beatles. But that wasn't enough. We set out to change the world. What happened? Who did it? And why? Next week is the 10 year anniversary of the whole shooting incident. One journalist is about to look into the mystery. I was trying to contact you about a story. From the moment Brian Slade stepped into our lives, nothing would ever be the same. He was, in the end, like nothing he

appeared. Right after everything crashed, Brian seemed to get lost in the lie; he became something else. Miramax films invites you to throw away your expectations and take a magical trip back to the 70s, when the glam scene rocked London and the outrageous music, fashion, and behaviour shocked the world. I knew I should create a sensation.

Unlike the one presented in the trailer to *Natural Born Killers*, this trailer's sales pitch makes no claim that the material is important, new, or timely. Haynes's name never appears, and there is no reference to earlier works by Haynes that might suggest a frame of reference for this film. Instead, the film is pitched (and here I may be exaggerating, but not by much) as Disney with an edge: this will be an "outrageous" "magical trip" to a world of rock music, sequins and misbehaving celebrities offered up by the makers of the transgressive but fun *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and *Clerks* (1994). This final invitation to view the film clearly dominates even the elaborate story abstract that defines the film's narrative as a murder mystery. It goes without saying that it skirts the gay material that pervades the film. It is obvious therefore that the trailer for this film misrepresents the film in order to sell it to potential viewers.

But misrepresentation is not inaccuracy. A murder (hoax) does offer the occasion for the narrative and spectacle is a central pleasure of the film's visual style. The costumes are outrageous—and won an Oscar for it—and the gay content that pervades the film is not its exclusive subject matter. Thus an evaluation of the trailer's faithfulness to the film is beside the point, and worse than this, avoids a much more important issue.

As a sales pitch cinema trailers are successful and useful to the extent that they make members of the public into members of a film audience. Accuracy and inaccuracy (and this must be a key point in any discussion of trailers) are therefore irrelevant because they become an issue only after a ticket is bought. The cinema trailer's function is to put bodies in a theatre, not be fair to the film. New viewing contexts, of course, change all that. Viewed over the internet, cinema trailers no longer simply put people in a cinema; they become a guide for watching the film. Considered as explanations of how to watch the film rather than as reasons to watch the film, the misrepresentations of the trailer for *Velvet Goldmine* become important because they badly prepare viewers for what they will see.

So what film does *Velvet Goldmine's* trailer prepare the viewer to watch? It seems clear that, on a basic

level, viewers are told to expect a film that will be fun, celebratory, and maintain a certain lightness of treatment. Furthermore, the fact that potential viewers are invited to "re-live" the glam rock scene suggests that the film is a nostalgia piece that will present something familiar, something remembered, even if only vaguely. In terms of genre, the detailed story arc very clearly elicits the murder mystery. This familiar context conjures specific viewer expectations (e.g. heavily plotted narrative) and behaviours (e.g. a tendency to search for objective facts or clues and to engage in puzzle solving) that will set the stage for viewing of the film as surely as do the questions posed by fans awaiting *The Two Towers*. Perhaps most importantly, in a contemporary cinema culture where "lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer understandings of popular culture...exist as appropriative of and subsidiary to taking things straight," the complete absence of gay material in the trailer necessarily suggests that there will be none in the film ^[18].

It seems fair to say, that anyone prepared to watch a film in this way, will be bewildered by what confronts them when Haynes's film is projected. The film is a spectacle and, I would argue, fun, but it is not light and certainly not nostalgic in the way that this term is generally used in discussions of contemporary movies (think *Forrest Gump*, 1994, or *Almost Famous*, 2001). Viewing from these contexts is sure to be frustrating. There are too many layers beneath the surface spectacle, the narrative is too convoluted, and the film too long to allow simple attention to the costume and music. Worse for the nostalgia viewer is the fact that Haynes seems bent on revising rather than remembering glam rock, which reveals the expectations raised by the trailers story abstract as especially misconceived. Patterned after *Citizen Kane* (1941), the narrative works more as a group memoir than a murder mystery (not least because there is no murder). As such its construction is sprawling, at times redundant, at other times obscure, and in general lacks the forward drive that is emblematic of the mystery genre. It is also likely that viewers drawn to this film to relive a memory are probably the viewers who will be the least open to the film's revision of this memory, a revision that begins with the opening sequence and continues unabated to the end of the film: the film opens with emblematic queers Oscar Wilde and Jack Farie and ends with Christian Bale's character (a figure in the film of the glam rock fan and the film's audience) reclaiming his own memories of glam rock as the sign of an emerging gay identity.

This mismatch between the sales pitch of the trailer

and the way in which it prepares viewers to watch the film was most likely obscured when *Velvet Goldmine* was released; and without an examination of the film's reception upon its release, it would be impossible to determine what influence it may have had on its success at the box-office. Yet, examining it in the light of internet downloading still helps to clarify the distinction between two functions and to suggest what importance they each have on the viewing of narrative film.

CONCLUSIONS

Recent developments in trailer viewing, specifically, the downloading of trailers from the internet, are revealing the notion of trailers as mere advertisement to be only a partial understanding of the work of these devices. Far from being a simple sales pitch that accurately or not vends its wares, the trailer provides the narrative information and genre contexts that attentive spectators can—and do—use to structure their viewings of the film. But what are we to make of all of this since, after all, the study of trailers can be—and should be—only a small component of film study?

To answer I would suggest that as trailers migrate into new sites of exhibition through new technologies, the changes they undergo may serve as key indicators of emerging film viewing practices. If this is true, and I hope that my analysis at least suggests that it is, then trailers' functions and uses should not go unexamined. Distinguishing between a sales pitch and a viewing guide and identifying the contexts that make trailers first one and then the other, seems to be a fundamental first step in this direction. But this is only a beginning. Further study would hopefully identify how particularly important preparatory functions such as genre identification, story descriptions, and ideological declarations do their work. In addition, it would be important to examine how other presentations of trailers alter their function. But other potentially rich areas of analysis abound. To cite only two examples, I would call attention first to their universal incorporation into DVD releases, where they are an integral part of an extended paratextual system of interpretation; and secondly, to the unexamined but important role they play in the creation of commercial auteurs, and therefore, our contemporary cinema culture. It is through consideration of these and related questions about the work trailers are doing that these mysteriously captivating but frustratingly banal pieces of cinema will begin to be useful for film studies.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Marshall Sella, "The 150-Second Sell, Take 34" *The New York Times* July 28, 2002.
- 2 Gerard Genette, *Paratexts*, Trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 198-208.
- 3 Sella, "150-Second Sell."
- 4 Rick Lyman and Laura M. Holson, "Holidays Turn into Hollywood's Hot Season" *The New York Times* November 24, 2002.
- 5 Amy Harmon, "Movie Studios Provide Link for Internet Downloading" *The New York Times* November 11, 2001.
- 6 The trailer text in both cases is the same. "Cinema trailer" and "internet trailer" will be used to distinguish between different methods of viewing the same text.
- 7 In the Spring of 2003 a series of sites were dissecting the trailer for *The Two Towers*: one of the most extensive frame by frame analyses of all of the available trailers. This particular site also directed interested downloaders to movies where each of the available trailers was being screened, an important service for those willing to buy a ticket to a movie they wouldn't otherwise care about in order to watch a particular trailer on the big screen (i.e. the way it was meant to be seen.). The trailer breakdowns can be viewed at: <http://www.theonering.net/movie/preview/>.
- 8 Sarah Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers: Voice-Over Narration in American Fiction Film* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 74, 75.
- 9 Jonathan Glenn, interview by David Geffner in "Anatomy of a Trailer," RES: Resolution Independent (July/August 2002), p. 43.
- 10 Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers*, p. 80
- 11 Genette, *Paratexts* p. 224.
- 12 David Geffner "Anatomy of a Trailer," p. 42.
- 13 *ibid.*, p. 44.

14 *ibid.*, p. 42.

15 “Director’s Commentary,” *Gods and Monsters*, dir. Bill Condon, 1998. DVD.

16 The censure of Disney can be read at: <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/amResolution.asp?ID=435>. The resolution that started the boycott can be read at: <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/amResolution.asp?ID=436>.

17 Any links between the boycott and marketing decisions made by Miramax or Disney are obviously conjectural. Still, one week after the commencement of the boycott, Disney recalled a hip-hop album already in distribution, claiming it was inappropriate to release obscene material through Disney subsidiaries. Despite denials, this move was viewed as a response to the boycott. The story as reported by ABC news can be viewed at: http://more.abcnews.go.com/sections/us/clownposse626_2/.

Circumstances surrounding Miramax’s film marketing strategies are also suggestive. In the three years prior to the 1997 boycott, gay films such as *Priest* (1994) and *Lie Down With Dogs* (1995) were released by Miramax and marketed as such. In the three years following the boycott, its explicitly gay releases, *Velvet Goldmine* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* were not.

18 Alexander Doty, *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 52.

Brian Crane is currently a PhD student at Université de Montréal.

