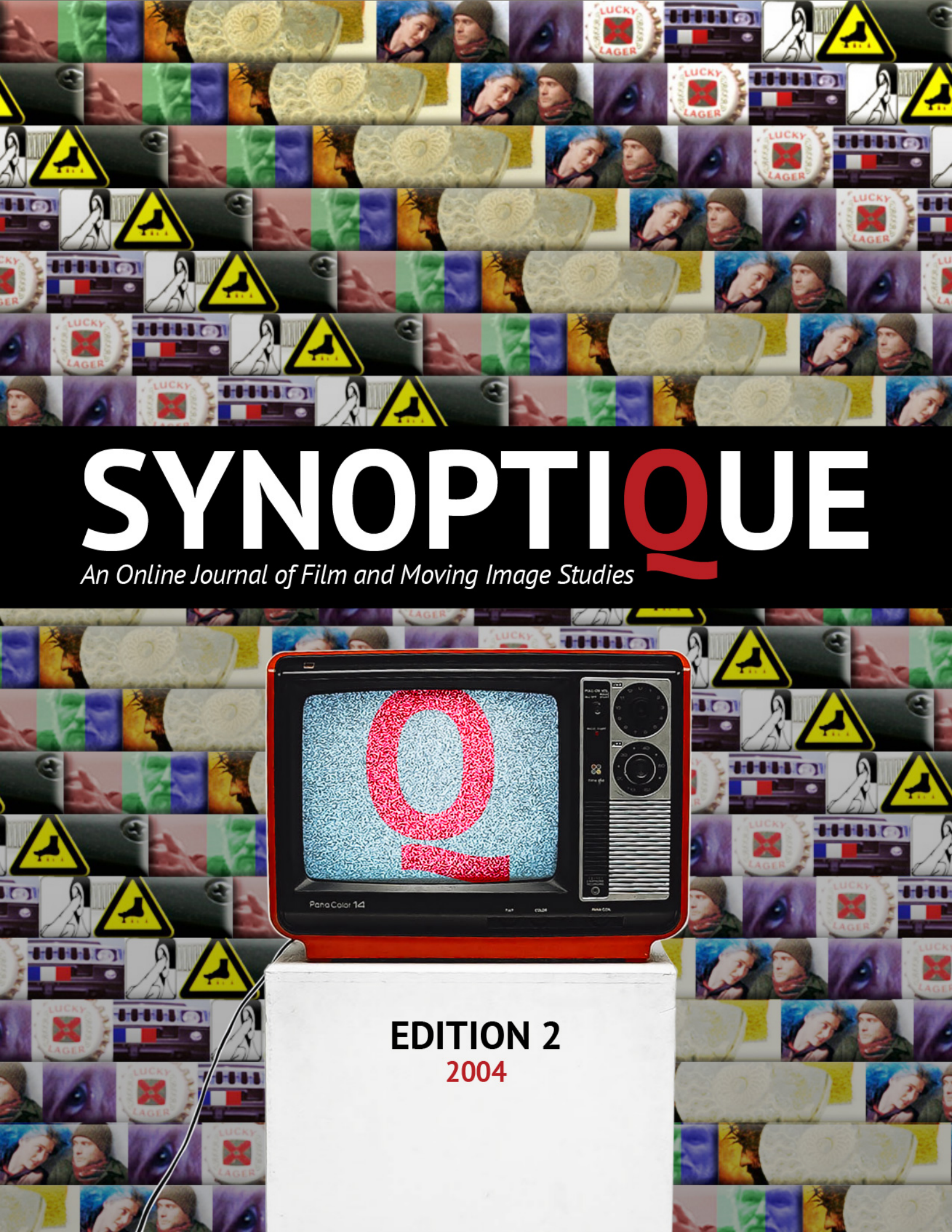

SYNOPTIQUE

An Online Journal of Film and Moving Image Studies

EDITION 2
2004

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This is a new edition. There will be another edition in May. In June we will start publishing weekly.

Text from the last edition:

This is *Synoptique*, a new journal about film and film studies. Click on **Overview** above for 19 short explanations of this project. Please click on **Issues** for information about *Synoptique*'s refereed editions.

We're waiting for this edition's **layout** page to load (it may already be done if it says at the top of this page CLICK HERE TO CONTINUE). Normally, that link would take you to our **Weeklies** page. This edition is a little different.

