

SYNOPTIQUE

An Online Journal of Film and Moving Image Studies



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An Online Journal of Film and Moving Image Studies

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Introduction

Synoptique Editorial Collective

Synoptique 6

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

Nouvelles vue sur le cinéma québécois

edited by Bruno Cornellier presents its summer-autumn 2004 edition on Sexe, sexualité et nationalité

OFFSCREEN

is the English companion publication to the wildly successful French journal Hors Champs. It is heroically maintained by part-time Concordia Faculty member Donato Totaro. The latest edition is about film preservation.

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About Synoptique:

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

We wanted to create an online resource of student work at Concordia. For students at Concordia. To give expression to the intellectual character of M.A. Film Studies at this University by publishing what was rapidly becoming a lost history of ideas. Students work here for two years, take classes, write theses, go on their way, leave faint traces, might never take a stand or apportion

an opinion. We wanted to discover what tradition we had inherited, what debates we were continuing, which debates we weren't inventing. But what began as a way to provide a continuity of ideas between years for Concordia M.A. Film Studies students, has been expanded to recognize the play of influence and the fluidity of thought as it accounts for a discourse that links our classrooms to Montreal, and Montreal to the world. So that we might recognize again these ideas if we should pass them by. So that we might see what we missed or took for granted when we thought they were ours.

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

We want to establish a context. We want to make sensible a context within which these ideas won't be lost, where they can be found, breached, and their physiognomies compared. So this task becomes once removed from archaeology. This is commentary on chains of insights, some familiar, some decaying, some life altering, some devastating. On a lifetime of education. Not a series of explicit investigations—not just that—but a resource where ideas influence ideas through clandestine channels. Ideas influence life and lives influence idea. It shows the chemical palettes where colours in proximity do not just mix to create new shades but are reactive, explosive, transformative: are not in service of any single picture, but are the spectacular elements of a long-standing community long-standing in flux. The professors, the experts, the

professionals, the thinkers that have made decisions to teach certain things and in certain ways, the students that chose to follow leads, reject others, see some films and not others, read some books but not others, find their way, realize all of the myriad ways that their taste and sensibility has developed... this is education. This long process of education. We've been thinking about the polyphony of educations in these communities. The desire to get better. How art and life make sense.

En Français:

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

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

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

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

manières dont leurs goûts et leur sensibilité se nourrissent... c'est en partie cela l'éducation. Le long processus de l'éducation. Nous avons réfléchi sur la polyphonie des différentes éducations dans ces communautés. Le désir d'être mieux. Comment l'art et la vie font sens.

On Film Style

Brian Crane

This essay is one of three published in this edition on the concept of style. It was inspired by the Synoptique Style Gallery (founded in November of 2004), which was the beginning of an ongoing project investigating ways to discuss the concept of film style. These essays will provide some of the groundwork for a Forum on Film Style to be published in in Synoptique 7 (February of 2005).

If a man approaches a work of art with any desire to exercise authority over it and the artist, he approaches it in such a spirit that he cannot receive any artistic impression from it at all.
—“The Soul of Man Under Socialism”

Working on the style gallery came with a proviso: along with a few others, I would write an initial response. Easy I thought. I had a clear idea of what I wanted going in, now I just had to jot it down.

So what was my idea? Simple: despite the theory, the politics and everything else that encrusts work situated in a competitive, disciplinary discourse, I believe film study is still, thankfully, a practice of object-love. In other words, the root of most scholarship can still be traced back to the individual scholar’s love for the films they discuss. For me, the gallery would thus have two purposes:

1. to gather proof that I wasn’t wrong in my faith about our work’s basis in object-love;
2. to put participants in the position of declaring the connection between their scholarship and their object-

love.

In film of course (and I imagine in other arts as well), style is all you get. But in preparing for the gallery, I discovered that “style” was a dangerous word. “Style” has been a rallying cry for a long series of on-going debates about the institutional make-up of film studies as an emerging (and, some would have us believe, disappearing) discipline. Through this we have learned that to define style (perhaps even to talk about it) is simultaneously to regulate what (in) film should be studied in the context of the university. The gallery I hoped could provide a way around this fear by creating a space where we could trace a wide variety of film research back to a recognizable and common love of (or, in the life-less jargon of our day, “commitment to”) particular films.

This of course was foolish. The gallery, which I hoped would get us past the disciplinary squabbles that allowed some of us to believe we dealt with style—real style—while others with equal satisfaction could sleep peacefully knowing that they did not, began to betray recognizable fault lines. The division between gallery participants and non-participants in my circle of acquaintances, for example, began to mirror rather uncomfortably the division, familiar from scholarly publications and academic conferences, between “formalists” and “culture studiers”.

The gallery is still of course a success. That much is clear. But I’m waiting for the culture studiers to step in and drop the style bomb the formalist gallery desperately needs (a culture bomb won’t work). Film

is a made thing; it is nothing but style. But film is also an artistic, cultural object. What then is the relationship between style and culture? What is the relationship between people's object-love and their interest in culture? Where are the style examples that point toward answers to these questions? With clipboard in hand, pencil whetted, and white lab coat draped squarely across my shoulders, I'm waiting for these clips and commentaries to appear on-line.

In the meantime, it seems worthwhile to state informally three thoughts about object-love that relate to the questions of style posed by the gallery.

1.

I believe that good film scholarship is hard to read. Not because of obscure theory, not because of opaque writing, not because of insistently declared political platitudes, not because of the apparent marginality or temporariness of its concerns. No, good film scholarship is hard to read because you continually want to put it down and watch the film it's discussing. Good criticism excites you by presenting genuine insight that allows you to see the film better. It's impossible when reading it to avoid asking yourself, "Is that true? How could I not see that?" The only legitimate response to good criticism is to go back and see the film again for yourself to verify what you are being told. Object-love, with its necessary focus on the matter of the film, on its style, always seeks out and aims to produce this kind of scholarship.

2.

Object-love reminds us that our basic unit of study is the film: not the body of work, not the national, cultural context, not the industrial history, not the political program of the artist or the critic. These areas of study (and more besides) may be essential to the study of film; but their value as knowledge depends upon the value of the individual films they make sense of.

3.

Object-love reminds us that criticism should always concern itself with beauty. This is a word more troubling even than style. We distrust beauty, and depending on how badly we have been abused by the beautiful, we may even hate it. Beauty is not fair and has nothing to do with merit or just desserts. There is nothing egalitarian or democratic or progressive about it. We learned this years ago on the playground

and at homecoming. Beauty is a mysterious power that overwhelms us, sometimes, in the world of art, by hiding itself in abject ugliness. Beauty reminds us that the object is bigger than we are and that this is why our love is worthwhile. We may dislike it or distrust it, but beauty is not going away. More importantly, in the world of made things, beauty is all that finally matters. As art scholars, our choice is not therefore between treating beauty or not; it is between treating beauty well or treating it badly. Object-love is fundamentally an aesthetic endeavour.

I must seem at this point to have wandered far from the subject at hand since I offer no theory or system of style. I offer only the belief that style must be understood film-by-film through careful attention to the details of their representations. I've called these details beautiful, insisted on the value of that beauty, and implied in a most impressionistic, non-scientific way that our attention to the details of this beauty may be motivated by a love similar to the one that makes my beloved's eyelashes worth counting. Sue me. I'm no advocate of a sterile formalism.

But I'm not advocating for impressionism, cinephilia, or a new generalism either. I'm advocating for scholarship that seeks concrete detailed knowledge about the workings of the very objects that moved us to become scholars in the first place. And for us to be prepared to teach that knowledge to others in a variety of formats. This knowledge is available through no system of style, no theory of film, no idea of culture. It is available only through the difficult work of the critic drawn to these objects with passion, humility and, yes, love.

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

Notes on Style and Design

Adam Rosadiuk

In this detailed analysis, the author suggests that most of the qualities we wish to attribute to ‘style’ are best considered as elements of ‘design’. The essay goes on to explore the relationship between ‘design’ and the ‘natural’. ‘Style’ is something much more ‘human’ and, according to the author, more philosophic. This essay is one of three published in this edition on the concept of style. It was inspired by the Synoptique Style Gallery (founded in November of 2004), which was the beginning of an ongoing project investigating ways to discuss the concept of film style. These essays will provide some of the groundwork for a Forum on Film Style to be published in in Synoptique 7 (February of 2005).

Consider your idea of a ‘house’, a house without specific form, a ‘thing’ that houses. Imagine what you imagine to be the bare minimum required for a house to be a house: the image doesn’t have to be vivid, but you need to know what I’m talking about. There are certain elements a house must have before it can be called a house: four walls and a roof, perhaps. You may wish to debate this point, but we can relegate that to semantics. Regardless, our ‘image’ more or less approaches the constituents that are necessary for a thing to function as a house—and this is the key for what I will say later: our image of ‘house’ responds directly to its functional role. And while the description is unclear, our sense of its basic function is not. The translation of this idea of house into physical reality can never be ideal, and in fact, there is little reason it should be: there are innumerable ways to embellish this house as we build it.

Those embellishments may be more than functional—they may be gorgeous. But this is still not ‘style’. And there can be different ‘types’ of house: but a cave is not a style, a shack is not a style, a log cabin is not a style, a palace is not a style. A house can have many real world variations—and these variations can be more or less conventional, to the point that they seem *natural*—but, there is a certain threshold of design a house must cross, a certain distance from its functional role, before the house communicates (along with its ‘house-ness’) an actual style. The house must be ‘designed’—its design must exhibit some sort of coherence, even if its coherence is a dissonance. What is clear is that as we approach conceptualizing a style of ‘house’ it becomes necessary to include an active human creativity. Human intelligence, and human will, is what defines style: which is why we can never accuse a tree with ornately curved forms in its bark, for example, of being in the “rococo” style. It’s just a tree; it’s just a variation on a tree. Understanding this ‘threshold of design’, this singularity and coherence, is easier to ‘sense’ than it is to actually prove. And while some styles are very much related to individuals—Frank Gehry’s work, for example—others are much more subtle expressions of cultural fads: Gothicism, for example. But both can be analyzed. More importantly, we can study these styles to the point where we not only understand them, but we can use them as categories to help us understand styles and phenomena we have yet to encounter. This is ‘style’ as ‘concept’. And concepts can always be put to use.

There are significant differences between ‘style’, ‘taste’, and ‘design’. Consider your idea of a computer: a thing

that ‘computes’: a machine that rapidly carries out the same mathematical task repetitively. Computers, to be useful, require a human interface. The ‘mouse’ is a design solution, an engineering solution, to one part of the problem of a human interface. But another design would do: a light-pen, for instance. You could buy a light-pen, and learn how to use it, but most people do not. It’s a question of convention and of ‘taste’ (which always has something to do with practicality, no matter how random or idiosyncratic we think it is). ‘Design’ encompasses everything from a bird building a nest, to the elaborate criteria we invoke when faced with any decision. ‘Style’ is something else, though intimately related. The computer company Apple has worked very hard to create an ‘Apple style’—everything from its logo, its fonts, to the pinstripes on its menu bars, to the look of its commercials. Apple exercises a great deal of control over its style—releasing new product lines regularly that carefully shift the overall look of their products in new directions. All of Apple’s efforts work in tandem to create a public ‘sense’ of the ‘Apple style’—and, indeed, in this formulation, style is very public. There are many other companies that chart the ‘Apple style’, and make products that will complement the ‘Apple style’ and appeal to consumers who want a unified ‘look’ for their computing equipment. In this case, it is clear how established style influences design. Some of these products exemplify the ‘Apple style’ better than others, and no doubt a detailed analysis would be able, at any moment in the development of the ‘Apple style’, to identify the necessary design elements a product must have before it can partake in the ‘Apple style’. This, I’d suggest, is what ‘style’ means the most often. Style, in this formulation, is separable from what exhibits it. The thing would still be a thing—in this case, a computer—without any style at all. This is a crude way to separate form and content, but in sum this what we’re doing. In this formulation, style is something added on. When we say something is ‘stylized’ we mean it has some sort of style applied to it, either to a part, or to the whole.

ON DESIGN

The above discussion is useful in thinking about style, I’d maintain, because it provides a sort of narrative of how style came to be. First, there was nothing, then an idea, then the real world and contingent design and manufacturing of that thing, and then there was the added significance of style. In thinking through these examples, I realize that I put primary importance in the construction of a thing on the process of ‘design’. Design is problem solving. Ideal design responds

perfectly to the practicalities of the thing existing in the world. Design, in its purest form, reacts to the world. Hypothetically, the design of something manufactured is already latent in what it responds to. Again, continuing to think hypothetically, the shape of a made thing can be calculated knowing the exigencies of nature, and human intervention is not needed. The sort of design we see, for example, in a bird’s nest: the selection of materials, and the order, all responding to chance and imperative.

This is starting to sound close to an evolutionary model. Once we are in the realm of human production, though, the exigencies to which the thing must ‘conform’ is expanded to include human history. Very often one of the most significant influences on design is a pre-existing style. An architect designing a building for the downtown core is forced to design their building so that it will work with its surroundings. Multiple criteria are taken into consideration, but the style of the surrounding designs is one of the most crucial. When, in this case, we study style, the style is the ‘concept’ that motivates the design, it is that which we embellish. The architect has a sense of prevailing style, and consciously will want to ‘push’ that style. It is, however, unnecessary for the architect to do a scientific study of the buildings in the area to get a concept of the prevailing style. The judgment passed on instances of design—those accepted as appropriate, and those rejected as inappropriate—is based on, though not limited to, something we might call intuition. And this is surely a phenomenon not well understood in modern discourse. Style is the name we give to the categories we’ve learned to recognize, that we feel close to. In this formulation, style is close to etiquette, and propriety. To unwritten rules.

I am suggesting that it’s through ‘styles’ that we think about the world. When attempting to understand the world, we are always faced with limited information—the intuitive process of inference, as it relates to reason, makes up for this deficit. Understanding concepts is the act of inferring based upon limited information, and the more information that is available the clearer the concept becomes. The same is true, to an extent, for styles. Concepts share with style the qualities of unity, coherency, and above all, *sustainability*—styles, though, are far more complex, and are linked far more closely to repeated sets of discriminate actions. To personal history. Our sense of personal style is not far removed from our sense of personal political style. Or our moral style. There is some sort of logical consistency to our actions, but no one would claim to know completely the

logic of all their actions. It is the coherency of a style that makes those actions make sense. Our ‘style’ and the ‘concepts we understand’ are closely related.

Like everyone else, artists get most of their personal style from their culture. But this inheritance is only the beginning. The artist, because of taste and skill sets, is intent on refining their personal style, exploring this faculty of intuitive understanding. While most of us use personal styles of thought to formulate opinions, artists formulate expressions of personal style. When this personal style enters into forms of artistic communication, it becomes a sign of personal vision; it becomes the content of the work. That is to say, an artist has a particular sensibility, based on culture, experience, intelligence, and taste, that they are exploring and refining through interaction with art: other works, and their own. The closer the artist gets to representing their ideas perfectly (and in this case, ‘perfection’ is determined by the artist’s sensibility), the more perfectly they express (and *develop*) their personal style. And the better they express this, the more they present to us a vivid, unique, and captivating personal vision. These ideas may be as vague to the artist as their own conception of their own personal style: indeed, truly successful style, and great art, is dependent on the chance intersection of ‘taste’ and ‘design’.

ON ART

It is no simple task to imagine ‘art’ in the abstract—as an idea in terms of its function—the way we can with most things made by human beings. If we consider art to be communication, and can consider a pure unadorned concept as we may imagine/sense it, then we can imagine ways that the concept could be represented, and that representation may approach the coherence of a style. But art is very rarely trying to communicate a straightforward concept—indeed, when we sense that it is, we accuse it of being bad art. The artwork is trying too hard to ‘function’—which is why artists prefer the term ‘working’, as in “the piece is really working.” Something can ‘work’ without it being actually ‘useful’. Very often, these issues amount to a question of an art’s content: “What is it supposed to do?” becomes “what is it supposed to mean?”

There is a simple way to say something, and a complex way. There is the simplest way. And there is also the most conventional way. Constructing a conventional way to say something is a process of design. Anything that complicates the process of communication is either bad design, or it is style. In this formulation,

style distracts from communication—it complicates, obfuscates. But this is not how communication works, and most definitely not how art works. The style of a communication can amplify the message in surprising ways; sometimes the style of a message can communicate something separable from the message that it stylizes. Style is something added on, but in this case style can radically change the function of the thing—so much so that it may be impossible to know the *nature* of the thing: what it was before it was stylized.

Because the ‘function’ of a work of art is hard to gauge, because it seems made to *exist* rather than *to be used*, art feels very close to nature, even despite its heightened artificiality. This is art’s persuasive power. This is why art is philosophically important.

ON NATURE ^[1]

Style is useful, and as something useful it is unnatural. And it is ‘function’ that distinguishes manufactured things from natural things: nature has no function. Nature has no purpose. Nature is neither harmonious, nor chaotic—both of those terms are terms that express degrees of functionality. Not to say that nature doesn’t ‘work’, nor that we can’t understand how nature works—but that sort of scientific intervention is inherently de-naturing. Nature, not to put to fine a point on it, doesn’t ‘work’, it just *is*. Nature does not produce objects for the purpose of utility, the way we imagine utility, nor is nature’s purpose to find balance. Nature is self-sustainable only through flux. Nature is infinitely surprising. In more concrete terms, nature provides objects and things that humans can use, but that is not why those things were designed. A tree can fall against a bank and provide shelter: can ‘house’. But its quality of ‘houseness’ is entirely accidental. We can use a stick to beat something—but the stick is not a bat until we re-design it. ‘Beating things’ is no more in the nature of a stick than a computer is made natural if it is used by a monkey. Human beings are part of nature insofar as we have no purpose; we are separate from nature insofar as we believe that we do. And as much as human beings depend on nature, nature does not serve us. Style is unnatural insofar as style is purposeful, insofar as it is an expression of will. Discovering a ‘true’ conception of nature—this thing outside paradigms of usefulness—is the traditional subject of philosophy.

Let’s assume that the purpose of art is to “hold the mirror up to nature” and that an artwork—at its absolute most basic—is thus a thing that represents nature but is not part of nature itself. An artwork reproduces nature,

most often for the purposes of decoration. However, as any decorator knows, the goal of art is not exact duplication of objects, it is not pure mimesis. That fact has been made unavoidably clear since the invention of technologies like the photograph, which can produce images of Nature with accuracy far in excess of what artists are capable. But long before these inventions, artists (as those distinguishable from craft's people) were those who represented Nature in non-naturalistic ways—who embellished, who reinterpreted—and who, paradoxically, got closer to ‘capturing’ Nature than slavish mimesis ever could. Of course, not all of the differences between the subject and the work can be attributed to artistic intervention: much of a work's shape is determined by the practicalities of design: the medium, the day, the artist's taste, experience, and the history of design this work will take part in. As in the examples at the beginning of this essay, once these design choices are organized so as to demonstrate a coherency of design, the work of mimetic representation can suddenly achieve a consistent style. Style determines artistry. It was the photograph—the image in the mirror captured—and its claims on art that made this equation both evident and necessary. Style, in this formulation, is thus an evaluative characteristic: style makes art.

I feel this long line of reasoning more or less ‘works’. This term ‘work’, as I've used it before, is essential in understanding art. It's an inherently vague term, but I would suggest that it has something to do with our conception of the way nature ‘works’. When something is ‘working’ it exhibits balance, grace, rhythm, form, symmetry—qualities of aesthetics. And while the properties of aesthetics are properties we've derived from nature (I would hesitate to say from a *concept*, or style, of nature), and are demonstrated by nature, they are not ‘natural’ themselves. That is to say, that though a perfect circle can exist in nature, its ‘perfectness’ is not an inherent quality of the natural thing. It is only ascribed. Which is why we tend to call things that are ‘too perfect’ unnatural. These qualities are communicated to us through a long history of style and design, and all design in some form or another answers to that tradition.

ON A THEORY OF STYLE

Walter Benjamin's conception and approach to style, while unorthodox and difficult to tease out precisely, offers a very compelling technical description of what style does and where it is most sensible. I've found helpful a seemingly minor line from the “Exposé of 1939” about an architectural style called Jugendstil,

which “strives to disengage [tectonic forms] from their functional relations, to present them as natural constants; it strives, in short, to stylize them” (20). Benjamin here seems to be providing a definition of what happens when things are “stylized”. “Tectonic forms” is a vague term in architecture, referring to the basic elements of architecture: post/beam/arch, etcetera. Tectonic architecture is characterized by a privileging of use value, though not to the point of fetishization. I tend to consider “Tectonic forms” as something related to the pure image of a ‘house’ that I was grappling with in the first paragraph. As described by Benjamin, Jugendstil, or “Dream City”, takes this functional architecture and pushes it until its use-value seems natural. Jugendstil, called in *The Arcades Project* “the stylizing style par excellence” (S8,2, p. 556), was characterized by its excessive and powerfully beautiful use of images from nature: art-nouveau vines, leaves, swooping arches. Thus, Jugendstil is a style that uses a natural style. And while nature itself does not exhibit style, a comprehensive human vision of nature, one of many, could be called a ‘natural style’. For Benjamin, Jugendstil applies a ‘natural style’ to tectonic architecture creating the effect of ‘naturalizing’ it, which means—in Benjaminian vocabulary—to remove from that which it expresses the way it is functioning in human construction. Jugendstil stylizes tectonic architecture by making it appear natural, and, according to Benjamin, if anything is to appear natural it must be divorced from its use value (which explains the way human junk can begin to appear natural).

I want to stretch Benjamin's definition a bit. In the above, Benjamin presented us with a concept/style called “tectonic architecture”, which is based on ‘natural’ elements in the world—‘natural’, in this case, refers to the same sort of ‘naturalness’ demonstrated by mathematics. Arches are stronger than post and beams, $2+2=4$. These are qualities that are discovered by us, as *a priori*, in nature, and that are used for human ends—in this case, the building of buildings that are ‘architecturally sound’. Jugendstil, as a style, divorces “tectonic architecture” from its use value, presenting the entire structure as exhibiting, simultaneously, two conditions: what it does, and what it is. Its status as something manufactured, and its status as something natural. Between those two conditions lies the possibility of its real ‘purpose’: what it is really communicating, its ‘truth’. An artwork, like a film, is a more complicated structure, in terms of what it represents, if not in actual intricacy of physical construction. I tend to think we can push the above definition of style ‘into’ the artwork, where a thing's ‘function’ is not immediately

pertinent to how it ‘functions’ *in the real world*, but to how it ‘functions’ within the *world of the artwork*. How it functions as a piece of the whole.

In this case, I can offer a hypothesis of what it is style ‘does’, and I can offer it in italics: *style disengages any one working element from its use-value in the work, and presents that element as a natural constant*. In other words, we look at a moment in a film and determine if it is ‘working’. Some moments in a film work in such a way as to de-emphasize that they are working—but not to the point where they don’t ‘work’, but to the point where they become natural (i.e. they have no ‘function’). This accounts for the uncanny experience of style in a work of art. Paradoxically, the most profound style moments will be precisely those moments that announce themselves the loudest, the moments that most convince us that what we are experiencing is *not* natural. That is to say that style can—and it can also be very very subtle—break the illusion of transparency that an artwork like cinema can create. But style is not merely a giant finger pointing out the ‘artifice’ of art—it is, more appropriately, an emblemization of nature. It is a representation of true nature through artifice. This is a highly significant human experience, and, I would argue, the only experience that can provide—outside of divine revelation (perhaps the most stylized of all experiences)—an actual sense of the natural.

ON STYLE AS IDENTITY

It is highly significant that the more sophisticated an artwork’s design, the more we want to say things like “it takes on a life of its own,” or, “it is what it is, it couldn’t be any other way.” It is commonplace for an artist, at a certain point in the creation of an artwork, to disavow control over what becomes visible, sensible, and fully formed in their work—they can no longer claim responsibility for how the piece is working, nor account for the possibilities of alternative interpretations. While design brings an artwork closer and closer to a state where it seems natural—and thus emphasizes the work of art’s use-value as a re-visioning of nature—there is a point where we no longer associate the work’s power with its closeness to nature but with its closeness to something else: to something human. This is why, not to be absurd, that it is necessary to give styles names. To identify them; to give them figure. The clockwork of design, which functions using the physics of the natural world and thus achieves an almost naturalness of function, gives way to the ambiguity of what we associate with an identity. That is to say, that the constituent elements no longer seem ordered

around exigencies of nature, but instead around a personality, around a consciousness. At this point, when we now try to understand it, we understand it *sympathetically*, not analytically. We respond to it as one human consciousness to another, not in terms of our history of aesthetic experience in the human world and the natural, but in terms of the experience of our own consciousness. When we become sensible of an artwork’s identity—and ‘identity’ is both unnatural and constructed as well as a profound expression of an individual’s ‘nature’—then we have entered the realm of an artwork’s style. This is the ‘threshold of design’—our design as spectators—that needs to be crossed.

But does all this simply relegate the vast majority of aesthetic appreciation to the study of design, leaving style to occupy some vague and indeterminate role as a metaphor for human self-consciousness? I would say yes, insofar as that a study of artwork would benefit from a sober study of a design that includes all manner of variables: artist’s intention, taste, cultural influences, cultural styles, cultural design, historical design, historical styles, collaboration, the practicalities of the medium, the production history, etcetera. The separation of design and style would save the sophisticated scholarship of the former from the burden of universal significance—rather, it becomes engaged with universal verifiability. A study of style—of recognizing the presence in an artwork of an identity—is only possible through a detailed analysis of design. But still the question remains: what are we looking for when we are looking for identity, for markers of a style that might be worth interiorizing? The method, I think, will only reveal itself in practice.

The study of style is philosophical. It is the discovery of nature. A style moment is an expression of the power of the simple and the singular to express, in a flash, the whole. Teasing out those particular and relevant moments based on an inchoate conception of the whole, collecting into kinds and dividing along natural joints, is—at its best—the most basic philosophic act. It is in our apprehension of style that we put to the test the fine handiwork of sensibility, the ways intuition and imagination guide reason when faced with answers that seem unverifiable in one lifetime. The more styles we perceive in the world—through art and conversation—the more we refine our own personal style: the way we dress, the way we decorate, the way we live, the way we tend to think, the way we tend to act—this develops, what we can call, our own personal philosophy. This is where the analysis of style becomes an analysis of our habits of thought.

Film, as the most radically mimetic of human arts, and the most hypnotic, charges the relationship between art and nature. Film Studies needs to reconsider its use of style as a concept both too broad, and yet not ambitious enough to put into relief one of the most astonishing qualities of art: to *create*, not just *represent*, an experience of nature. Style is generative, not representational. The analysis of style is less like taxonomy, and more like biography.

David Cronenberg, Walter Benjamin, Arthur Lipsett, Robert Altman, New German Cinema, and The Western.

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1 There is ‘Nature’ (birds and bees, oaks and stones) and there is ‘nature’ (as in the sentence, “It’s in his nature to be cruel.”) Nature, capital ‘N’, is the name we give to the Natural world—things, I argue, without ‘function’. The word ‘nature’ is most often applied to what things ‘do’: if a wheel always turns we can say that not only does it have the capacity to turn, but it is its ‘nature’ to turn. If it stops turning we can still make that claim, however, convinced that the wheel was meant to turn. Here, a thing’s nature becomes closely linked to its purpose. That leap, however, from saying that “it is man’s nature to be cruel”, to saying that “cruelty is man’s purpose” is not an easy one. Nor can we easily say, “overcoming natural cruelty is man’s purpose”. Nature—capital N and lowercase—are intimately related to truth. In Film Studies, we use concepts of nature when we speak about genre and film form, though we tend to elide the word. “The nature of documentary film is...”, “It’s in the nature of cinema...”, “The Western creates a binary between the natural and the civilized...”, “Film Noir offers a sober look at the ugliness of human nature...”, “As audience members it’s not in our nature to...”

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Style As Sample

Colin Burnett

In this brief reflection, Colin Burnett argues that the most appropriate metaphor for film style is Harvard philosopher Nelson Goodman's image of the sample, which not only evades some of the conceptual shortcomings of available theories of film style, but draws attention to the strengths of these theories as well. Goodman's notion of style in the arts has the virtue of being friendly both to historical poetics and philosophy of art.

This essay is one of three published in this edition on the concept of style. It was inspired by the Synoptique Style Gallery (founded in November of 2004), which was the beginning of an ongoing project investigating ways to discuss the concept of film style. These essays will provide some of the groundwork for a Forum on Film Style to be published in in Synoptique 7 (February of 2005).

If I were bullied into a dodgy alleyway and told at gunpoint that I have three measly words to explain what "film style" means, I'd reply post haste: "Bordwell, Burch, Goodman." Depending on the erudition of the goon, I might just get off scot-free.