The Provocateur Auteur - Paul Verhoeven and the Reception of Starship Troopers (1997)

Owen Livermore

In late November 1997, on a brisk winter day, I found myself at the entrance of West Edmonton Mall, the World's Largest Entertainment and Shopping Centre. Growing up, I had always shunned this regrettably prominent 'landmark' of my hometown, with its daily dolphin shows, massive chain stores, and depressingly conventional architecture. Due to my burgeoning obsession with film, I had to swallow my pride to see the newest film by Paul Verhoeven in the mall's megamovieplex. The film was *Starship Troopers* (1997), based on the controversial 1959 novel by cult sci-fi author Robert A. Heinlein. On the strength of a script by Ed Neumeier (1987's *ROBOCOP*) and special effects by Phil Tippett (whose credits include *Jurassic Park* (1993) and the *Star Wars* movies (1977,1980,1983)), my expectations were understandably high. I watched as a tale set in a distant future unfolded before me, where the world is controlled by a militaristic, totalitarian government in a state of war with giant alien bugs who threaten Earth. The story follows a group of naïve, perfectly molded teenagers as they graduate from high school, turn into soldiers, and promptly die in the most brutal ways imaginable, framed in the structure of a propagandistic film that evokes likenesses to both Leni Riefenstahl and the American *Why We Fight* series.

To my surprise, the young audience started to respond to the film enthusiastically and applaud the soldiers in a way that horrified me. I was seeing rather overt references to *Triumph Of The Will* (1934), but was the audience? By the end, the crowd was cheering at the film's propagandistic call to arms. The credits began to roll, and I slowly filtered out of the theatre, stunned and appalled. As I adjusted to the bright lights outside, my

head was crowded with questions about the audience and the rather twisted agenda of Verhoeven. I looked into the eyes of the moviegoers as we filtered out of the theatre. Do they realize that they are being manipulated at a very basic level to cheer for and identify with a future-fascist society? Do they even care?

I stayed away from the film for a long time, chilled by its harsh and manipulative strategy. However, when revisiting it as I was researching its reception in the popular media, initial reviews reveal an interestingly mixed response. Be they positive or negative, a survey of writing in the popular media regarding *Starship Troopers* eventually unearths certain reoccurring points. Diverse elements of the film under scrutiny in a majority of reviews include: the effectiveness of satire, expectations and/or constraints of genre, violence, and the issue of identification with the characters. The confused and often contradictory nature of the reviews surveyed maps out a complex and enlightening terrain of reception in mainstream journalism.

SATIRE

A recurring topic in reviews of *Starship Troopers* revolves around the question of satire in the film adaptation. The viewpoint that Verhoeven's source material is derived from the work of what some call a "right-wing sabrattler" (Ebert) lends to a certain amount of ambiguity regarding the agenda of the filmmaker ^[1]. A review in the *Globe & Mail*, for example, denies the presence of a satirical angle in the film entirely, instead classifying the film as strictly entertainment:

Here, while he follows the general outlines of Robert A. Heinlein's 1959 novel, he skips over its political implications. Verhoeven's world is both mock-nostalgic (clean-cut boys and cheerleading girls) and futuristically fascist (fetishizing machinery, the military and the suppression of individuality and desire) ^[2].

The writer goes on to call Verhoeven's adaptation "kitsch fun" while stressing that "Heinlein's celebration of military-citizens in *Starship Troopers* was disturbingly sincere" ^[3].

The question of how satire operates (if it operates at all) in *Starship Troopers* is also evidenced by a series of enlightening articles in the *Los Angeles Times* that appeared at around the time of the film's premiere. An initial review of *Starship Troopers* by Los Angeles Times film critic Kenneth Turan on November 7, 1997 describes a "...jaw-dropping experience, so rigorously one-dimensional and free from even the pretense of intelligence it's hard not to be astonished and even mesmerized by what is on screen" ^[4]. Turan's lukewarm review of the "cheerfully lobotomized" film that "offers no shortage of all manner of carnage" prompts a rebuttal a few weeks later in the *Los Angeles Times* by a guest writer named Jon Zelazny in an article entitled "Counterpunch: Amid 'Troopers' Gore, it's Easy to Miss the Message". Zelazny, in a call to recognize an especially audacious form of satire in *Starship Troopers*, argues that "[W]hat Verhoeven has created is nothing less than a total replica of a propaganda film that the futuristic government of earth would itself create, if in fact its goal were to recruit young men and women to swell the ranks of the starship troopers if they were engaged in a distant war" ^[5]. Paramount to Zelazny's argument is the understated nature of the satire in *Starship Troopers*, and he states that "...the oh-so-subtle warning Verhoeven slips us is that people can be swayed by even 'dumb' movies into supporting war and violence" ^[6]. One week later, writer Michael Voss pens a response to Zelazny's piece in the *Los Angeles Times*. The article questions the importance of Zelazny's contention that viewers are taken in completely and do not comprehend satirical elements in the film. To Voss, Verhoeven's entire project fails because the satirical aspect of the film is not clearly delineated for a "mass" audience: "[p]ity the poor, misunderstood filmmaker, who had to actually live under Nazi occupation as a child, yet who somehow fails to clearly present the satiric focus of his movie in a manner that the masses can appreciate and understand" ^[7]. Presenting satire in an ambiguous way becomes problematic for Voss, who

questions Zelazny's claim that 99.9% of moviegoers missed the satire in the movie. Voss raises an interesting point in his criticism of the film's satirical elements when he states, "is it no longer the director's task to integrate his audience, to bring meaning to them, rather than the other way around?" ^[8] The ideal for Voss is a film that removes ambiguity in relation to satire, so that a consistent reading of the film is possible. In the above debate, interpretations of *Starship Troopers* by the viewer are crucial, as is the possibility that contradictory readings of the film can coexist. An important question to ask regarding *Starship Troopers* and all of Verhoeven's films is in relation to this acutely divided reception: is it still satire if the audience does not recognize satirical elements inherent in the story?

VIOLENCE

Many observations of *Starship Troopers* concentrate on the elevated levels of violence not normally present in a science fiction film. By most (if not all) accounts presented in this essay, the level of violence and gore is excessive. A writer for *The Deseret News* implies a dubious motive for pushing the boundaries of violence within the genre, suggesting that "in fact, [Verhoeven's] only goal these days seems to be pushing the buttons of the Motion Picture Association of America. If *Starship Troopers* can't get an NC-17 for its over-the-top violence and sickening gore, nothing can" ^[9].

In a similar cautioning tone, a column in *The Washington Post* entitled "The Family Filmgoer" sets out to describe in detail the violent acts in the film for parental consideration. Jane Horowitz writes, "high school kids who like science fiction and war stories will get a jolt out of this long, loud, ultra-gory sci-fi epic, if their stomachs hold up" ^[10]. In describing the "unsettling" heroes in *Starship Troopers* that "... look and act like actors in a Nazi propaganda film" later on in the article, Horowitz remarks: "[s]o, while high-schoolers applaud the action, adults may want to talk about the film's more insidious elements" ^[11]. This rather noteworthy generational consideration mirrors the release of Heinlein's book back in 1959. The book, originally intended for a youthful audience obsessed with science fiction literature at the time, was rejected for publishing in a "juvenile" book series for its unsettling elements and was later released as an "adult" book ^[12].

Roger Ebert's oft-quoted and provocative line in his review that "*Starship Troopers* is the most violent kiddie movie ever made" suggests a level of violence surpassing socially acceptable standards for films aimed

at youths ^[13]. While some note that the violence of *Starship Troopers* is excessive for the genre, Sacramento Bee writer Joe Baltake contends that the violence has a satirical function. He writes, “while other contemporary movies sanctimoniously tell us that violence is a bad thing and then hypocritically wallow in it to prove their point, *Starship Troopers* giddily celebrates its own viciousness” ^[14]. *Film Journal International*, in a decidedly negative review, finds blame and a twisted pleasure in the film’s supposed failure to fit into its genre:

[p]erhaps the sole pleasure moviegoers over the age of 11 will derive from *Starship Troopers* [...] is finding inventive ways to describe it to curious friends and loved ones. But even such attempts as ‘Leni Riefenstahl Meets Melrose Place,’ ‘Ayn Rand’s *Top Gun 2*,’ and ‘Gidget Goes *Gattaca*’ fail to convey the staggering mindlessness of this hugescale exercise in neo-Orwellian kitch ^[15].

An *Empire Online* review of *Starship Troopers* reinforces its violent qualities, remarking that “[t]his is easily the goriest mainstream movie Hollywood has ever made” ^[16]. Elsewhere in the article, writer Ian Nathan notes that, “[o]f course, there are those who will take its square-jawed, bang-bang hooey —blast the bugs, kids! philosophy on face value. But that doesn’t bear thinking about” ^[17]. Here, Nathan acknowledges (and finds problematic) a viewer that takes the violence literally, that is, as entertainment packaged as part of a genre. The above reviews reveal a need (subconscious or conscious) by the writers to place *Starship Troopers* into the science fiction mold (or more pejoratively, the teen melodrama), a process problematized by the excessive violence. Verhoeven’s film, by depicting violence without reproach, goes beyond the limits of genres that usually take it upon themselves to draw up and enforce the boundaries of socially acceptable actions.

CHARACTER IDENTIFICATION

Another point of discussion in writing on *Starship Troopers* is the perceived lack of any character that elicits sympathy in the viewer. Many reviewers display an open resentment for the characters and, by proxy, the actors who play them. For example, the review in the *Globe & Mail* describes the acting in terms of other low-brow forms of entertainment:

[j]ust as you get over the awe-inspiring scenes of kamikaze insects, the movie returns to scenes of the young cast of models/actors who carry their uniforms better than their dialogue. The

B-movie cast of young pretties perform with that dead-behind-the-eyes quality of the Beverly Hills 90210 cast ^[18].