This preview of *Synoptique* is for getting excited about. In this gorgeous moment to be in love with cinema. *Synoptique* is a film journal, but it's also an experiment, and a terribly ambitious project: it's a snapshot of a particular community built around a mad delight in a thing. It's an experiment in the way small details make sensible the whole. This is microscopic work on a massive scale. On this big picture. That giant screen. The small fine postage-stamp sized bodies poised for projection. Click on **Statement of Purpose** for more details. This modest Preview will be updated over the next month or so as we develop ideas and design, all in preparation to begin publishing weekly sometime in April. We are looking for contributors. Artists, thinkers, talkers. Experimentalists.

Please contact **editor@synoptique.ca**.

Weekly publication is appropriate to the web. We want to reveal the play of ideas that result in statement, summation, and refutation. We're interested in the false leads, the dead ends, and unexpected vistas. Basically, we are breaking down a monthly or bi-monthly more classical publication into cumulative weekly installments. This is serial scholarship. We're cultivating things over time. We can chart progress. Enjoy the view. This gives us flexibility to respond to our community. This is about how to both comment upon and live within a community.

Bienvenue sur *Synoptique*.

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Brakhage at Concordia [Bourget Building, January 26, 2001]

transcribed by Lys Woods

26 April 2004 | 6532 words

Click to hear a Real Audio clip (untranscribed) of Brakhage's Speech

BRAKHAGE: So the subject, as I understand it, today, is the home movie. Is that right? (Inaudible answer.) Cheryl Simon? (laughs) Oh, I'm sorry…oh dear. Hello. I'm sorry if I kept you waiting. (Richard Kerr: "That's the advertised concept, but umm..") Yeah. Okay, well it's a good place to start. Because first of all I think it's all home movies. Everything else is hubris and hyped bullshit really. It's all home movies. It's all, at best, amateur. Now usually it's not good enough to be called amateur, but amateur is certainly, as you speak French so regularly here you know, means lover. And for all the people who despise the term and make fun of it and use it as a derogatory term, the truth of the matter is that there is nothing greater on earth than to actually be able to extend your love and to express your feeling of love for those that you do love, and maybe I'm a big romantic; that will be soon clear, but I think its something I share with most people that haven't been too recently disillusioned by some abuse of that term.

Now that's the other problem, a lot of people have abused love just horribly in our time. First of all the dictionaries and the etymologists have that the word so applies, is so misapplied that one can say: "I love sunsets, I love tomatoes, I love my mother, my father, I love my sister whom I just had a big sibling rivalry with. I love my cat, my dog; I love the president. I love the flag"—so on. "I love these toys. I love my job," you don't hear that too much, but anyway, the word gets so diluted that it, finally it's something that one can't in fairness use when you encounter the real feelings of affection, not just to a mate, say, or a wife or husband, but to a good friend even; you say, "Well, how can I use that word that's so dirtied by various usages?"

So, it's a word like art that needs to be to some extent protected. Not to be niggardly about it. Certainly, wherever one feels a real sense of loving compassion one should express it and acknowledge it. Or where one feels art one should at least hopefully hope something's art, but one shouldn't be too sure 'til you've lived with it for awhile, or that it be culturally such 'til it has been around for awhile. And one of the problems, and likenesses that film shares with love, is that always love is having to be regenerated, and its terms are always newly come upon in any given language. And usually are come upon meaningfully when one actually has such a suffusion of feeling that there's no other term that will do. And then one hopes one has the term left to use at that moment.

Similarly, film has been around, not long enough to be fairly called a cultural art, and we don't know that it will be. How long can it be preserved? People keep having ideals about this. I can tell you the outside ideal I've heard at the moment, is that a tight-packed, twice-washed, well made interneg that's packed airtight in cellophane, you know like a heavy saran wrap, will last probably for 170 years with no noticeable change in color or deterioration of line. So…but nothing's been around for 170 years so we don't know for sure, but it seems, by all the things I've read, a reasonable hypothesis. Love of course, unless one is thinking of it as lasting beyond death which real lovers certainly do, of course, also has a life limitation as itself on earth, however one's designed it. The other thing you can say about art, in any sense, and love that's related and is certainly more particularly true of film, though we don't know if it is one (an art) or not, is that you can say that it will be personal and individual, as personal and individual in the appreciation as it has to be in the making. And why does it have to be in the making? Because in the making one wishes to create something that's absolutely essential to oneself, and will express the truth--the most truth that anyone can know. And though people do everything they can socially to abort this truth it still remains unarguable that every single person is absolutely unique on earth, and there's never been anything like you or me or any of us here ever before, or ever conceivably could be. And that also… what even makes that more maddening and almost frightening beyond belief, that every moment that keeps being more and more true; that is, every moment is new. This moment is new. What I said just a few seconds ago is past now. And this is new for each of us, because each of you have brought to this, experiences by the billions probably, that no one else on earth has ever had.