While the first two of the triad hold positions of eminence in such matters and hardly need me to defend them, the third is decidedly 'left-field.' I should add before I proceed that I slightly prefer Burch's term "parameters" to Bordwell's filed-down conception of "style" and believe that using "parameters" might have saved the latter from a good deal of grief from his

detractors. It also would have obviated the somewhat awkward and knotty view, expounded in *Film Art*, that a film's *form* is subdivided into two systems: (narrative) *form* and (cinematic) *style* (355). The reason I bring the Harvard professor of philosophy Nelson Goodman (1906-1998) into the fray is that I believe that his work on style might be used to untangle knots of this kind.

Susan Sontag's famous and perennially useful study "On Style" is another source worth considering here. I'm particularly taken by the section that addresses misleading style metaphors. Naturally she does not dismiss metaphors altogether, but sets her sights on refuting those that distort the phenomena. Three in particular—style as a curtain (style reduced to a "decorative encumbrance"), style as transparent (style reduced to a matter of quantity, "more or less," "thick or thin"), and style as surface (style relegated to the outside while content constitutes the inside of the artwork)—fail to account for the place of style in the totality of the artwork. Sontag's answer is simply to reverse the last one, making style the core, a work's "soul" (17). As she provocatively phrases it, relating artistic style to how we 'hold' ourselves in public, "our manner of appearing is our manner of being. The mask is the face" (18).

Whereas Sontag's 'style as soul' metaphor is a useful rhetorical tool, I prefer another (one that manages to wiggle past Sontag's minefield): Goodman's "style as sample." The reason (which, by the by, is the same reason I am fond of the work of Bordwell and Burch) is that style in Goodman's hands remains something resolutely verifiable, which has the side benefit of

making statements about a given work's style governable by the principle of falsifiability. In other words, they can be proven false either by the simple standards of logic or by plain observation.

Goodman's discussion of "exemplification" in "Routes of Reference" (from *Of Mind and Other Matters* [1984]) examines style in the context of its place in the overall significance of an artwork—how a work exemplifies a style. After defining denotation ("where a word or string of words applies to one thing, event, and so on, or to each of many" [55]), Goodman distinguishes "verbal" from "pictorial" denotation, in which a symbol functions in a "dense" and "replete" symbol-system, marking the minute variations in the qualities of the symbol as more significant than they'd otherwise be. A regular straight line functions 'less' pictorially in a line graph than in a painting of a landscape because fewer qualities of the line (thickness, shade, and so on) are significant in the former than in the latter.

Not all forms of reference are denotational ("description," "notation" and "depiction" are denotative); "exemplification" is an instance of "nondenotational" reference. Something that exemplifies, rather than describes or depicts, is a "sample" that *refers to a feature of the sample, and nothing more*. Goodman's exemplifying symbol (or sample) applies to the world of art in a manner significant to style; I cite him at length:

Sometimes abstract paintings and musical works that neither represent nor express anything are extolled as "pure", as not referential. What matters is claimed to be the work itself, its own features, not anything beyond and referred to by it. But plainly not all countless features of the work matter (not for example, the painting's weighing four points or the symphony's being performed during a rainstorm) but only those qualities and relationships of color and sound, those spatial and temporal patterns, and so on that the work exemplifies and thus *selectively refers to ...*" (60; emphasis added)

By exposing as false the idea that non-representational artworks do not refer, Goodman comes to an important point about style. A stylistic characteristic is not just any characteristic that one can list (in film terms, the combined weight of the canisters that hold the reels of a film is of no concern to style); it is a characteristic that the work advertises, selects or "heightens in our consciousness" by organizing it into discernible patterns

(65). Goodman bluntly states, in a later section of the book, "On Being in Style," that "[a] stylistic feature [...] is a feature that is *exemplified* by the work and that contributes to the placing of the work in one among certain significant bodies of work" (131; emphasis also added). Style refers without denoting, and based on this kind of reference, comparisons can be made with other works.

A much simpler example brings Goodman's notion of style as sample into clearer focus, and it pertains to Goodman's oft-used image of a swatch of cloth. The seat of the chair that the reader is currently seated upon is most likely covered by some sort of cloth or fabric. This cloth has certain features—colors, patterns, texture. If a small piece or sample of this fabric were cut from the seat of the chair, then that sample would continue to retain its ability to refer to some things or features, but lose its ability to refer to others. Given that it is merely a sample, it would be insufficient to denote the chair from whence it came; that is not its function. Thus, a sample of cloth, like a visual strategy of a film, exhibits certain features of itself and little more. One could speculate about the place of the sample in a given totality, of its 'meaning' vis-à-vis the whole, but this species of speculation has little to do with style. To offer a twist on Sontag's thought, style is neither the mask nor the face, but a chip off the mask itself that epitomizes either some feature or other of the mask or of the face behind it.

Carrying this notion of sample into the realm of film, certain kinds of film exemplify the technical choices that go into their making. All films, it would seem, at some moment or another, exemplify these choices, even as these moments may be extremely fleeting. Goodman's description of exemplifying reference, of a work's ability to refer to order rather than to denote a given meaning, calls to mind Bordwell's description of parametric narration in Chapter Twelve of *Narration in the Fiction Film*, a chapter that devotes considerable attention to the intersection, in a species of film narration, between a film's plot-elucidating and stylistic systems. Assuming a somewhat combative tone, but nevertheless making a persuasive point, he illustrates the tendency to overlook this intersection:

Possessed of a *horror vacui*, the interpretive critic clings to theme in order to avoid falling into the abyss of "arbitrary" style and structure. The critic assumes that everything in the film should contribute to meaning. If style is not decoration, it must be motivated compositionally or realistically

or, best of all, as narrational commentary. It is important to recall that in any film, [plot] structure—the selection and organization of story events—does not unequivocally determine a single stylistic presentation. [...] There is always a degree of arbitrariness [...] (282-3)

Bordwell's aim in this section of his book is to demonstrate how a parametric narrational order is identifiable by its references to technical features and their rhythms; narratives of this kind do not merely *possess* these features, but *exemplify* them.

Taken together, the models of Bordwell and Goodman suggest that style, epitomizing film as a technical process beyond being just a dramatic or narrative one, need not denote, need not be motivated by or dependent on the plot, in order to be significant, or to refer. When representational meaning, or in Goodman's idiom, denotative reference, is played down in a work of art, the remaining 'exemplifying' or decorative, characteristics ("style") take center stage.

I believe that Goodman's broad notion of style sets us on our way to teasing out more sophisticated notions of and categories that address the various ways in which plot organization interacts with intelligible patterns of style. Goodman's "style as sample" metaphor runs to the core of relationships crucial both to the perceivable patterns of a singular artwork and to the historical links between the patterns of many.

If Goodman is correct these patterns of exemplified features do not limit themselves merely to film-specific techniques. The properties that a given film stands as a sample of exceed the range of considerations that fall into the category of film parameters. As a result, Goodman's conception forces us to reconsider the commonly held assumption that style is equivalent to 'form.' Goodman here aligns himself with art historians. The kind of property sampled in a work, which is to say, those characteristics that a work exemplifies, may be either 'formal' or those that belong to the work's 'content;' they may participate either in its 'manner' or 'matter.' A given sample of cloth is a sample of certain colors or textures. A given film may be a sample of certain photographic or staging or editing techniques, but it may also exemplify certain kinds of character, of speech or performance, of land- or cityscape, of genres, of fashion from a given era, and so on and so forth.

While this certainly does not mean that everything is 'style,' it does mean that anything depicted on screen

could potentially be a stylistic feature depending on the context and circumstances in which the film displays it and in which the feature is taken up for discussion. A film that is significant for a given attribute *serves* that attribute, singles it out. *Touch of Evil*, in its first shot, exhibits the aesthetic of the long take; Bresson's *Pickpocket*, by virtue of the neutered inflection that the actors are coached to adopt, displays a unique acting style; the latest Bond film, *Die Another Day*, singles out the distinctiveness of its credit sequence—the first among Bond films to include narrative information; Hitchcock's *Rear Window* exemplifies the opulence Grace Kelly's wardrobe, while scarcely calling attention to the nondescript attire worn by Raymond Burr, for instance. What's clear from these examples is that while they represent features that are highlighted (in very different ways) by the films themselves, as samples of the peculiarities in question they are significant not for the way they express what the film is about, but for the ways they call attention to aspects of themselves and create the conditions for comparison with other films.

Goodman's sample metaphor suggests that the questions that lead to an examination of a work's style are not the same as those that lead to an examination of its form. Whereas consideration of form has roots in textual analysis, or the study of a work's means for expressing its content, deliberation about style stands as a product of historical analysis. A feature of a film may be both formally and stylistically significant, but it may also be significant for one of these reasons alone. The possibility that a feature that is stylistically significant may be formally insignificant (or vice versa) suggests to me that while these categories of study often overlap, they are not one and the same. Consider my submission to the *Synoptique* Style Gallery from Bergman's *Persona* (1966). With its silent film staging, the segment is stylistically significant in its echo of early film practice, but its formal significance remains a question. If the formal questions I ask in the write-up for this style moment, pertaining to the significance of Bergman's staging to the overall meaning of the segment in relation to the rest of the film, can be answered, then without doubt these strategies would be noteworthy stylistically *and* formally. But what if it was revealed in scholarship on the film's technical make-up that cinematographer Sven Nykvist used a new kind of light bulb to achieve certain fill light effects in the segment? The use of this new bulb, which the segment would stand as a sample of, would be formally insignificant while being of considerable interest to the historian of film style.

What requires distinguishing are the practices developed

for interpreting a text and those developed by scholars to study the salient properties that situate a text historically. These are two divergent modes of analysis and the basis for a conceptual distinction between style on the one hand and form on the other.

I bring this discussion to a head with a working definition of a “style moment.” The term stands for a moment in a film that is worth sampling as an instance of a property or series of properties. What the properties are depends on the larger frame of reference or simply the vantage point from which this specific property or set of properties is being considered. Usually such properties will help designate what films are like in a given era. Despite the fact that many of the style moments thus far compiled by the editors of *Synoptique* betray a tendency on the part of the contributor to either confound style with form (as in the case of my own example from *Persona*) or to work with a more casual conception of style, the findings of this inquiry should at least give future contributors a moment of pause as they consider the properties that make their particular moment of choice significant in the history of film style.

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There is No Band at Club Silencio

Thoughts on David Lynch and Mulholland Drive

Colin Burnett

What accounts for the feeling of dread and disconnect that follows us out of the theatre after watching a David Lynch film? Mario Falsetto examines the carefully constructed universe of *Mulholland Drive*, looking for clues. He demonstrates how the film fits into (and goes beyond) the cinematic traditions of modernist surrealism and post-modernist stylistic excess.

The moments we remember from a David Lynch film are often those moments that are only tangentially related to the workings of the film's narrative. It's often those things that have the most profound impact in a Lynch film. Lynch has always been as much concerned with the emotions of a scene, or the *feel* or *mood* of it, as he might say, than with anything as concrete as narrative structure or character formation. To have a better understanding of how Lynch deals with narrative issues actually requires an embrace of the non-narrative elements of his art. This can be tricky in Lynch's work since the line that demarcates what is or is not part of a film's narrative is often obscured. Frequently, what we associate with a film's style may be crucial to our experience of the film, but not essential to how the narrative functions. Questions of meaning in cinema have never been restricted to questions of narrative. There are all sorts of things in a film that can have profound meaning or impact, such as the look on an actor's face, or the way an image seems to linger on screen long after it has given up its meaning. Perhaps it's related to that elusive "third meaning" that Roland Barthes talks about, that level of meaning that resides somewhere beyond plot and style. Cinema is

an art of resonance. Cinematic moments linger in our unconscious, and they haunt us unaccountably. They become a part of our waking life as much as they are a part of our dreamwork.

Lynch's world is a more abstracted world than that of most other films, and his films are often more concerned with creating moments of archetypal power than in creating engaging characters, although I think they always seem to want to create an involving, even empathetic experience. How precisely does Lynch develop his abstracted, deeply disturbing cinematic universe? What is the relationship between various stylistic or narrative elements in Lynch's films and why do they have the kind of resonance we associate with the greatest art? This essay is an attempt to explore some aspects of these vital questions.

Lynch has often been referred to as one of the few genuine, contemporary surrealists. His concern with the force of the unconscious and how it drives our waking life is central to what makes his work so powerful and seems to connect him to earlier generations of surrealist artists. For Lynch, the unconscious is a real place, as real as anything in our waking life. He frequently talks about chance occurrences, those happy accidents that seem to occur in all of his films, such as the sudden inspiration of Dean Stockwell's use of an electrician's lamp as a microphone in the sublime "In Dreams" sequence in *Blue Velvet* (1986). Apparently, Lynch's career is full of such moments of happenstance. The underlying and surface sexual tension in many scenes in his work also links Lynch to the notion so crucial to both Freudian and surrealist thought: unconscious,

sexual desire determines much of our waking life. Additionally, the idea of the double, so central to both *Lost Highway* (1997) and *Mulholland Drive* (2001), is another key concept that the first generation of surrealists borrowed freely from psychoanalysis.

Mulholland Drive doesn't necessarily feel or look like a dream, at least not all the time, but it certainly incorporates a dream logic aligning it to such surrealist precursors as Buñuel and Dalí's *Un Chien Andalou* (1928) and Cocteau's *Blood Of A Poet* (1930). At first glance, the world of *Mulholland Drive* resembles our own universe, although it's obviously wackier. But the oddness of Lynch's universe is the result of many deliberate aesthetic choices. It can be the way Lynch places incongruous elements within the same space, such as the scene of director Adam Kesher (Justin Theroux) and the cowboy (Lafayette Montgomery) meeting at a corral in the Hollywood hills. It feels weird because *Mulholland Drive* is contemporary in time and place, yet the cowboy seems like a throwback to an earlier era when real cowboys were used as stunt men or minor actors in 1930s movies. We feel a sense of displacement, of a time warp, a juxtaposition of elements that somehow don't belong together. It's similar to the *frisson* of seeing Merit Oppenheim's fur-covered teacup and spoon at the Museum of Modern Art, redolent with physical texture and a sense of the uncanny. Lynch may not be a surrealist *per se* – he'd probably reject any such label – but his work and creative process certainly acknowledge something of a surrealist approach to making art.

Mulholland Drive's narrative movement is hallucinatory and elliptical. The theme of fragmented identities and the illusory power and potentially destructive effects that movies can have is woven throughout the film's construction, mise-en-scene, montage and sound. Viewing the film one is reminded how sensual the cinema can be, much like the hallucinatory, erotic power of the films of Josef von Sternberg. Lynch's work has strong connections to the decadent, Sternbergian universe of *Scarlet Empress* (1934) and *Devil Is A Woman* (1935), films that also valorized mise-en-scene, abstraction and sensuousness over narrative logic.

The most unusual aspect of *Mulholland Drive*'s narrative structure is undoubtedly the way we are forced to re-think the entire movie based on the material contained in its final 45 minutes. Whatever we think the concerns of the first 100 minutes are – the tale of the young, wide-eyed Betty (Naomi Watts) who arrives to take Hollywood by storm only to be embroiled in the dark, mysterious world of amnesiac, car-accident victim Rita (Laura

Elena Harring) – must be radically revised in the final movement of the film. This aspect of the film, in some ways, is a variation on the narrative/stylistic idea of the retroactive match cut, which alters our understanding of the meaning of a shot or sequence after it is first encountered. The strategy was articulated with the greatest sophistication by Michelangelo Antonioni in his modernist masterpieces of the late 1950s and early 1960s, such as *L'eclisse* (1961) and *L'avventura* (1960), and can also be found in the work of filmmakers as diverse as Alain Resnais, Nicolas Roeg, and Terence Davies. Through some perceptual alteration within the shot, or because of some later narrative development, we are forced to revise our understanding of what has come before. It's a modernist technique that allows the film to keep reinventing itself. Viewers must continually adjust their understanding of the material, either in perceptual or narrative terms, because the meaning is constantly changing. The notion of retroactivity is a key structuring principle of *Mulholland Drive*, but it's not merely individual shots but the meaning of the whole movie that needs revision.

For some filmmakers, the retroactive technique is related to making narrative film approximate how the mind and perceptions work, moving from one space and time to the other, disregarding the notion of linear temporality. Beyond that it relates to the idea of fragmenting information over the course of the narrative. It's also connected to notions of perceptual distraction and phenomenologically being in the world where we are constantly bombarded with sensations whose meaning remains hidden, or which will only reveal itself later. The idea of trying to approximate the ways the mind and body experience time and space is one way that modernist narrative took up many concerns of the avant-garde, converging in beautifully mysterious ways in films such as Antonioni's *The Passenger* (1975), which ends famously with a seven-minute, moving camera shot echoing Michael Snow's monumental work of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The final movement of *Mulholland Drive* asks us to reinterpret the first 100 minutes of screen time as now being a universe fabricated in the consciousness of small-time, failed-actor Diane Selwyn (Naomi Watts), who lies dying (or dead) somewhere in a run-down apartment in Hollywood. Linking the narrative material of the film's final movement to the material that preceded it becomes critical in terms of how we understand the workings of the film. Of course, crucial as it may be to connect narrative information to the film's internal structures, it is not this alone that makes

Mulholland Drive such a unique experience. As in most of Lynch's other work, the film asks us to attend to every aspect of its construction from colour schemes to camera movement, from music and sound to performance, from lighting to editing patterns, from set design to costume and make-up. In short, every element of the film's construction can be a container of possible meaning.

What's especially interesting in Lynch's film is the way all the material of a scene is presented as meaningful and significant. The hierarchy of significance that we associate with most movies, where some things are to be attended to more than others, is abandoned. We can never tell while watching a scene – at least the first time around – what its most salient features are. It's possible that a seemingly minor detail will turn out to be of critical importance. Everything is presented on the same level of significance. It's like some of Robert Altman's soundtracks in his films of the 1970s where the bit players' dialogue is heard over the dialogue of the main characters. Or when Altman's constantly zooming camera picks out details in the background that don't seem to be very important. Antonioni's wandering camera sometimes does the same thing. The process of making meaning thus remains fluid and always open to revision. And there's a kind of democratic notion to it. The viewer has to decide what's most important in terms of the sensations we perceive. It's a way to connect the mechanics of making movies to the workings of human perception. These notions of uncertainty, built-in ambiguity and dissolving hierarchies are in direct contrast to the way the classically "well-constructed" movie operates.

Viewers have been conditioned by years of movie going to try and decipher how narrative works in terms of logical cause and effect. It's at the heart of the classical Hollywood model, and along with other elements, such as the way space and time are organized through the eye-line glance and 180-degree rule, character formation, narrative closure, and screenplay structure, it's been a remarkably resilient form that continues to have an amazing hold on world cinema and television. There have been numerous filmmakers who have explored narrative and what it can do, and exploded the classical model and offered alternatives to it. But no matter how much some films have played with the idea of cause and effect, or with notions of modernist and post-modernist organization, or narrative ambiguity, there haven't been many films that strive to operate in non-rational ways, or in truly surreal fashion as does *Mulholland Drive*. It's an exciting experiment interrogating the nature of

narrative.

The disconnected, fragmented structure of the film makes us feel, at times, as if we've entered into the middle of separate narratives. Consider the scene at Winkies restaurant where one man recounts to another his horrifying dream involving a monstrously grotesque man whom he believes resides behind the restaurant and will cause him to die. These sequences, and others in between, have no apparent connection to each other. It seems as if we've entered into the middle of one narrative and then proceeded to a completely different one. Narrative events unfold in the first hour and half with little sense of how one sequence necessarily connects with the other. The logic of cause and effect does not seem to be a part of this Lynchian universe as one bizarre scene follows the other. At the same time, there does seem to be a main narrative of sorts that involves Betty (Naomi Watts), the aspiring actor from Deep River, Ontario – echoing the name of the Deep River apartments in *Blue Velvet* – and Rita, the accident victim of the car crash that begins the film.

One strategy that contributes to the idea of a more abstracted narrative is the way we keep hearing snatches of dialogue within individual scenes, but for much of the movie we are unable to connect these narratives to each other. Not only that, but the segments themselves are so fragmentary and elliptical that we aren't given enough information to fully grasp the narrative context of the sequences themselves. Lynch plays on our understanding of how narratives are supposed to work and our conviction that we grasp what the film is trying to do. On the surface the film plays as if it actually makes sense, even while something inside us tells us we don't really know how things connect.

The idea of narrative abstraction is connected in Lynch's films to concepts of heightened emotions and cinematic excess. Meaning in a Lynch film is more often to be found in its foregrounded mise-en-scene rather than its plot machinations. The film's structure and questions of point of view become much more important than trying to get a handle on who the characters are or what their relationship is to each other. In Lynch's world, the sound of blows is amplified, colors are exaggerated and emotions are heightened. All the stylistic elements we've come to expect, at least since *Blue Velvet* when Lynch's work begins to be most imbued with the idea of excess, are all evident in *Mulholland Drive*. Lynch's work tells us that color is as important as action; that visual and aural texture is as important as character or dialogue; that feeling is as important as the intellect. It

forces us to reflect on how we understand the way we think movies work.

As an example consider the scene where Adam Keshner confronts his wife (Lori Heuring) in bed with the pool man (Billy Ray Cyrus) and pours pink paint in her jewel box as he leaves their house. We know (retroactively) that this scene was formed out of a snatch of dialogue by Keshner at the party – “I got the house and she got the pool man” – and certain colors that are highlighted there. The pink and blue chair in the background of the blue pool at Keshner’s house and the scene featuring Keshner’s wife with the pool man are ways the unconscious mind might transform that material. The visual design and color scheme carry as much meaning as the dialogue or narrative situation of the scene.

By the time we get to the movie set where Adam Keshner is seen shooting *The Sylvia North Story* with Rita/Camilla, we’re not sure what we’re watching. *Mulholland Drive* has referenced (at the very least) half a dozen genres or sub-genres including the fetid atmosphere of film noir, murder mysteries, teen movies, musicals, absurdist comedy, melodrama, and identity-crisis movies. It even alludes to the masterpiece of identity-crisis movies, Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958). We’re an hour and half into the film and we seriously wonder what possible narrative cohesion can materialize to bind these disparate elements and generic references together. When we start hearing the snatches of dialogue from the earlier audition scene as Keshner shows Camilla how to play the scene in an automobile, we have a strange reaction not dissimilar to watching the perplexities of a Maya Deren film. Shots are repeated but since they’re in a new context – the shot isn’t exactly the same length and the material that precedes and follows it has been modified – it feels new. We get a sensation of defamiliarization; we think we know something but at the same time it feels strange.

Referencing so many genres and the business of making movies makes perfect sense in retrospect since we soon understand that Diane Selwyn’s unconscious is responsible for the earlier material. Her world would naturally be a world made up from the movies. Her unfulfilled aspirations to make it in the movies, like so many others before her, have relegated her to the margins of the industry. The heightened, paranoid universe that her unconscious invents makes sense in terms of how the unconscious might transform her waking reality as she sinks deeper and deeper into delusion and psychosis after her relationship with Camilla comes apart.

Mulholland Drive contains deliberately paced, languid editing rhythms that are the result of both a long-take camera strategy and slow editing patterns to create a world that seems more connected to our subconscious than to our waking reality. Space and time have their own logic in the unconscious. The tone also keeps shifting from one scene to the next creating an unstable, ambiguous quality. The sense of veering from highly comic to deeply disturbing material, and everything in between, contributes to the unsettling quality and sense of dread that permeates the film. It recalls the dreamy quality of Stanley Kubrick’s *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), another recent film that also feels like a projection into the interiorized universe of its main character (Tom Cruise). Not coincidentally, Lynch shares with Kubrick the notion of creating a “total cinema,” to use French film critic André Bazin’s phrase, where every element of sound and image is carefully calibrated to work in concert to create a multi-layered, cinematic experience. When Lynch talks about creating a *mood* in his work, he is deliberately simplifying a complex, aesthetic organization that is precisely constructed out of many elements, both visual and aural. His meticulousness is comparable to Kubrick’s in its careful attention to every detail, although the range of his concerns seems narrower. Is it an accident that during the shooting of *The Shining* (1980), Kubrick is said to have repeatedly screened an obscure film called *Eraserhead* (1977) by an unknown American director named David Lynch for his friends and crew and called it the most fantastic movie he’d ever seen? The aesthetic overdetermination of *Mulholland Drive*, *Eraserhead* and *Eyes Wide Shut* is an important aspect of the investigation into cinematic subjectivity at the center of each film. It’s also not an accident that texture and tonal instability are key aspects of all three films. Lynch shares with Kubrick a belief that the world we inhabit is a strangely mysterious one and not as accessible to comprehension as most films would have us believe.

Much of *Mulholland Drive* has a brooding sensuality that is often a result of repeated, slow camera moves into dark passageways. There are also innumerable moments where the camera goes into and out of focus to help communicate a character’s subjective point of view. In one scene Rita and Betty race toward the camera and the two personalities, in tandem with the camera, create an almost cubist-like reverberating effect which might indicate that the two personalities are merging or shifting back and forth. It’s reminiscent of a shot in *Lost Highway* where Bill Pullman’s character is transformed into the character played by Balthazar Getty. Other examples of visual texture are some of

the overhead shots of the night-time, Los Angeles skyline that punctuate the film. These shots not only contribute a dreamy, surreal quality to the film, but they force the viewer to think about the issue of point of view, and who might actually own this god-like POV. Shots like these help communicate the idea that we have entered into the mind of a character, although we still don't know whose. It is only in retrospect that we comprehend that Diane Selwyn's consciousness is responsible for structuring much of what occurs in the first 100 minutes of the film.

The out of focus material is particularly interesting on several levels. There is never any kind of smoothness to these shots or any attempt to create a seamless illusionism, something that Lynch could easily have achieved with digital effects – had Lynch had the remotest interest in creating digital effects. For Lynch, it's important to acknowledge the mechanical nature of the film medium, and his insistence when he was making *Lost Highway* on continuing to edit on a mechanical device (the kem) as opposed to a digital system such as the Avid (Chris Rhodley, 237) is a clear indication that Lynch values film over video. What's also interesting about so many of these camera effects is not only that they are noticeable or that they draw attention to themselves, but that they are so *obviously* mechanical. They are visibly the result of someone physically manipulating the camera lens. These moments add a kind of painterly texture to the film in ways not dissimilar to the textures that sound seems to implant on the image in Lynch's work. In *Mulholland Drive* sound helps communicate the perpetual sense of dread we feel throughout much of its running time.

The emphasis on the physicality of things and the film's absurdist tone are two of its strongest strategies. They're evident from the film's earliest moments with the violent car crash, the impact of which is heightened by the exaggerated sound of crashing metal and the intensity of the camera work and editing patterns. The emphasis on the physical continues in several subsequent scenes, such as the first scene at Winkies where the man recounts his horrifying dream, and the scene where the small-time criminal murders the other hood for the black book. The absurdly paranoid tone continues in the first scene at the studio with the Castiglione brothers (Dan Hedaya and Angelo Badalamenti), which is the first time we hear of the actress Camilla Rhodes as one of the brothers (Badalamenti) pulls out a photograph and states "This is the Girl" (who will now be given the lead in the movie currently being directed by Adam Keshner).

The bizarre scene is interrupted by several shots which imply that the movies business is not only controlled by organized crime but also by a strange, crippled dwarf in another room, shots that echo the theatrical, heightened spaces and absurdities of *Twin Peaks*.

The emphasis on the physical is plainly noticeable in other scenes, such as the smashing of the limousine by Keshner with a golf club; the fight between Keshner, his wife and the pool man where every blow seems amplified in the extreme; and the scene in which an overweight enforcer arrives at the Keshner home only to be confronted by Keshner's hysterical wife and the white-trash pool man, ending in a chaotic mass of tangled bodies. An interesting element of this scene is the way it begins with the sound of a needle dropping on a recording of Sonny Boy Williams singing "Maybe Baby," adding another element of physical texture to an already violently physical scene. The first word of the song is the elongated "Baaaaby. . ." which follows Rita's words, "maybe, maybe," of the previous scene, as she and Betty call the phone number hoping for some clue to Rita's identity.

Adding this kind of "rough texture" to his film is another way for Lynch to insert himself into the film, to draw attention to the hand of the artist. It's like seeing the artist's hand in some of James Whitney's hand-drawn animations of the 1950s, in contrast to later computer-generated animation where the machine-made quality of the images is so prominent. It's why Lynch seems to want to have a hand in so many aspects of the filmmaking process far beyond the writing and directing chores most auteurs assign themselves. It's why he spends precious time fashioning some of the most elegant furniture in the films himself, or why he works on the sound in post-production, or writes some of the songs, or is intimately involved in the editing. Lynch admires the craft of filmmaking as much as its art. He wants to be engaged in the physical act of making movies at almost every level.