For a reviewer on *Spliced Wire*, a film-oriented website, the “generic” characters are symptomatic of a larger problem in mainstream spectacle films that place special effects ahead of acting talent. “If *Starship Troopers* is a success,” writes the author, “it will be an indication that name stars are not needed to buoy one of these hollow ‘event movies,’ and that may open the floodgates for a tidal wave of starless, plotless effects flicks” ^[19]. An article in *The Chicago Reader* by Jonathan Rosenbaum links the lack of character identification in *Starship Troopers* with self-denial on the part of the viewer: “it seems to me that we’re all too eager to share the movie’s disdain for the target audience [...] just as we’re much too docile about accepting the film’s blood lust as American” ^[20]. The writer elaborates on specific characters in the film by drawing a comparison to one of the most popular science fiction genre films, *Star Wars*:

When Luke Skywalker loses his relatives to alien villains, we’re invited to spend at least a few seconds commiserating with him to validate his desire for payback. But when the parents of Johnny Rico (Casper Van Dien) get nuked—among 12 million other earth dwellers, no less—what we’ve already seen of this pair makes them only slightly less repellant than the bugs who wipe them out, so the tragedy and outrage are simply rhetorical ^[21].

In a *Salon.com* article entitled “Melrose vs. the Monsters,” Scott Rosenberg calls into question the effectiveness of Verhoeven’s delivery of satire. His argument rests on a belief that *Starship Troopers* actively seeks out (yet fails) to elicit viewer sympathy for the characters. Instead, comparisons with other (financially successful) examples of the science fiction genre in the article point to spectacle as a means to an end of commercial gain:

There’s nothing wrong with good satire—but it’s self-defeatingly stupid to inject it into any story that expects us to care what happens to the characters. The creators of successful latter-day space operas, from *Star Wars* to *Independence Day* have always understood this. Nothing in *Starship Troopers* carries the conviction of the Force or even *Independence Day*’s rah-rah for mankind idealism; the movie can’t commit to the militarism it inherited from Heinlein, and it never finds

a different ideal to substitute. Except, maybe, a belief in special effects ^[22].

Writing for *The Flick Philosopher* (an online film journal), Mary Ann Johanson calls for characters that elicit sympathy in the viewer, but later concedes a possible motive behind the construction of “callow, shallow” characters. “That none of the twentysomethings playing these high-schoolers can act is, I am certain, all according to director Verhoeven’s plan” ^[23]. Johanson’s comments suggest that it was the director’s intention to populate his film with unsympathetic characters, an idea that escapes the expectations of many critics. In fact, whereas others find weakness in the two-dimensional characterizations, she sees strength. By using a flat, superficial, yet popular style of performance in his film (thus the comparisons to prime-time melodramas such as *Melrose Place*), Verhoeven draws a link between popular Hollywood dramatic forms (filled with pretty yet vacuous figures) and the fascist ideology of the source novel. As a consequence, the film also runs the risk of alienating or insulting the intelligence of viewers; this is, in effect, the fine line of satire.

CONCLUSION

Since his arrival from Holland, Paul Verhoeven has quickly established a reputation as a provocateur, a maker of ‘difficult’ genre films that contrast sharply to perceived norms. As Rob van Scheers describes it in his book *Paul Verhoeven*:

Mr. Verhoeven is an odd fish, a European intellectual with an untamed appetite for the cinematic equivalent of red meat. The Verhoeven approach: technical finesse, earthly tastes, a lurid imagination, and a zest for putting the ‘big’ back in the ‘big screen’ ^[24].

Verhoeven’s films, while produced within a dominant, hegemonic Hollywood, land in a gray area between ‘dominant’ and ‘subversive:’ his films are surprisingly forceful, yet contradictory. An analysis of the reception of *Starship Troopers* shows how the film opens up seemingly contradictory discourses by virtue of its irrevocably mixed message. In his essay “Heinlein, Verhoeven, and the Problem of the Real: *Starship Troopers*” J.P. Telotte comments on the far-right ideology of Heinlein’s novels:

[m]any of his stories finally seem to be about a kind of cosmic survival of the fittest and the difficulties his young protagonists face in learning

this fundamental truth in life. Their emphasis is frequently on the sort of discipline that would be needed to endure in new and often harsh environments—and by extension, for his juvenile readers to survive in a potentially harsh and constantly challenging future, such as the one facing the United States in the Cold War era. That emphasis has led many to see in all of his work a rather troubling ideology ^[25].

It is this troubling ideology that I encountered on that cold winter day in 1997. However, I felt its lasting effects most profoundly in the film’s reception in that crowded theatre, cementing the thought in my mind that, for better or for worse, *Starship Troopers* is truly a film made for the people. As his films reach a mainstream audience, they reveal similar contradictions in the society that receives them. *Starship Troopers* is undoubtedly a film made for younger viewers with plenty of disposable income, but just as writers are unsure of how to place *Starship Troopers*, *Starship Troopers* is unsure how to place the viewer. A seemingly totalitarian film made by someone who lived under an oppressive Nazi occupation as a child, *Starship Troopers* leaves it unclear whether viewers will appreciate the bleak satire or “eat this gooey sci-fi thriller up with a spoon” ^[26].

Raising the issue of ‘communication to the masses’ is vital to Verhoeven’s work here; the message to the viewers is therefore deliberately compromised. For Verhoeven, this holds true especially for Hollywood summer blockbusters, films expressly made for wide audiences and which can easily be shaped into shameless propaganda. Thus, the discussion around the filmic text, the controversy, becomes as important as the film itself. Eliciting a varied response may support an audacious project that links the Hollywood product (of which *Starship Troopers* is a part) with blatant propaganda, Nazi and otherwise. I think that the reason for making a film in the vein of *Starship Troopers* may well be a wish to produce an opening to expose this problematic, to drive an alien probe straight into the forehead of the mainstream.

1 In the reviews surveyed in this essay for Verhoeven’s film, Heinlein and his work is described as Fascist (Lacey, Rosenberg), totalitarian (Rosenbaum, Ebert) and very right-wing (McCarthy).

2 Lacey, Liam. “Review of *Starship Troopers*.” *Globe & Mail*. 17 November 2003.

- 3 *ibid.*
- 4 Turan, Kenneth. "Stop Buggin' Mel; Based on the Heinlein Novel, 'Starship Troopers' is Directed by Paul Verhoeven With Lots of Attention to Mayhem, Gore, and Goo." *Los Angeles Times*. 1 Nov. 1997: F1
- 5 Zelazny, Jon. "Counterouch: Amid 'Troopers' Gore, its Easy to Miss the Message." *Los Angeles Times*. 1 Dec. 1997: F3
- 6 *ibid.*
- 7 Voss, Michael. "Exploring Hidden 'Satire' of 'Starship Troopers.'" *Los Angeles Times*. 8 Dec. 1997: F3
- 8 *ibid.*
- 9 Vice, Jeff. "Review of *Starship Troopers*." *Deseret News*. 17 November 2003.
<http://deseretnews.com/movies/view>
- 10 Horowitz, Jane. "The Family Filmgoer." *The Washington Post*. 7 Nov. 1997: N49
- 11 *ibid.*
- 12 Telotte, J.P. "Heinlein, Verhoeven, and the Problem of the Real: STARSHIP TROOPERS". *Literature/Film Quarterly* #3 (2001) Pg. 197,198.
- 13 Ebert, Roger. "Review of *Starship Troopers*." *Chicago Sun Times Online*. 17 November 2003.
<http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert.reviews/1997>.
- 14 Baltake, Joe. "Review of *Starship Troopers*." *Sacramento Bee*. 17 November 2003.
<http://www.sacramentobee.com>
- 15 Satuloff, Bob. "Review of *Starship Troopers*." *Film Journal International*. 17 November 2003.
<http://www.filmjournal.com/Article.cfm/PageID/64298266>
- 16 Nathan, Ian. "Review of *Starship Troopers*." *Empire Online*. 17 November 2003.
<http://www.empireonline.co.uk/reviews>
- 17 *ibid.*
- 18 Lacey, Liam. "Review of *Starship Troopers*." *Globe & Mail*. 17 November 2003.
- 19 Blackwelder, Rob. "Review of *Starship Troopers*." *Spliced Wire*. 17 November 2003.
<http://www.splicedwire.com/97reviews/starship.html>
- 20 Rosenbaum, Jonathan. "Multinational Pest Control: *Starship Troopers*." *The Chicago Reader*. 17 November 2003.
<http://www.chireader.com/movies/archives>.
- 21 *ibid.*
- 22 Rosenberg, Scott. "Melrose vs. the Monsters." *Salon.com*. 17 November 2003.
<http://www.salon.com/ent/movies/1997/11/07starship.html>
- 23 Johanson, Mary Ann. "Character Assassination: *Starship Troopers*." *The Flick Philosopher*. 17 November 2003.
<http://www.flickphilosopher.com/flickfilos/archive/97/starshiptroopers.html>
- 24 Van Scheers, Rob. *Paul Verhoeven*. London and Boston: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1997. Pg xi.
- 25 Telotte, J.P. "Heinlein, Verhoeven, and the Problem of the Real: *Starship Troopers*". *Literature/Film Quarterly* #3 (2001) Pg. 198.
- 26 Vice, Jeff. "Review of *Starship Troopers*." *Deseret News*. 17 November 2003.
<http://deseretnews.com/movies/view>

Owen Livermore is currently working towards his masters degree in film studies at Concordia University, Montreal. Owen is originally from Edmonton, where he first began studying film at the University of Alberta. His interests (which change daily) include asian cinemas, exploitation film, and video games.