In addition to which we know that in our cellular structure wherein we're most alike, most liken to each other that at least one can set up a body of medicine that, to some extent, can cure most of us of some of the same diseases or ills. But the truth of the matter is that cells, those that are involved in cells and look at them closely enough to see their individuality know that there are no two cells in anybody's given body that are at all alike, and if you want the most maddening exercise of this; I mean, there are reasons why even though you don't see all the cells of any particular body, you can soon come to feel that that must be so as you don't find any that are alike, and furthermore that there are rational arguments and laws which suggest that that must be true. The most wonderful exercise, and you can easily do it in this weather: get a little piece of black velvet, go out and catch a few snowflakes And then take your magnifying glass and look at them. There's only about six forms of snowflakes but I defy you to find two alike, and if you do and if you can keep them frozen solid enough to show them, you've made the Guinness Book of World Records. And then when you look and see how unique and individual within this very limited form that each have. Like you know there's the…however many pointed star snowflake, there's the hexagonal snowflake, and so on so forth: there's just very few forms. And then you look at those in your little hand, and you have to have sub-zero weather and not breath on them and watch them through your magnifying glass, and then look up and see (them) coming down everywhere, everywhere, piling up on the ground everywhere, and then you have some sense of what your own cellular system is, as distinct from anybody else's collection of individual and unique cells.

And all of these must somehow collaborate with each other in various ways or we die. I mean they have to get together, and I've seen this on a really microscopic level, where you have individual heart cells have been separated out and each of them make this little tiny pulse and each of their pulses are slightly different. Different rhythm. Then you nudge them together on a petri dish, and get several of them together and one of their pulses begins to dominate the others and then they're all beating like a little group of six or seven and finally thousands of them hundreds of thousands finally getting together to make up the beating, the complex beating, of the four chambers of the heart which really doesn't have a ka-thump, ka-thump, but it has four chambers in complex interaction that make at least eight and when you count in the beats of the less noticeable or hearable beats of the valves opening and closing and so on, you have really a great super jazz drumming instrument which also is unique and distinct from any other person's and which is unique and distinct from moment to moment. But we do share under certain pressures the beats speed up and become faster with their own rhythms, but faster or slower sometimes become unbearable under certain unhappinesses like failed love is one of the worst if not the worst. Then the pain that is felt in the whole chest and which becomes integral with the heart's felt agony is again absolutely unique but one wants needs to share it somehow. It's too big for the chest. Too big for one person so they go ka-boom, ka-boom, ka-boom (rhythmically tapping his chest) and thus begins the dance, thus begins music, and finally they get the hollowed drum and whack, whack (pounds seat) and send it for miles with more complexity as they listen more and more to their heart and it is unique beat to that person's, just his or hers attention to it, as to what it is, and that's the beginning of music, and therefore the art of music. And finally, then, other things are added like a hollow reed that can play some of the tones that one can hear in the ear of the nervous system, and eventually bassoons and who knows what all—you know: bagpipes to lead men into war and the whole thing, a juice harp, and whatever, but so it is with film. And it all is home movies.