In the film's final movement, what becomes important is how Lynch orchestrates and re-conceives the earlier material so that it now takes on new meaning. During this phase of the film, we keep returning to shots in the room where the body of Diane Selwyn lies decaying as her narrative, in somewhat linear form now, is strung together. We also get frequent point-of-view shots, with the camera lens frequently going in and out of focus to emphasize that her consciousness controls what we now see. The party scene where Keshner and Camilla (Laura Harring) eventually announce their engagement begins

with Diane's limo ride and her stroll, hand-in-hand with Camilla through "a secret path" to the house. Material now comes at a furious pace to alter our understanding of what has come before. There's almost too much of it for the viewer to keep track of. From linguistic snatches of spoken Spanish by the catering crew to Keshner's reference to the "pool man" to a reference to "Wilkins," another party guest. Also at the party, we see Angelo Badalamenti drink a cup of coffee – in the earlier studio scene we see him comically spit out his espresso onto a napkin; we get a shot of the cowboy as a party guest; and we are introduced to Keshner's mother, Catherine "Coco" Lenoix (Ann Miller) and see her gobble down pecans. Of course, the fact that it's Ann Miller has its own allusions to Hollywood's golden age (as does Lee Grant's role as the ditzzy neighbour, Louise Bonner, at the apartment complex in the earlier part of the film).

Interspersed with this party scene is a sequence at Winkies restaurant where Diane is served by a waitress (Melissa Crider) with a "Betty" name tag, and her reference to "this is the girl" as she shows a sleazy hitman (Mark Pellegrino) a photograph of Camilla Rhodes (Laura Harring) to presumably rid herself of Camilla once and for all – if Diane can't have Camilla, no one else will. Also in this sequence, we view a man standing at the counter who we remember as the man with the horrifying nightmare in the first scene at Winkies.

Not all the material is serious, of course. It wouldn't be a Lynch film if it was all dark and disturbing since Lynch sees so much humour in the world. Ann Miller's "Coco" and her pecans are turned into dog turds left by a dog belonging to "Wilkins" in the scene when Betty first arrives in Hollywood. Chad Everett's character at the audition scene is nicknamed "Woody," which seems an apt moniker for the sleazy and highly-sexed character he plays during the audition sequence.

Much of the experience of watching *Mulholland Drive* engages us in play, as we revise the meaning of previously received information. Ultimately, it doesn't much matter if we miss some ideas that Lynch may have inserted. By the time we immerse ourselves in the film's final movement, we've been sucked into one of the wildest, most disorienting bits of cinematic game-playing since *Lost Highway*. But it's the experience of watching the film that is central to Lynch's project, not deciphering each narrative detail. The film's complicated narrative structure is there to make us feel the power of the unconscious. We're meant to be disturbed by the film, to feel as unhinged as its lead character.

Like Federico Fellini, Lynch creates characters who often function as different aspects of the self rather than as integrated, whole characters. They are meant to embody different traits in a self that seems to have no center. Like Sternberg, his actors become another aspect of our dreamwork, abstracted shadows of light and dark on a screen surface, as abstract as the painted silver trees in *Devil Is A Woman* or the exotic presence of Marlene Dietrich. Lynch's world hints at the dark interior worlds that exist for most of us but which we'd prefer not to examine. Lynch lets us go to these dark places in the relative safety of a movie experience. "Relative" because Lynch believes that movies can also be dangerous – as powerful and as therapeutic as any other great art can be, as illuminating and as mysterious.

Mulholland Drive contains two unquestionably great scenes, as good as anything Lynch has given us before: the audition scene and the scene at "Club Silencio" where Rebekah Del Rio lip-syncs to her a cappella version of "Crying" in Spanish, as Diane and Camilla tearfully watch her performance until the heavily made up singer collapses in mid-song. It's a great example of the theatrical strategies we frequently find in Lynch's films and brings together many of the themes that have been explored thus far. It begins with a strange, low to the ground moving camera shot outside the club as the camera quickly moves forward across the desolate parking lot. As the eerie, disturbing shot sweeps us along, the world of the film no longer feels like our own. Inside the theater, a magician acts as master of ceremonies and intones: "No hay banda," "There is no band, everything is tape recorded." We proceed to see musicians play instruments to a sound that clearly comes from another source. It's deliberately fake. The scene examines in a powerfully emotional way the power of the conjuring act of making these illusions we call movies. What's the difference between being moved to tears by something in the real world or by an illusion? For Lynch there is no difference, because there is nothing illusory about the unconscious or the imagination or our feelings. We may not know how things happen; we may not be able to distinguish between the real and the imaginary, but that only adds to the power of the mystery. Even *knowing* that Rebekah Del Rio is lip-syncing Orbison's song "Crying" does not lessen its impact. If we feel something deeply then what does it matter if it is the result of some trick? Knowledge does not negate emotions. The mind cannot turn off our emotions at will or control the emotional self.

The audition scene is crucial because it is a sublime example of how someone can imagine that they can

transform the most banal dialogue into an artful scene. We've just heard Betty and Rita rehearse the dialogue a few moments earlier, and cannot imagine how this can possibly be played for "real" or be in any way moving. Betty's earlier reading with Rita is right out of day-time TV soaps, all surface and cheap emotion. Betty valiantly tries to give her idea of what an emotional scene would be played like before she and Rita break up in convulsive laughter at the lame dialogue. The amazing sequence where Betty really does the audition with Jimmy "Woody" Katz, beautifully played with oozing, smarmy charm by Chad Everett, himself an actor long associated with television, is an astonishing scene. How could that bit of mediocrity turn into this astounding scene? It's akin to some mysterious alchemical process. Lynch understands that great acting is never about pretending. It's always about playing it for real, getting at the truth of the character or a scene in imaginary circumstances. That's why actors are artists, and creating a real character can be on a par with any other creative act, because it elevates the imaginative act to the level of creation.

The intensity of feeling that both performers convey leaves us breathless. The reading has to be better than we can imagine, and it is. Suddenly it feels altogether new. It's the same dialogue, but has a completely different life. It's a breakthrough scene, both for the character Betty plays and for Naomi Watts. In this scene a star truly is born. Lynch's film is an examination both of how Hollywood works on our unconscious and an illustration of young starlet, Naomi Watts, transforming into a major actor before our eyes. Nothing she has done up to this point in the film has prepared us for the astonishing power of her reading. The depth of feeling she conveys is mesmerizing. Her body trembles with intensity as she deeply feels every emotion.

The many ambiguities and mysteries of *Mulholland Drive* extend to seemingly small details such as the character of Louise Bonner, the ditzy neighbour who intrudes into Betty's apartment with her cries of "Someone's in trouble. Something bad is happening here." As played by an almost unrecognizable Lee Grant with overflowing masses of hair and a long cape, she both recalls the horrid, homeless (wo)man of the earlier scene and alludes to the interdictions of countless fairy tales. She becomes the personification of our instinctive self that warns us about the dangers of the world, as much as the homeless (wo)man's horrifying visage becomes the beastly personification of Betty's/Diane's distorted, dark feelings about Camilla, and her lost dreams of making it in Hollywood. Grant's

character may have been one of those things that might have been further developed if the original television pilot had been extended into a weekly series. No matter. Her unknowability is perfect for the film because the idea of knowability extends to the idea of character as much as it does to any questions we may have about the relationship of one scene to the other. Who are these characters? What is their relationship to each other? What do the characters at the Winkies restaurant have to do with the characters involved in making the movie, *The Sylvia North Story* that Adam Keshner (or is it Bob Brooker) is directing? And what are we to make of the horribly deformed, scary man (woman) behind Winkies that shocks a character to death and who holds what may be a key to the film's meaning (the blue box and blue key), but who remains as enigmatic in the end as the woman with blue hair at "Club Silencio?" If all our questions were answered then *Mulholland Drive* really would be a clever but ultimately a minor work. The fact that the mysteries remain is a sign that Lynch has created a more substantial, enigmatic work that will linger in our conscious (and unconscious) mind for a long time to come.

In Lynch's world, the most privileged resource of human capability is the imagination. In some ways the actual making of *Mulholland Drive* is a concrete illustration of this idea. Not only for the character of Diane who imagines she can be the greatest actor in the world and give the most moving, heartfelt performance at a movie audition, but it extends to the (re)making of the film. Lynch has had to re-imagine his work of art from scratch. He has had to reconstruct it and give it a new form and set of meanings from what he may have intended when he first conceived the film as a television pilot. Out of the old form he was able to fashion a greater, more profound work, with more resonance and deeper power. He has expanded the range of thematic and stylistic issues and created a work with more philosophical weight. In the guise of a mystery film, he has fashioned a document on the nature of experience. In the process he has made a statement not only on the seductive power and cruelty of the film industry, but the deeper mysteries of desire and how our unconscious works.

On one level, *Mulholland Drive* is concerned with how we respond to the best (and worst) in movies. How can a Joseph Cornell fashion one of the great surrealist masterpieces of the last century (*Rose Hobart*, 1936) out of mediocre kitsch like *East Of Borneo* (1931)? Because Cornell knew that the best art always worked in mysterious ways. If it is to penetrate deep

into an individual's unconscious it needs to have the direct power and intensity of a dream. Cornell's radical reworking through montage of images from a B-movie illustrates that any material has the potential to be transformed into an artwork if the imaginative powers of the artist are great enough, and if the form is radical enough. Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* is in a similar tradition. It invokes the seductive power and eroticism of Hollywood movies, and it links the ecstatic power of images (and sounds) to the *experience* of watching movies. It asks (in a non-rational way) why some films make us *feel* so intensely, and so deeply.

The tragedy of Hollywood, as well as its greatness against every rational impulse, is that it can instill the most extraordinary desire in viewers. Each of us can be made to believe that we are capable of the most remarkable things while watching a film. It is the great empathetic art. It can create illusion so complete that we can feel the most extraordinary emotions at the movies. But Lynch also has fun with this great illusion-creating machine. In Diane/Betty's paranoid unconscious, the production company is run by gangsters and strange deformed characters who observe all from enclosed back rooms. The crazy quality of some of these scenes drifts into a Kafkaesque-like implication that the industry is operated for some unknown motive that goes much deeper than the business of making money or creating entertainment. Is it part of some elaborate plot to control our fate? Who could be doing this and for what reason? It's a paranoid vision of the Hollywood power structure, but is it any more absurd than the whole business of making movies where hundreds of millions of dollars are expended on some of the most ludicrous products ever imagined?

At times, movies seem to be able to satisfy all our intellectual and emotional needs. Movies for Lynch are both dangerous and necessary – dangerous because they can be more forceful and frightening and real than anything else in our normal daily experience, and necessary because like most significant art, our lives need the enrichment that only certain kinds of deeply meaningful, urgent experiences can give us. Movies are important to our imaginative lives. Like music and art, they feed our soul. They help us understand who we are and what we're doing here. And it isn't just the great movies that do this. As an earlier generation of surrealists illustrated, bad movies can have as much impact on our psyches as good movies. *Mulholland Drive* reminds us that movies can still put us in an emotionally dangerous, disturbing place. We are reminded of the dark, murky mysteries of the world, the unknowability

of the world, as well as the archetypal power of movies.

I think it would be wrong to reduce *Mulholland Drive* to some kind of parlour game where the viewer tries to knit together the various clues, only to decipher the film's narrative structure and offer up a grand interpretive scheme for what things might mean. The film's narrative structure is but one element in a complex aesthetic strategy. Its power and mystery depend on many factors. Ultimately, *Mulholland Drive* is much more than the sum of its parts. Whatever meaning we might propose for such things as the blue key and the mysterious box that it opens, or the homeless man behind the restaurant, can only serve as partial explanation for the feelings the film generates. These narrative details don't necessarily get at what is powerful about the film or why it resonates deep within us long after we've experienced it. *Mulholland Drive* privileges a particular approach to the unconscious and the process of making art. Lynch's film argues that interpreting a work of art is of necessity a limited operation. Some things are best left ambiguous and mysterious like the world we live in. Take away that mystery and all we're left with is some crazy notion that the world makes sense and that we actually know who we are and what we're doing here. What makes David Lynch such an important artist is the way his work forces us to confront the certainties of our lives and contemplate the mysteriousness of being in the world. Added to this is his remarkable control of the medium. He seems to bring out the best in all his collaborators, and because of his attention to the precise details of making movies, a David Lynch film is as elegant in its construction as it is mysterious and profound in meaning.

Mulholland Drive has the urgency of the best art. It reminds us of the experiential power of movies. It offers the tantalizing proposition that the order we crave in our waking life may indeed be illusory, and the seeming chaos of the unconscious the more meaningful reality. It also asks us to rethink how we understand terms such as illusion and reality. That a film can even propose such ideas is the miracle of David Lynch. He is an artist who continues to astonish.

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The Construction of the “Hitchcock Blonde” in *Marnie* (1964)

Jodi Ramer

Jodi Ramer offers a careful close analysis of extended sequences from Alfred Hitchcock’s *Marnie* (1964) to frame her discussion of the formal construction of the Hitchcock Blonde. Ramer employs a measured “soft psychoanalysis” with consideration of film style and the place of the film within a range of broader contextual fields (e.g., Hitchcock’s oeuvre, the femme fatale, and issues of gender representation). The notion of style Ramer presents is informed by consideration of narrative and characterization as integral elements of a formal analysis of style.

The image of the “Hitchcock Blonde” is a familiar one, more specific but perhaps almost as well known as that of the femme fatale. The Hitchcock heroine, in her purified state, has a crown of well-peroxidized hair, elaborately upswept and emphasizing an unfussy vista of forehead; she is well-groomed, even severe in the cut of her modest but moneyed clothing; she is “cool,” a self-possessed WASP, the elegantly detached type. This type—seen through Grace Kelly, Kim Novak, Eva Marie Saint, et al—naturally has its variations, but does maintain, throughout several of Hitchcock’s films, enough recognizable traits to merit investigation. Such investigation usually follows in the form of soft psychoanalysis, citing Hitchcock’s impoverished self-esteem and his need to set up an unattainable glamour-girl as fodder for his propensity to lose himself in fantasy. But the ultimately elusive reason for Hitchcock’s use of the “cool blonde” is less interesting than the consideration of just how Hitchcock as filmmaker makes use of the cool blonde,

how her image is created—from costume, make-up and hair, through camera placement and editing. Does this heroine occupy a special place in a given film; is her presence signalled stylistically, her body treated in a distinct or identifiable manner?

Marnie (1964), starring Tippi Hedren, stands out as a Hitchcock film in which the “cool” heroine breaks out of her supporting role as poised-and-pretty love-interest and enters the fray. Here she is not just a protagonist who must deal with an external blight, as was Hedren’s previous role of Melanie Daniels in *The Birds*, but as a character fraught with pathology, a pathology that in itself drives the narrative (Marnie thieves and cons, is blackmailed into marriage, is frigid and made suicidal and then finally is returned to a repressed memory, all because of her pathology—without it, there really is no narrative at all). As such, the film is really about the cool blonde rather than just featuring her, and for this reason I see *Marnie* as a good place to start in studying the employment of the “Hitchcock Blonde.” My space here is unfortunately too limited to address similar female figures in other Hitchcock films, nor is my aim to establish a comparative study of the figure; rather, I endeavour to provide a detailed account of the filmic construction of a particular character in a particular film, and insofar as the Marnie character may be identified in typage as a cool blonde Hitchcockian heroine, this instance may also be seen as representative of an aspect of the so-called Hitchcock style.

The formal construction of Marnie as heroine is complex, for narratively she functions both as subject (the protagonist) and as object (the legendary cool

blonde). Furthermore, in either capacity she also alternates between femme fatale and particularly vulnerable ingénue. As the former, Marnie is a cunning thief, unencumbered by emotional involvements; as the latter, she is the inexplicably troubled young woman who cannot understand her own compulsions, nor trace her own past. Both types of gendered typeage coexist in the female lead of *Marnie*, and yet, overall each mode is given differentiated treatment, such that Marnie as a character is at times formally coded as dangerous and mysterious in her attractiveness and at others as sympathetic and softly appealing.

In keeping with this complexity, Marnie's appearances on-screen—as well, tellingly, as the times she remains offscreen—are linked to the film's stylistic presentation of narrative and "atmospheric" elements of suspense. *Marnie* as a whole is nicely illustrative of a stylistic motif found throughout Hitchcock's oeuvre: the use of montage to pointedly—almost over-deliberately—convey information, chiefly through use of a point-of-view insert shots of a given object (or specific space/place). Often this object is connected to a character's train of thought by the inclusion of such an insert preceded by a shot indicating an actor's eye-line: the montage creates the illusion of the character gazing at a given object, thus drawing the viewer's attention to this detail. Marnie is often caught up in this montage network of gazes, objects, and focused attention, and I would argue that the variations of this filmic relay occur around and in regards to Marnie preponderantly, and in correspondence—though not always clearly definable—with the fluctuating positions she occupies within the narrative. Ultimately, though the playing out (through compulsion: thefts, assumed identities, avoidance of men) and uncovering of Marnie's pathology drives the story and defines the eponymous character, Marnie herself is placed within the film moreso as object than subject. This is to say, Marnie, as character and as a body on film, is generally acted upon, commented on, and positioned, within mise-en-scene and patterns of editing, as a passive rather than active party: as an object.

Discussing the female body on film as an object is, of course, entering into fraught territory. Laura Mulvey's enormously influential article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) adopts a psychoanalytical model to account for dominant filmic codes in which the male character—and by extension the male viewer—is entitled to gaze at the female character with mastery, a privilege not granted to the objectified female and her spectatorial counterpart, who is excluded from

anything but a masochist relationship to cinematic pleasures. Mulvey's polemic established a persuasive account of patriarchal norms in representation, but fails to acknowledge that, quite simply, women can and do experience pleasure at the movies, and that even when formally objectified, female characters may contain an affective potency that cannot be underestimated.

It must be noted that such qualifications of—and outright disagreement with—Mulvey's article have been wellvoiced by feminist critics and even Mulvey herself: current feminist discourse is not much interested in insular, hothouse psychoanalytical critique, and has eschewed the tendency of judging the merits of a given representation in binary terms (i.e. "good" or "bad" portrayals of women).^[1] Such a departure from earlier models of feminist evaluation (important in their time) makes for a freer—and more sensible—approach to the study of filmic form and style, which otherwise is irrationally hindered by an imposed negative or positive value which would suggest that certain formal and stylistic choices are inherently reactionary or progressive (and, by extension, reactionary or progressive by specific, time-and-context-bound criteria). My investigation here of how the female lead in *Marnie* functions as an object, therefore, is not bound up in the negative valence that might be attributed to such observations; rather, I am interested in how Marnie is constructed on film and through filmic techniques, and how such construction adds to a complex characterization.

This complexity I do not take up in terms of psychological "depth" (a matter which is arguable, and has been debated, in relation to the overt and some say naïve treatment of psychoanalysis the narrative employs)^[2], but as a suggestive and varied approach to characterization through film style. *Marnie* underwent critical complaint at its release (from Andrew Sarris, for one, and especially from many reviewers in England, nostalgic for Hitchcock's British period) for being, among other things, not enough of a thriller and too much of a psychodrama.^[3] But *Marnie* certainly finds its place within Hitchcock's oeuvre in the film's use of a mystery or crime ultimately revealed as a MacGuffin: conventional tantalizing devices quite beside the point except in the crucial establishing of suspense and an atmosphere sinister or unsettling. The thefts committed by Marnie, her changes of identity, the threat of being exposed by Mr. Strutt and other ex-employers—even the details and convincingness (or lack thereof) of her psyche, its pathology, and her "treatment" under husband/amateur therapist Mark (Sean Connery)—all ultimately fall under the aegis of MacGuffin. These

details are not crucial in themselves, but are the kind of detail that contribute to the driving force of the film (like “realism” or continuity, issues that Hitchcock himself often insisted were not important if the movie is succeeding in drawing the viewer in).

In the case of *Marnie*, the female lead is constructed as the embodiment of an enigma, an enigma that constantly piques the interest of the characters who revolve around her. As such, the film’s workings focus on Marnie’s primary relationships (with Mark, and with her mother—which includes the traces of Marnie’s mysterious past) and the secondary relationships that unfurl from these focal points (including Strutt, Lil Mainwaring, the man who recognizes her at the racetrack, the little girl Jessie). The suspense of the film certainly is in uncovering the mystery of Marnie, but moreso in watching the unfolding dynamics around Marnie as the fascinating centre, as the object around which curiosity and suspense revolve. Marnie participates as protagonist in this drama, and yet, as the centre, she is rather passive, really quite helpless and less involved, less interested in her cause than those around her. Thus, the character is treated throughout the film primarily as an object of intrigue.

My discussion of *Marnie*, then, is one that considers narrative and characterization as being integral to a formal analysis of style. If I see the film as being principally “about” the engagement and intrigue produced over Marnie’s character, rather than, say, a serious treatment of a psychoanalytical case-study, or a crime thriller, this is not because the story or narrative alone produces this effect. To state the obvious: the script, taken in itself, could have privileged very different elements, altering the mood, altering what gets emphasized; likewise for the same script treated differently in production and post-production. As much as this point seems evident, it is worth making in order to demonstrate how it also works the other way, serving to reveal the holistic nature of film style: though formal elements may be separated from content and studied as such, style must be more of a merging of the two. Particularly in the case of Hitchcock, a director so motivated in telling a story with the most effective means possible, elements of the overall story become heightened and downplayed by his stylistic interventions in various ways that the screenplay alone would not reveal. ^[4]

Certainly Hitchcock, insistent on the nature of film as a visual medium, occupied himself with the craft of developing such elements through showing rather

than telling. All of this is to establish my interest in the film’s treatment of Marnie and the amount of showing that goes on around the development of her character and its function as intriguing object. The telling has a part to play in this—I will detail the opening sequences of Marnie, in which discussions around this mysterious female figure are key to her introduction—but Hitchcock would seem to be less invested in the affect produced by this aspect of the story. Thus, the repressed trauma Marnie had suffered as a child may not seem commensurate with her symptoms, or, to take it further, the entire psychoanalytical framework attached to Marnie’s character, as some have scoffed, may seem just plain silly—and yet, the film’s focus on showing us a stylized approximation of trauma and the return of the repressed would seem to be the affective core of the piece, with the details of Marnie’s past and psychic journey just a way of getting us there for the show, as it were. Defenders and detractors of the film have both applied themselves to explaining the meaning of Marnie’s episodes—either to justify or bemoan devices such as the red suffusion flashes or the patently artificial backdrops and rear projection. While the interpretation of these devices (as Expressionist, as an artful deployment of artifice, as distanciation, as encouraging subjective identification, or what have you) often blooms into the kind of purple over-reading that Hitchcock’s apparent fascination with unattainable women receives, this tendency does point up the manner in which interpretation is inextricable from discussions of style.

This point warrants a somewhat lengthy detour: I have stated that I do not want to engage in the kind of interpretative overreaching that often characterises examinations of Hitchcock films, and any auteurist study, the kind that contorts itself to find (hopefully compelling and convincing) reasons for any given stylistic motif, a framework of justification for whatever the film, or the oeuvre, in question might contain. But I do not attempt to eschew interpretation altogether. To comment on the use of, say, red flashes in the film these flashes must be taken as something, must be given some kind of interpretive assessment. The use of rear projection is a formal device and recognizable as such, but pointing out its use falls short of providing a meaningful discussion of style. It means more if one is informed as to how common or rare the practise was at the time of the film’s production—and in the case of *Marnie*, rear projection was beginning to look dated, at least according to reviewers’ complaints on the issue. But to take up these complaints and defend rear projection and fake-looking backdrops as part of

Hitchcock's evolving style is to engage in interpretation. Either one judges these devices as looking realistically convincing enough to be in line with the tradition of Hollywood moviemaking of which Hitchcock was a part or one interprets them as looking sufficiently fake to be surely intentionally artful. One might argue that Hitchcock was simply using production methods with which he was most comfortable, not liking to shoot on location, and yet surely this claim, true as it may be, misses something in the overall effect of *Marnie*, with its undeniably strange blend of Hollywood realism, acidic-hued brittleness, and dream-quality hysteria. One cannot really do justice to the Hitchcock style without acknowledging the affect formal devices—in specific, notable instances and in overall, cumulative power—have on the viewer, as subjective as these affects necessarily are. The critic is not immune to such impressions, and it would not serve him or her to be immune: the critic's job is to refine such impressions and examine them with refined rigor.^[5]

Ultimately, to me, the formal treatment of the titular character in *Marnie* makes for compelling study because the stylistic management of this on-screen body corresponds in a satisfying manner with a more impressionistic, interpretative reading of the film. For one, the overall construction of *Marnie* as a curiously contained, unreachable, elusive character—intriguing but somehow something short of compelling, too brittle, too unfathomable, yet also too commonplace to excite more than an intellectual curiosity—is a construction that nicely, microcosmically, mirrors my impression of the film as a whole. That is, I would describe *Marnie*, the film, just as I described *Marnie*, the character, above. And in having a mitigated response to the film, in finding it really very interesting but less than wholly successful, I am reluctant to apply a totalising interpretative vision to the film, and both suspicious of and dissatisfied with others' efforts to do so. Alongside other objections, I think that this approach diminishes what is so very interesting about *Marnie*, which is that one can hardly account for the strangeness of it: its combination of stylistic excellence and contextual naïveté, the artifice that is obviously intentional and yet which does not go far enough, the hysteria that references the best of classic "women's film" melodrama while foreshadowing the cheesy, overwrought sensibility of the TV-movie-of-the-week. Quite possibly *Marnie*—like the unenthusiastically received films that followed, *Torn Curtain* (1966), *Topaz* (1969), *Family Plot* (1978)—is indicative of Hitchcock operating within changing cinematic conventions and styles and being simply, stubbornly or cluelessly, old-

fashioned (whereas *Frenzy* (1972) makes use of a gritty naturalism in vogue at the time). Such a possibility need not be fatal, but can be acknowledged without either dismissing the film as hopelessly dated or recouping it by claiming it as an artefact of genius—in which everything is intentional, brilliant, and never bound by history or context.

Finally, I am intrigued with how the formal patterns around *Marnie*'s construction as female character invoke certain broader thematic experiences of gender difference and its representation. I do not need the film to be coherent or unified around such themes (and it is not), nor do I ascribe feminist—or misogynistic—intention to the filmmakers, nor rely upon encoded psychoanalytical/ideological "truths" to be channelled through the text.^[6] Rather, I find enticing correspondences between what is concretely present on a formal level and what these devices suggest when expanding outward from straight formal analysis into the realm of interpretation.

The character of *Marnie* is introduced in a manner befitting a femme fatale, with a sense of mystery and vaguely menacing purpose. The film begins with a tight shot of a (perhaps seductively) plump and dimpled yellow handbag tucked under the arm of a well-suited-in-tweeds lady. The shot expands as the woman, whom we see from the back carrying, with her other arm, a suitcase, walks steadily, in high-heeled pumps, down a train platform. She then stops and, with a graceful little twist of the ankle, sets down her suitcase and gazes down the empty tracks. The viewer is given opportunity to contemplate this fetching figure with the flatteringly cut dress suit, as the camera follows the receding woman at an ever-slower tracking pace, adjusting to allow the figure to get ahead, until the camera becomes static, allowing her to ultimately walk into long shot during a long take of thirty seconds (not long for a long take, but it feels like one, letting this single action unfold in real time). We are soon to find that our attention has been directed at the handbag for reasons of narrative foreshadowing: a few sequences later the woman—still only viewed from the back and as body parts, particularly as agile hands—will dump from the handbag and into a suitcase large bundles of cash. The woman is to remain faceless for the first six and a half minutes of the film (following the credit sequence).

The interest in *Marnie* as a character—and additionally as a compelling femme fatale figure—is further created

around the idea of her in absence. After her halt on the train platform, a rather jarring straight cut takes us to a strikingly direct medium close-up of a put out-looking middle-aged man with glasses declaring, “Robbed!” He is almost looking into the camera, and seems to be addressing us. He then changes his eye-line, looking and gesturing left, adding “Cleaned out!” Cut and an insert of a safe—open, with the top shelf clearly emptied—appears, as if to indicate just-so-there-can-be-no-mistake. Cut back to Strutt, the strenuously complaining man, who goes on to say that \$9,967 is missing, “And that girl did it. Marion Holland.” We do not know who this Marion is, but Strutt goes on to describe her (in such detail—and as if he is describing a show horse, “good teeth”—that the policemen interviewing him and his dubious-looking secretary share a smirk at his expense). She sounds potentially like the mystery lady with the handbag. Strutt is then joined by Sean Connery’s character Mark Rutland in confirming the comeliness of this “Marion,” and while Strutt huffs about her having seemed so “nice, so efficient, so...” Mark offers wryly, “resourceful?” while the camera moves to hold him in a medium one-shot that lingers on his ironic, amused expression. He seems to be gazing off at something in the distance, at which point a straight cut takes us back to the tight shot of the handbag under the arm, though this time the setting is different. In the abstracted space created by cinema, Mark’s gaze seems to be literally traveling toward this mystery lady and the proof of her crime, as a sort of literalization of the movement of his mental attention. As viewers, our attention had been drawn to the woman and her bag once before, and now again—with the addition of new information and the shared interest of other characters in this spectacle of lady and handbag—to heighten our suspense.