KILL BILL : VOLUME 2

The 2nd Inter-Review

Owen Livermore

PROLOGUE: *After several weeks of defending KILL BILL VOLUME 2 from its many detractors, we have decided to address some of this criticism and possibly prove that we are not, in fact, part of some conspiracy to help Quentin Tarantino take over the world. As a result of our lofty goal, this interreview got a little out of hand. We went way over time, budget, and word count so we decided to break this into two parts, Volume 1 and Volume 2.*

VOLUME 1

FIRST CHAPTER : FACE TO FACE

Sarah Duda: Okay, *Kill Bill. Kill Bill.* I like the rhyming title. You?

Jonathan Doyle: It's better than *Tuer Bill*, that's for sure.

Let me just say that I think the movie, both volumes, totally and completely kicked some major ass. I had an amazingly fun time watching them. Not many movies inspire me to do kung fu as I leave the theatre.

Yeah, you almost poked my eye out. I had to remind you, "I am not Elle Driver. You are not Pai Mei." But you just didn't want to hear it.

I'm surprised that so many Tarantino fans disliked it.

I honestly believe that *Kill Bill* is more subtle than his other films—certainly in its characterizations—so some people are wondering where all the obvious Tarantino stuff is (i.e., the flamboyant dialogue). They don't want action, but they don't want subtlety either. They want that something-in-between that was the focus of Tarantino's previous films. But *Kill Bill* is less controlled. It's a film of extremes.

A lot of people really hate it.

The problem with most of *Kill Bill*'s detractors is that they're

not fans of genre filmmaking. There's nothing wrong with that, but just as a jazz hater would never review a Duke Ellington album, a genre film hater shouldn't review *Kill Bill*. It doesn't make sense. They're criticizing the film because it's a genre film, not because it's a *bad genre* film.

I'm so sick of *Kill Bill* haters complaining that it has no depth. They are totally missing the point. If they want depth, they should go see something else.

It's a visual and emotional film, not an intellectual one. Personally, I think it's far more challenging to effectively communicate feelings and sensations in a film than it is to communicate ideas. But critics and academics tend to have more respect for idea-driven films because they translate better to the written word.

But why do they hate it so much?

More than Tarantino's previous films, *Kill Bill* is a movie-movie. The extremes of content, style, and tone are a little more extreme than usual. There's something about the tone that bothers people who aren't familiar with horror films, martial arts films, spaghetti westerns, etc. I'm not sure what it is exactly. But it's not quite realistic.

In his previous films there's this emphasis on human relationships. I'm not saying that there is no emphasis on human relationships in *Kill Bill*, but I think it's more prominent in his previous films. *Kill Bill* is something that viewers have to give themselves up to and just go with. Emotionally, it's simple: love, vengeance, hate, retribution.

There's evidence of all that in *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, and *Jackie Brown* but, you're right, it's less prominent. To me, the key is that *Kill Bill* is done in movie language, not real-life language (and I'm not just talking about dialogue). People are constantly applying the realism test to movies: "is it realistic enough?" If you apply that to *Kill Bill*, you're lost because it's not realistic. It's not trying to be. It's deliberately theatrical and it's far too weird for a viewer to have a passive reaction. I'm sure passive audiences hate *Kill Bill*. It messes with their complacency.

You have to be imaginative enough to draw your own meaning from it. And I'm not saying that to imply that I am somehow above or beyond the average spectator. I just think that, rather than sit with your face all screwed up and "not get it," you should try to figure it out. If you want a message fed to you, go see something else. *Kill Bill* is basically just fun, fun, fun for the whole family.

CHAPTER TWO : THE BLOOD-SPLATTERED BRIDE

How do you feel about the criticism that the films are too violent?

Not this question again. I think that particular criticism is really weak.

But we have to defend the film, and "too violent" is a criticism that keeps coming up. If you were selected to defend the film in front of the Supreme Court, what would you say? Why isn't it a problem?

That's such a huge question. I don't know. I guess because the violence is so stylized, I don't feel like some weird freak who is getting off on real suffering.

Yeah, it's fake violence. Tarantino says violent scenes in his movies are like dance sequences in musicals.

Absolutely. The whole violence thing sends us into all sorts of complicated issues like censorship and whether violence causes violence and I just don't have an answer to that. It's a violent film. Therefore, there is lots of violence. If you don't like violence, go check out *The Horse Whisperer*.

Believe it or not, they were both photographed by the same guy, Robert Richardson. You could tell he was lighting Pai Mei like a horse. I could, anyway.

That's a really crazy coincidence. I just chose that film off the top of my head.

Was there any violence that you thought was particularly effective in the film?

I really liked all the fake blood squirting around in *Volume One*. Like when Sophie Fatale gets her arm chopped off. That's entertainment. I thought that was (for lack of better word) cool. And funny. Even though it pulls you out of the movie and makes you think about special effects, I liked it. But, again, that's a personal thing. It reminds me of old horror movies. What did you think of the fight sequences?

I wasn't crazy about the House of Blue Leaves sequence in *Volume One* because the action seemed too choreographed. I thought the fight between Uma and Daryl Hannah was more spontaneous and enjoyable because they were forced to use interesting props, the kind of stuff you'd find in a trailer. I also liked some of the Vernita Green fight but, again, it was a little too choreographed for my taste. To be honest, I'm not crazy about fight scenes in any movie.

I really liked the fight scene between Uma and O-Ren at the end of VOLUME ONE. The fake snow, the garden, it was very nicely shot. It had a totally different feel from the House of Blue Leaves sequence.

CHAPTER THREE : BEST CHAPTER

Sarah and Jon agree: "Chapter Eight: The Cruel Tutelage of Pai Mei"

CHAPTER FOUR : THE ORIGIN OF KILL BILL

I really love the buried alive sequence. I like when Tarantino nods to horror conventions. I would love to see him do an out-and-out horror movie. Actually, maybe not. He's too selfreferential and pop cultural. I don't like horror films like that.

But he's not that way in the buried-alive scene. It's pure horror. The audience is in complete, terrifying darkness for a minute or more, as we hear Budd and his sidekick dump soil on the Bride's grave.

If he could make a whole movie like that, I would be first in line to see it.

Me, too. Or...I guess I'd be second. Do you want to talk about the criticism Tarantino keeps getting for referencing other movies? That seems to be the source of some serious animosity.

Okay, sure. You know, my personal feeling is that everybody borrows from everybody. A popular theory, nothing new. But I really don't see anything wrong with QT being inspired by movies. We're all inspired by movies.

I don't see how the movie references detract from the film in any way. Critics of this practice claim that Tarantino is just patting us on the back for "getting" the references, but I enjoyed the scenes where I didn't get the references as much as the scenes where I did get the references.

Besides, I've watched many of the scenes that he supposedly copied and they are all different in a number of ways. And speaking of inspiration, I am going to put forward the argument that we are all inspired by Tarantino. Our whole generation. We've all seen *Pulp Fiction* and, whether we liked it or not, whether we wish to emulate it or forget it, it has affected us. And I think that people should give QT his props for being a cool sucker.

I think they're just voicing their frustration for not being more widely versed in Tarantino's film culture. They feel like the film is communicating to some genre film elite, rather than the broader film-going public that they are a part of.

You can feel cool if you recognize where a particular scene comes from but, at the same time, if you don't know, you can appreciate Tarantino for bringing it to your attention.

Yeah, I think that's really important. I've seen many movies solely on Quentin Tarantino's recommendation and I've enjoyed almost all of them. If he's referencing the films effectively, viewers should be curious and excited to see those films. What more could you ask from a filmmaker? He's making people more enthusiastic about movies. That's a great thing.

Precisely. Tarantino loves films, therefore he references them in his work. Just like a dude who loves horses will reference horses in his work (i.e., *The Horse Whisperer*). Good example. And just because one work refers to another doesn't mean that the ideas are being used in the same way. You could adapt a film's ideas to a piece of writing, for example.

CHAPTER FIVE : BILLY BUDD

The criticism that some people had of *Volume One*—that it was shallow and insubstantial—doesn't really apply to *Volume Two*. Most of the characters are complex and surprisingly ambiguous.

Absolutely. I agree. I really love Michael Madsen's character, Budd. I think there's a great deal of complexity in a loser lifestyle coupled with a sense of honor.

The relationship between brothers Bill and Budd—I wonder if they were named after Billy Budd?—is one of my favorite aspects of *Volume Two*. The only reason Budd wants to hurt The Bride is because she betrayed Bill. But he won't reveal to Bill how much he loves him.

Budd even says that he's only killing Uma because she "broke Bill's heart." Very romantic.

I think Tarantino went out of his way to make Budd sympathetic. In fact, he's the only character on the Bride's "death list" that she doesn't kill, either directly or indirectly.

On the other hand, you have to pause and think about the sadism and cold-bloodedness that is necessary to do what he does to The Bride.

Yeah, it's complicated.

I thought it was weird that Budd captured Uma so easily. She is usually so cautious but, for some reason, she basically walks right into his (not very devious) trap. Big mistake, Uma. That's an issue I can't figure out. What was she thinking? She knew he was there. She heard him come to the window.