I tell you when I first really realized it; I always kind of knew it in myself, but when I first really realized it, when I was privileged to be invited to a special afternoon final performance of the restored Judy Garland film, uh god help my brain, James Mason, Robin Bickford, (audience help), A Star is Born, thank-you, thank-you. And I was surrounded in the afternoon by mostly Hollywood people, you know, that were just, I mean, not just famous people but people just from the neighborhood. And as the movie which was an old movie was unraveling, I began hearing people speak up quite openly like they do in living-rooms you know when they show the home movies they say, "Oh, do you remember when that drugstore! You remember that drugstore that's where Uncle Harry got …," and so on. And you know, meanwhile the camera's moved on and followed Judy Garland and moved out of the scene, and it went on like that the whole thing and then someone was telling someone else, quite openly like they would in a living-room, saying, "Oh it was terrible what happened to Charles Bickford he's such a great actor, but he ran foul of," I forget which producer, some producer, "and they black-balled him and he didn't have any work for thirty years." And now he gets a final before he died, he did his great final thing in A Star is Born. And all these stories came pouring out form all these people. Then I began going to other shows in Hollywood whenever I went to town, and I found this was not uncommon, and you don't get in the little, sort of like, regular movie theatres, you know like the A-plex theatres or something in Westwood, but you get it if you got out into the neighborhoods at all. People discuss their home movies because that's the town where most of these movies are made. And certainly it's the town where most of the people came from who made the movies. So, so they're traveling in Egypt and doing the Queen of Sheeba or whatever, but it's still some movie star down the block and how she did it, and how Hollywood it was, and is.

Well, having had that idea I began to investigate the word amateur and I began to study more the home movies of people which I also had, just by rote, always sort of despised. I mean what an imposition: somebody goes to Wyoming with their wife and mother-in-law and whatever, their children, and they photograph the trip and they want to show you their pictures from Wyoming. And they are not you know they don't know how to handle a camera, the camera was new, and things are overexposed or underexposed or superimposed or clacking loose in the gate or whatever as a first experimentation that I ever really fully experienced in film was in so called home movies. Then you begin to find when you look into it there are reasons for, it is not by accident that the mother-in-law's face is superimposed over some brown bear's face, you know (laughter). It's not by accident that certain things are overexposed and so dark you can't see them at all. But meanwhile there's a running commentary that is denying the whole thing and is saying, "Oh, I 'm sorry this is terrible, I know, and this is boring." And I really found that the most boring part of it was the constant apologia that came from these amateurs for being what they were. I mean, after all, there was clearly more love involved in most people's photography of the baby, than ever I've seen in a Hollywood movie, more real love. And expressive, too, the kind of humbleness with which, well, some people aren't humble and then they're vulgar amateurs.

But, at any rate, when someone lets him or herself be themselves with the camera in hand and not worry about being a professional or something, they photograph with such tenderness and such beauty, the baby, the first steps of the baby, they try to get everything you know, because it's all passing, anyone with a baby sees that, "Now you see it, now you don't. They no longer throw their spoon on the floor," you know. It's over. It's all gone; It will never happen again, 'til their a teenager, you know. It's all over. And did they get it, a hold on time. You know, something that will last is the point. Something that's removed enough from the roughage and sometimes outright horror and excruciating difficulty of raising children, the impossibility of living with another human being. And all people should be told this when they plan to get married. It's utterly impossible to live with another human being. And then see if you can beat that. Cause many people beat that. They manage to do it forever--forever. And if not literally, forever, somehow forever in the heart. But in the meantime, pictures have been taken.
And the scrapbook is nice, but it has its limitations, but to actually be able to share with each other the movement, the movement of the baby, the movement of one's own heart. I've literally watched a lot of movies, of home movies, where you can see the heartbeat of the person photographing. You know it goes like that (makes pulsating signs with his hands). And you look at the edge of the frame, and you've been influenced by this whether you knew it or not, but if you look at the edge of the frame. The edge of the frame is going like this (makes film frame with fingers, and pulses in and out). Cause the filmmaker is trying as hard as possible to hold his or her breath you know to not move, but the heart, cause they're pressed against the face and they're having these feelings, the heart is doing this to the frame-line (demonstrates a shaking frame). So I started letting that in, doing everything I could to encourage that to come into my work.

There was a point where my 16 mm equipment, all but the camera, were stolen from my car in New York city. We had no place to live, we had no other place to park than where we did, so it wasn't negligence, it's just that we were unlucky and someone broke in and took all this equipment. And I arrived back in Colorado all completely downed, you know, and with three kids, four at that point, and had to move back in with the in-laws—that terrible defeat—and had nothing to work with. And I had about 40 dollars, so just kind of as a gesture that we weren't coming in to mooch on them, I said, "Well, I'll go to town and buy some groceries," and as I was in town I passed a little shop, and in the window was a little shoebox, with a little tiny 8 mm camera, 3 rolls of unexposed film, a couple of exposed rolls, a little editor, a little, tiny things, all fit into a kind of shoebox. It stuck out a little bit here and there. But there it was for $20. So I bought it, and that's how I began the psalms. And then I bought $20 worth of groceries.