Again we are given the spectacle of the handbag/woman sashaying away from us, this time down a hotel hallway, tracked by a slowly moving camera that allows the receding figure to gain on it into several seconds of a full body shot in depth, before she turns the corner (just as Hitchcock emerges from a door into the hallway to put in his cameo). She is followed by a bellboy carrying large wrapped packages. The straight cut that immediately follows her turning the corner finds us in a generic-looking hotel room set in neutral colours, and we see the packages, evidently women’s apparel wrapped in tissue and department store boxes, strewn about. Unpacking these boxes is the dark-haired figure, still with her back towards us but now in a bronze-patterned silk robe to the knees, much more opulent and exotic than the prim, practical robes we will later see Marnie wearing: here, with her raven tresses, as the

attractive thief “Marion Holland,” she functions in definitive femme fatale mode.^[7]

The woman is transferring new clothing and accessories into a shell-pink suitcase, pearly and fresh beside the dark suitcase (the one she was carrying on the train platform) that receives cast-away, crumpled attire: the woman throws a lacy bra and slip (*de rigueur* vamp apparel) into the old suitcase, a gesture pointedly recorded by a crane shot which has come in over her back and moved in to a closer shot of the suitcases, giving us a good view of the cast-off items, as well as the careful way the new, pristine and lady-like articles (satin boudoir slippers and white gloves) are being arranged. All of this information signalling the process of changing personas (which is considerable—the boxes, the suitcases, the separated piles of personal effects) is handled with great economy. It is easy to miss the specific clues and simply notice that a woman is packing, but the camera and editing make sure that this impression of the scene is there to be had. At this point, not-yet-Marnie’s body has functioned as yet another object, another clue within these introductory sequences, signifying in the details. The dark hair is now out of frame, and the delicate hands and refined coral-hued manicure now become the representative image of this woman, just as the thrown-aside brighter, flashier clothes are replaced by the subdued greys and creams of the new items.

The next cut follows along the same plane of action, a rapid readjustment from the close medium shot of the suitcases to the yellow handbag, also on the bed in front of the suitcases. The woman’s hands smoothly open the purse, remove some essentials (comb, wallet, makeup compact) and then swiftly dump the remaining contents of the purse into the new suitcase, these contents being piles and piles of cash. The camera stays quite tight on these actions, following the flow of her arm movements. There is a fluidity and intimacy to all of this, in the closeness of the camera to the action, and its ease of movement, and also in the woman’s smooth gestures: she obviously knows what she is doing, and has done it before, probably several times. This impression continues with the next shot, which is a close-up of the wallet, from which she removes a Social Security card, then picks up the golden face-powder compact, opens it and unhinges the mirror with a nail file to reveal a secret compartment, and sorts through a number of such cards, all with different names. She then replaces the old Marion Holland alias with a new one, Margaret Edgar, and slips it into the plastic folder in the wallet, in front of an “In event of an accident card” (a bit of

sly Hitchcock humour). The camera's holding on these methodical actions (this last sequence being all one shot of 26 seconds) is a very Hitchcockian device, taking us visually through the details rather than offering verbal exposition, and allowing for a focus on the intimate materiality of the diegetic world as experienced by the characters and thus by the viewer, rather than relying on the abstracted actions we only hear about, or infer.

From the minutiae of this task of identity-changing, the film moves into a dramatic revelation. As Bernard Herrmann's score suddenly soars with harps and violins, a dissolve (a dreamy contrast to the clean straight cuts we've had so far, and which are the norm of the film) transports us to a close up of a white ceramic sink in which the black hair is being washed. Artistic licence has black hair dye come off like spilled ink into the water (as it never would: only several rounds of bleaching would strip the hair of that dark stain) and voila!—cut to a slight low angle view (with the camera where the mirror should be) of a soggy mane poised above the sink and, with a toss of the head, the lovely face of our (now blonde) mystery lady is finally revealed!

The face we see is recognizably the shining face of an ingénue, not femme fatale. She looks like the Marnie we will come to know, but a glorified version, with sparkling eyes (Tippi Hedren's eyelashes, both real and fake, are very intricately mascara-ed, giving her particularly bright doll-like eyes), clean smooth peachy-white skin, and a refined smile of tasteful abandon: this is the carefree face of Marnie that we will only see in the forthcoming Forio-riding scenes, the ones with much maligned back-projection. Otherwise, Marnie looks composed, reserved, and often tense. She seldom actually looks distraught; even during her panic attacks she is presented as tight with shock. She only really comes undone in the final scenes, from the killing of her beloved horse Forio through to the confrontation of her mother and her past—at which time her hair is partially down rather than pulled into a complicated up-do, and through her distress she becomes bedraggled and dewy, like a child woken from a nightmare. Marnie is constructed as an elegantly withholding woman of refinement (seemingly classless, or classy—rather than actually high-class, as is the patrician Lil Mainwaring, or Grace Kelly's Hitchcock characters). In her pathologies, she becomes vulnerable and pitiable in a childlike manner; she never, except possibly when riding Forio, confronts her demons as a woman, nor expresses herself as a womanly sexual being. She is, then, quite convincingly "frigid." Much of this has to do with her smart sleek coifs and clean, business-like

makeup, and especially her prim costuming: unflashy, practical suits and blouses; the robe she wears on the honeymoon cruise, which certainly sends a message of untouchableness to her unwanted new husband, as the neckline nearly comes up to her chin; the ice-white party gown, covering everything but her neck. But the sense of containment within Marnie is also a result of the containment around Marnie, and this is due to the placement of Marnie through montage as an object of contemplation.

After revealing her face, the film still employs the scheming, active femme fatale Marnie: the next scene returns to the previous stylistic motif of following her from behind; we are taken through her process of stashing the old suitcase in a locker, and then led, through Marnie's gaze off-screen, matched with an insert of a floor grill, to take careful notice of her covert toss down the grate of the yellow (like the money-filled handbag she has disposed of) locker key. But following this we get a glimpse of the leading lady Marnie in what is perhaps her "real" life, as she confidently checks into a cozy country bed-and-breakfast and, with relaxed hair and sporty outfit, takes her dearly loved horse for a ride. Here, Marnie's movements are monitored by the male stable hands—before cutting to a shot of Marnie and Forio galloping off in the distance, a shot of the unnamed (and unimportant as a character) stable hand watching Marnie intently as she rides off is held just long enough to strike one as uncomfortably or surprisingly over-long. This shot is easily forgotten when a cut later we are privileged to his view, and another quick cut finds Marnie in medium shot, astride a mechanical horse (that is out of the shot) and glowing with the pleasure of the ride. This shot not only contains the rather obvious (but not as strikingly fake as many of the film's supporters and detractors will declare) back projection, but also curiously has Marnie wearing an altogether different sweater than the one she had on previously. Whether due to continuity error or an almost avant-garde way of suggesting different days spent by Marnie at this activity, this scene does create a subtly jarring sense of dislocation or dream—an attempt by Marnie to escape reality? Or at least a sign that the film, stylistically, is not beholden to verisimilitude (especially as it is directly followed by the taxi's approach to Marnie's mother's house, with the dramatic painted backdrop of an imposing ship). And, retrospectively, the stable hand's gaze signals the kind of world that Marnie finds herself trapped in, a world of probing gazes in which, as criminal and psychically-scarred woman, she must navigate a safe, self-sufficient path.

Space does not permit me, here, to analyse the film as a whole with such detail. But I choose the opening sequences because they nicely set up the manner in which Marnie tends to function throughout the film. She is introduced as a captivating, attractive specimen, the object around which much intrigue revolves. She is at this time given the status of protagonist, a status that takes over as the blonde leading lady takes over from the darklady femme fatale. The narration remains almost exclusively (but not strictly so) with Marnie throughout the film, following her through her travels to her mother's, to Forio's stable, to her interview and working days at Rutland's, and in her encounters with Mark and his family. Likewise, after the opening sequence with Strutt, the narrative unfolding is fairly restricted to Marnie's experience and knowledge of events, though within this her own past, her thoughts and her secrets are not disclosed to the viewer until they are made known to another character, and even close-up and lingering shots of her face do not reveal much before it is explicitly stated— Marnie's facial expressions are not readily readable, and evidence points to Hitchcock's direction as largely responsible for Tippi Hedren's composed, inscrutable bearing here. Certainly Marnie's triggered phobias and panic attacks are treated with a stylized, expressive subjectivity. Considering the foregrounding of Marnie as protagonist, she is given few point-of-view shots, or at least her POV shots are diminished in emphasis among the other characters' POV shots (even incidental, non-recurring characters such as the stable hand and, pronouncedly, the shady, pestering man at the racetrack)—POV shots that take Marnie as their object.

Marnie's optical POV is utilised pointedly for the montage gaze-floor-grate-and-dropped-key referred to above. It is also in play in the early scene at her mother's house, an instance wherein Marnie's emotions—her discomfort with her mother and attempts to please her, her rather absurd jealousy of the little neighbour girl—register as repressed but acute. And the lurid close-ups of Mark's eyes as he forces himself upon her are expressively sinister Marnie points-of-view. But generally, POV shots are given to the characters that surround Marnie, and are directed at her. A number of scenes are organized around a given character or characters taking note of Marnie, their curiosity specifically piqued by her. Thus, a character newly introduced or coming into a scene midway are often granted POV shots of Marnie, such that Marnie's movements are tracked by others even when the scene "should" be Marnie's, that is, scenes that exist to further the information on or characterization of her, or the plot in which she is the

protagonist. The racetrack scene, for example, actually begins, after a few establishing shots, with a medium close-up of a stranger, then cuts to a shot of Marnie and Mark in the distance, framed from the perspective of the stranger's spy-hole (a rolled up newspaper). When Marnie interviews at Rutland & Co. she is first spied on by an intrusive-feeling crane shot (in the famous Hitchcockian "voyeuristic" camera style) which backs up only to have Mark, upon his entrance, insistently follow Marnie with his gaze, with an intimidating high-angle among others, and then Lil, upon her entrance, to also monitor Marnie's presence with interest. Marnie POV shots are related to her criminal scheming: though watched by others on this, her first day in the office, her attention is captured by Mr. Ward's checking, in a locked drawer, on the combination of the safe. This is shown through an exaggerated POV shot, in that the action with the key and the drawer are presented in a close-up, as though Marnie's attention could allow her gaze to zoom in on the details. And in the subsequent scene, on another day at the office, the camera circles Marnie in a dramatic, bird-of-prey crane shot until it arrives at her face and her own gaze, which a straight cut reveals as a POV shot of the receptionist at the open safe, cut back to Marnie at which point the camera careens back, behind her, to reveal Mark watching her watching the safe. Marnie's every move, it would seem, is monitored, and even her own perspective, her own POV shots, are controlled, as it were, by a relay of gazes that fix her as the object. Caught in this containing relay of gazes, Marnie is cast as the intriguing but inscrutable object—the fascinating, unattainable, unforgettable Hitchcock blonde.

Jodi Ramer wrote on Post-Feminism and Boredom in Synoptique 4.

1 Feminist critics such as Miriam Hansen, Patrice Petro, Anne Friedberg and Giuliana Bruno are interested in the advent and development of cinema and cinema-going as commensurate with the experience of urban modernity. In both, women are and have been active participants in inevitably gendered, but not necessarily limiting, ways. The experience of popular culture—its pleasures as well as its disorientating and alienating effects—is central to this revisioning of the last century, which sees the so-called postmodern as just a continuation, and in many ways a replaying, of early twentieth century modernity

2 Robin Wood takes on such critiques in order

to defend *Marnie* as an accomplished and deliberately artful/artificial film; they can also be found in both of Spoto's studies on Hitchcock, though he aligns himself with Robin Wood's take in *The Art Of Alfred Hitchcock*, and then sides with the film's detractors when he writes his Hitchcock biography. A recent study of *Marnie*'s production history by Tony Lee Moral also addresses these criticisms.

3 See endnote above.

4 Hitchcock's intentions, while usefully telling as a source through which to study the film, are not ultimately at issue, but the signs of storyboarding, direction, mise-en-scene, art direction, set and costume design, and editing that are traceable in a given film and more widely across an oeuvre, add up to that thing called style. In all of these elements Hitchcock, with his attention to detail and concern with artistic control, was instrumental. His involvement extended to the development of a script in pre-production, often an adaptation from a novel, as in the case of *Marnie*, or from another source. Much has been made of the reoccurring thematic and narrative motifs in Hitchcock's movies; whatever the causality or degree of intent that may be attributed to these patterns, their presence indicates that the Hitchcock style is undeniably imbricated with aspects of story, narrative and characterization.

5 Spoto falls into a critical sandtrap when, after learning through research for his biography on Hitchcock that the director gave up on *Marnie* after suffering romantic rejection from Tippi Hedren, he denounces his former position as defender of the film's unnaturalness as expressive of the title character's subjectivity and writes, "But the real reason was simpler and sadder, and those reviewers who were critical, it should be admitted, were right: these moments in *Marnie* are not emotionally disturbing, they are simply visually jarring; they mark not a deliberate use of unconventional means, but are simply unpleasant examples of the director's cavalier disinterest in the final product" (476). This despite a production history and interviews by the director and his crew that express Hitchcock's desire to make a stylised, perverse and unconventional film from a novel which is more a standard psychological thriller; this despite a pronounced deliberateness accorded by Spoto—and everyone else—to Hitchcock's other films, which share with *Marnie* common stylistic motifs. But most problematic is Spoto's naïve assumption that "facts" turned up in research delimit the "right" approach to a film text. Again, the film itself cannot be ignored, and a text's impressions on the viewer must be

reckoned with.

6 In his book on the making and reception of *Marnie*, Tony Lee Moral insists upon all of this, without examination, and it is annoying, to say the least.

7 But still within the modest reserve typical of the Hitchcock blonde: unlike another Marion, Marion Crane of *Psycho* (1960), who though blonde, is not really a Hitchcock blonde, not with her extreme bras and open sexuality. The formal use of Janet Leigh, including her style of dress, is pointedly different, with much more focus on the body than the rather spiritualised, clean-face-and-superb-clothing treatment the cool blondes receive. This dichotomy is somewhat merged but tellingly maintained in *Vertigo* (1958), wherein Kim Novak plays both Madeline, the sublime "face" type, and Judy, the lower-class "body" type.

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Vox ex machinas: Rethinking the Narrator in *Barry Lyndon*

Chris Meir

An evaluation of *Barry Lyndon*'s narrator in terms of unreliability and genre revision. Key characteristics of the narrator in Thackeray's source novel are described and their importance explained. Kubrick's use of voice-over is compared to the source text's in terms of adaptation. The paper concludes that the film's narrator preserves the key characteristics of the source while engaging in a revision of the Historical film genre that parallels Thackeray's revision of the picaresque tradition.

For many, *Barry Lyndon* (1975) is one of Stanley Kubrick's greatest artistic achievements, but in the period following *Lolita* (1962) it was also his worst commercial failure. Not only did the film perform poorly at the box office, but at the time of its release, it also received a very cool reception from the critical community at large. Pauline Kael, for instance, said:

If you were to cut the jokes and cheerfulness out of the film *Tom Jones* and run it in slow motion, you'd have something very close to *Barry Lyndon*. Kubrick has taken a quick-witted story, full of vaudeville turns...and he's controlled it so meticulously that he's drained the blood out of it. The movie isn't quite the rise and fall of a flamboyant rakehell, because Kubrick doesn't believe in funning around. (quoted in Miller 232)

As ill-informed as it is, Kael's response reveals the extent to which genre and expectation figure into the typical film-goer's experience, and indicates how

much Kubrick's film disappointed these expectations. For some critics, the displeasure in what was thought to be present in this film was exceeded, and may have been partly determined, by the disappointment at what was in fact missing: traditional treatment of traditional materials, that is to say, the immemorial salivation at the chiming of generic clichés. (Spiegel 203)

Instead of "chiming" clichés, Kubrick made a film that intentionally defied convention. This paper will be an examination of just how Kubrick carried out this project of genre revision by examining one specific device in the film: the third-person narrator. *Barry Lyndon*'s narrator is a very complex character in the film that deserves a much fuller and nuanced treatment than has heretofore been offered. To accomplish this, I will trace the development of the film's narrator from its source in Thackeray's novel, a novel that is quite generically revisionist in its own right. In adapting *The Luck of Barry Lyndon*, Kubrick created a film which, despite all the semantic differences from its source, closely parallels the iconoclastic thrust of its literary progenitor.

Though Kael's claim that Kubrick "drained the blood" out of his source is obviously an unfair exaggeration, there can be no denying that he did in fact mute much of the novel's roaring tone. Scenes of violence and tumult, such as young Redmond's "toast" to Captain Quin, are rendered in a manner that, to put it mildly, is notably subdued in the film. Even a cursory glance at the corresponding scene in Kubrick's film demonstrates that it distills and ritualizes the events in representing them. Likewise, characters are altered in

such a way that parallels this general alteration in tone. Ryan O’Neal’s Barry, for instance, rarely displays any visible emotion, and moreover hardly ever speaks. This stands in marked contrast to his all too violent and verbose counterpart in the novel. Also, in place of the tempestuous Lady Lyndon of Thackeray’s novel we have Marisa Berenson’s tragic heroine, whom one critic has quite astutely compared to Maria Falconetti’s Joan of Arc. These differences in enunciation and character aside, the most audacious change that Kubrick makes in his film is the one that we will be concerned with for the rest of this analysis, this being the change that he makes in narrative voice.

THE NOVEL’S NARRATOR

The most marked difference between the novel and the film is that the former is told from a first-person narrator’s point of view. Thackeray has Barry tell his own story in the form of a memoir dictated to his mother while in Fleet’s prison for debtors in 1811 while slowly dying from alcohol-related maladies. Barry’s narrative voice in the novel is one that is full of obvious lies and bragging, with Thackeray’s imaginary editor, George Fitz-Boodle, intervening at several junctures to drive home the point of Barry’s dishonesty. We can witness this technique in the following passage, where Barry describes his treatment of Lady Lyndon during their marriage:

[Lady Lyndon] was luckily very fond of her youngest son, and through him I had a wholesome and effectual hold of her; for if in any of her tantrums or fits of haughtiness— (this woman was intolerably proud; and repeatedly, at first, in our quarrels, dared to twit me with my own original poverty and low birth)— if, I say, in our disputes she pretended to have the upper hand, to assert her authority against mine, to refuse to sign such papers as I might think necessary for the distribution of our large and complicated property, I would have Master Bryan carried off to Chiswick for a couple of days; and I warrant me this lady-mother could hold out no longer, and would agree to anything I could propose. (247-248)

After some digression on Barry’s dubious relationships with his lady’s female servants, which I have here omitted, the editor, Fitz-Boodle, interposes with the following footnote:

From these curious confessions, it would appear

that Mr. Lyndon maltreated his lady in every possible way; that he denied her society, bullied her into signing away her property, spent it in gambling and taverns, was openly unfaithful to her; and, when she complained, threatened to remove her children from her. (248)

The “trick” here in Thackeray’s novel, allowing the reader to see through the clearly dishonest narration of Barry, is an extremely crude one. It is not difficult at any point, including this one, to see that Barry is not accurately representing the facts of his life, and that his account has a darker truth embedded in it. The editor serves to further point out the obvious. As Thomas Allen Nelson, speaking of the novel, points out, “Barry’s verbal posturings become as obvious as they are trite, so that one soon learns to measure what he says against what Thackeray means” (167-168, emphasis in original). Thackeray had a very specific intent with this excessively unreliable narrator, and to articulate this intent we must examine *The Luck of Barry Lyndon* as a genre parody.

The Luck of Barry Lyndon is a satirical version of the picaresque, a genre of fiction that came into high popularity, along with the novel, in the eighteenth century. We can all perhaps list the salient features of tales like Fielding’s *Tom Jones* intuitively: an innocent hero, typically without parents but always of an apparently low birth, sets out on numerous adventures where through his own bravery and wits he rises in wealth and social rank, finding true love and living happily ever after. The typical picaresque does not feature a first-person narrator like Thackeray’s, but instead features a partially ironical third-person narrator much like the one that Kubrick provides in the film version of the tale. In employing the first-person narrator (most likely borrowed from the satires of Jon Swift [Stephenson 253]), Thackeray has every intention of deflating the idyllic picaresque paradigm.

Thackeray based his story on the real life history of the then widely known and notorious criminal John Bowes. The fact that Thackeray chose such an infamous criminal for his ostensibly picaresque tale does much to illuminate his intentions with the novel. To truly appreciate the implications of such a choice of models, a modern reader may imagine a Danielle Steele-type family saga modeled on the life of Lizzie Borden. Instead of giving us the low-born innocent of *Tom Jones*, we get instead what the Victorian “bounder”: “one who seeks to overleap the settled and venerable bounds of class” (Stephenson 252), and a vicious, brutal (and

worst of all, Irish!) one at that. The employment of the Swiftian satirical narrator has the effect then of keeping “the fatuous arrogance of [Barry] always before the reader” (Feldmann 197). The goal here is to confront a reader who would be expecting a garrulous, gallivanting hero with an obnoxious criminal who is, on top of all this, intent on deceiving his readership into thinking that he is the iconic hero to whom they have become accustomed in adventure novels.

THE FILM'S NARRATOR

In turning to the film's narrator, we find ourselves with two major critical readings of the device which are from satisfying in their conclusions. Mark Crispin Miller outspokenly characterizes *Barry Lyndon's* narrator as an unreliable one. According to Miller, the lack of overlap between image and commentary indicates a dearth of objective reliability. While examining scenes such as Barry's departure from Lisichen and those depicting Barry's treatment of Lady Lyndon, Miller continually harps on the fact that “we never see any evidence” to support the narrator's claims, claims which he describes as “authoritative libel that passes for insight” (236). The problems with this analysis are legion, beginning with Miller's assumption that lack of overlap and redundancy indicates unreliability. While it is true that in Miller's examples we don't see evidence to support the narrator's contentions, we also do not see anything that disputes them. These details are left somewhat ambiguous in the film, but this does not necessarily mean that the narration is simply “structuralized slander” (236). In fact several critics point to the “problem” of the film's eschewal of visual and aural redundancy as one of its strengths: it indicates narrative economy. All these points and more are raised by Sarah Kozloff in her *Invisible Storytellers*, wherein she systematically discredits these assertions of unreliability. Unfortunately, this acute diagnosis of the shortcomings of Miller's argument leads Kozloff to conclude that the voice-over should be equated with “Thackeray,” as if Kubrick had meant to embody the novelist in this character (123). While one could argue that Thackerayan aristocratic sensibilities are presented and perhaps being lampooned in the voice-over narrator (Stephenson and Falsetto suggest such an understanding), summarily naming the character “Thackeray” is an unwise characterization. The sensibility is there in the narrator, with his superior and ironic tone, but it is unlikely that many audiences would come to the film with an inherent understanding of what “Thackeray” signifies. While authors like Shakespeare or Dickens have taken on a certain popular persona, Thackeray remains somewhat obscure to the

vast majority of the film-going public. Even specialists in the field of cinema must do some research before Kozloff's assertion can begin to make sense. Her mistake is a productive one, however. Naming the voice-over “Thackeray” is a critical *felix culpa* which points us to the popular conception of historical fiction that to some degree underlies this understanding of the narrator. To return to Miller for one moment though, we must point out the conclusion that Miller draws from his theory of the “unreliable narrator”, a conclusion indicated by his essay's title, “Kubrick's Anti-Reading of *The Luck of Barry Lyndon*”, is that Kubrick has made a film which substantially deviates from the spirit of its source, in large part through its unreliable narrator. But when *Barry Lyndon* is examined along the lines of cinematic genre, we immediately see where the thesis fails.

“As a ‘costume romance’ of the eighteenth century, *Barry Lyndon* is neither *Tom Jones* nor *Scaramouche*” (Spiegel 203), and one of the things that sets the film apart is its unconventional narrator. The semantic elements of the historical film are, like those of most popular genres, so common that most viewers can list them. These include, but are not limited to, a diegetic time set in the historical past, ornate costumes and sets designed with historical authenticity in mind, characters caught up in historical forces, typically wars or revolutions of some sort, and of course love and happiness. Most historical films must include some sort of narration to explain the film's setting as part of an overall project of facilitating spectator involvement in the fiction; this device usually takes the form of title cards introducing the year and geographical setting of the film, or more overt voice-over narrators like the first-person narrator in *Dances With Wolves* (Costner, 1990) or the third-person narrator in the film version of *Tom Jones* (Tony Richardson, 1963). *Barry Lyndon* does in fact exhibit many of these semantic elements, but of course, Kubrick's arrangement and employment of these elements and his generic syntax is what distinguishes the film from many others.

THE HISTORICAL FILM

Leger Grindon, in his study *Shadows of the Past*, describes the two most common structures for the historical fiction film to take: that of romance, and that of historical spectacle. These forms, or syntaxes, are distinct from one and other but also often overlap, with the historical spectacle usually being the backdrop against which the romance takes place. Such is the case in *Barry Lyndon*. According to Grindon's model, the

romance will feature two lovers whom the narrative arc of the film will seek to unite (10). Paramount among the film's romances of course is that of Barry and Lady Lyndon, which is anything but the happily ever after of *Tom Jones*. Throughout the courtship and marriage of the couple it is the narrator who keeps reminding us of the cynical facts of the relationship: that Lady Lyndon is, at least at the beginning, in ardent love with Barry; that Barry sees the romance as an opportunity to improve his material position in the world; and that once the marriage is realized, "Lady Lyndon [takes] on a position not much more important to Barry than the fine rugs and furniture" in his life. There is some visual corroboration of this last fact, but by and large all of this romantically deflating information is conveyed to us exclusively through the narrator. The narrator's mocking tone when describing Barry's infatuation with Nora provides foreshadowing of Nora's ultimate betrayal of Barry and the marriage of convenience that takes the place of their romance. Likewise with the cynical facts that counterpoint the Lischen episode: Lischen's "heart was like many of the neighboring towns, and had been stormed and occupied many times before Barry came to invest it." Here, in a moment that mirrors the episode in the novel in tone and function, the narrator is the only thing that keeps the viewer from sensing any feeling of tenderness on the part of the lovers. This reminds the viewer that there is no romance in the world of *Barry Lyndon*, a sentiment that finds a strong parallel in the correspondent passage in Thackeray's novel.

The other major form present in the historical film, according to Grindon is that which is centered around the spectacle of history. "The spectacle emphasizes the extrapersonal forces (social, economic, geographic, and so forth) bearing on the historical drama" (15). This is usually seen in terms of the set designs and costumes, or the historical period in general featuring wars, great personages or momentous events. *Barry Lyndon* is a film rife with historical spectacle: we have George III, the Seven Years' War as seen from the British and Prussian sides, aristocratic duels that were so much a custom of the eighteenth century, and even the French Revolution which is obliquely referred to in the date (1789) on the annuity bill that Lady Lyndon signs at the end of the film. But we again see the disparity between the traditional deployment of the spectacle in historical fiction films as described by Grindon, and their specific employment in *Barry Lyndon*. Once again our humble narrator has no small role in aiding this deployment. The narrator debunks the glorious historical war, first by purposely acting as an imperfect historian: "It would take a great philosopher to explain the causes of the

Seven Years' War in which Barry's regiment was now involved, suffice it to say that England and Prussia were on one side while France was on the other." Not only is this the only information that we need to know to understand the film's plot, but it also shows the mythology of history, as the causes of wars that one learns in schools don't really affect those involved in them. The narrator is also intent on undercutting any romantic notions about actually fighting in a war: "It is all well and good to dream of great battles, but to see war up close is a whole other thing" and later characterizing the business of the great men of history as carried out by "thieves, pickpockets, and robbers." We meet the film's most illustrious historical personage, George III, only after the narrator has described how Barry has gone about bribing the king's closest councillors. Time and time again, the narrator speaks as if to keep the viewer from any naive ideals they may have harbored about the romance and spectacle of history. In this way the voice-over serves to defy the viewer's expectations and instead rework generic convention in a way that makes the viewer uncomfortable with its historico-aesthetic assumptions that have long been enforced by escapist historical fiction.

In his final comment on the historical film genre, Grindon remarks of the typical genre film, with its blending of romance and historical spectacle, that its "historical perspective strives to expand and generalize [the characters'] significance" (223). *Barry Lyndon*, with its final title card saying "It was in the reign of George III that these personages lived and quarreled, they are all equal now," undercuts this convention most of all.