I can't figure that scene out. It makes no sense. I guess I'll just let it go because it does lead to the burial stuff, which I love. But I think QT could've had her captured in a more interesting and intelligent way.

Part of me thinks that Budd is supposed to be the dumb member of the gang. After all, he fell for Elle's snake trick and he buried The Bride shallow enough that she was able to escape.

He is really stupid for trusting Elle. I guess we could assume that Budd is not careful with Elle because he doesn't particularly value his life. He seems to feel that whatever will be, will be. Still, he should have taken more precautions. Just like Uma should have taken more precautions when she snuck up on him.

Budd seems to be on bad terms with Bill so the Bride probably didn't think they'd be communicating. She didn't know Budd was expecting her.

I'd do things my way?' But little they know that it's so hard to find One rich man in ten with a satisfied mind.'

-“Satisfied Mind,” the song Budd plays right before The Bride attacks

What about the scenes of Budd in the strip club?

A few people have complained to me that those scenes are unnecessary, but they're really not. Budd claims that he pawned off the priceless Hanzo sword that Bill gave him for only a few hundred dollars when, in fact, he has kept the sword because of its tremendous sentimental value and because of his unspoken love for Bill. The strip club scenes illustrate that Budd is willing to degrade himself for a minimum wage job, rather than sell the sword that could make him a millionaire.

Those scenes are totally necessary in terms of building up the multiple layers that make him who he is.

I also think the sympathy that Tarantino creates for Budd fuels our hatred for Elle Driver, after she kills him. Along with the discovery that she killed Pai Mei, this makes us even more anxious to see The Bride kill her. It makes that scene more exciting. I feel kind of sick saying all this. “I want to see the Bride kill!” But that's what the movie's all about. I'm not ashamed to admit that I liked it when the Bride stepped on Elle's eyeball.

I loved the eyeball stuff. There's something totally cool about the ability to snatch someone's eyeball out of its socket. What a charming move. Did you think Daryl Hannah was good as Elle?

I thought Elle was one of the most unlikable characters in recent memory. They usually don't allow women to be that cold-blooded in movies. I liked that.

I really love the scene of her in the nurse's uniform in *Volume One* when she is walking down the hall, whistling. The music picks up and takes over the whistling, while the split screen is going on. Really cool. Tarantino said he took that whole idea—including the music, I think—from the trailer for John Frankenheimer's *Black Sunday*. Unfortunately, the trailer's not on the DVD so I haven't been able to see it. But speaking of feuds between Uma Thurman and Daryl Hannah, have you heard about their ongoing war in real-life?

END OF VOLUME 1 – TO BE CONTINUED

“How many times have you heard someone say ‘If I had his money,

***THE LAST SAMURAI** Confused About American-Japanese Relations?*

Martin Lefebvre

The Last Samurai is a bizarre, confused, and ultimately incoherent film about a U.S. army captain (Nathan Algren/ Tom Cruise) from the famed 7th cavalry brought to Japan in 1876 to supervise the creation of an American-like (read: modern and Western) imperial army whose initial purpose in the film is to fight against traditionalists led by spiritual/ samurai leader Katsumoto played by Ken Watanabe^[1]. The first engagement between the opposing forces is disastrous for the still ill-prepared imperial army and the American captain is captured by the band of samurai. They take him to a remote village where he comes to respect them and their noble way of life (one in which honor and spirituality dominate) and eventually joins them in their fight to stop the ‘Americanization’ of Japan. The sole survivor of a massacre—worthy of Peckinpah—, Captain Algren, becomes in effect (and in the end) the ‘last samurai’.

The interesting question, of course, is what motivates Captain Algren to join forces with the samurai in the first place? Or, to put it differently: why would a contemporary American film offer a critique of the Americanization/ modernization of 19th century Japan? Is this a ‘politically correct’ critique of American imperialism? And if so, why does it endorse Japanese imperialism (the samurai in the film are still loyal to Emperor Meiji, even though they oppose his ministers)? Isn’t the very idea of an emperor/ living-god (whom the film’s American hero pledges to serve at the end) anti-republican? Working our way through such questions the strangeness of the film’s confused project begins to unravel.

A key figure in this project is the American Indian. The first shots of the film show the samurai leader Katsumoto meditating in nature while, cross-cut with them, are images showing the ‘contents’ of his meditation; music that connotes the spirituality of the moment accompanies the scene. Nature, spirituality, the simple and good life, discipline, honor: one immediately realizes that the cinematic terms of reference, the terms under which we are meant to understand the samurai, are those of the noble savage of revisionist western films (from *Cheyenne Autumn* to *Dances With Wolves*). Not surprisingly this is evidenced by the title’s intertextual connection to Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans*. The connection is made explicit when we learn that captain Algren is haunted by his participation in the massacre of an Indian village inhabited mostly by defenseless women and children. Though he is celebrated as a war hero, the events have nonetheless left him in a state of cynical and drunken selffloating. But while the film’s thematic vocabulary is clearly borrowed from the western, the displacement of the typical *western* conflict between Indians and whites to a conflict between traditionalism and modernization in the *Far-East* dramatically changes the meaning of this vocabulary^[2].

For in simple-mindedly taking the side of traditionalism over modernization (itself an important theme in post-war Japanese cinema), the film ends up endorsing the development of the right-wing, conservative, anti-Western, nationalist, militarist, and imperialist Japanese politics of the Showa era (whose conditions of possibility lay in the Meiji period—the period depicted in *The Last Samurai*), the very politics that eventually

led to, among other things, the annexation of Korea to Japan in 1910, the bloody Sino-Japanese war of the 30s and even to the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. Of course, as one would expect, the film's 'critique' of modernism is overlaid with (American) populism: the villains are proto-bourgeois Japanese ministers (read: bureaucrats) acting out of greed and a thirst for power, while the heroes truly represent the 'people' (peasants bow to them) and are seen to work for the good of the Nation. The utter (political, historical, and cultural) confusion of the film thus comes in good measure from presenting the politics of Japanese Fascism through the terms of reference and celebration of the American Indian over the Western way of life and from critiquing the introduction of a Western military into Japan—ironically the very sort of military that merged with the ultraconservative Fascist ideology of the 30s. (Add to this the fact that the ultra-conservative and anti-Western samurai Katsumoto is able to speak English with his American captive and you have a good idea of a script that has no clear idea of what it is doing).

How then are we to explain the film's own ideological project, its place in a world ever more dominated by American imperialism? In many ways the film is incoherent on this ground: while it critiques American militarism it celebrates a Japanese discourse that leads straight to imperialism, Fascism and militarism. More strangely still, it romanticizes the samurai by connecting him to the underdog plight and struggle of the American Indian and therefore turns him (against any sense of historical veracity) into a victim of unjust oppression in order to better endorse conservative politics. Dressed up so that it might appear as a critique of American imperialism, the film, it turns out, does quite the opposite. Of course, one cannot help but wonder whether such incoherence is of the same sort that blurs the boundaries between democratic and Fascist tendencies in American politics today...

come to mind) is not irrelevant to this film.

FOOTNOTES

1 In reality, during the Meiji reform the Japanese army modeled itself on the French and Prussian armies while the navy adopted the British model.

2 Of course, the film's iconographic vocabulary of samurai sword play is borrowed from the samurai film genre. That the samurai and western genres have often been compared (*The Seven Samurai* and *Yojimbo*, which would eventually be remade as westerns, immediately

TROY D'oh! *The Iliad Redux*: Some Notes on Adaptation in *Troy*

Janos Sitar

Disappointment is almost guaranteed whenever people attempt to adapt any literary work for the cinema, especially because nerds like myself will forever be questioning the faithfulness of the film to the short story, novel or poem on which it is based. So while I am well aware that listening to another stickle over inconsistencies in adaptation can be equally irritating, it goes without saying that such critical 'house-cleaning' is nevertheless a necessary step on the path to understanding how an adapted work of the stature of Homer's epic appears in its new form. Hence, I present the following notes.

Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy* attempts to synthesize the entire relationship between Paris and Helen and the subsequent fall of beautiful Ilium into 3 hours of screen time. Homer himself never attempted such a feat in *The Iliad*: the bulk of the Trojan cycle is filled out by the poet in *The Odyssey*, not to mention the work of other poets and playwrights, including Virgil, who describes the final days of Troy through the voice of Aeneas in *The Aeneid*. Having said that, a clearer picture of the whole will no doubt give a more complete notion of the world presented in *Troy*, if only because it'll show what the film includes, omits, and how interesting these choices are.

THE GODS

One does not turn to a page in *The Iliad* without finding some reference to the gods. Deleting their presence from the story has the effect of cutting out all the ads from an issue of *Vanity Fair*: it leaves you with a rather skimpy amount of paper. Setting aside the amount of

time spent in Greek and Roman literature departments discussing whether or not people believed in physical manifestations of divinity, their physical and tangible presence is important to the world of *The Iliad*. Set in the hallowed age of heroes when gods and humans were thought to have interacted on a regular basis, the poem offers divinity as a force that has direct influence on the events of the siege. The film however, as a modern existential version of the story, presents humans as entirely in control of all of the actions and events. Paris (Orlando Bloom) and Helen (Diane Kruger) are depicted as actually being in love rather than paired off by virtue of Paris' selection of Aphrodite as the winner of a beauty contest with Athena and Hera. While absolute human agency is an interesting spin on the events, it causes, first, a lot of narrative problems and, second, difficulties in the presentation of Greek culture.