And the Songs thus began, and my conscious involvement, not with the aesthetics of Sergei Eisenstein or the other great masters that I had been consciously inspired by, but I began to wean myself off of that enough so that I could open up to the world of the news reel, which is another kind of home movie. Our trip to the Second World War front is no more or less devastating than many peoples trip to Wyoming. It's more deadly, of course, and more world serious. But, I mean, the hand-held camera is the same. The beating of the heart can be felt the same. I had the good luck to meet some of the great newsreel photographers of that era; in fact Pete Smith who was, when he was an 18 year old kid, sent out on a dumb assignment from his Pathé studio to photograph a big German blimp coming in and docking out in New Jersey. As it turned out it was the Hindenburg. He had a Mitchell which weighs, I don't know, 100 pounds in itself. He had a huge, very expensive 50 pound tripod: he had 150 pounds, he's a slight, 18 year old kid, he's hand-cranking, it's a hand-cranked Mitchell, and this whole thing blows up in front of him. And he lifts this off the ground…Is there anyone here who hasn't seen the explosion of the Hindenburg? (Answer in the affirmative.) Ah, well, you will eventually, it will show up on TV or something. It's just incredible. You see this dirigible, it's filled with, alas, hydrogen, that just explodes in fire everywhere, and people hurling themselves out of the windows down to the ground, and many died, of course. And he's lifted this thing up, and he's hand-cranking, and you can feel at times as he stands like this (shaking arms); I don't know if it's the heart or just the muscles beginning to shake from the weight that he's holding, he's like that mother that picks up the car to get the tire off of her child's leg. He had super-human strength, and made, again, one of the great home movies of all time— all too human. They had a wax disk going, so the cameraman's supposed to comment literally on what he's shooting, and he used foul and profane language constantly while photographing this, and got fired when he got back to the company, when they heard the disk. The head of Pathé was super-Christian and said: "Fire that kid." He brought in the greatest piece of newsreel footage, probably, in the history of the form. And he was fired because he was so moved. He didn't remember cussing. He said, "I wasn't ordinarily a kid that cussed," but the most awful obscenities came out of him as he witnessed this horror in front of him. So that was the home movie part of it that we did not get to see in the newsreel theatres.

Make it up for yourself, restore it, wherever possible—that was the all too human side coming out along with the incredible sense of a human body moving behind this imagery, and the pulse, I say, of muscles that are cracking under the stain of, he's hand cranking which doesn't permit the greatest subtlety of heartbeat or anything to come through, but certainly the body's trauma is very visible at the edges of the frame, along with the incredible horror of what's happening before your eyes.

The greatest image of such…that I've ever seen of the heartbeat in film, is not made by clutching the camera to the self, but in the most amazing way. It's, now I'm going to have trouble remembering the name, Indian women, did, umm, forgive me my brain is just…Yes, Ellie Epp, thank you. You, remember the one she did when she went home. What's that called? (inaudible suggestion) Yeah, that's a great one too, all of her films are great, but the one when she went back to her Indian reservation. And, it's the last work, alas, that we've seen from her. And photographed the house where she grew up, and the cold, bleak, she was like upper B.C., you know, cold and barren land. And she went out on ice, and set the camera up on a tripod, and is photographing a spate of barren ice. But she's holding the camera and I guess because it's on the ice, and the whole thing somehow it puts her heartbeat at the fame's edge, across this whole frozen landscape; you know, like the one spot of warmth anywhere visible in a thousand miles in all directions or whatever is her heart beating at the edges of the frame. So there's a home movie to be sure. Ellie Epp…Reason I've forgotten her name is, I mean I love her work, but no one writes of it or speaks of it anymore. Do you show it at all? Have you seen some…(inaudible answer) Notes in Origin (**1**), yeah so there's one to rent sometime if you can, cause I think that's, not just because of this one shot, but because the whole thing is somehow imbued with that sense of absolute persona, desperately needing to see and see in such a way that's unique, that's honest, because if we are unique, and I defy you to say we're not. You're really going to have to think that through and if you can prove we're not then you'd be one of the top philosophers in the world and the US army will love you for it, and the CIA and so on…, and the boy scouts. But if you can't prove that then your stuck with that in order, if truth is a value, if that's what we need to have long-lasting, and if truth has anything to do with the arts, and there's another tough philosophical question to tackle, then it must be unique or it's a lie. The extent to which it is not new is a cover-up.