Kubrick's reading of Thackeray is clearly anything but an "anti-reading." In its assault on comforting forms of escapist fiction, *Barry Lyndon* demonstrates a spiritual affinity with its literary predecessor, and up to now, has met with a similar fate. With all these challenges to viewers to rethink their conceptions of history and its fictional representation in the genre film and picaresque novels, it is no surprise that neither version of *Barry Lyndon* was terribly popular. Yet, they both remain very important works of iconoclastic art.

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Whose Film Is It Anyway: Interpretation, Reception and the Queering of *Basic Instinct*

Lysandra Woods

Lys Woods examines the critical and popular reception of *Basic Instinct* with particular attention to the protests organized during the film's production and around its theatrical release. An alliance of protesters was formed by member of GLAAD, Act UP, Queer Nation and the National Women's movement. Woods surveys various scholastic and journalistic reviews of the film, focusing particularly on the largely negative reaction to demonstrations against the film's—and Hollywood's—offensive representations of homosexuality.

Since the 1980s, reception has played a crucial role in film studies. Today, the interest and investment in reception is such that the category is beyond serious challenge, regardless of the fact that many practitioners choose to elide questions of reception altogether. But despite the signs of reinvigoration, a lingering unease underpins the imbrication of the study of film with the study of reception, an unease which may present itself in various guises and to various degrees but remains predicated upon the discrete, and, at times, oppositional imperatives of the interpretation of film texts (the foundational methodology of film studies), and the interpretation of interpretation—reception. That said, this unease has not necessarily been a detriment, but in itself offers a rejuvenating if unresolved investigation into the roles of the institution, film studies and the academic in postmodernity. Clearly, reception studies can have multiple roles and positions within the discipline; and the manner in which the institution and individual academics structure their turn to reception is both relatively open— audience research,

fan studies, historiography, star discourse—and open to contradiction and incompatibility: between the discourses of institutional academics, journalistic film reviewers, filmgoers and audiences, and Hollywood marketing.

The underlying animosity, or diverse agendas, between the various fields that constitute reception has much to do with film's peculiar position within both modernity and the institution. With respect to the former, film has always straddled oppositions: mass audience and elite critic; careless habit and contemplative reverie; industrial technology and rarified art; and in regard to the latter, the institutionalization of film studies occurred during (and via) the moment in which film studies was inextricably enmeshed with apparatus theory, a construction of legitimacy which overtly privileged those who had a working knowledge of high French theory. Within the institution the film reader was critical, distanced, and legitimate, able to scour the depths of the film text to uncover and reveal its meaning; but outside of the institution the film viewer was constructed as, at worst, illegitimate and, at best, naïve, the ideological primitive to the institution's sophisticate. Needless to say, this history is not conducive to suddenly and easily embracing the mass in mass art and popular culture. ^[1]

RECEPTION IN ACTION: THE CASE OF *BASIC INSTINCT*

As one of the more high profile protests organized against a Hollywood release, the outcry over *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992) acts as a telling case

study that foregrounds the fault lines and discursive competitions within the multifarious components of reception. Not only the protests themselves, but more crucially the largely negative reaction to the protests by both the mainstream press and scholarly journals inadvertently map the stakes of diffuse and disseminated postmodern authority, and highlight the broad incompatibilities of the various sectors and vying constituents of film studies, film criticism, film culture and film reception.

After a troubled production, during which, according to the *Toronto Star*, the producers of *Basic Instinct* had to obtain a court injunction to ward off protesters from the film's San Francisco location shoot, the protestors readjusted their tactics for the film's theatrical release. Composed of a loose-knit alliance between GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation), Act UP, Queer Nation, and the National Women's movement, and at times sporting T-shirts that read, "Catherine Did It," thus spoiling the film's surprise ending, the protesters vocalized and made visible their own boycott of the film, while encouraging other filmgoers to do likewise. The coalition's putative agenda was to inform the public about Hollywood's long history of demeaning and offensive representations of homosexuality (informative pamphlets were made up and distributed), and to hamper the boxoffice payback of *Basic Instinct*, the latest incarnation of Hollywood's homophobia and misogyny.

The protests were a nationwide offensive, taking place in such densely-populated cities as San Francisco, Los Angeles, Dallas, Atlanta,^[2] with press conferences and spin-off performances also occurring. For instance, six Queer Nation members were arrested in New York after disrupting Sharon Stone's opening monologue during her *Saturday Night Live* guest-host appearance.^[3] Generally, the protests were taken up by the media with little attention to specificity; indicative of the media's hysterical reaction, the protests and protesters took on a life of their own, treated as an amorphous, ubiquitous entity, an attitude which is lucidly, if incidentally, evinced by media pundit Ms. Clift on the CNN segment *Crier & Company*. Speaking of the protests and filmic representation, Clift declares that the answer to Hollywood's woes vis-à-vis the *Basic Instinct* protests is none other than Kevin Costner: "He needs to do for the gays what he did for Indians [!?] in *Dances With Wolves*." Within the mainstream media, "the protests" and "protesters" come to stand in for "the gays"—all of them. This phraseology is troubling, as well as inaccurate, but I want to use it for the remainder of the

paper for two interconnected reasons: firstly, to draw attention to the fact that the media parlayed the protests as a phenomenon, a metonymy for homosexuality as a whole; and secondly to utilize the vague and ill-formed, yet potent image of the protests and protesters as they live on in the public imagination, encouraged by television coverage which unerringly focused on chanting, rowdy crowds: "Two, four, six, eight/Hollywood must stop the hate." (In all probability, some of the protests may have been relatively calm, comprised mainly of leaflet activity.)

Basic Instinct, of course, had a huge opening weekend, which lead to the first round of media head shaking as commentators, almost in unison, bemoaned the protestors' ineffectual tactics. CNN's "media analyst" Martin Grove is typical of this attitude: "The protestors were trying to give you a different impression of *Basic Instinct*, a negative impression. But the film's strong debut, the second biggest opening of the year, indicates those protests probably backfired." As Matthew Gilbert, in a special report in the *Boston Globe* entitled, "Cashing in on Controversy," asks: "Do forces such as Queer Nation [...] recognize the power of negative hype? If their goal is to keep the public from seeing the offensive lesbian portrayals in *Basic Instinct*, then they are surely misguided and naïve." Silly protestors, don't they know the 60s are over? Don't they know all publicity, good or bad, is still publicity?

But publicity also counts for concerns other than the film. The protests raised GLAAD and Queer Nation's own profiles, an attendant benefit that is recognized by Gilbert's concluding remarks: "More people will see *Basic Instinct* after the protests, but more people will know about Queer Nation as well as the offensive stereotyping of gays and lesbians in Hollywood movies." GLAAD spokesperson Geoff Mangin tows a similar line when he remarks that "*Basic Instinct* was destined to be a box office success, with its huge, sexy, marketing campaign and the release of the film during a non-competitive time of year," but goes on to offer that in his mind the protests were worthwhile and productive in that they were "able to get people to talk about how gays are portrayed in film. It was a trade off [...] we received an enormous amount of attention about the issue."

This occasional, and grudging praise of the protests, though, is overshadowed by the general, barely concealed contempt for the protests as a "pointless" endeavor and an "over-reaction." *Chicago Sun Times* writer Llyod Sachs rather impassionedly cries "gay and

Lesbian activists are contributing to the bloodletting of color and risk from movies and other forms of popular culture.” (Sachs must know that he can’t blame the protesters for *Philadelphia* (Jonathan Demme, 1993)—doesn’t he?) And Sachs has lesbian critic Ruby Rich to commiserate with him over the “negative impact” of the protests. Rich, rather sanctimoniously, offers that: “Responding to Hollywood product and judging its positive and negative values is a doomed venture [...] Those who put all their emotion and energy into protesting *Basic Instinct* instead of promoting *Edward II* deserve what they get.”

While *Basic Instinct*’s homophobia is undeniable, although possibly ambivalent, it pales beside the overt and tasteless homophobic remarks one encounters in perusing the press’ responses. Gilbert, attempting clever humour, twists the AIDS awareness slogan “Silence=Death” to “Silence=Box Office Death,” and *The Independent* ran a peculiar “HIV Positive Role Models” headline for Adam Mars-Jones’ coverage. Mars-Jones’ connection between the AIDS epidemic and the *Basic Instinct* protests belies a conflation of the two and an anxiety over both. ^[4] AIDS activism is, of course, the other popular image that combines political action with visible and self-identified homosexuality, and in the early 90s an arena in which protests and political activism received a vast amount of media coverage. In some sense, the media backlash against the political activism engendered by the film can be read as the forum in which public hysteria surrounding “gayness” took its most uninhibited form, especially as *Basic Instinct*, despite its lip-service to homosexuality is primarily invested in heterosexual sex. One of the strange sub-texts of the protests, and one which applies equally to the efforts of gay activists to increase awareness of both the scope and the indiscriminate nature of AIDS, pivots on the blurring of boundaries between gay and straight communities, between gay and straight issues, between gay and straight sex. And in this light, the media’s furious response to the film’s protests would seem to imply a return of repressed hostility that could be openly voiced in relation to the frivolousness and vagrancies of the entertainment industry and its discontents.

If the protestors failed to win mainstream media support—and I only encountered one critic who lauded them outright—, they fared no better in scholarly publications. ^[5] Strangely, in fact, while one could find many instances of the broad incompatibility between academic and journalistic responses to the protests (the latter tends to focus on their economic failure, while

the former demonstrates no concern for the protests’ “success” or lack thereof), these two camps momentarily reconcile their differences around one similar point of critique: the protester’s inability to properly read a film. Sky Gilbert in the *Toronto Star* intones that: “The work of art may, in fact, be working on a complex, metaphoric level. And I certainly think *Basic Instinct* is a film of beauty and a work of art.” The implication here is clearly that the protesters may have missed the “complex” and “metaphoric” meanings, a sentiment also articulated by Julianne Pidduck in *CineAction*:

By highlighting *Basic Instinct*’s tongue-in-cheek, hyperbolic qualities, I would like to qualify and diverge from the literal type of reading offered by Queer Nation [...] I am not arguing that my reading must be the only correct one, but it suggests that a multivalent cultural text like *Basic Instinct* merits closer attention that is meted out by a rote literal critique. (70)

Pidduck goes on to enlist critic Catherine Carr’s take on the film to suggest an alternative reading:

This is a movie about male anxiety and paranoia. Women who are sexually powerful cause their anxiety, as do women emotionally attached to other women. Catherine is both. True—she and the other three might all be killers. But look who they’ve killed. Family, for one thing. Brothers. Men who might become husbands. It’s part of the whole male anxiety scenario. In fact, it’s almost a parody of a guy’s worst nightmare. And I thought it was a scream. (70)

The undercurrent of Pidduck’s charge is not only that the protestors missed the possible complexities of the film’s multivalent address but also that the protesters are somewhat anachronistic in their conceptualization and enactment of resistance. But resistance itself is by no means a simple or uncontested position in the 90s. As Judith Mayne argues, the legacy of 70s apparatus theory cannot be quelled by simply inverting the terms:

If the model of the cinematic subject assumes homogeneity, then projecting heterogeneous ‘activity’ can be just as vapid and indistinct as the term ‘passivity.’ While it may be preferable to speak of black spectators as always resisting the fictions of mainstream cinema (preferable, that is, to ignoring race altogether), I fear that the continuing dualism of ‘dominant’ spectators versus ‘marginal’ (and therefore resisting ones) perpetuates a false

dichotomy of us and them. Defining the other as the vanguard of spectatorship only reverses the dichotomy. (159)

That is—and Mayne goes on to investigate this facet in her study of star reception—resistance no longer implies a blanket criticism of the Hollywood classical narrative concomitant with the turn to alternative, avant-garde film forms as the mode that would produce a critical spectator. Now the “resisting” or “critical” spectator does not eschew visual pleasure in the image (*pave* Mulvey), but is constructed as the critical work entailed by the marginalized viewer to eek out sites of pleasure in mainstream productions that have been designed under the aegis of dominant paradigms. Mayne’s point, though, is that this positioning of the “critical” is not resisting Hollywood as much as it is continuing the classical formation of identification along multifarious lines to optimize the widespread and even contradictory pleasures that a film could elicit in contradistinction to the lone happy viewer of the 70s model: the white heterosexual male.

Implicit in Pidduck’s position is her performance of a feminist critical intervention, one that entails reading against the grain of the film’s dominant economy in order to find her pleasure elsewhere. As she concludes:

Catherine Trammell [*Basic Instinct*’s protagonist, played by Sharon Stone], with all of her impossible verve and absolute sexual confidence, her ability to turn a room full of seasoned cops into so much quivering jelly, even her tight grip on the proverbial castrating ice pick, provides moments of supreme pleasure for the feminist spectator—a fleeting but potentially empowering fantasy of transcendence to bolster up our imaginary reserve. (72)

The ire the protests inspire within academic circles in the 90s seems to be connected to their rejection of any pleasure principle whatsoever, their refusal to get with the polymorphous and heterogeneous textuality that is the talisman of the 90s intelligentsia. At this juncture, then, applying such heteroglossia to the protests and protesters themselves may prove useful, as well as reconsidering the role of resistance outside of the pleasure dome.

I wonder if Pidduck herself is overly literal-minded in regards to the protestors’ actions, as are nearly all the commentaries; that is, is the point and the only end of the protests to call attention to the film’s deleterious representation of lesbianism; or, possibly, are other

issues at stake—issues that, appropriately enough, also structure the film beyond its almost myopic investment in all things heavy-breathing and wall-banging? One academic article which makes no mention of the *Basic Instinct* protests is also one that has little interest in the film’s sexual escapades and sexuality shenanigans. Commonly, *Basic Instinct* is treated as an early 90s “erotic thriller” alongside others of its ilk, such as *Fatal Attraction*, *Disclosure*, *The Hand That Rocks The Cradle*, and *Single White Female*; but Marie Danziger’s “*Basic Instinct*: Grappling for Post-Modern Mind Control” views the film under the aegis of another early 90s narrative trend: the pathological dynamics between “readers” and writers.

Grouping such films as *Misery*, *Barton Fink*, and *The Player*, the stakes of *Basic Instinct*, for Danziger, are not defined by gender and sexuality (although both play a part) as much as they are by the struggle for *narrative authority*: “It seems both sides will go to any length to tell their version of the story. The ultimate victory is to have the last word.” Re-viewing the film from this perspective, Danziger argues that:

In *Basic Instinct* the key conflict has all the earmarks of the classic writer/reader vendetta. The flawed cop with the checkered past is Michael Douglas, and he’s pitted once again against his natural enemy, the fatally attractive, sexually devouring blonde who’ll stop at nothing to get her man. The point is that the obsessive predator is a threatening writer figure: she’s found out all there is to know about him in order to make him the central figure in her next murder mystery. Since she intends to kill him off in the last chapter, the cop has a real stake in pushing a rewrite. (8) ^[6]

Presumably, Danziger declines to mention the protests as she does not feel they pertain to her own singular take on the film. But narrative authority and “authorial” rights are as much the concern and the byproduct of the protests as are the issues of identity and representations of sexuality and women; but, unlike the film, the lines between reader and writer are not clearly demarcated. Indeed, apiece with the hubbub and recriminations surrounding the protests is the struggle between who has (or should have) the access and the authority to transform their (private) reading into (public) writing.

Writing about the protests, Mayne comes close to broaching this subject when she notes that: “I am not certain that spectatorship is the appropriate word to describe these political actions, which have far less

to do with how films are seen and consumed and far more to do with how they are produced” (164). Her assumption is that the protests are to some degree predicated upon a quest for representational control, which I think works, although along divergent lines than Mayne suggests. Rather than an investment in how films are produced, the protests seem to have everything to do with how the film will be seen and consumed; regardless of whether or not the protestors saw the film themselves, their actions construct one nodal point of the film’s reception, not only in their own manifestation as an overt display of political action, but outside of that modality, too.

That is, precisely what is at stake in the protests is the *grain* of the film, an entity no longer conceptualized as occurring at the site of production or circumscribed and contained within the text itself, but located in extratextual discursive action. Numerous commentators remarked that the choice of *Basic Instinct* is an odd peg to hang years of frustration over Hollywood’s profilmic treatment of gays and lesbians. While these critics could not exactly defend the film’s representational choices and strategies, they did point out that homosexuality is simply a peripheral issue in the film, a narrative device more than anything else; as Gary Arnold observes in his review, “[t]he lesbian angle is nothing but an angle.” Obviously, attempting to inoculate issues of representation by claiming angles is a problematic defense strategy, but Arnold’s point is worth exploring insofar as it suggests that the ontological status of homosexuality in the film is barely more than a kinky sub-plot. One could speculate that if not for the uproar, few reviewers would have even mentioned homosexuality in conjunction with the film. The grain of the film would have been a neo-noir, over-the-top erotic thriller, and those who liked it would have most likely greeted it as *Rolling Stone’s* Peter Travers does:

What makes *Basic Instinct* a guilty pleasure is the shameless and stylish way Verhoeven lets rip with his own basic instinct for disreputably alluring entertainment. The film is for horny pups of all ages who relish the memory of reading stroke books under the covers with a flashlight. Verhoeven has spent \$49 million to reproduce that dirty little thrill on the big screen. You can practically hear him giggling behind the camera. His audacity makes you giggle along with him.

And without the protests, the film’s controversial slack would easily have been taken up by questions of filmrating and censorship over the expurgated 45

seconds that saw the film move from the unprofitable NC-17 bracket to the more lenient and consumer-friendly R rating.

The success and efficacy of the protest is its hijacking of the film’s meaning, its repackaging and re-prioritization of the film’s content such that (and here the protest is curiously similar to an industrial marketing campaign) even before the film’s release its grain had been already concretized to the degree that it almost necessitated a response from the film’s commentators. And this aspect, this precociousness, may be why nobody likes the protesters: they are public amateurs. Unlike film critics and film academics, they have not been bestowed with the power of professionalism; they forged themselves a soapbox instead.

THE POSSIBILITIES OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Mayne correctly claims that the protests are not an issue of spectatorship per se, but they do function as a site of reception outside of the official channels of discourse, and moreover, outside of the by now “natural” habitat of amateurs: the internet. My concern is that film studies, both as a discipline and as an arena supposedly open to oppositional voices, did little more than simply dismiss the protests. Why is the discipline only comfortable with bodies of reception if they are at a safe historical remove, and indeed, is it merely a coincidence that the institutional turn to reception and spectatorship is accompanied by an increasing attention to historical subjects and subjectivities? At the same time, the recent trend in turning to the public sphere—in situating cinema as it lives in the world, rather than as it is seen on the screen, as it is refracted through numerous viewing positions and the social apparatus itself—is a potentially lucrative pathway out of simply incorporating reception and spectatorship as evidentiary artifacts for any given academic position or interpretation. With this turn we can begin to recognize that cinema is, and always has been the domain of amateurs.

For instance, in Miriam Hansen’s article “Early Cinema, Late Cinema: Transformations of the Public Sphere,” an introductory piece on the potentialities of envisioning the cinema as it works with, informs, and constructs a public sphere, she can postulate that:

In Chicago movie theaters catering to African-Americans during the 1919s and 1920s [...] the nonfilmic program drew heavily on Southern

black performance traditions, and live musical accompaniment was more likely inspired by jazz and blues than by Wagner and Waldteufel. Although the films shown in such theaters were largely white mainstream productions, their meaning was bound to be fractured and ironized in the context of black performance and audience response. I am not saying that such reappropriation actually happened in every single screening or every theater [...] But the syncretistic makeup of the cinematic publicity furnished the structural conditions under which the margin could be actualized, under which alternative forms of reception and meaning could gain a momentum of their own. (147-48)

In a similar vein, one might begin to formulate alternative visions of the protesters, not based on whether their reading of the film is valid or invalid, but alongside the issues that their very presence outside of the theatre raised in terms of reception. The efficacy, or more properly, the effects of the protests are not simply a matter of a successful boycott calculated in box-office receipts (as Hansen notes, empirical measurements may not be the appropriate method), but would begin to encompass a broad array of social arrangements and attitudes. The material proximity of the protestors to the exhibition site of one raunchy, A-level hetero-sexploitation picture may have, like the musicians in Hansen's formation, not only "actualized" marginal voices, but also worked to "fracture" and even "ironize" the onscreen proceedings, as much as they also may have increased their taboo value. The comparison of self-identified gay and lesbian bodies on the street with the film's own envisioning of "lesbian" bodies and desires would seem to mark an ironic and unavoidable juxtaposition between the lived reality and the Hollywood fantasy, while the presence of gay men in the protestors' ranks may have called forth, and already proposed, the film's own central repression: the male-male love between Michael Douglas and his detective partner and only friend, Gus (George Dzundza). These examples are hardly definitive, but they do begin to formulate how the protest's fructifying effects could be both calibrated and discussed, especially in terms of the film's poetically ironic aftermath.

If the protests were so wrong, misguided and useless, so out of touch with the pulse of the public, why is it that they, more than anything else, constitute the film's legacy? They undeniably achieved a victory at the symbolic level in that they have irreversibly "queered" *Basic Instinct*. HBO's *The Larry Sanders Show* performed a

reenactment of Sharon Stone's infamous leg-crossing, no-underwear scene, with a befuddled Larry Sanders and his ardent, devoted admirer David Duchovny, as the players. Michael Douglas made a guest appearance on the sitcom *Will and Grace* as a gay detective who falls for Will, a part which includes a turn on the dance floor of a gay bar—to Missy Elliot's "Get Yer Freak On," no less. And finally, succinctly summarizing the protesters' complaints, but from a position of comfortable appropriation, which may be the most vital of the protest-effects, comedian Margaret Cho, in her film *Notorious C.h.a.* happily mines her sexual experiences with women for comic fodder, including her encounter with an ultra-femme vamp at an S&M club: "Oh please," moans Cho, "if I'm going to go down on a woman, I want her to be a 300-pound bull dyke; I mean, I want her to look like John Goodman. I don't want to be Sharon Stone-d to death."

Lys Woods wrote about the Academic Conference and the "Death of the Graduate Student" in the layout of Synoptique 4.

1 I realize that my assertions here are open to challenge; that is, some may argue that the relationship between film studies and reception is an untroubled one. As evidence for my case I would call upon Henry Jenkins's "Reception Theory and Audience Research," which, especially in its concluding pages, outlines some of the difficulties in breaking down the boundaries between academic critics, with their penchant for textual interpretation, and fans, with their penchant for emotional outbursts. The reverse formation of these attributes is, of course, also true.

Also, of note as a truly bizarre application of reception studies is Stephen Crofts' work on *The Piano*; indeed, I think that the awkward co-joining of the two disciplinary tactics have been nowhere more reified. Crofts baldly states: "[my hypothesis] suspects that reviews may attend little to the film's female Oedipus-oriented modes of address [...]" (145). Gee Stephen, do you really think so? Later in the same article, Crofts more generously (and reasonably) concedes that due to the "broad incompatibility between discourses of psychoanalysis and of journalism, it would be understandable if few reviewers mentioned the female Oedipus-oriented modes of address as such," before ingenuously continuing: "Indeed, the first two of these—Ada's oedipal trajectory and the film's attachment to the preoedipal/ 'semiotic'—are not mentioned by any review in the sample, even indirectly"

(147).

Crofts' analysis is unfailingly reception-oriented, replete with charts composed of columns to tabulate the reception of *The Piano* in four national contexts, with a fifth chart to exhibit the combined results. As well, Crofts is intent on maintaining the importance of textual analysis as a film studies tool, insofar as he wants to propose a connection or "continuum in terms of text, circulation, and reception" (146). Crofts reads the text as one that has an investment in the female oedipal trajectory, and he wants to utilize his reception analyses as "support" for his hypothesis that: "*The Piano*'s success was substantially based on its invocation of an oedipally oriented female subjectivity" (152). In some sense, Crofts wants to validate, to prove, his textual analysis through reception studies, and, as Crofts' contribution here veers dangerously close to the social sciences (hence the neatly organized chart), proof, which has perhaps been lacking in film studies, suddenly appears as a feasible option—so argues the rhetoric of his neatly arranged charts.

2 See Kevin Phinney's article, "Activists Mobilize for National 'Instinct' Protest; Gays Take 'Campaign of Education' to the Streets."

3 See Beth Kleid's *Los Angeles Times* report.

4 Indeed, the early 90s erotic thriller genre as a whole can be seen as a response to the AIDS crisis, saturated as it is with the overwhelming threat that sex is no longer safe.

5 Bizarrely, perhaps, one of the only people who took the protestors charges to heart is the man responsible for the whole affair, the film's screenwriter Joe Eszterhaz. His \$3 million screenplay had landed at the GLAAD offices and immediately set off an alert and protest against the film. Initially, Eszterhaz wanted to comply with the protesters and adjust the script accordingly (a move for which he was publicly chastised by elements of the mainstream press); as he recalls in an interview with Jim Woods: "I suffered a great deal of prejudice when I was a kid [...] that something I had written was offensive to gay people was horrifying to me." Eszterhaz's changes were blocked by both the film's director, Paul Verhoven, and the film's male star, Michael Douglas. Later Eszterhaz said of the problems he faced with Verhoven: "When a film makes \$420 million, it tends to patch up any differences you have." If nothing else, Eszterhaz exhibits a seemingly forthright honesty.

6 Danziger rightly calls attention to the fact that Douglas has had more than one encounter with this female lover/nemesis, most notably with Glen Close in *Fatal Attraction*, but interestingly, Douglas has had an earlier onscreen relationship with another female writer as well. Indeed, in *Romancing The Stone*, Douglas' irascible but loveable Peter Pan, *Indiana Jones*-like adventurer personified the febrile yearnings and writings of Kathleen Turner's mass-romance author—not only did reader and writer meet cute, they complemented each other, solved the case and fell in love. As a litmus test for 90s cynical self-awareness, and arguably, post-feminist empowerment, one has to look no further than the difference between Turner and Douglas's heartfelt reunion at the end of *Romancing The Stone* and the almost parodic take on such coupling bliss at the never-ending end of *Basic Instinct*. Completing yet another athletic sex session, Douglas proclaims: "We'll fuck like minks, raise rugrats, and live happily ever after." The camera, of course, has other intentions; following a screen fadeout, the image returns as the camera moves down the bed to reveal an ice pick tucked away underneath.

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David Chow: Portrait of an Unconventional Hong Kong Filmmaker

Mélanie Morrisette

Up-and-coming Canadian-Hong Kong filmmaker, David Chow, speaks to Mélanie Morrisette about his awardwinning documentary short, *Yeung Ming* (2002). The film follows the stirring story of a young girl separated from her family, including her twin sister, by the strict migration policies of Mainland China and Hong Kong. From his unique perspective as a Hong Kong Chinese who moved to Canada and then returned to his homeland to make films, Chow discusses Chinese political and social issues, as well as the future of the film industry in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong is world renowned as the dynamic city of action and martial arts films. Since the secession of Hong Kong to Mainland China in 1997 and the Asian economic crisis, however, Hong Kong's economy is gradually declining. With the recent SARS crisis freezing financial growth, film production has inevitably decreased accordingly. Luckily, the Hong Kong industry has a history of resurfacing with new trends. One of the current emerging trends is perhaps documentary filmmaking, as evidenced by promising Canadian-Hong Kong filmmaker David Chow.

Chow points out that he is one of an increasingly rare breed: a documentarian working in a climate in which documentary film has little commercial value. The limited financial resources for documentary projects in Hong Kong are largely directed at producing current affairs reports for local English-language television. Chow feels the content of these reports is complaisant and patronising to its audience.

In returning to the land of his ancestors after living in Canada, Chow seems to have brought with him the knowledge and sensibility of the decades-old Canadian documentary tradition. He has gained critical notice with his first short documentary film, *Yeung Ming* (2002), the story of a Chinese citizen from Mainland China who attempts to migrate to Hong Kong. *Yeung Ming* raises important social questions regarding Hong Kong's immigration policies and reveals the filmmaker's sensitivity to the discriminatory exclusion of the Mainland Chinese from Hong Kong.

I first met David Chow during the *Hong Kong International Film Festival* in April 2003 and we exchanged various ideas about culture and film. Considering he had lived in Canada for several years, I was interested in his point of view on the situation in Hong Kong. When David returned to Canada this year on a brief trip, I met with him to talk about *Yeung Ming* and the issues facing the changing Hong Kong society.

Mélanie Morrisette : David Chow, you are originally from Hong Kong. Your family left for Ottawa, Canada, and then you went back to Hong Kong. Why did you decide to return to Hong Kong at that point in your life?