One major problem that their omission creates is linked to the issue of prophecy and fate. Prophecy is a major aspect of the Homeric epic and of the culture of the period. People of power never acted without querying the gods first and then struggling over the instructions given, interpretation being a central part of divine prophecy; gods were rarely concise. Part of the tragedy of Troy is that the most of the people involved know that bad things are going to happen. The city's fate lies solely with Hector, who senses that his death will signal that the end of Troy is nigh. The prophetic figure on the Trojan side is Cassandra, whose fate—to speak the truth and yet to never be believed—is at the core of the tale's tragic forcefulness. TROY skirts this issue entirely by simply omitting the character of

Cassandra altogether, emphasizing the (post-) modern, Nietzschean rift between god(s) and humans that the film takes for granted.

SEXUALITY

The aggressive heterosexuality of *Troy* is as prominent as the absence of the gods. Many, many months ago I audibly groaned when I heard that Patroclus (Garrett Hedland) was going to be presented as Achilles' (Brad Pitt) cousin rather than as his lover. Thankfully I wasn't called upon to offer up this response a second time during the screening I attended, as a man behind me yelled out during Patroclus' funeral, "He's his lover you fucking Hollywood cowards, read the books!" Negotiating male sexuality in the Greek world may be difficult for us today, but this does not mean we can simply gloss over the fact that men in most ancient city-states were free to have sex with women and young men, a young man being seen as the something of an equivalent to a woman. While the Greeks never offered anything in the way of a sociological explanation of this practice, a possible source is the absence of a structured educational system. Whereas rich families could afford a tutor, it was common to send a young man ("eromenos") to be educated by an older man ("erastes") with experience in the arts of rhetoric, politics and military tactics. The labels "eromenos" and "erastes" suggest that a sexual relationship occurred on a fairly regular basis (see Plato on pederasty). While male sexuality in this context was strictly codified, it was read in terms of active and passive positions whereby the male is defined as being the active participant (the top in modern lingo) to the female or feminized passive (the bottom).

I label *Troy* an aggressively heterosexual film because it goes out of its way to avoid any possible male-on-male sexual practice, even though an explanation would have been easy to insert into the narrative. But *Troy*'s peculiar 'sexlessness' goes beyond this; the current hetero-social fear of the male body in cinema extends even to the film's depiction of the Greek camp and to the manner in which the leading figures are represented. The absence of nude male bodies caught me somewhat by surprise particularly because nude men would hardly have been scarce in this context. Part of Greek social practice was to exercise and wrestle in the nude. Nudity also extends to the realm of hygiene, as displayed in the Roman marble copy of the *Apoxymenos* by Lysippos. *Apoxymenos* literally translates as "oil scraper;" the statue itself displays men cleaning themselves by rubbing oil on their bodies and then running around

until they are sweaty so that the oil and dirt could be scraped off.

As for the leading males, Brad Pitt and Eric Bana (Hector), the mere presence of their muscular bodies does in some way connote a sense of sexuality and offer eye candy for the viewer. However, the film does nothing in its formal structure to 'sexualize' their bodies. Throughout TROY I kept thinking about how Brad Pitt's body had a stronger sexual presence in FIGHT CLUB than it does as the semidivine Achilles.

TIME

A crucial aspect of the epic nature of *The Iliad* is that it takes place over an absurdly long period of time. The 10 years that the war lasts creates a sense of drainage, exhaustion, and desperation between the two camps. *Troy*, in its Movieland revisionism, cuts this period down to a couple of weeks, which somehow seems to drain out the tension that was so important to the original. While the action of *The Iliad* itself occurs in a relatively short period of time, it constantly alludes to the past and the future, indicating that there is more to the story than what is presented in the poem. But *Troy* does the complete opposite by trying to be too tidy about characters and plot. And, while there is a nod to Virgil and *The Aeneid* in the form of a cameo appearance by Aeneas (Frankie Fitzgerald), Petersen's version disregards so many narrative strands that he's forced to kill off characters in a stunningly throwaway fashion. The deaths of Ajax (Tyler Mane) and Agamemnon (Brian Cox) are particularly odd, for both figures play prominent roles in tragedies set after end of the Trojan War, penned by Sophocles and Aeschylus respectively. *Troy* therefore superimposes a structure of closure whereby the villainous Agamemnon dies on camera for the sake of pleasing the audience and maintaining the first rule of the Blockbuster action movie: the bad guy must die before our eyes.

+ *Splinter Reviews II*

Dark Waters [DVD] (2004)

A direct-to-video, Blockbuster shelf-filler that sinks cinematic gutlessness to new depths. How so? By performing the most shameful bait-and-switch that I've witnessed in a while. The box, temptation for lovers of shark attack films, claims that the movie is about genetically-enhanced super sharks à la *Deep Blue Sea*. I expected nothing at all from it, except perhaps for a few silly and, if I was lucky, gruesome and slightly tense, death scenes, but somehow it still managed to disappoint, especially because the sharks—all CGI—only make two or so appearances and sink their teeth into so few victims, having been shoved aside by an uber-lame story about a secret military operation. Perhaps my appetite will be satisfied by this Summer's *Open Water*, released at Sundance this year and shot on MiniDV and with real live sharks.

-Colin Burnett

Dogville (2003)

While I am not usually a fan of Trier's pompous stylistic choices, his misanthropy, or his religiously masochistic devotion to humanity's malevolence, he may have stumbled onto something here with this morality play. The film's stark beauty is surprisingly breathtaking. Equally surprising is that his ending is powerfully satisfying. This wouldn't have worked in a 'normal' movie but his stripped, jarring art direction keeps us removed from emotion and focused on his message. If it wasn't for the level of his arrogance in his delivery, this film could have easily been one of the most powerful films of the year. It remains unforgettable

regardless of whether you agree with his take on the nature of goodness.

-Collin Smith

Eternal Sunshine Of The Spotless Mind (2004)

This film comes so close to being brilliant that when you realize how great its faults are it is all the more disappointing. As it stands, it has significant logical holes which would have been easier to overlook if the film makers had managed to make us believe in the characters. However, we are constantly asked to accept the emotions that characters are articulating without seeing any evidence that those emotions could be real. This is a story about love and identity yet we are given no reasonable amount of depth that would lead us to believe in that love or any kind of identity. The real power of the movie is not to erase the memory of its leads but the memory of critics who leave the cinema believing their have come away with an experience that is more than the most disappointing film of the year.

-Collin Smith

Home On The Range (2004)

This is the last traditionally animated film that Disney, or any other major American studio will release for a long time. Ironically, in terms of tone and visual style, it has more in common with the Warner Brothers' Looney Tunes shorts than recent Disney blockbusters. Clever, irreverent and hilarious, this film marks the return of the delightful songs of Alan Menken. Here's hoping that American 2-D animation will return to a new renaissance in the near future.

-Collin Smith

I'm Not Scared (Io Non Ho Paura) (2003)

... of what? Though stubbornly emphasized at the beginning and at the end, the title makes just about as much sense as the film's tagline: "Secrets. Betrayal. Murder." Both seem to be referring to another film. No matter; these minor discrepancies don't sink the film's saving grace: the photography. The black and gold palette in particular serves the material well. These Italian hills, like a wavy sea of golden wheat, are a sight for sore eyes—in this case literally so, for a kidnapped boy who's kept shackled in a hole under an abandoned house. Yet the beauty and significance of the images only really register by virtue of the film's languid fades to black. Director Salvatores 'kidnaps' a worn cinematic transition device and breathes new life into it, manipulating fade-outs in such a way as to suggest solitude and fade-ins the wonder of sight. A film whose most profound moments occur as the images disappear into and re-emerge from pitch black.

-Colin Burnett

Kill Bill Volume Two (2004)

The Nation's Stuart Klawans lays into Tarantino's unstable diptych for being a maze of digressions. While this is true, I ask if it is necessarily a bad thing? Thurman travels through the film as if caught, trapped, in a labyrinth of disparate spaces, scenarios, styles and moods on her way to the climax of an admittedly feeble story whose main thrust is a domestic dispute told entirely in hyperbole. The director has experimented with this kind of thing before, but here more than ever he is explicitly engaged in stylistic play, the most redeeming elements of which are Robert Richardson's showy photography and the director's own unique solutions to a panoply of self-imposed staging problems. What makes this OK, aside from the inspired results, is that none of these techniques 'editorialize,' that is, serve to couch the proceedings in added layers of meaning: they are done simply for themselves. By not relying upon 'the gimp,' Tarantino proves that he isn't one, setting the stage for a foray into solid film craftsmanship. And to those who aren't convinced that this is enough: next time you see the movie, pay attention to how the staging works to create a rhythm that fluctuates between stillness and a variety of kinds of movement so as to demonstrate that someone making this film knew what they were doing.

-Colin Burnett

The Ladykillers (2004)

I have always believed that the Coen brothers are at their best when they are reveling in their intellectual, non-sequitor, absurdist humor and this remake of Mackendrick's 1955 film provides just enough plot to contain their enjoyable mayhem. Tom Hanks reminds us of how funny he was before he became an Oscar winning actor in the wonderfully ridiculous role of Professor G.H. Dorr, while the rest of their cast perfectly personify the other caricatures needed for this caper. It's always a pleasure to have something this genuinely funny to laugh at in the cinema.