Now there are elaborate forms of cover-up. Hollywood is probably the best in the world at it: they cover-up all their uniqueness of person and amalgamate it and get something that the bankers will approve, and then along come a few people that are allowed to be mavericks, like Scorsese and so on, to help the cover-up; they're like token people, you know. The rest are expected to behave, and move straight down the marshaled line, and not be risking millions of dollars--perfectly reasonable, from a horrific industrial standpoint. But they have to go to such great lengths to cover-up uniqueness of person. It is very, very tough, very difficult; It is like dressing for the prom or something like that, you know what I mean. You have to pretend you're being unique, like you have a different colored dress and you don't want the same dress as anyone else or the same suit. Well, the suits, men aren't really supposed to try to be unique so they should all look exactly alike--like undertakers. But the women should look like flowers or something and be in different colored dresses, and it's all to give the impression of uniqueness, but, of course, it is anything but. It is so horrendous; it's like the beauty contests or something, you know. Let me burrow in on that a little bit, because a little girl was murdered in my town; principally, because she was a beauty queen at the age of six, and they've written about everything else, including how they can't seem to catch her parents, no one seems to, has even subpoenaed her urologist who treated her over a hundred times, for things that Cyril Wecht, the greatest autopsist in the country has said absolutely and undeniably, indicate constant sexual child abuse for a long time before her death.(**2**) And all kinds of movies, I'm sure you've seen some of them, alas, where she comes out in her little cowboy hat, and does her little Las Vegas number, and wiggles her behind and so on. And, brutally murdered, and nobody brought to trial for the matter. I mean, how did I get onto that, (audience member: "Prom?") Prom, yeah, prom will get you there (much laughter). Well, that's where it begins, she just had it a little early. And then after the prom, you're supposed to go over, and they slip you some drug at the frat house, and rape you, you know, etc., and themselves in the process. So, there it is: people get sold down the river, all trying to be alike. But, I mean, literally, here was this child, oh it's so awful; I mean, one of my boys best young friend's was in the classroom with her, so it's leaned in heavily on us. The whole town, the little children particularly have suffered horribly from it, because for a long time the police were suspecting Santa Claus. There's this old guy that lives up in the hill and he comes down every Christmas cause he has a natural beard, and he plays Santa all over town. And police had him under suspicion, not the very obvious people who almost certainly had to have done it. But, again, as I say, the urologist was not called in to testify. Nobody was really investigated, because this is high powered money that's involved with Boeing and government work, and so on, so the cover-up was just enormous.

And, uh,…Aaahhh the prom. The prices we pay for the--in terror, I guess, of loneliness--that we pay in order to have the illusion of being like each other. And then, sort of like the last fling is teenage-ness, first loves and so on. And one falls in love and you think, "Aahh, at last, it really is true." This other person feels just the way I do. And I feel just the way they do. And particularly when we're having sex, we're just one. We're absolutely one creature. And then, maybe after sex, maybe at breakfast the next morning, who knows, but one or the other says something, and the other one says, "What?" (makes a face of startled incomprehension and chuckles) And this little tear in the fabric of this illusion; and then they begin talking, and soon there will be the first quarrel, but they say, "Well that was just the first quarrel that doesn't …" But really it's the first hint of reality in this vast cover-up illusion that people are alike, and if people use love for that reason, they end up, as most people do in my country these days, divorced, shortly after, because the greatness of the adventure is, you begin to find out this other person isn't like me at all. They don't even like the same things I like ordinarily, or very few of them, in yet they're staying with me for some reason—why? You know, the terror of that, the collapse of illusions in that moment, the fear that suffuses both of them; they're making love and suddenly they're recognizing that the other person is not feeling that same way: that a man does not feel the same way as a woman does or vice versa, when they're making love--My God, you know, "And I thought you liked that!"

1. *Notes in Origin* is a 1987 Canadian short film.