David Chow : What led up to my return happened organically. It was a gradual renewing of interest in my heritage, in particular my own family connection with Canada back in the 1800s. My parents talked very little about our family history and since I started making documentaries, my curiosity about my own roots grew. I started to ask questions, and it was like pulling teeth

for my folks. They told me bits and pieces and out-of-joint information. Then the mystery of my family began to unravel. I discovered that my great-grandfather and his two brothers left their home village in Hoi Ping, Guangdong Province, for Canada as contracted slaves. It was one of the four provinces from which the majority of Chinese came during the gold rush in North America. My great-grandfather and his brothers worked on the railway constructions in BC. Later, they drifted east and all wound up in downtown Montreal living next to the Irishmen in what is now known as the Chinatown area. Then came the Chinese Exclusion Act after the completion of the CP railway.

All of a sudden, I wanted to know about my roots and China in general. I started reading more about the history and dreaming of my great-grandfather's homeland. So, maybe the spirits of my ancestors were calling me *laughs*. I just felt the need to make a documentary in China and yet I was proceeding without a clue of what I'd be doing. I bought a return ticket to Hong Kong. It was meant to be a research trip, but I ended up staying.

MM: You made a documentary called *Yeung Ming*, co-directed with Sheery Lee. With this documentary you won an award at the Hong Kong Independent Short Film & Video Awards. Can you sum up the documentary and how you came up with the idea?

DC: My co-director is Sheery Lee, a journalist at the Hong Kong South China Morning Post newspaper. The documentary won the Special Jury Award at the 8th Hong Kong Independent Short Film & Video Awards – IFVA 2002. The total cash prize was HK\$7,000. It was shown at the *Hong Kong International Film Festival* in April 2003 as well.

I had contacted Sheery for another story on a leprosy village in China a year earlier but we never connected for one reason or another. Then out of the blue, I got an email from her and she asked me if I wanted to collaborate on a documentary project. We met the next day and she told me about Yeung Ming, a seventeen year-old girl who's fighting Hong Kong's high court decision to send her back to China. She's determined to stay with her parents and her identical twin sister. The Chinese Mainland government had broken up the family once before when she was twelve and now the Hong Kong government is trying to do it again. It has to do with the highly controversial Right of Abode policy that applies to children under age eighteen who were born in the Mainland but whose parents are

already Hong Kong permanent citizens ^[1]. The story was unfolding day by day and we had no control over it and no way to predict what would happen. It was like covering a war story. So, we decided to document her remaining nine days in Hong Kong before her deadline. Will the authorities arrest her and kick her out? Or will she resist and go underground? That's how we intended to build the story. We also lent the camera to Yeung Ming so that she could document things on her own.

MM: The film raises really important issues that are not unique to Hong Kong and China. For example, in Canada, to get a residency permit, the Canadian government will ask for a photocopy of your bank account. So many developed countries will target rich immigrants and not labourers that are willing to work. Is it your intention to denounce these kinds of policies?

DC: I have no problem with that kind of policy. What I have a problem with is if a certain group of people is singled out and not even considered a part of the application process. The point to make really clear is that Hong Kong had allowed the family to immigrate! But it was the Chinese authorities who prevented one of the twins from leaving the Mainland six years earlier. What happened to Yeung Ming is absurd: humanly tragic and yet painfully funny. I think it would make more sense if the Chinese government had not allowed the Lin family to take their dog or parrot to Hong Kong. But she was just twelve at the time...still a child.

Try this... the United States has allowed you to immigrate. But the Canadian Government says, "Oh we're sorry, you can't go because you're over the weight limit, unless you drop ten pounds. It's now or never. Why don't you just cut off one of your arms or your legs?"

MM: Your film shows the long processes that Yeung Ming needs to go through before she can get her residency. It examines the inequalities between rich and poor countries, the problem of immigration and the selection of the candidate. What is the solution according to your point of view? Since Hong Kong returned to Mainland China, is the solution to open the border?

DC: The majority of the Hong Kong citizens do not want the Mainland-born children to be in Hong Kong, fearing that they will take away their jobs. This is human nature at it's worst. The Hong Kong government first lost the Right of Abode case. In a face saving move,

Hong Kong asked the Chinese government to re-interpret the case. In order to gain the support of the Hong Kong citizens, the Hong Kong government blew everything out of proportion and scared the daylights out of the average citizen. I talked to one lady, and I quote: “if we let all the children in, Hong Kong would sink!” That just about sums it up. No one complains when HK lets the rich immigrants in or when the press announces how many investors’ immigrant visas are issued on a monthly basis. Hong Kongers are just as insecure as Canadians, like when a boatload of illegal migrants from China landed on the coast of British Columbia a few years back. But in the case of Hong Kong, we’re talking about our brothers and sisters from the north. Hong Kongers have forgotten that they were once refugees from the Mainland. I believe that Hong Kong wants all the economic and political “sweet deals” with the Mainland and yet wants to keep Hong Kong from re-colonizing people from China. Hong Kong has the same dilemma as Quebec. We have a very different culture from the Mainlanders.

“One country, two systems” is an early stage in this social experiment. Maybe on July 1, 2046, the border will come down, if not sooner. The border was set up to keep the Mainlanders off Hong Kong in the 50s but now the border is killing Hong Kong. Hong Kong people still like all the benefits of having security check points and a psychological separation between the two cultures. Economically, Hong Kong is increasingly dependant upon the Mainland. Personally, I feel that the sooner the border comes down the better. But we need a pro-active Hong Kong government instead of the one that is handpicked by the Chinese government.

MM: What about the false image of Hong Kong that is projected in Mainland China... as a factory of hopes where you can become rich? How do you think it affected Yeung Ming’s family?

DC: I think the family has been fooled all along. They had no idea how vicious and cruel capitalism could be since they came from a more laid back communist system. In order to make ends meet, both parents have to work long hours in their low paying jobs to keep a roof over their heads and food on the table. Mainland immigrants face widespread discrimination. The Lin family is no exception to the rule. By giving up one of their daughters for years to live with lies and disillusionment, they suffered a double blow. However, their family bond has been greatly strengthened. The father ran around tirelessly for years to fight for his daughter to reunite with the family. As the pressure

mounted, he was hospitalized by a stroke. What the Lin family went through is a story of the triumph of the human spirit against adversity.

MM: With the lack of free speech in Mainland China, are the film, television and newspaper industries beginning to suffer from censorship and how is it affecting both Hong Kong as a whole and filmmakers like you?

DC: Sure, censorship is everywhere. But that’s what I have to live with. It’s more prevalent on the Mainland. Every film project has to be approved by the central government. As Hong Kong companies increasingly rely on the Mainland market to survive, Hong Kong producers have to tailor their films to mainland markets.

Major local newspapers, television shows and films are very cautious in reporting political views on the Mainland government. However, in Hong Kong we can still say whatever we want to the local government with the exception of political views on issues relating to Taiwan. In fact, we keep hearing how we want the current chief to be ousted. But if you’re supportive of the independence of Taiwan or Hong Kong, you could receive all kinds of death threats because you would be viewed as a traitor. And with the recent anti-Article 23 sentiment, that was the major concern ^[2]. If Article 23 were introduced, you would be deemed criminal and would be arrested if you were involved in the independence movement in any way. They wouldn’t even need a warrant in order to come into your home to arrest you. The end of civil rights.

What I do doesn’t really bother anyone. I’m not out to overthrow the government. In essence, the Chinese government is really a big mafia. They only have themselves to fear. And they’re scared to death. They’re watching over their shoulders all the time to see who is plotting to oust them. We hear “traitors” all the time, over and over. And they do fear Hong Kong...that is where the Chinese revolution started. Will history repeat itself?

MM: Are you thinking of doing a co-production between Canada and Hong Kong, since you have a special status, having both nationalities and knowing both cultures?

DC: Sure, I’m always open for collaboration with anyone from any country if there’s a story that we’re both happy with.

MM: What are your next film projects?

DC: Currently, I have three feature film projects in development in Hong Kong. No details I can talk about here, except that one is an erotic detective thriller. The other two are more art house. I like going between very commercial projects and films that have a personal approach. A split personality has more fun.

MM: Is there any chance that *Yeung Ming* will be presented at one of the Canadian film festivals?

DC: I hope so. If they'd invite me.

Mélanie Morrisette wrote about Yuen Wo Ping in Synoptique 5.

David Chow welcomes your questions and comments. You can reach him through his website: <http://www.geocities.com/dwfcchow/studioD/>

¹ The story of Yeung Ming and her family's struggle with the Mainland government and Hong Kong immigration is documented at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/1916485.stm>

² “On 24 September 2002 the HK SAR government released its proposals for a controversial anti-subversion law, which China supports but democracy activists fear could stifle freedom of expression. The document was issued at the start of a three-month public consultation period. The Basic Law – Hong Kong’s “mini-constitution” which has governed the territory since its 1997 return to the Chinese sovereignty – required an anti-subversion bill to be passed under Article 23. Hong Kong’s Chief Executive, Tung Chee-hwa, said that the planned law was necessary to ensure national security. The government, however, was aware of the disquiet it would cause in the sensitive years following the territory’s hand-over and delayed its proposal until now.

Human rights organizations fear that the proposals, if passed into law, would undermine the existing human rights and civil liberties enjoyed by Hong Kong people and could be used against anyone China or Hong Kong objects to, including political dissidents and religious or spiritual groups such as Falun Gong –already outlawed on mainland China.”

– Amnesty International Press Release December 9, 2002.

Further information regarding Article 23 is available at: <http://article23.org.hk/english/main.htm>

A Global Coalition Against Article 23 Legislation has been formed: <http://www.againstarticle23.org/en/>

Mélanie Morrisette est née à Québec. Après avoir fait des recherches au China Film Archive et au Hong Kong Film Archive, elle a complété sa maîtrise à l'Université Concordia. Son mémoire aborde le développement des chorégraphies dans le cinéma d'arts martiaux. Elle est en ce moment enseignante à la polytechnique Ngee Ann à Singapour.

Review of the 2004 Montreal Festival of New Cinema

Jon Doyle

Montreal's Festival of New Cinema (formerly FCMM) is a mysterious festival with an incredibly broad mandate: "the dissemination and development of emerging trends in cinema and new media." In other words, the festival can show just about anything. Still, as you wander in and out of films, patterns take shape and a clear programming voice starts to emerge. This is a festival that values serious, bleak films. It is also a festival that values maverick artists (both filmmakers and their subjects) with a politicized vision of the world. These qualities are on full display in *Touch The Sound* (Thomas Riedelsheimer, 2004) and *Superstar In A Housedress* (Craig Highberger, 2004), two of the many non-fiction films I managed to see at this year's festival. The former is a startling and innovative look at deaf musician Evelyn Glennie, while the latter is an amateurish but loving tribute to playwright, Warhol collaborator, and gay icon, Jackie Curtis. As these films and countless others illustrate, non-fiction filmmaking is the area where the festival truly distinguishes itself.

Read on as Jonathan Doyle, Synoptique's resident Splinter sprinter, spins an intertextual web in his reviews of 17 films.

***Z Channel: A Magnificent Obsession* (Xan Cassavetes, 2004)**

A personal favorite at this year's festival was Xan Cassavetes' (daughter of John) excellent *Z Channel: A Magnificent Obsession*. For those of us too young to remember life before home video this is an eye-opening look at Z, California's art-house cable channel of the

1980s. As home video was first coming into popular use, Z was already showing the uncut version of *Heaven's Gate* (Michael Cimino, 1980) in its original aspect ratio. This was a pioneering network that influenced countless filmmakers and laid the groundwork for home video as it's understood today. Cassavetes charts the channel's history through parallel narratives. The first is the troubled story of Z Channel mastermind Jerry Harvey. Along with his various wives and co-horts (critic F.X. Feeney and filmmaker Michael Cimino), Harvey struggles to keep the channel vibrant amid increasing competition and tremendous psychological problems (Harvey made daily trips to a psychiatrist). As the film reveals fairly early on, Harvey's life came to an alarming end in 1989 when he murdered his wife and then committed suicide. The film's other narrative is a prolonged love letter to the Z Channel from those who watched the network religiously (i.e., Alexander Payne and Quentin Tarantino) and those who benefited from it professionally (i.e., Robert Altman and Jacqueline Bisset).

Z Channel over-flows with wonderful clips from wonderful films and, while most of these are familiar to devout film lovers, there are also some alarming revelations (Henry Jaglom's long unavailable *A Safe Place* (1971), the films of Stuart Cooper, etc.). The film is also filled with memorable anecdotes, including the unexpected revelation that Tarantino absolutely loved the extended, uncut version of Visconti's *The Leopard* (1963) that played on Z. If nothing else, *Z Channel* illustrates the positive effect that a genuine love for cinema can have on a film.

***Guerrilla: The Taking Of Patty Hearst* (Robert Stone, 2004)**

Another standout documentary is Robert Stone's *Guerrilla: The Taking Of Patty Hearst*. This incredibly suspenseful re-counting of Hearst's kidnapping (by the Symbionese Liberation Army) and subsequent conversion to revolutionary bank robber is filled with alarming news footage from the 1970s and present day interviews with many of those involved. The audio recordings in which Hearst scolds her concerned parents are a hilarious highlight in the history of rebellious college students. The film situates these events in the context of Watergate, Vietnam and other political upheaval of the time. Stone gives credence to the SLA and defends their intentions in spite of the fact that those intentions obviously went awry. Once our sympathies have been aligned with the SLA, it's fascinating to see the news coverage unfold, counter to our sympathies. Stone targets all the obvious villains: the Hearst family, the FBI, and the media. But he is also guilty of demonizing Hearst, a popular stance from revolutionary-sympathizers who feel she sold out their cause, returning to the safety of wealthy living. But she was kidnapped and tormented for weeks before embracing the SLA, a fact that Stone unfairly downplays. I'm sure the Symbionese Liberation Army had good intentions – I'm all for feeding the poor and destitute – but their ambition to radically alter the United States with an army of 10 was a little unrealistic, not to mention undemocratic. It should also be noted that the revolutionaries who Stone is quick to celebrate were guilty of several murders both before and after the kidnapping and, other than court negative press attention for their cause, they didn't achieve much of anything. In any event, this is a surprisingly tense and morally complicated document of the times.

Robert Greenwald's Trilogy of Bush-bashing Documentaries

The festival also presented a trilogy of similarly titled Bush-bashing documentaries by Robert Greenwald: *Unprecedented* (2002), *Uncovered* (2003), and *Unconstitutional* (2004). Greenwald is a prolific producer and director of political documentaries (he also released *Outfoxed* in 2004), most of which are haphazardly assembled but include the occasional perception-altering revelation. Of the three Greenwald films at this year's festival, only *Uncovered* – a documentary about the current American war in Iraq – is directed by Greenwald. This is probably the weakest and most revelation-free of the three. It's basically a series of (poorly lit) talking head interviews

with disgruntled former employees of the CIA and the FBI. Their assessments are highly informed and probably accurate but ultimately irrelevant. In recent months, the dishonesty of the Bush administration has come to be accepted and even embraced by the American public. For non-believers, it's nice to see Bush's lies further exposed but the constructive importance of this film is questionable.

More impressive is *Unprecedented*, a documentary about the notorious American presidential election of 2000. In addition to a truly disturbing breakdown of the voting irregularities that prevented many African-Americans from voting, this documentary features ominous warnings about the hazards of the Republican-funded, computerized voting technology that was used during the November 2, 2004 presidential election. In retrospect, these warnings may have been prophetic. Several weeks after the election, a few lone journalists continue reporting new voting irregularities (i.e., votes being subtracted rather than added). *Unprecedented* saw this coming and, while cable access production values may dull its impact, this is an eye-opening documentary.

Even better and easily the best of the three is *Unconstitutional*, the first detailed account I've seen of the civil liberties violations stemming from the getting-more-bizarre-every-day "war on terrorism." Your fundamental belief in the inherent good of law enforcement will be shaken like never before as you see undercover police officers, posing as anti-war demonstrators, mace their fellow protestors (including the elderly). Unfortunately, Greenwald's films do little other than provoke and disturb their audience. This is the latest genre in exploitation: the nonfiction, political injustice film. Each revelation pushes the same button just as a good scare or joke would. On this level, the films are engaging. But a transcript of these films would have roughly the same effect. While Greenwald effectively communicates disturbing information, he does so without the ambition or imagination that characterizes the best non-fiction filmmaking.

***Mondovino* (Jonathan Nossiter, 2004)**

Politics are also the focus of Jonathan Nossiter's *Mondovino*, a fairly thorough over-view of the international wine scene. Nossiter critiques California vineyards for bribing influential wine critics and, even worse, homogenizing international wine tastes. With the increasing popularity of American wine – as well as the franchise-like spread of American companies throughout European vineyards – traditions of wine

diversity are in greater danger than ever before. Those familiar with Nossiter's earlier, ultra-arty fiction work (*Sunday* (1997), *Signs And Wonders* (2000)) may be taken aback by this relatively straightforward foray into non-fiction. Nossiter is a professional sommelier (he knows a lot about wine) and that's his main interest here, not artfulness and formal precision. There's the occasional visual flourish or creative editorial juxtaposition but, more than anything, Nossiter's style is represented by dismissive cheap shots where detailed analysis might have been more effective. He seems more interested in generalizing about international politics and globalization than really revealing the truth about the world of wine. Still, this is an interesting subject handled in a light-hearted, entertaining manner.

***Tarnation* (Jonathan Caouette, 2003)**

The most hyped documentary at the festival was *Tarnation*, Jonathan Caouette's \$218 debut that was assembled using home videos, old photographs, iMovie and little else. The film so impressed Gus Van Sant that he signed on as an executive producer. In fact, it's not hard to imagine Gus Van Sant directing a scripted version of this film himself. Like Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), *Tarnation* is the story of a young gay male (Caouette) and his troubled, complicated relationship with his mother. After several bizarre psychiatric misdiagnoses and the resulting medication/shock treatment, Caouette's mother repeatedly loses and re-gains custody of her son. The film charts their relationship from Caouette's birth to the present (he's now 32) and, while his formal approach is unfocused and often quite awkward, the film reaches for a cinematic grandeur that is almost un-heard of in conventional documentary. Mac users may struggle with the film's iMovie-to-the-nth-degree aesthetic (an endless barrage of text effects, transitions, color manipulations and image multiplications), but I was taken aback by how eerie and otherwise effective much of this turned out to be, particularly Caouette's striking use of music. That said, Caouette also suffers from drama queen indulgences and there's a general sense that something is missing. What does it all add up to? Not much, I'm sad to report, but it's still a revealing look at one man's hard-earned neuroses and lifelong desire to photograph himself.

***The Heart Is Deceitful Above All Things* (Asia Argento, 2004)**

One theme that united many of the fiction films at this year's festival was a general sense of isolation and

despair, by no means a recipe for box office success. Most extreme in this regard is *The Heart Is Deceitful Above All Things*, the second feature by Asia Argento (*Scarlet Diva* (2000)), daughter of Italian horror maestro Dario (Deep Red (1975) and *Suspiria* (1977)). This is an insane, over-the-top portrait of a young boy who has been removed from the home of his abusive mother (played with an extremely bizarre accent by Argento) and sent to live in a utopian foster home. As the movie begins, the boy is dragged away from his happy foster home and returned to his mother's unloving arms. This leads to endless incidents of abuse, abandonment, and star cameos (Peter Fonda, Winona Ryder, Marilyn Manson), all presented with surprising sensitivity and even the occasional touch of poetry. The child's unquestioning acceptance of even the worst abuse is heartbreaking. When the mother's latest boyfriend returns from a hedonistic weekend, the boy apologizes for drawing on the walls and says he didn't expect the boyfriend to return. He then hands the man a belt and waits for the abuse to begin. These kinds of observational details bring life to the film and, while it falls apart in its final act, this is a surprisingly well-made, heartfelt effort that signals the arrival of a promising young filmmaker.

***Palindromes* (Todd Solondz, 2004)**

Less promising but occasionally interesting is *Palindromes*, Todd Solondz's latest exercise in nihilistic, misanthropic, anti-people filmmaking. Solondz's "big idea" is to have several actresses of different ages, races, and weight classes play the same character. He's trying to make some kind of vague point about audience identification that fails miserably. If I had to guess, I'd say this approach stems from Solondz's lack of confidence in the story he's telling and his sense that it might benefit from a diversion. Not only does this diversion fail, but it isn't even necessary. In fact, in order to appreciate the film, it's probably best to just ignore the multiple identity device and try to follow the film's somewhat original narrative. Solondz inverts the conventional teen abortion paradigm: a 12 year old girl desperately wants to have a child but her parents force her to have an abortion. Rejecting her parents' anti-choice act, the girl goes on the lam and joins forces with another group of anti-choice activists: abortionist killers. There's potential here, but Solondz won't commit to any of his ideas. He wants to provoke and offend his audience without taking responsibility for a point-of-view. Ultimately, timely and important issues are sidelined in favour of a trivial, post-modern examination of "representation" and other film studies buzz-words.

***Marebito* (Takashi Shimizu, 2004)**

In the really unusual timing department, Japanese director Takashi Shimizu's low budget, digital video film, *Marebito*, played on the same day that his unwatchable blockbuster, *The Grudge* (2004), opened across North America. *The Grudge* marks the third time that Shimizu has directed the same source material (not including sequels!) and it's clearly wearing thin. But not to worry. Shimizu hasn't lost it. In between production and postproduction on *The Grudge*, he managed to shoot this saga of vampires and videographers on digital video in only 8 days. It's the story of a loner cameraman who records a suicide in the Tokyo subway. He becomes completely obsessed with the area where this incident occurred and soon discovers a bizarre underground world. This leads to a relationship with a nightmarish vampire woman and a surreal, murderous breakdown. Borrowing elements from *Eraserhead* (1977), *Pi* (1998) and *Peeping Tom* (1960), Shimizu creates something genuinely creepy. It isn't quite a horror film but it's full of odd, discomfiting sights and sounds. This film is a nice diversion from his path to Hollywood superstardom.

***The Assassination Of Richard Nixon* (Niels Mueller, 2004)**

If *Marebito* isn't enough loner action for you, there's Sean Penn's amazing variation on Travis Bickle in *The Assassination Of Richard Nixon*. Either Sean Penn has a lot of guts or just really good taste, *I Am Sam* (2001) notwithstanding. Like several other recent Penn projects (*21 Grams* (2003) and *Before Night Falls* (2000)), *The Assassination Of Richard Nixon* is an unconventional project made by an inexperienced filmmaker (firsttimer, Niels Mueller). Fortunately, Penn saw his opportunity to channel Robert De Niro's most famous role (the crazed title character in *Taxi Driver* (1976)) and took it.

It's the story of an idealistic furniture salesman who has recently split up with his wife. He spends most of the film honorably struggling to reconcile with his wife and become a better salesman. But honesty and good intentions get him nowhere and, before long, he's ready to unleash his frustration on the ultimate salesman/liar, the logical scapegoat for all that is wrong with the world in 1974, Richard Nixon. It's unfortunate that Penn won an Oscar for his routine work (by Penn standards) in last year's *Mystic River*, as this is most certainly his most complex, disturbing, and satisfying performance to date. Admittedly, the film lays things out in an occasionally simplistic, cause-and-effect way, but it is

filled with unexpected detail, surprise, and humanity. Penn is incapable of performing a scene without throwing in a twist to keep the audience off-guard. This character may be crazy but, unlike Travis Bickle, we rationally understand every stage of his breakdown and we sympathize entirely. This makes for the kind of shocking and provocative filmmaking that is almost unheard of in 2004.

***Land Of Plenty* (Wim Wenders, 2004)**

While significantly less radical and provocative than *The Assassination Of Richard Nixon*, *Land Of Plenty* is Wim Wenders' first worthwhile fiction film in almost a decade. He follows two separate characters, Lana (Michelle Williams) and her uncle Paul (John Diehl), as they struggle to combat two significant American problems: poverty and terrorism. Lana volunteers in a homeless shelter and tries to greet the suffering lower class with sincerity and good-will. In contrast, Paul is a gung-ho former Green Beret, pre-occupied with preventing future terrorist attacks. He blocks out all human relationships and devotes his energy to patrolling the streets of Los Angeles in his vigilante van. Eventually, Lana and Paul come together and take a typically Wendersian road trip where Paul exposes his own paranoia and opens himself up to some of the compassion that drives Lana. Diehl gives a solid performance as the paranoid uncle, but Williams elevates the film beyond the ordinary. Her ethereal earth-child performance is a little too squeaky clean, but it's also a pleasantly atypical portrait of youth, one that acknowledges the compassionate impulse that often separates young from old. Williams is the most mature, sophisticated, humane character in the film and she actually sets her uncle on a less paranoid, more moral path. It's a welcome alternative to the conventionally vacuous, self-absorbed portrayal of youth seen elsewhere in mainstream entertainment these days. Unfortunately, the film lacks the cinematic ambition of Wenders' best work, but it's an inoffensive, good-intentioned film.

***Childstar* (Don McKellar, 2004)**

Easily the worst film I saw at the festival and further proof that the Canadian film industry needs help, *Childstar* destroys any good will that writer-director-star Don McKellar might have earned with his directorial debut, *Last Night* (1998). To hear McKellar tell it, Hollywood films are shallow and lacking in craftsmanship. Unfortunately, McKellar is guilty of the same charges. Why is it that parodies of Hollywood movies always

look cheaper and less intelligent than the real thing? If Hollywood films are as awful as they're supposed to be – and some of them are – filmmakers should parody them accurately. Instead, McKellar reduces everything to black-and-white clichés: the self-absorbed/sexually curious childstar, the arrogant/controlling childstar mother, the talentless but creatively tortured Hollywood director, etc. McKellar's material is fuelled by bitterness and frustration, not acute observation or analysis. Simply put, satire is not a good fit for his particular (and tiresome) brand of sardonic humour. There's nothing more off-putting in filmmaking than a moralizing sense of superiority; unfortunately, that's what McKellar is all about.

9 Songs (Michael Winterbottom, 2004)

Another surprisingly weak effort came from British filmmaker Michael Winterbottom, one of the most prolific filmmakers working today. His films have been consistently intelligent, cinematic, and unique (all right, *The Claim* (2000) was a little too much like *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971), but what's wrong with that?). Although his films have always been characterized by a loose formal approach, until recently there was always a feeling of discipline and sophistication in the writing (usually by Frank Cottrell Boyce). In his last couple films, however, Winterbottom seems to be moving away from the rich, detailed worlds of *Welcome To Sarajevo* (1997) and *24 Hour Party People* (2002) and into an even more relaxed, seemingly script-less mode. When the form of these films is adequately worked out, as it was in this year's amazing and unfairly ignored *Code 46*, the results are as impressive as anything Winterbottom has done. However, with *9 Songs* Winterbottom has bypassed content altogether and left us with very little formal invention to make up the difference. Every serious filmmaker makes at least one film about sex and I guess this is Winterbottom's. But *9 Songs* is made with an extremely prudish sensibility. Winterbottom thinks hardcore sex is, in and of itself, alarming enough to sustain our attention. Even worse, he achieves the impossible and actually makes sex boring. Winterbottom has also inexplicably decided to combine his exploration of sexuality with a bunch of concert performances by alternative rock bands such as Black Rebel Motorcycle Club, Franz Ferdinand, and Super Furry Animals. All this plus two irritating protagonists and you've got a confused film from a director in flux.

She Hate Me (Spike Lee, 2004)

Continuing on the disappointment front, it should

be noted that Spike Lee has a serious attention-span problem. Wrapping his head around a single hot-button topic isn't enough for the controversy-friendly auteur. In *She Hate Me*, he deals with at least two (and maybe more) provocative issues of our day: corporate scandals and lesbian parenting. It's the story of Jack Armstrong (Anthony Mackie), a black biotech executive who is fired after blowing the whistle on his corrupt, white bosses (Woody Harrelson, Ellen Barkin). Left with no income, he's forced to prostitute himself to lesbians desperate to get pregnant. His ex-girlfriend (now a lesbian pimp, basically) organizes all of this and, of course, it all comes back to haunt Jack in the film's final act, a truly bizarre hybrid of *The Godfather* (1972) and *Mr. Smith Goes To Washington* (1939). Throughout the film, Lee's un-restrained handling of politically-charged material gets him into hot water as he suggests, among other things, that lesbians really need men and that black males are prostitutes at heart who will do anything for a buck (as a result of exclusionary white greed, of course). I don't think Lee intends to make these statements but they're all over the film. Politically correct viewers beware. After the welcome maturation on display in 2002's excellent *25th Hour* (which Spike didn't write), he has returned to the unfocussed hijinks of earlier Spike Lee joints such as *Jungle Fever* (1991) and *Girl 6* (1996). Like those films, *She Hate Me* is a well-crafted and entertaining intellectual train wreck.