-Collin Smith

from *The Montreal Jewish Film Festival, 2004:*

Dziga And His Brothers (2002)

The beauty of the archival footage and stills is marred by the monotony of the documentary's construction. "What would Vertov do?" should have been their mantra, but instead a voice of god narration and linear order leaves one pining for the rhythmic editing of MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA. O Vertov, where art thou?

-Janos Sitar

from *The Montreal Jewish Film Festival, 2004:*

Kasenjah: The Jamaican Jewish Wedding (2003) / ***Awake Zion*** (2003)

The joy created in the pairing of two seemingly incongruous elements is evident from the peels of laughter and snickers emanating from the audience during the screening. Prefacing *Awake Zion* with *Kasenjah* is interesting because the idea of cultural marriage suggests an intimacy and widening of familiar circles in a polyethnic and multireligious society; there is room for growth and intermingling that was thought to be impossible before. Laughter bound that audience together as the borders of culture were made visible and then traversed without fear.

While marriage indicates a linear push forward as love and the potential for new life is celebrated, Monica Haim traces the lines backwards to find that the cultures of Rastafari and Judaism are not as distant as people think. This celebratory documentary (in progress) points to a relationship that begins with the legendary affair between King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba and beyond the 1930 coronation of Haile Selassie I in Ethiopia. Haim guides the audience through the dancehalls of New York and headphones

of people around the world. I felt honoured to witness the boundaries breaking down as the snickers dissipated and Hasidic dancehall sensation Matissyahu's skills on the microphone became a point of unification.

-Janos Sitar

The Punisher (2004)

Marvel Comic's anti-hero could have provided the basis for a gritty, film noir revenge saga, which is why it's so surprising that after adapting its other properties, such as *Spider-Man* and *X-Men*, so successfully, that Marvel would allow such a cheap and insulting production to be released. *The Punisher* is strictly B-movie material complete with all the corny dialogue and hammy performances but with none of the guilty pleasure. Thomas Jane looks more like a gay porn star than a tough guy, and still the movie manages to be revoltingly homophobic. It's as if someone dared John Travolta to make a worse film than *Battlefield Earth*.

-Collin Smith

The Snow Walker (2003)

This is a simple story about a Canadian pilot and an Inuit woman who crash in the wild and manage to find each other lost in all that space. Ernest and sincere, the film's rendering is remarkable. Few movies take advantage of the natural beauty of the North West Territories or understand the relationship its people have to the land. Too much time is wasted away from the two central figures, but while they are on screen the film is a complete pleasure.

-Collin Smith

Super Size Me (2004)

Morgan Spurlock's microcosm of fast food and instant obesity sheds light on the macrocosm of the average American diet and one of its holiest institutions: The Mack Shack, Rotten Ronnie's, Mickey D's. Watching the footage of Spurlock emotionally breaking down as his liver becomes pate is no where near as frightening as the footage of a young girl eating chips and pop for lunch and finding out that the school does nothing about it. The line between personal and corporate responsibility is constantly being questioned as Spurlock so willfully attempts to live like an average American by only taking 2000 steps a day and eating what is rapidly becoming the most common food available. While this could be thought of as a soft-lefty doc that really only caters to corporate hegemony, the sheer grossness of the experiment and the look of shock on the doctors'

faces is enough to guarantee that this is something that McDonald's will be hard pressed to manipulate in their favour. If they ever return Mr. Spurlock's phone calls.

-Janos Sitar

Doctor Vornoff's Corner #2 : Paracinema

Dr. Eric Vornoff

“One is always considered MAD, if one discovers something others cannot grasp!”

So, what do we call these weird films and where do they come from? Well, it's a long story, and as this column progresses, we will examine some of the issues and history that surround low-budget film industries and cult films—essentially non-mainstream film productions that appeal to a specific, unique and sometimes fetishistic audience. Critic and scholar Jeffery Sconce has labeled these types of films as “Paracinema” [1].

He describes paracinema as being less a distinct group of films than a particular reading protocol, a counter-aesthetic turned subcultural sensibility devoted to all manner of cultural detritus (372). The paracinema can contain any film so long as it adheres to the requirements of its counter-aesthetic. Sconce's work, now nearly ten years old, is a solid foundation for academic interest in paracinema. His call for academia to acknowledge that paracinema is slowly being accepted and institutions are gradually addressing issues that surround these films. But his work is also a cultural watershed of sorts; his articles (perhaps unintentionally) split paracinema between the historical period of lowbudget film production, on the one hand, and contemporary film and television productions that have adopted the counter-aesthetic of the past and brought it into the mainstream flow of our contemporary mediascape, on the other.

It is not difficult to see evidence of the paracinema's counter-aesthetic in such films as the new crop of

Slasher/comedy films, martial arts-stunt based films like *The Matrix Trilogy* (1999-2003) and Tarantino's *Kill Bill* (2003), MTV's reality films (*Jackass* (2002) and *The Real Cancun* (2003)), all of Takashi Miike's films, and direct to video productions (like *Girls Gone Wild* and *Bumfights*). And let's not forget the plethora of television shows that have adopted a paracinematic counter-aesthetic, usually mixing it with a heavy dose of self-conscious style (*The Sopranos*, *Queer As Folk*, *Six Feet Under*, *Nip/Tuck*, just to name a few), or the so-called reality programs that dabble in it as well (*Extreme Makeover*, *American Idol*, *Fear Factor*, etc.).

In addition, we could add webcams, sex tapes and other visual displays to the mix. Although Sconce linked the adoption of paracinema audience's ironic reading strategy to many avant-garde and mass culture filmmakers, he fails to note the full scope of the unchecked 'mainstreaming' of the paracinema's counter-aesthetic (373). What once was considered cultural detritus has undergone a reinvention, and paracinema has been repackaged with a new marketing campaign. The old paracinema is now resold to consumers as edgy, sophisticated, and hip, without acknowledgement of the transgressive counter-aesthetic of paracinema. However, the purpose of this column is not to explore the visceral aesthetics of today's cultural detritus. Instead this column will focus upon the ancestry of our contemporary culture and try to create a better understanding of how the hell we ended up here in the first place. In other words, my mission is to examine the past, the historical context of the paracinema, its counter-aesthetic, and indirectly how this subcultural sensibility achieved mainstream

consideration.

For those of us who have served as the old guard of paracinema, this mainstreaming currently underway has been a bonanza. So many previously unavailable titles and even never-before-released films are now within easy grasp. Moreover, this growing access has provided the opportunity to examine the aesthetic principles of this ‘movement.’ As Sconce has stated, the paracinema is far from a distinct body of films: it includes ‘badfilm,’ splatterpunk, ‘mondo’ movies, sword and sandal epics, Elvis flicks, government hygiene films, Japanese monster movies, beachparty musicals, and just about every other historical manifestation of exploitation cinema from juvenile delinquency documentaries to soft-core pornography (372).

For Sconce, this meandering body of film locates its counter-aesthetic through the viewing practices of its fandom, what he calls a type of reading protocol. To a certain extent, Sconce is right: paracinema has been maintained by the ironic reading strategies of its audience, who revel in the transgressive assault of “bad” films. However, this approach to paracinema is limited, for it can only account for the reception of its audiences. These films were not produced for the “sophisticated” viewing practices demanded by *Mystery Science Theatre 3000*; they were made to shock, thrill, and titillate. Therefore, we must look at this body of films and question what it was that brought audiences into the drive-ins and grind houses, to stay up late for a midnight movie, and (much later on) to go to video stores looking for paracinema.

This isn’t hardcore, and it certainly isn’t arousing. It’s just plain weird!

If we glance at the brief survey of paracinematic films drawn by Sconce, we will find that there is in fact one theme, trope, or characteristic that defines the counter-aesthetic. The vast array of films that qualify as the paracinema can present such diverse images as the confused orientation of the singing cowboy; a guy running around Griffith Park in a rubber ape suit with a fish bowl on his head; the incomprehensible drawing of a bloated drug addict called “King of Rock’n’ Roll;” the morbid frigidity of Annette Funicello; the syphilis ridden body of a U.S. Navy sailor; leather-clad lesbians smashing school rooms; topless flower children chasing a drunken Ed Wood around a Hollywood mansion; and thousands of strange, lurid, disturbing, and (at times) simply ‘bad’ subject matter. However, all of these paracinematic examples, and thousands

of others, are all unified by one commonality: the human body as spectacle. Certainly, Sconce is correct in stating that paracinema has been maintained by the ironic reading strategies of its fandom, but at the initial point of production, paracinema can be defined by and orientated around the spectacle of the human body. This can take the form of a heroic, sexual, grotesque, violent, monstrous, deviant, or distressed body, but it is always the body as center stage which has united paracinema.

Therefore, if we begin to examine paracinema through its presentation of the body as spectacle, we can see an uncommon image formed, one that is not differentiated by the usual conventions of nationalism or artistry, but one separated by its reliance upon the visceral, lurid and transgressive. Moreover, it is the fixation upon the body that has caused paracinema to maintain its underground position and limited accessibility. Distribution and exhibition of these films has been relegated to grind houses, drive-ins, nocturnal TV broadcasts, and the 8mm and 16mm (and later videocassette) home market. We might therefore look at paracinema as a separate, even an autonomous film industry, one that has thrived and prospered for decades in the shadows of Hollywood, Art films, and academic discourse. The paracinematic industry is nocturnal, transient, and solitary. It is a cinema unto itself, populated by its own cast of actors, artists, and con-artists. It is its own unique form of low-budget, late-night capitalism.