Meanwhile, fear, like an aura of fear, which is awful ugly, it smells like soap and milk, comes out from under people's armpits, and surrounds them. And they have their first challenge for the great adventure of life: the love of the other, of the alien, of the completely alien creature out there that I'm somehow with, that's impossible to live with, but we're somehow doing it, and so on. Now, the antidote to all this horror and silliness, to the prom, to the illusions, the wrong usages, I would take it, of love and so on, are really the arts, because arts, not because artists are greater people, they're really, and I've know most of them, and they're, present company excepted, they're mostly shits of the worst order, they're absolute…you wouldn't want one living next door (much laughter) to you, think about it: Vincent Van Gough living next door, coming over to borrow your ear and a cup of sugar every morning--Good God! That was a nice pun cause he doesn't have his own anymore, he cut it off and so on--you know, he wants yours. They're really, really difficult people, for the most part; though, I have noted, there's a new generation that's the most puzzling of all that tend to be very sweet artists, and I've said to one of them that I'm quite close with and work with even on the step-printer, and said, "Mary Beth, you don't have to cut your ear off, but you're going to have to scream and stamp your foot every now and again or you're setting too high a standard for artists, you know, it will drive the rest of us crazy. She is so sweet and kind, and her friends Zachary and Eric, they're sweet and kind, too and they're great artists, and I look at them in astonishment, to have endured Kenneth Anger, Harry Smith, Jack Smith, all those Smiths, you know (much laughter). Paul Sharriss, who has the record for outright horror. You know, you've invited so and so to come to speak to your students: what will happen? You see if you can get them there sober rather than drunk, or maybe in some cases you want them drunk rather than sober. I mean, but they're certainly unique. Now the great trick would be to find a way to be this in the workplace but not spilling all over the society and wrecking lives, including each others. I mean, most of my generation is dead, most of them from one form of suicide or another. Some of them are worse than dead, they're in asylums or what not. They cracked up under the strains of everything. So there's very left, and I'm sort of looking forward to some home movies that can be made in a less stressful neighborhood of the psyche. You know, something that can feed…Well, I mean I'm not saying that those films that they made weren't necessary. I mean, the world certainly, absolutely needed it in the teeth of the atomic bomb; it needed to know the full spate of black magic. And Maya Deren, who was a terror to live with too, and I lived with her, Kenneth Anger, Perry Smith, from the inside gave a balance; that is, an aesthetically balanced work, which is one of my first definitions of art, and would be of home movie, too, for that matter, balanced imagery of black magic and of the desire to have power and control over the earth and over other human beings. So, anyway, all these things are clouding up into my mind: people not easy to get along with, but now we have a chance, I think, or I'm sensing it's happening, it isn't something I'm wishing for. I had given up wishing for anything, to tell you the truth, in terms of the arts, cause they are an absolute, below any imagined bottom in the United Sates. And in case you think they're all that much better in Canada (much laughter), let me just give you one figure that will probably surprise you. I checked it out, it was so surprising I couldn't believe it. The city of Berlin, the city, spends more money on the arts, all the arts, including film, than the United States and Canada as countries together--the city of Berlin, and Paris is probably not far behind. You know, so what's happening here, you know, well: "Stamp them out. Get rid of them, as quickly as possible." Given what they're doing these days, it's probably destroying a whole generation of artists, is giving them, what's that God damn… Ritalin that we have to fight all the time. The kids come out with a piece of brilliant genius and they come home and…. (lost material; change of tape).