Primer (Shane Carruth, 2004)

As any Kubrick skeptic will tell you, taking focus and organization to the opposite extreme can be equally problematic. Schematic, mathematical filmmaking is usually not a good thing, but, for once, it's kind of effective in *Primer*. This is the debut of Shane Carruth, a young mathematician who took an interest in filmmaking a few years ago and went to great pains to learn everything about that topic. All the technical stuff, anyway. This film is not particularly clear, but, from what I gathered, it's the story of two ambitious young inventors who inadvertently invent a time machine and take the first steps toward a practical application of this unwieldy device. The characters are deeply unappealing and uninteresting but the film's unique take on non-linear filmmaking is exciting in an unsophisticated way. Multiple versions of characters weave through multiple plains of reality, traveling back-and-forth in time. As viewers, we are asked to do little more than put the pieces together – the film has no emotional or thematic content – which is amusing in a crossword puzzle kind of way. It was made for almost nothing and, as the end credits emphasize, Carruth did everything but the

catering (his parents did that). While I wouldn't expect any great artistry in Carruth's future, this is certainly a competent debut.

***A Letter To True* (Bruce Webber, 2004)**

Finally, an astonishing change of pace and probably the best film I saw at the festival was Bruce Weber's beautifully-composed, humanistic exploration of life in general, *A Letter To True*. Clocking in at only 78 minutes, this film crams more passion, feeling, and cinematic adventurousness into its running time than any of the longer features I saw at this year's festival. Plot synopsis is futile as it's really a meandering essay film along the lines of Chris Marker's significantly more cerebral but equally affecting *Sans Soleil* (1983). Weber's film is structured around a lengthy voice-over – a letter he composed for one of his dogs while on the road. This format supports Weber's episodic structure as well as the innocent, even naïve tone that is so central to the film's effect. Somehow, optimism and positive thinking are more credible when addressed to a really cute dog. For more than thirty years, Weber has been an acclaimed photographer who occasionally dabbles in filmmaking. During that time, his preoccupations have remained consistent – old movies, celebrities, dogs, and photography – and they all come together stunningly in this virtuoso, one-of-a-kind film. In a festival full of wonderfully negative films, it was nice to end on one as wonderfully positive as this.

P-A Despatis also reviews the Festival of New Cinema in this Edition (in French).

Festival du nouveau cinéma 2004 - The sky is the limit!

P-A Despatis D

Ayant assisté à plusieurs des éditions précédentes du Festival du nouveau Cinéma, je peux affirmer que cette 34^e édition du festival a été un franc succès. Alors que d'une part le festival a permis aux cinéphiles plus ou moins avertis de (re)découvrir les maîtres du cinéma tels Almodovar, Ozon, Kiarostami et Depardon pour ne nommer que ceux-ci, le festival a également présenté une sélection très forte de premiers longs métrages et de longs métrages faits par des réalisateurs émergents. Le festival a en tout présenté une centaine de films, desquels j'en ai vu près de la moitié.

Évidemment, le fait de voir 51 films en quinze jours est avant tout un acte masochiste. Littéralement. Certaines journées j'arrivais au festival pour une première projection à neuf heures du matin et je ne ressortais de l'enceinte du festival que vers les une heure du matin. Je suis donc allé à certains visionnements à contrecœur, affamé et à moitié endormi. Par ailleurs, vers la fin du festival, les films de deux heures semblent devenir interminables et les films pour lesquels on n'accroche pas deviennent insupportablement difficiles à regarder. C'est alors qu'on se demande pourquoi on s'inflige un tel châtement. De plus, alors que quelqu'un qui ne voit que cinq ou dix films au cours du festival peut se permettre de choisir méticuleusement, il n'y a pratiquement aucune sélection possible lorsqu'on en voit cinquante. Le fait d'avoir un horaire optimum qui permet de voir le plus de films possible prend le dessus sur la sélection des meilleurs films. Je suis donc tombé sur un certain nombre de navets. Mais, le maso que je suis, n'a pas le choix de voir tant de films. En effet, peut-être qu'on regretta toute l'année suivante d'avoir manqué un certain film, surtout si l'on apprend par

l'entremise d'un autre festivalier qu'il est très bon. Pire encore : ce sentiment d'avoir manqué un bon film sera accru si le film est sélectionné aux oscars ou dans une cérémonie d'envergure.

Le but est donc de voir le plus grand nombre possible de films afin de potentiellement tomber sur un film qui va nous marquer. Ironiquement, ce besoin quelque peu maladif de voir tous les films nous force également à voir les films mauvais s'ils ont reçu beaucoup de couverture. C'est notamment pour cette raison que je suis allé voir *L'intrus* de Claire Denis. Comme le film a été hué au festival de Venise lors de sa représentation et comme je n'ai pas aimé son dernier film non plus, les chances étaient que je n'aimerais pas non plus ce film. Je suis tout de même allé voir ce film comme s'il y avait une infime chance que je l'aime. J'avais entendu qu'il n'était pas bon, mais je n'en étais pas sûr. Maintenant si! Quand, quelques jours plus tard, un des journalistes s'est plaint à un des programmeurs d'avoir sélectionné « une marde pareille », je ne pouvais qu'agréer avec fierté dans ma tête.

Ce genre de 'pari' peut s'avérer très infructueux comme dans l'exemple précédent. Cependant, plusieurs films que je pensais ne pas aimer ou que j'ai seulement sélectionnés afin de remplir un trou dans mon horaire se sont avérés de très belles surprises. C'est notamment le cas du film *Public Lighting* que je pensais ne pas aimer et *Antares* que j'ai pris comme 'bouche-trou'. Les deux films se sont révélés très bons et figurent parmi ma liste des meilleurs films du festival.

Perché du haut de la mezzanine de la salle de presse

du festival, je ne pouvais m'empêcher de regarder la foule de cinéphiles s'agglutinant à l'intérieur de l'Ex-Centris plusieurs dizaines de minutes avant le début de leur film dans le but d'obtenir une bonne place. Les files d'attente sont parfois longues au festival et les deux cinémas dans lesquels le festival se déroulait sont à une dizaine minutes de marche l'un de l'autre. Cela signifie par définition qu'au moins à deux ou trois reprises le cinéophile aguerri devra faire un sprint de deux minutes ou moins vers l'autre cinéma. Les files sont moins longues que les interminables, mais ô combien jouissives, files d'attentes du Festival Fantasia qui commencent souvent deux heures avant le film. Bien entendu, la distance de dix minutes à pied entre les deux cinémas n'est pas énorme non plus comparée au Festival International des Films de Toronto qui a ses deux cinémas aux deux extrémités de la ville. Le Festival du nouveau Cinéma n'est donc pas un festival difficile à fréquenter. Cependant, il n'en demeure pas moins que c'est un festival très exigeant pour un cinéophile qui voit plusieurs films par jour – surtout si ce pauvre cinéophile a cinq films en rafale dans le cinéma du Parc dans le sous-sol d'un centre commercial à l'abri de tout rayon de soleil!

Plusieurs critiquent le festival pour ces (bien minces) inconvénients. Par ailleurs, comme Claude Chamberland (le programmeur du festival) a bien à coeur la distribution de films étrangers au Québec et qu'il fait beaucoup de lobbying pour que ces films trouvent un distributeur; la majorité des films qu'ils vont voir au festival vont sortir en salle au cours de l'année suivante. Pourquoi se casser la tête à acheter des billets, faire de longues files d'attente, se sentir bousculé et subir le stress inhérent à tout festival alors que dans quelques mois, ou même dans quelques semaines, le même film sera présenté dans une salle dans un contexte beaucoup plus détendu.

Bien que cet argument soit valide, ces gens semblent oublier que le festival reste avant tout un événement de 10 jours qui permet aux cinéphiles de faire un marathon de cinéma. Tel qu'abordé précédemment, il y a certes un certain aspect masochiste dans le fait de regarder 51 films à un festival, cependant le festival réussit très bien à créer une ambiance particulière que les spectateurs ne pourront pas retrouver alors qu'ils iront voir le film dans un cinéma ordinaire. C'est cette ambiance, probablement la meilleure parmi tous les festivals du genre à Montréal, qui fait que les gens iront voir 3, 4, 5 ou même 8 (dans mon cas) films par jour au festival. Pendant 10 jours, la Terre arrête de tourner, nos préoccupations quotidiennes cessent et on se trouve

plongé dans un univers parallèle rempli de surprises, de découvertes et de nombreux coups de coeur. On ne peut pas revivre cette ambiance quasi magique en dehors du festival. Malgré le dolorisme inhérent au fait d'aller si intensivement au festival et malgré le fait que j'étais physiquement et mentalement épuisé, le premier matin post-festival j'avais déjà hâte à l'édition suivante! Et, je vais d'ailleurs encore faire le même type de marathon—tout en essayant de voir encore plus de films que cette année. The sky is the limit!

LA PROGRAMMATION

Cet intense marathon de 51 films a, fort heureusement pour moi, commencé bien avant le début du festival. Les visionnements de presse ont débuté près de deux semaines avant le début officiel du festival. Cela m'a permis de voir près de 15 films avant tout le monde. Il fait toujours bon de quitter la maison à 7:30AM pour aller voir 3 visionnements de presse d'affilés! Bon, peut-être pas, mais cela permet aux journalistes d'avoir un avant-goût de la programmation du festival avant qu'il ne commence. C'était un avant-goût plutôt amer. Il faut dire que la majorité des visionnements de presse précédant le festival n'étaient pas pour la plupart de réalisateurs de renom et étaient généralement des films de moindre importance par rapport aux oeuvres plus connues et plus attendues. Donc, alors que le Festival du nouveau Cinéma présente habituellement de très bons films et que les attentes des journalistes habitués au festival étaient très hautes, un certain climat de morosité et de cynisme régnait parmi les personnes présentes lors de ces deux semaines de visionnements de presse. La qualité des films à laquelle on était en droit de s'attendre n'y était tout simplement pas. Était-ce une mauvaise année pour le cinéma international? Mais où étaient donc ces grands films tant attendus? Qu'à cela ne tienne, les grandes oeuvres ont commencé à déferler en grand nombre quelques jours avant le début officiel du festival avec des films comme *Innocence*, *Mirage* (*Iluzija*) et *Les Tortues Volent Aussi* (*Lakposhtha Hâm Parvaž Mikonand*).

Évidemment, le fait d'aller aux visionnements de presse a plusieurs avantages. Outre le fait que l'on puisse voir un nombre accru de films par rapport au commun des mortels, cela nous permet d'éviter les salles remplies. De plus, comme on évite les files d'attente et les bousculades dans le lobby du cinéma; aucune interaction avec le public n'est toutefois pas possible. Il ne faut pas le nier; le lieu où l'on regarde le film va grandement changer notre lecture du film selon le type d'audience présente au visionnement. La relation avec le festival change

donc et l'on est moins susceptible de rencontrer divers problèmes techniques et pratiques (panne informatique aux guichets, longues files d'attente, ...). Ce sont ces problèmes qui frustreront bien des gens et qui minent en quelque sorte leur expérience du festival.

Les nouveaux arrivés parmi l'équipe du festival ont tenté d'élargir ses horizons. La sélection des films cette année s'est en effet avérée des plus diversifiée. Par exemple, le festival s'est permis d'offrir aux spectateurs une série de films plus étranges les uns que les autres dans une nouvelle section appelée « temps zéro ». Dans cette section, le festival a osé présenter des oeuvres folles d'Asie. *The Fucons* – concernant une famille de mannequins en plastique – ainsi que la comédie musicale thaïlandaise *The Adventures Of The Iron Pussy* sont tous deux des exemples de ces films électrisants auxquels les purs et durs du festival ne s'attendaient pas. Plusieurs films de cette section ont d'ailleurs été présentés dans le très fréquenté(!) cinéma L'Amour. J'ai eu la chance de voir le film *The Adventures Of The Iron Pussy* une fois au cinéma du Parc et une seconde fois au très chic cinéma L'Amour—m'étant malencontreusement endormi durant la première séance du film. Alors que l'audience de la première représentation était plutôt calme, l'audience du cinéma L'Amour était très volubile! L'ambiance n'était pas aussi chaude que celle des présentations déchaînées au théâtre Hall durant le festival Fantasia, mais néanmoins, il y avait beaucoup plus d'ambiance que ce que l'on voit habituellement au festival.

Je ne saurais trop dire si cette entreprise quelque peu périlleuse a été fructueuse ou non, mais soulignons que la qualité de la sélection au sein de la section « temps zéro » aurait sans doute pu être meilleure. Ceci n'est pas pour dire que ces films n'ont pas leur place dans un festival comme le Festival du Nouveau Cinéma. Certains films de cette section valaient le détour. Par exemple, tout droit venu du Festival de Cannes, le film *Calvaire* qui suit les péripéties d'un chanteur, kidnappé par un groupe de villageois détraqués et à la mine patibulaire, en a ébranlé plus d'un au festival. Le film n'est sans doute pas aussi réussi que les films phares du genre tels *Délivrance* ou *Misery*, mais il n'en demeure pas moins un film très angoissant et bien réalisé. Il ne fait aucun doute que la majorité des films présentés dans cette section auraient sans doute pu trouver un meilleur public à Fantasia. Par exemple, lors d'une des représentations de *Calvaire*, plusieurs personnes sont sorties. Le film aurait été parfait pour Fantasia et aurait sans doute rempli la salle de gens qui voulaient voir du sang et qui s'attendaient à un tel film. Les attentes ne

sont pas les mêmes au Festival du nouveau Cinéma.

Plusieurs autres sections figuraient dans la programmation cette année. Le festival a par ailleurs également offert une très forte sélection de documentaires. Outre quelques flops monumentaux dont *Darwin's Nightmare* (les autres personnes au visionnement de presse étaient pour la plupart de mon avis), la section des documentaires était très bien réussie. Plusieurs documentaires se sont d'ailleurs démarqués du lot. C'est notamment le cas du film *Le Maître Et Son Élève (De Meester En Zijn Leerling)* qui suit trois chefs d'orchestre qui assistent à une « master class » donnée par le très réputé Valerie Gergiev. Un autre documentaire très bien réussi est *Public Lighting* du canadien Mike Hoolbloom. Comme certains de ses films précédents, *Public Lighting* est un assemblage d'images disparates, empruntées ou originales. Les six histoires du film ne sont pas toutes réussies, mais le film fonctionne très bien et est un adroit mélange entre documentaire et cinéma expérimental.

De façon générale, la sélection du festival a été très bonne, comme à chaque année d'ailleurs. Ce n'est en fait pas tant la sélection des films de ce festival que la remise de prix qui est discutable. La sélection est très bonne, très variée et fait découvrir aux spectateurs une multitude d'oeuvres. La sélection des films gagnants laisse toutefois beaucoup à désirer. Bien que le festival ne soit pas directement impliqué dans la sélection des meilleurs films dans les diverses catégories, il est fort à parier que les organisateurs pourraient faire quelque chose pour améliorer la situation. Cette année par exemple, dans le volet documentaire, l'ONF a remis le même prix à 5 films qu'elle a jugés ex æquo. C'est quelque peu risible, surtout que l'un des films, *Darwin's Nightmare*, est un échec majeur et laisse grandement à désirer. Les quatre autres films sont effectivement très bons mais au point à remettre cinq prix ex æquo? Les autres aspects du festival ont été très bien réussis et l'organisation fût presque impeccable.

UNE DIVERSITÉ PAS SI DIVERSIFIÉE?

Malgré toute la diversité de la programmation et la multitude de pays ayant soumis des oeuvres, plusieurs lignes unificatrices peuvent être faites parmi les films. Une de celles-ci, la plus forte sans doute, est la misère humaine et l'aliénation des personnages par rapport au reste de la société. Nombre de films ont montré la misère humaine de façon parfois très crue. Les films d'auteur ont depuis toujours abordé des sujets souvent plus délicats que les films d'action typiques qui ne sont que bien souvent des véhicules pour l'autopromotion

des vedettes. Cependant, dans les éditions précédentes du festival, le nombre de ces films sur la misère humaine était très limité et ces films n'occupaient pas une part importante de la programmation. Seuls quelques films lors des années précédentes abordaient le sujet dont notamment *Un Temps Pour L'ivresse Des Chevaux* (2000) et *Hundstage* (2001). Le festival a été submergé de ce type de film cette année. Près de quinze films cette année dont celui d'ouverture (*Clean*) sont des films troublants sur l'état de la société. Il s'agit d'un pourcentage très élevé. *Clean* présente cela dans un contexte beaucoup moins cru mais l'on suit néanmoins les péripéties et le quotidien difficile d'une droguée qui essaie de reprendre la garde de son jeune fils. Les films québécois, quoiqu'en général n'abordent pas de tels sujets, ont également représentés cette tendance avec l'excellent *Jimmywork* notamment. Mélange entre film noir, documentaire et film de crime, *Jimmywork* suit les péripéties d'un quinquagénaire ivrogne vivant dans les marges de la société. Plusieurs autres films ont montré ce genre de misère de façon beaucoup plus crue et dure. Les films comme *Mirage* (version de *Les Choristes* sur l'acide!), avec leurs factures stylistiques très léchées et les films comme *Or, Mon Trésors* avec un style plus réaliste font tous fois de difficultés humaines dans notre société moderne.

Bien que plusieurs raisons puissent expliquer la croissance de ce type de cinéma, la libéralisation accrue des méthodes de production explique sans doute en partie pourquoi maintenant chacun veut (et peut) partager sa déprime avec le monde. Disons que cet énoncé pousse le phénomène à l'extrême mais plusieurs films sont ni plus ni moins qu'un tel 'partage'. C'est le cas du film *Tarnation*. Dans ce documentaire, un jeune vivant avec sa mère schizophrénique se filme et filme sa famille depuis qu'il a l'âge de 11 ans. Ce film montre les moments les plus forts de sa vie qui sont bien souvent les plus tristes. Nul besoin de dire que le film est des plus perturbant!

Il est très intéressant de se rappeler qu'après les conflits mondiaux est souvent venu un certain cinéma d'échappement. Par exemple, dans les années soixante-dix les gens voulaient oublier la guerre du Vietnam. Les studios ont très vite compris ce besoin et ont beaucoup misé sur les films axés sur les succès d'un personnage. *Rocky*, *Jaws* ainsi que *Star Wars* sont parmi les films les plus connus sortis de cette tendance. Le cinéma indépendant et le cinéma d'auteur ont bien souvent été à l'abri de ces tendances. Les films du Nouveau Cinéma allemand en sont sans doute le meilleur exemple. Avec la libéralisation accrue des moyens de distributions, ces

films auparavant inaccessibles au public nord-américain sont maintenant plus disponibles que jamais. La programmation des festivals montréalais reflète donc forcément cette tendance.

Le Festival du nouveau Cinéma a aussi un certain penchant pour le sexe—ce qui permet de faire un certain contrepoids à tous ces films difficiles! Parmi ces films il y avait notamment *Annie Sprinkle's Amazing World Of Orgasm*, *History Of Sex* ainsi que plusieurs films de fictions controversés comme *9 Songs* et *Anatomie De L'enfer*. À chaque année le festival a son lot de films sexuellement explicites. Ainsi, *O Fantasma*, *Du Pic Au Coeur* et plusieurs autres films ont été projetés sur les écrans de l'Ex-centris ces dernières années. Cette tendance ne change pas, peu importe le contexte sociohistorique!

Sur une note plus sérieuse, très peu de comédies ont été présentées cette année. Le succulent *Aaltra* contrebalance à lui seul tous les films déprimants que le festival a présentés. Il s'agit sans équivoque d'une des meilleures comédies que j'ai vu au cours de ces dernières années. D'autres semblants de comédies ont été présentées au festival. Un des échecs les plus retentissants est sans doute le film *The Adventures Of The Iron Pussy* de Apichatpong Weerasethakul. Les premières minutes du film sont désopilantes mais le tout devient vite lassant. Alors que Pen-ek Ratanaruang est passé maître dans ce type de cinéma, Weerasethakul ne réussit malheureusement pas à suivre ses traces correctement. De plus, avec toutes les comédies thaïlandaises désopilantes produites cette année (*Mum Jokmok*, *7 Prachin-Barn*, ...), il est surprenant que le festival ait choisi celle-là! *The Adventures Of The Iron Pussy* fait lui aussi parti de la section « temps zéro ».

LES FESTIVALS À MONTRÉAL

Plusieurs festivals de cinéma (Toronto, TriBeCa, ...) ont dans leur programmation une telle section dédiée aux films d'horreur et bizarre. Mais l'on ne peut s'empêcher de constater que le Festival du nouveau Cinéma en voulant élargir ses horizons semble s'étaler sur les platebandes des autres festivals de Montréal. Cela n'est pas une mauvaise chose en soit car ça pousse les divers festivals à rehausser la qualité de leur programmation respective. Ce n'est pas non plus un problème pour les cinéphiles qui se retrouvent face à une programmation de meilleure qualité et face à une plus grande sélection de film. Là où ça peut devenir un problème, c'est au niveau de la diffusion du film lui-même. Prenons par exemple le film *Last Life In The Universe* du thaïlandais

Pen-ek Ratanaruang. Il a été présenté à Fantasia au lieu du Festival du nouveau Cinéma. Plusieurs personnes à Fantasia ne l'ont pas aimé, car ils ne sont pas habitués à ce genre de films au festival. À l'opposé, plusieurs personnes intéressées par ce genre de films l'ont raté car ils n'ont daigné regarder l'horaire de Fantasia puisque ce festival présente surtout des films fantastiques et d'horreur. Il y a plusieurs autres exemples de films qui auraient gagné à être à un festival plutôt qu'à un autre.

Que ce soit *Calvaire* au Festival du nouveau Cinéma ou *Last Life In The Universe* à Fantasia, ces exemples montrent bien comment la réception d'un film change selon le festival où il est présenté. Que dire des nombreux films de très bonne qualité présentés à Image + Nation (le festival gai et lesbien de Montréal) comme le film *Beautiful Boxer*. Plusieurs personnes les manquent, car ils ne fréquentent pas ce festival. La qualité de la programmation à Image + Nation ne cesse de s'accroître à chaque année et tous les amateurs de cinéma devraient y aller peu importe leur orientation sexuelle.

La solution n'est certainement pas d'unir tous les festivals dans un seul festival de dix jours, car les spectateurs auraient un nombre faramineux de films à voir dans un court laps de temps. Une des solutions possibles serait d'avoir une meilleure cohésion entre les festivals et une meilleure éducation auprès du public.

Non ! Fantasia ne présente pas juste des films de monstres et de Kung Fu. Non ! Image + Nation n'est pas qu'un festival « pour tapettes ».

Les autres festivals plus petits (tel le Festival du Film juif, polonais, italien, etc) sont nécessaires à Montréal car le Festival du nouveau Cinéma ne peut à lui seul présenter 50 films gais, 50 films juifs, 50 films polonais, etc. Cependant, il semble vraisemblable que ces festivals gagneraient à avoir une meilleure association avec le Festival du nouveau Cinéma afin que leur visibilité soit rehaussée—ne serait-ce qu'une association au niveau du marketing.

LE FUTUR DU FESTIVAL DU NOUVEAU CINÉMA

Le prochain Festival du nouveau cinéma aura lieu du 13 au 23 octobre 2005. C'est la seule chose qui est sûre.

Il y a quelques semaines à peine, le festival a déposé auprès de la SODEC et de Téléfilm Canada une soumission d'un projet d'expansion visant à doter Montréal d'ici

2007 d'un festival d'envergure internationale. « Le Festival du nouveau Cinéma de Montréal, le doyen des festivals internationaux de cinéma au Canada, estime avoir tous les atouts nécessaires pour devenir le grand festival international de cinéma de Montréal, lui assurer un rayonnement permanent, un positionnement international unique et des retombées économiques importantes pour le Québec ». Ce projet que Daniel Langlois décrit ainsi avec tant de fierté passe donc par une programmation élargie et plus diversifiée.

Dès l'année prochaine, deux nouvelles sections seront ajoutées au festival. Les « Soirées Galas » présenteront des premières de films commerciaux très attendus afin d'attirer davantage le grand public. Aussi, le festival veut présenter une section « 1er au Box-Office ». Cette section présentera quant à elle des films locaux populaires de dix pays. Trop souvent le cinéma commercial est négligé dans les festivals, surtout le cinéma commercial étranger. L'ajout de ces deux sections semble très pertinent et sera tant bénéfique pour les spectateurs à l'affût de vedettes que pour le festival. Cette expansion devrait permettre au festival d'attirer un nombre accru de spectateurs et d'améliorer de beaucoup sa visibilité internationale.

Un peu plus haut, je parlais d'une meilleure cohésion entre les festivals et d'une meilleure éducation du public. Le festival semble ouvert à de telles idées, car à en croire le communiqué de presse, le festival a amorcé des pourparlers avec les Rencontres internationales du Documentaire de Montréal et les Rendez-vous du Cinéma québécois afin d'explorer de nouvelles formes de collaborations. De plus, dans le but de former le jeune public, le festival travaillera en étroite collaboration avec divers organismes d'enseignement dans le but d'offrir aux générations futures de cinéphiles une diversité accrue de choix cinématographiques.

Le Festival du nouveau cinéma a donc le vent dans les voiles. Il reste à voir si la SODEC et Téléfilm Canada donneront leur aval à ce projet très ambitieux.

Jonathan Doyle a lui aussi un article sur ce festival dans ce numéro ci (en anglais).

Pierre-Alexandre Despatis D. poursuit des études de deuxième cycle en études cinématographiques à l'Université Concordia. Ses intérêts touchent principalement à l'étude de la réception et de l'acte de spectature au cinéma, ainsi qu'aux processus de lecture et de cognition de la narration filmique. Son intérêt pour les adaptations cinématographiques et les remakes explique sa dilection pour l'infame(!) remake de "Psychose". Les comédies musicales et les cinémas asiatiques (ainsi que les comédies musicales asiatiques) comptent parmi ses principaux champs d'intérêts au niveau des genres cinématographiques.

Gun and Other Play: Takashi Miike and Fantasia Festival 2004

Owen Livermore

I liked to play with guns as a kid. Futuristic nonsensical ray-guns, traditional toy six-shooters— my favorite was a miniature pump-action shotgun that made a great *ka-chunk* sound when it was cocked and loaded. I spent hours running around the yard, killing my brothers and pretending to die in the most dramatic ways possible. I also enjoyed films. Wait... I still do, but it's more complicated now. At a festival like Fantasia, I now feel an obligation to approach films with deadpan determination, even in the lineup, and even as the teens in front of me are totally geeking out about the much-hyped *Kill Bill* series. Actually, most of my time at the festival was been spent in some form of queue, which is good for catching up on some reading but bad if you're a fan of social interaction.

Over the course of the month-long festival, there were a number of satisfying films shown, like Kiyoshi Kurosawa's uncharacteristically light-hearted *Doppelganger* (2003) and a sampling from Satoshi Kon's elaborately woven anime television series *Paranoia Agent* (2004). I however was waiting to see one man, whose appearance in *Last Life In The Universe* (2003), a film from Thailand featuring rising Japanese star Tadanobu Asano and a stunning use of colour by Christopher Doyle, garnered a spirited reaction from Fantasiaites. ^[1] Thin, grumpy and wearing sunglasses, this yakuza boss had little patience for post-9/11 airport security. Takashi Miike didn't say much in his cameo, but he didn't really have to: his own films would do all the talking.

Takashi Miike has quickly established a reputation for outlandishly violent, unpredictable films made in

Japan's lower-rung V-Cinema system (the "V" means mostly direct-to-video), all the while working at a Fassbinder-esque rate. This is fitting for a man who thinks that one can only be considered a director when one is actually directing. ^[2] Miike is perhaps best known for his 2000 film *Audition*, or to be more specific, the film's sickening final act, which served to solidify his status as *provocateur*. There was a time when one of the only venues to see Miike films in the West was at a film festival like Fantasia. ^[3] As I write this piece, releases from Miike's vast filmography (both bootleg and legitimate) are beginning to come out of the woodwork. Luckily, three of Miike's films, none of which had been readily available in North America, made it onto Fantasia's program.

Deadly Outlaw: Rekka (2002) is yet another musing on the violent lives of yakuza and stars venerable VCinema veteran Riki Takeuchi, one of Miike's favorite players (see *Fudoh: The Next Generation* (1996) and the *Dead Or Alive* trilogy [1999-2002]). This time around, the hyperbolic Takeuchi plays Kunisada, an unstable gangster seeking vengeance on the rival gang that assassinated his boss and mentor. Takeuchi's character is volatile to the max and this is emphasized from the top. The first five minutes of the film consists of a montage orgy, as we cut back and forth between the boss's assassination (in which he obstinately refuses to go down), and the reaction of the jailed Kunisada, who builds up enough rage to burst through the protective glass confining him and take on a dozen police officers. This sequence is punctuated by a booming, unrelenting rock score, ^[4] which abruptly intrudes at key moments in the film.