Amongst the detritus of historical paracinema, there resides many undiscovered treasures and truly bizarre films, not to mention a whole lot of shit. One of the shining lights is the recent DVD release of *Satan In High Heels* (1962) by Something Weird Video. This is truly a late-night film, exhibited only in urban grindhouses and Southern drive-ins whose sole purpose is the presentation of the spectacular body. Meg Myles stars as the sultry, slutty, husky-voiced super-bitch Stacy Kane. This girl is hot stuff and she certainly lives up to the film’s title. Stacy starts the film as a carnival burlesque dancer, stripping for nickels and dimes in front of slack-jawed yokels. But Stacy has greater ambitions: she beats up her junkie husband, steals his roll of cash and heads for New York. Once in the big apple, she lands a job singing in a nightclub, where she has an affair with the club owner (and his son!). Stacy tries to manipulate everyone around her until her web of lies and deceit inevitably collapses: the end of her two tumultuous relationships aptly coincide with the return of her junkie husband and his switchblade.

There is no doubt that Meg Myles is the spectacular body in the film. She struts, she sways, she teases relentlessly: all the men in the club desire her. She even has a suggestive (albeit discrete) skinnydipping scene. And when she performs the song "Deadlier than the Male" clad in a leather outfit and brandishing a whip—WOW! She has total control of the film, demonstrating well that she really is "Satan in high heels." In addition to the sultry song stylings of Meg Myles, the film features several other nightclub performances that are fascinating glimpses into the lost world of New York's nightlife during the early 60s. However, the film could be criticized for being overly melodramatic, the performances coming off like daytime soap operas (it's not surprising that Miles and co-star Grayson Hall spent the remainder of their careers working in daytime suds-ers).

The DVD of *Satan In High Heels* and its accompanying special features have been digitally remastered, and while they are of the best possible quality, this does not mean that the films are free of imperfections. Remember that these films were not intended to survive over the years, and very few producers saved master copies, so there are times when the image is scratchy or grainy. But these imperfections only add to the trashy sensation of these films, preserving a bit of that grind house authenticity.

The special features on this DVD keep with the theme of the spectacular body. Something Weird Video provides their usual plethora of trailers and slide show of 60s sexploitation/exploitation art. In addition, there are two short subjects. The first is a 40s-era arcade loop. Perhaps a brief history is necessary. Arcade loops were short films that were viewed through old Mutoscopes at Penny Arcades, amusement parks like Coney Island, and traveling carnivals.

Sometimes, these short films would be strung together and shown in Burlesque theatres or distributed in 8mm to watch at home or at the Legion hall. Often these films were single Burlesque routines or naughty nudie pictures. The one provided by SWV is *Satan And The Virgin*, a cross between a novelty act and a strip tease. A dancer, wearing a puppet of a devil on her hand, swings around while the puppet removes her costume. "Oh! The devil made me do it!" It may seem a bit silly or naïve from our perspective, but back then, this was hot stuff!!! The other short subject is titled LATEX SHE-DEVILS. A man dressed in S&M gear enters a room to attack two women as they make out, but these crafty lesbians quickly turn the tables on the intruder and make of him the victim, subjecting him to a seemingly

endless spanking. Although sleazy, its pretty tame stuff (even quite boring, I'd say), but don't fret— this isn't hardcore, and it certainly isn't arousing. It's just plain weird!

The true gem on the DVD is the extra-added attraction, the 1962 nudie film *The Wild And The Naked*, undoubtedly one of the strangest films ever made. Shot in Texas (although the film claims it was made in Latin America), we see a day in the life of a French Model named Paulette. While taking a break from her nude photo shoot, Paulette falls asleep by the pool, and enters into a perilous, surreal, nightmare. *The Wild And The Naked* is a remarkable film for a number of reasons. First, like many ultra-cheap films, it was shot silent and then given voice-over narration, music and sound effects later.

The post-sync sound gives the film a disembodied quality; Paulette's voice maintains at a strange distance from the events of the film. But unlike most films produced in this silent/voice-over fashion, this one maintains its silent feel. I would even put forward the opinion that the filmmaker, Stan Roberts, was inspired by the desert sequences in Von Stroheim's *Greed* (1924). The use of long takes, natural shadows, and the constant grappling with the harsh landscape is quite remarkable. But of course, the main object of the film is not its artistry but simply the depiction of nude young women.

It is interesting to stop and consider the nudity on display here. Paulette is a fairly attractive woman, but she does not come close to the over-industrialized standards of sexuality that we are accustomed to today. She has big shoulders, small breasts, and thick thighs. In fact, she is the absolute contrast to the wantonly sexual young female that is gaudily flaunted in contemporary popular culture. Moreover, there is no evidence of plastic surgery, body sculpting, or personal trainers. Paulette is 100% natural. This is one of the great revelations about nudie films from the past: women were considered beautiful and sexy in their natural state. They did not need plastic surgery or any alterations to be a sex object; all they had to do is show a little skin and the male audience's blood would boil. This does not change the fact that she is being objectified (a fact amplified by the disembodied voice-over), but it is a stark contrast to the sexual imagery of today. She certainly retains her spectacle as a sexual object, but in today's light, she is a spectacular body not because of her nudity but because of her unaltered and natural body.

As stated, this is a strange film, not just because Paulette

runs around au naturel, but because the film plays with the idea of voyeurism (i.e., the prying eyes of the mainly all-male audience). Although it is possible that this self-critique and awareness is unintentional, the film goes to great length to create an endless array of staring eyes. Throughout the film, Paulette is leered at. She arrives at a photographer's studio where the camera's stare is relentless. Even as she is dressing, the unattended camera continues to stare at her. As she relaxes by the pool, a delivery man gawks at her. The film suggests that these voyeuristic acts have driven poor Paulette into a psychotic dreamstate, a relentless nightmare of objectification. Once asleep, she finds herself in front of a nightclub and, throughout her voice-over narration, she proclaims that she finds herself in a state of confusion. She has a cocktail in the nightclub and then dances with a man who makes unwanted advances upon her. She flees the club only to find herself hitchhiking at the side of a highway, again stating "I don't know how I got here." A car stops to pick her up; she enters only to find it is the creep from the club. He drives the car to a secluded place and attempts to rape her. She runs off into the trees, where the branches tear at her clothes until she is completely nude.

She eventually finds herself on the sandy banks of a river. There, she is observed by a wild hermit who watches as the would-be-rapist pursues her. Paulette eludes the creepy guy, only to be attacked by the crazed hermit. This leads to the film's first fetish sequence: Paulette and the hermit fall into a mud hole and wrestle until Paulette is covered head-to-toe with mud. She is able to escape only because the rapist has caught up with her, and he begins to fight with the hermit.

Fetish sequence number two: skinny-dipping. Feeling safe as her two pursuers fight, Paulette bathes in the river. We watch as she relaxes and washes off the mud. However, the hermit, who has escaped the rapist, is now watching her skinny-dip. As she suns herself on the beach, the hermit sneaks up and (with a conveniently placed piece of rope) ties her up.

Fetish sequence number three: a bondage sequence. The hermit binds Paulette's hands, and then stakes her to the ground, but he doesn't rape her. Instead, he dances foolishly and throws sand at her. Fortunately, someone else is watching Paulette. The hero, who has been observing the hermit's dance from his motorboat, and like all good heroes, promptly shoots the hermit in the head and rescues Paulette.

Together they flee in his boat, going ashore to drink

whisky and make love. But this too is being watched, this time by an ape-man high in the trees. Noticing the ape, Paulette runs off into the bush. Our hapless hero follows but— get this! — he's being watched, too, by a group of nude women with tree branches tied around their waists. These earthy nature girls waylay the hero by dancing around him in a circle. He is unable to flee the nature girls who are in turn also being watched by another bush-nudist. The film eventually returns to Paulette still lost in the woods, where the hero finds her and the two depart to safety in the motorboat. Paulette awakens by the side of the pool.

I don't like providing such a detailed synopsis of a film, but in this case I feel it is necessary to completely understand all the levels of voyeurism that are going on here. Paulette is under observation throughout the film, more often than not from bestial sources: the rapist, the hermit, the ape-man, and the nature girls. Now consider that, originally, this film would have been shown in some sticky-floored grind house, or in a smoke-filled men's club basement at some bachelor party. This denunciation of bestial voyeurism becomes slightly subversive, albeit only slightly because the film still provides ample female skin and fetish sequences. Despite its overt objectification of the female body, there is this strange, conflicting social commentary in the film, which makes *The Wild And The Naked* a truly bizarre cinematic experience.

Satan In High Heels and *The Wild And The Naked* are far from cinematic masterpieces, but the low budgets work to their advantage. Certainly the acting is not very good and some of the performances are genuinely amateur, but these deficits actually create a certain air of honesty, as though the actors were playing themselves (and of course, some of them are). The budgetary limitations also pushed the filmmakers to shoot on location; again this has a positive effect, as it gives the proceedings a sense of naturalness and actuality. These elements, combined with the constant lurid and tawdry atmosphere of the overly objectified female body, reveal these films for what they actually are— good (sleazy) fun.

Dr. Eric Vornoff

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Sconce, Jeffrey. "Trashing the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style." *Screen* 36.4 (Winter 1995): 371-93.