In the film's quieter parts, distinctly long takes prevail. As much as Miike is known for rapid-fire montage sequences, like the overwhelming opening sequence of 1999's *Dead Or Alive*, he is also adept at creating a sense of dynamism by orchestrating movement in largely static camera set-ups. A key gun battle in *Deadly Outlaw: Rekka* is fought on a forest road, which Miike chooses to shoot from dozens of meters away in a long take. The combatants are partly obscured by trees; the outcome of the fight is not apparent until the take ends. The effect, allowing us to hear but not see the action, is a tension that one could describe as both oblique and intelligent. In an startling turn, Miike leaps from this sobering, almost patient 'realism' to the brand of kinetic découpage he is known for in the film's hyperviolent climax, when Kunisada trades in his pistol for a rocket launcher and his arch-enemy answers by bringing out a weapon aptly described by one writer as "a cross between a heavy machine gun and a steadicam".^[5] Not surprisingly, the final battle resulted in an appreciative ovation from the festival audience.

One Missed Call (2004) features Miike's take on the expanding so-called "J-horror" cycle made popular in the West with films like *Ringu* (1998) and *Ju-On* (2000).^[6] In this production, Miike worked as hired gun for a big studio, something he has done before with varying degrees of success. The gimmick that drives the plot this time is cell phones, certainly an obsession for youth in Japan (and growing to everannoying levels here). Teenagers at a local high school start hearing an unknown ringtone on their cell phones— a creepy little tune which elicits comparisons to a host of creepy little films. Not answering the call means receiving cryptic messages from a mysterious source and, not surprisingly, those students that get the call end up pushing daisies not long after.

While the material may sound altogether too conventional for this iconoclastic director, the constraints of J-horror do not end up shackling Miike's signature audacity. He manages to bend the rules that make up the secretive "urban legend" aspect of J-horror (and 'regular' horror films as well). So often, the events in films of this kind unfold due to the dismissive aloofness of institutional authorities like the church, police, and mass media. This is certainly how *One Missed Call* begins, but Miike takes the material to the opposite extreme in the climactic moment in which gruesome events are broadcasted live on national television.

With Miike, anything is possible. While the ironies of

the often implausible events are not lost, the sense that Miike blatantly sets up the viewer for shocks at a nonstop pace prevails and makes for an unyielding aura of obscenely pleasing anxiety. This feeling of happy dread was doubled by the effect of the audience reactions around me. The girl to my left started crawling up into the fetal position, and the girl directly in front of me started breathing in uneven, wheezing gasps. Beyond fear, the prevailing impression the film left is one of appreciation for the technical skill of a director who knows how to push the audience's buttons.

Roughly translated from Japanese as "cow's head", *Gozu* (2003) is a singular film not only within Takashi Miike's body of work, but that of his contemporaries as well. In a recent interview, Miike states that *Gozu* is the product of ideas gathered from American horror films.^[7] Although he doesn't name names, I would include David Lynch as an inspiration in this case, if for nothing else than Lynch's tendency towards the automatism of the surreal. Other traits shared by these filmmakers call for comparison, including cinematography that mixes saturated colour and shadow and the establishment of an ambient, sonic atmosphere. However, the two directors go their separate ways in their presentation of the absurd; while events of *Lost Highway* (1997) and *Mulholland Drive* (2001) are treated with an almost stolid seriousness, *Gozu* rolls about gleefully in the muck of its own outlandishness.

Hideki Sone plays the inexperienced young yakuza Minami, who is conscripted to put his mentor Ozaki, unforgettably played by Sho Aikawa, on ice. It seems that Ozaki has lost his grip on sanity; in the amazing and hilarious opening scene, Ozaki saves his boss from a tiny Pomeranian he suspects to be a killer dog trained to find and kill yakuza. Minami and Ozaki leave for a small town where Minami intends to quietly execute his *aniki*. There, Minami promptly runs into all sorts of strangeness, losing his mentor in the process. To find Ozaki, the befuddled Minami interacts with the strange townspeople, who seem bent on holding secrets from him. Minami eventually stumbles upon his mentor completely and inconceivably transformed, which sets up a climax that is at once shocking, unfeasible, and uproarious.

With *Gozu*, Miike effectively pulls the bait-and-switch, setting up an atmosphere of horror and replacing it with comedy via absurd surrealism. The "lynchpin" (pardon the pun) is Hideki Sone as Minami, who, as the only one who has his wits about him, reacts to the strange world around him with straight-faced fear, aggression and

panic (not unlike Porky Pig in the land of the Do-Do). He of course does not see what we see—that the array of odd occurrences is tapping into his subconscious, into his fears and desires. Whatever he does, rational explanation always remains slightly out of reach.

A noteworthy congruence between the three films discussed here is their puzzling, almost curt, endings (which I will politely not reveal here). They're not really of the *deus ex machina* variety, even though there is not an ounce of plausibility or logic to the resolutions offered. It is as if Miike brings the narrative up to the point to where he is no longer interested and then lifts the curtain to expose the nature of the construct. In this way, Miike's denouements reveal *film as play*—as artifice, but maybe more importantly, as *fun*. It reminds me of those times in the yard as a kid. No matter how much fun I was having, at a certain point one of my parents interjected and told me that it was time to wrap it up and do something boring like go to church or eat supper.

I think that Miike will no doubt continue to be a big draw at festivals like Fantasia, in part because of the playfulness of his work. Indeed, to attend Fantasia is to ultimately rediscover the fun that ideally should accompany fervent cinephilia, an insight not lost on the yapping teens often found in the Fantasia ticket line.

Owen Livermore wrote about the reception of Starship Troopers in Synoptique 3.

is provided by a 70s Japanese rock group called The Flower 'Travellin' Band. Two members of the band were given roles in *Deadly Outlaw: Rekka*. For more on this significant dynamic in the film, see Mes, pp. 280-288.

5 Mes, p. 286.

6 Indicative of the popularity of these films in the West, Hollywood has turned *Ringu* and *Ju-On* into *The Ring* (2002) and *The Grudge* (2004), respectively. In an interesting turn, *The Grudge* (starring Sarah Michelle Gellar) was helmed by the director of the original, Takashi Shimizu.

7 Otto, Jeff. "Interview: Takashi Miike." *IGN Filmforce*. July 22, 2004.

1 *Last Life In The Universe*, directed by Pen-Ek Ratanaruang, ended up capturing a number of awards at Fantasia, including the Gold Jury Prize and the *Association québécoise des critiques du cinéma* Award.

2 Since his humble beginnings in V-Cinema in 1991, Miike has directed well over 55 films and a number of television series. For an enlightening commentary by Miike about the art of filmmaking, see *Agitator: The Cinema of Takashi Miike* by Tom Mes (Godalming: FAB Press, 2003).

3 Indeed, Fantasia is noteworthy as one of the film festivals in North America which helped to solidify Miike's international reputation, which took off in 2000 shortly after the release of his critically acclaimed *Audition*.

4 All of the extra diegetic music in the film

+ **SPLINTER REVIEWS (V)**

This Month, featuring: *After The Sunset*, *Alexander*, *Alien Vs. Predator*, *Beautiful Boxer*, *Birth*, *Bridget Jones: The Edge Of Reason*, *Les Choristes*, *Closer*, *Cremaster 3*, *Cremaster 5*, *Exorcist: The Beginning*, *Ghost In The Shell 2: Innocence*, *House Of Flying Daggers*, *I ♥ Huckabees*, *Immortel (Ad Vitam)*, *The Incredibles*, *Kinsey*, *Ma Vie En Cinémascope*, *The Machinist*, *Mariages, Mensonges Et Trahisons Et Plus Si Affinités*, *The Motorcycle Diaries*, *Nouvelle France*, *The Sea Inside*, *Searching For The Wronged Jesus*, *Sideways*, *Some Things That Stay*, *Stander*, *Tarnation*, *Underton*, and *The Village*.

***After The Sunset* (2004)**

This could be the worst American movie of the year. Ratner proves he's a hack by throwing out so many hooks and reeling none of them in. This whole film is cleavage. Worse, he expects us to laugh at his leads being caught in homosexually compromising positions. He thinks homophobia and the objectification of women is funny? Superman fans everywhere are rejoicing that he was dropped from that project and we will never have to endure his take on our hero.

-Collin Smith

***After The Sunset (Complot Au Crépuscule)*, (2004)**

Ce film n'est certainement pas un film innovateur qui révolutionnera le genre, ce film n'est certainement pas un film avec un scénario original, ce film n'est pas un film avec une réalisation hors du commun, mais pour ce qu'il est (un film commercial typique), il est très bien réussi. La simplicité de l'histoire ne m'a pas dérangé outre mesure. Cependant, l'insistance à montrer les

seins de Salma Hayek à chaque cinq minutes du film est quelque peu troublante. Mais bon, puisqu'il y a apparemment une règle non écrite qui veut que les films de voleurs soient tous sans exception sexy, je suppose qu'on ne peut reprocher à *Complot Au Crépuscule* de faire de même. * Soupir *.

-P-A Despatis D.

***Alexander* (2004)**

Harry Knowles said it well in his review of Oliver Stone's *Alexander*: "the critics are wrong, Alexander is great." Okay, maybe "great" is overstating it, but it is pretty damn good. *Alexander*, like the best of Stone's movies, is a film that its audience isn't ready for. Many films get unfairly maligned in their own time before audiences come around. Movies as diverse as *The Wizard Of Oz* and *Fight Club* were only recognized years later for the achievements that they are. While it may be popular to bash this film today, in a few years people will begin to see that Stone has made the first good film about Alexander the Great and one of the few good 'sword and sandal' epics of the past decade.

-Collin Smith

***Alien Vs. Predator* (2004)**

Maybe Paul W.S. Anderson will be remembered in history along the likes of Ed Wood, as one of the worst film directors of all time. However, I doubt he will reach even those lofty heights as there will be little nostalgia for his completely forgettable output. In this example of corporate synergy, he has sapped all of the socio-political analysis and all the claustrophobic goose bumps from the *Alien* series and even managed to betray the spirit of the purely B-movie *Predator* series

to produce the lowest level of filmmaking scum. This is designed to appeal to 14 year old boys and there is no intention for the memory of the film to last longer than it takes for the target audience to buy a tie-in video game.

-Collin Smith

***Beautiful Boxer* (2004)**

While not all Thai films are successful, Thailand is probably the home of the best national cinema worldwide. Being a sucker for Thai film (and Thai music!), I went to see this film without reading much about it and I was expecting to see a good (but light) and funny queer/sport flick along the lines of *Iron Ladies* or *Saving Private Tootsie*. After all, Thailand's film culture has a certain predilection for cheesiness (in a good way, though) and the depiction of gays as slapstick characters—like in *Heaven's Seven*. *Beautiful Boxer*, however, is a rather accomplished drama with amazing cinematography—head-over-heels above all commercial Thai cinema. Unlike *Iron Ladies*, *Beautiful Boxer* takes a more compassionate approach to the subject; the film is both touching and intimate. This is not your average sport flick.

-P-A Despatis D.

***Birth* (2004)**

I really wanted to like this film. But guess what? The boy's not the dead husband, and the film makes sure we know it from the very first sequence. So for the next two hours I'm left wondering how these people could be so stupid as to believe that he is. The only suspense—is Kidman going to fuck the boy?—what about now?—is tedious and pretentious. No, she's not going to fuck him. (Thank God.) And no, despite the camera's continual slow creeping toward “Miss Thang,” the boy's not going to give up the full monty. (Thank God.)

In short, not worth the time.

(Why couldn't they have told me that in the first shots?)

-Brian Crane

***Bridget Jones: The Edge Of Reason* (2004)**

11:29:07 pm

have just come from bridget jones. crap film full of not funny recycled jokes from rather successful first film.

am buzzing on caffeine from too many cappuccinos consumed to fight boredom during dumb movie. perhaps will never sleep again due to said cappuccinos. instead, will spend hours gazing at ceiling as punishment for going to crap film that i should have known enough

to avoid.

11:29:32 pm

***Les Choristes* (2004)**

La campagne de publicité massive a fait de ce film français un hit du box office Québécois cette année. Bien que le film soit très réussi, il est malheureusement plutôt vide; l'histoire n'est aucunement originale et stylistiquement le film ne l'est guère non plus. Il ne fait aucun doute qu'il est très beau d'entendre des voix de jeunes chanter dans une telle chorale, mais le film ne fait rien que le CD du film ne fait pas.

-P-A Despatis D.

***Closer* (2004)**

Pseudo-psychoanalysis
Stalwart self-obsession
Yearningly young
Cleverly charismatic
Helplessly hopeless
Orgiastic ogling
Punishing pessimism
Adolescent adults
Trashy treachery
Handsome hardship
Sexy suffering

-Zoë Constantinides

***Closer* (2004)**

Mike Nichols has become a master of understanding how to preserve a strong work of live theatre through the process of transforming it to the screen. From his first feature, *Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf*, to his latest masterpiece, *Angels In America*, Nichols has demonstrated a gift for transforming theatre pieces into fully realized cinematic experiences that maintain the integrity of the original vision while coming alive as motion pictures. He is still in top form in this, his latest triumph.

-Collin Smith

***Cremaster 3* (2002)**

I am terrifically unqualified to review this film. Not only did I buy tickets to a single installment of the 5 feature length films that make up Matthew Barney's *Cremaster* cycle, but I left *Cremaster 3* at the intermission.

So why do I bother? To put it simply, because this film revealed to me a sentiment I often felt but never expressed: there are some films that I really wish could be consumed like novels. At my own pace. *Cremaster 3* was stunning. It overwhelmed me, and I found myself leaving the theatre an hour and half into the film with

an hour and half to go because I desperately needed to go home and reflect on what I had seen.

Unfortunately, unlike a novel that I leave on my nightstand for a few days, this film is going to be a little harder to locate and finish.

-Shawna Plischke

Cremaster 5 (1997)

Any doctor who has ever prescribed Viagra should be forced to sit and watch the final installment of Barney's *Cremaster* cycle, for only Barney would have enough balls to propose such a productively radical solution to erectile dysfunction as this: simply attach several long ribbons to your penis, secure the other ends to the legs of some highly trained pigeons, then send the birds skyward and witness the glory. Nothing like a good bell-raising to boost the spirit, I always say.

-Randolph Jordan

Exorcist: The Beginning (2004)

1973's *The Exorcist* should have been a film with great sequel and prequel potential, however there has yet to be a worthy follow up to William Friedkin's classic. While the story laid out by William Wisher Jr. and Caleb Carr is a decent one, the execution of the film is all gloss and no depth. Harlin relies on extremely gruesome images and plenty of fake outs—loud noises that turn out to be nothing—instead of nursing any real sense of horror. The devil, or some sort of source of evil, is about the scariest idea that exists yet there is little to be fearful of here. The film scrapes the surface of examining the nature of evil by referencing Nazi insanity but then a plight of high school level, post-colonial morality shows the limits of analysis that the filmmakers are willing to embrace. This turn is purely for those who like to be grossed out, those who startle easily or those who like to giggle at sexual references but not for anyone who wants to leave the cinema with any real sense of dread.

-Collin Smith

Ghost In The Shell 2: Innocence (2004)

This highly acclaimed film has received a great deal of attention even outside of traditional animé circles. However, excitement over adult related animation may have overshadowed the limitations of the film. The problem is that the story just doesn't offer enough to carry us through the total running time. While this may have made a wonderful short film, as a feature *Innocence* leaves a great deal to be desired. While this film addresses its clichéd plot a bit more interestingly than in a film like *I, Robot*, for example, it still doesn't offer any revolutionary insights. It's only for die hard fans.

-Collin Smith

House Of Flying Daggers (Le Secret Des Poignards Volant, 2004)

Alors que le visionnement de *The Phantom Of The Opera* que j'allais voir a été annulé, je suis allé voir une autre sorte de comédie musicale. Alors que plusieurs comparent les comédies musicales aux films d'arts martiaux en raison de leur construction narrative similaire, ce film en est un très bon exemple. De plus, comme la protagoniste principale est aveugle, un accent très important à la musique et à l'ambiance sonore a été apporté aux combats.

Ce genre de scénario, très typique du genre, tient malgré tout la route et emmène les spectateurs dans les entrailles de la Chine de la fin des années 850—période où les Chinois avaient encore l'habileté de voler. Les scènes de combats sont très intéressantes et très bien chorégraphiées. La finale du film qui se déroule lors d'une tempête de neige est sublime et vaut à elle seule le détour.

-P-A Despatis D.

I Heart Huckabees (2004)

But it's actually *I Love Huckabees*, right?

At least we can agree on that.

-Adam Rosadiuk

Immortel (Ad Vitam) (2004)

Q : Why was I there?

Why didn't I leave?

Why am I writing this splinter?

A: Stupidity

Cowardice

Penance

-Brian Crane

Immortel (Ad Vitam) (2004)

Q : Why was I there?

Why didn't I leave?

Why am I writing this splinter?

A: Because the trailer of the film was awesome.

Because I liked the film, a lot.

Because someone had to set Mr. Crane straight.

-P-A Despatis D.

THE INCREDIBLES (2004)

This film is a good argument to prove that you can judge a film by its title. It's easily the most incredible film of the year. See it for yourself on the big screen. You will be thankful you did.

-Collin Smith

***The Incredibles* (2004)**

Someone at Pixar likes making movies, and we should pass legislation to make sure they don't stop. A strong but simple story that looks great. (Added bonus claim to good-ness: If the theatre had burned down before the film but after the incredible (!) short-film-slash-poetry-recitation, I could have gone home satisfied.)

-Brian Crane

***Kinsey* (2004)**

While this film might deify the researcher somewhat, it doesn't do so without being somewhat critical about his inability to allow himself to see past his work and his fears of true intimacy. However, this film is thankfully less interested in being a biopic than a strong argument against the "forces of chastity" that unfortunately are massing once again. It fights this fight differently than the good doctor had by focusing on what is entirely human about us all—our diversity—and how that gives us all something in common.

-Collin Smith

***Ma Vie En Cinémascope* (2004)**

The saddest music in the world. Alors que l'affiche du film et son titre laisse entrevoir un film très « glamour », il n'en est rien! Dès les premières minutes du film, il devient très triste et mélodramatique. Malgré quelques imperfections au niveau du montage, *Ma Vie En Cinémascope* reste très intéressant du début à la fin et dresse un portrait honnête de la chanteuse au passé peu reluisant. N'ayant personnellement pas connu Alys Robi durant la période de ses grand succès étant donné mon jeune âge, le film dresse un portrait très complet de la vedette pour le néophyte que je suis, en plus de donner un aperçu très captivant du Québec des années trente et quarantes. Après avoir réalisé l'infâme mais drôle *La Merveilleuse Odyssée D'alice Tremblay*, Filiatrault revient en force avec ce long métrage qui tombe à pic pour nous faire oublier l'horreur qu'est *Nouvelle France*.

-P-A Despatis D.

***The Machinist* (2004)**

Much has been made of Christian Bale's weight loss; he has been compared to Robert DeNiro and Renée Zellweger—although both of them famously *put on* weight—and this extreme measure risks overshadowing the articulated performance. He may be emaciated physically, but he creates a truly emaciated character to match. It is almost as if the audience can see Trevor's soul wasting away along with his body. This film is about selfdestruction but it's not all as bleak as the grainy, black and white, *Matrix*-like color pallet suggests. There is a sort of hope to the film, the kind of hope you have

when you have bottomed out and the only way to go is back up again.

-Collin Smith

***Mariages* (2004)**

À l'opposé du très intelligent *Mensonges Et Trahisons*, *Mariages* tombe dans l'empirisme du cinéma commercial français, hélas. Le film n'est pas un échec à proprement dit, mais il ne s'élève aucunement au-dessus des films commerciaux sans âme que la France s'entête à nous envoyer. Alors que les conflits interpersonnels dans le film *Comme Une Image* d'Agnès Jaouie sont très bien ficelés, il n'en est rien dans *Mariages*. L'histoire est tout aussi boiteuse que la réalisation qui nous force à nous demander pourquoi un tel film a été fait.

-P-A Despatis

***Mensonges Et Trahisons, Et Plus Si Affinités* (2004)**

Venue tout droit de la France, cette comédie sentimentale vaut bien le détour. La narration hors champ est des plus savoureuse, toute comme la performance de notre protégée Québécoise Marie-Josée Croze. Quelques quarantes ans après que la rédaction des *Cahiers du cinéma* se soit attaquée à la réalisation de films, quatre rédacteurs de *Studio Magazine* ont réitéré l'expérience en faisant de *Mensonges Et Trahisons* leur premier film. Quoique plus commercial que les films de leurs confrères, ce film est très bien écrit et est innovateur de par sa forme. Une nouvelle Nouvelle Vague ne sera sûrement pas créée, mais l'expérience fût fort prolifique.

-P-A Despatis D.

***The Motorcycle Diaries* (2004)**

If Che smiled with the same broad-faced innocence as Gael Garcia Bernal when he stood amongst the lepers and looked down at his birthday candles, then I too would have signed up for the revolution. Here's hoping Almodovar keeps M. Bernal under his wing and exhausts his considerable talents. On a serious note: who would have thought future guerrillas could be such fun-loving crack-ups?

-Brian Crane

***Nouvelle France* (2004)**

I feel really bad for saying this considering this film had the biggest budget in the history of Quebec cinema: this is a catastrophic failure. It is, it really is.

-P-A Despatis D.

***Nouvelle France* (2004)**

Overblown, pompous and somewhat ethnocentric, *Nouvelle-France* is the epitome of bad movie making.

This film makes every mistake an ‘historical epic’ can. It trivializes historical events by reducing them to culturally ‘meaningful’ moments of melodrama; it limits sociological analysis using a ‘history for dummies’ approach; it inserts inappropriate modernist values to force sympathy; and worst of all, it bores by being predictable and obvious. The romance makes *Titanic* look subtle. There is even a Celine Dion song to play over the credits. It is embarrassing that this film was made here. I really thought only Americans made movies this bad.

-Collin Smith

***The Sea Inside* (2004)**

Amenábar véritable homme accordéon qui passe non seulement allègrement du cinéma commercial américain (*The Others*) à un film de répertoire a écrit, réalisé, monté, coproduit et composé la musique de *Mar Adentro*! Le film raconte l’histoire vraie d’un quadraplégique joué par Javier Bardem qui demande le droit à l’euthanasie. Alors que le sujet du film peut sembler très dur et difficile, la luminance du personnage principal et les nombreuses scènes tirées tout droit de son imaginaire font de ce film un qui est à la fois magique et très émouvant.

-P-A Despatis D.

***The Sea Inside* (2004)**

The promising combination of Alejandro Amenábar and Javier Bardem unfortunately only adds up to a well made but run of the mill ‘dying man’ biopic. The film doesn’t pander to the genre but doesn’t rise above it either. It also doesn’t add a great deal to the right-to-die debate either. In the end it’s pleasant but forgettable.

-Collin Smith

***Searching For The Wrong-Eyed Jesus* (2003)**

Beware the ethnographic gaze! Filmmaker Andrew Douglas, and Virgilian guide Jim White, take a documentary road trip through the American dirty South of juke joints and Pentecostalism to uncover the secrets of the strange and “primitive” region. White declares himself an expatriate of the area who never really understood the spirit of his homeland. Theatrically staged roadside encounters with a cast of colourful characters are cinematically interesting, but reveal the inherent xenophobia of the film’s us-and-them construction. People you might really want to get to know are “examined” at arm’s length, abstracted through the camera’s slick lens and White’s patronizing discourse. Thankfully, in the end, the filmmaker explicitly admits the failure of his quest to crack the complexities of the South. The film is gorgeously shot on 16mm, and takes a truly innovative approach to a

new (?) genre, the musical road documentary. The soundtrack, featuring local Alt-Country and rockabilly artists, is killer.

-Zoë Constantinides

***Sideways* (2004)**

Believe the hype: each of Payne’s films has been better than the last, and this one’s no exception. Here, the writing, direction, and acting all deserve a screening of their own, so see this movie three times. You won’t get bored.

-Brian Crane

***Sideways* (2004)**

This movie is a surprising gem. It’s best that you don’t know what it’s about before you see it. Just let the story tell itself. But permit me to say this and this alone: it’s about adult characters in real situations reacting with true emotions in all its messy forms. A real treat for grown-up movie lovers. Whatever else is playing, skip it until you have seen this.

-Collin Smith

***Sideways* (2004)**

I don’t know if movies can change lives but they can certainly change days. Three film students go to a 10AM press screening of *Sideways* and, inspired by the film’s excessive wine-drinking, skip class and spend the entire afternoon in a Montreal park engaged in some heavy wine drinking of their own. Alexander Payne (*Citizen Ruth*, *Election*, *About Schmidt*) has been labeled a cynical satirist. This may be true, but in *Sideways* he demonstrates a genuine affection for his characters, one that’s powerful enough to inspire this film student to miss a 35mm print of *Jaws* and emulate those characters. Good films cause discussion, great films cause hangovers.

-Jonathan Doyle

***Sideways* (2004)**

Alexander Payne’s film is the latest in a cavalcade of backhandedly optimistic movies in which a tortured Paul Giamatti brings bad things upon himself. Like *American Splendor*, it asks, can Paul Giamatti ever be happy, or moreover, can he ever be happy in a starring role? *Sideways* ends on a hopeful maybe, which is better than his fate in *Big Fat Liar*. Despite this and it being a self-consciously literary literary adaptation, there is a lot to like; for example, that the film’s premise—two friends vowing to get laid—is a middle-aged version of a convention borrowed from teen-sex comedies.

-Gareth Hedges

***Some Things That Stay* (2004)**

Le jeu des acteurs est sans doute l'une des seules choses qui fonctionne bien dans ce film. Tout le reste laisse grandement à désirer. Le roman hyponyme sur lequel le film est basé est très bon et a eu une très bonne réception. Cependant, la réalisatrice n'a pas été en mesure de le transposer de façon intéressante à l'écran et le tout dérape très vite. Un trop grand nombre de thèmes ont été inclus (premier amour, religion, amitié, mort d'un enfant, maladie, ...) et aucun n'est adéquatement développés. Cela donne un film très éparpiller. La réalisation et la mise en scènes sont toutes deux maladroites par moment et par dessus tout, comment expliquer les nombreux plans hors foyer? Le film *Falling Angels* reste sans doute une meilleure alternative.

-P-A Despatis D.

***Stander* (2004)**

André La Mitraille is back! Basé sur une histoire vraie tout comme l'adaptation cinématographique de la vie de notre Monica nationale, *Stander* se veut lui aussi un film très noir sur les agissements d'un voleur de banque notoire. *Stander* apporte un nouveau regard sur ce type de films et montre bien qu'en dehors des assises Hollywoodiennes (ie. : *Ocean's 11* et cie.), les cinéma nationaux peuvent eux aussi produire de bons films de genre.

-P-A Despatis D.

***Tarnation* (2004)**

In a peculiar turn, I saw this film only a few days before I saw *Gummo* on TV. Both films share a very similar approach, and since Caouette said in an interview that *Gummo* inspired him to do this film, a comparison between the two is unavoidable. However, while *Gummo* was something of a fiction film, *Tarnation* is entirely made of real home video footage that Caouette filmed himself. I'm not sure which one is better, and in fact, I'm not even sure that it matters. That said, emotionally, *Gummo* works much better. Sometimes fiction is better than reality, right? *Tarnation* just seems like *America's Funniest Home Videos* with a twist; *America's Saddest Home Videos*. Don't get me wrong; I actually enjoyed this film. However, there's gotta be something more that just putting together a series of sad events together to make a great film. Mike Hoolboom's *Public Lighting*, which uses similar techniques, is a much better example of this type of cinema and successfully manages to present an intimate personal story.

-P-A Despatis D.

***Undertow* (2004)**

A truly amazing amalgam of *The Night Of The Hunter*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and *Badlands*— whose genius auteur, Terrence Malick, produced this—full of beautiful moments and odd, oblique characterizations (when was the last time you saw a character organize his books by smell?). In only three films, David Gordon Green (*George Washington*, *All The Real Girls*) has established himself as one of the most important (and ignored) directors of his generation. This 70s throwback uses every trick in that decade's formal playbook—freeze frames, zooms, the 70s United Artists logo—to illustrate the story of troubled, Southern brothers on the run from a crazed, ex-con uncle. In spite of the film's genre narrative, there are sequences (including its wonderfully ambiguous conclusion) that communicate almost entirely through cinematic language, foregrounding style to the point where it becomes the film's subject. Not all of the stylistic excess works, but when Green gets it right, he's as good as any filmmaker working today.

-Jonathan Doyle

***The Village* (2004)**

The true substance of the Shyamalan's genius lies in his adaptability to the realities of difficult working conditions. The clearest example of this is apparent from the fact that, having arrived on set to find his cast hopelessly inept at delivering period dialogue, he spontaneously writes in the "surprise" ending to render this ineptitude a plausible function of the narrative. Nice save. Perhaps he should have been a goaltender.

-Randolph Jordan