2. Brakhage is referring to the murder of JonBenet Ramsey, in Boulder, Colorado in 1996.

I mean, history is one of my hobbies, and the only antidote is the arts. For one thing, because they are unique and individual and they start with that truth, and starting with that truth they appeal to the uniqueness and individuality of anyone else in the audience, which is why most people hate them to begin with. Because they don't want to feel unique and individual, they want to go to the movies and spread their legs, and their 3 year old adult mind and be raped…gently, with a happy ending; or a sad ending that's meaningful that can have you go out and talk about it over coffee or whatever, and it's ridiculous, actually, and I love the movies and I go, and I do just exactly that: I spread my legs, and I get my mind down to about 3 years old, and I enjoy myself thoroughly; but I know what's being done to me, and I know when it's over its finito. I don't wander out onto the street and suppose that life is like that. It's an escape, you know. It's not probably good for the brain, but it's not as damaging as liquor is to the liver. So, I put up with it, and it's a big deal in my life. But let's don't be confused about what it is, I mean it's an outrageous lie. And like anything where you think you buy off the stress or the strain— with drugs, liquor, anything, misuse of love, your children will live for you, all these horrors, you know, go to war, and save the world. Again, the antidote is in the arts. Now whether film will achieve that kind of stature and meaningfulness, we don't know; we live in a time where many people hope so, and they work for that. And they work from the grounds, all of them, whether they know it or not, of home movie. Move only along the line of your love, move only…amateur, a-ma-teur, lover, be a lover, as a lover be lover want to be, themselves, unique and individual. And a wise lover wants the one he or she loves to be unique and individual, as well. And move along those lines with whatever means you have, and my, you know god given means, the thing that was given to me that I could do and what I really wanted to be was a poet, which is cheaper, has higher respect, is the art I like the best, and so on. But I said, "No, you can't be a poet. You're not a good poet." (laughter all around) And I found it out, lucky enough, early on by living with some poets and being honest about it, they were honest about it, and I became the filmmaker I am. But I made my first film thinking I was Jean Cocteau making a movie, you know. But, so, I'm given this thing I can do, and I have very little choice, and it's the best thing they'll let me do with any meaning to myself—twenty-five minutes later. So, I can..it has to be unique and individual because I am; it has to be honest or god help me. I mean, one of my definitions of art is it is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you god. Now the last part is even dropping out of the courts, you know; people aren't making people say god, cause nobody knows who's anybody's god is anyway, and it doesn't matter, that's probably the right thing to do in the courts, but in the workroom each person has to have something that's comparable to what some people would call god, or the all being, or the zeitgeist, or whatever you want to call it or have it be…the unconscious. The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you god. And tell me why would any amateur home movie maker film in any other way unless he or she were, very mistakenly, trying to be a professional. You say, "I'm a professional," the kids say, "Yeah, what ya mean?" That's like saying, "I am the father, you do what I say, because I'm the father and you're just a little kid. I'm the professional, now stand still and smile…Bbbbrrrrrhhh(makes the noise of a whirring camera). "Blow out those candles. Nooo, light them again, they didn't do it right. Did you make a wish? You didn't look like you made a wish. Do it again." Bbbrrrhhh…you know, that kind of upbringing. But the true amateur is stumbling around, her or she can't hardly get the film in the camera, they don't know how to work it, and they get it kind of together and they hope it's working right. And it goes: "Katcha, katcha, katcha," like that. And you get this wonderful blurred scene with the little kid sitting with lights flickering like this (waving arms), and then they stop and say, "Something's not right," and then they get in there and they make the hoop right, get the thing closed, you know, and then it's overexposed or underexposed cause they put their finger over the thing that's supposed to save them from that, you know, the electric eye. They're so impassioned they don't realize they have their finger over the lens, even, you know, so you get movies with like the passionate, shaking fingers of the mother with the child sitting, trying to blow out the birthday cake. I mean, you get all these wonderful things that anybody can relate to, that inspires anybody to be him or herself, that is to be a perfect fool, which as we know, people are. [fin]

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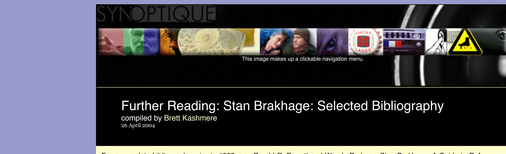

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compiled by Brett Kashmere

26 April 2004

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REVIEW: *By Brakhage: An Anthology*

by Jason Woloski

26 April 2004 | 2326 words

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of the same
DVD,
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Offscreen.

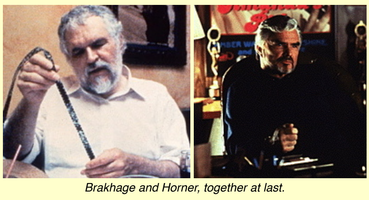
In the era of the laserdisc, The Criterion Collection essentially stood for an esoteric series of films released on to what many would construe as a highly exclusive home video format. In other words, to be a collector of Criterion releases in the days before DVD meant that you immediately stood out from the average movie fan, your personal collection of movies reflected an interest and devotion to the medium far beyond where most people would be willing to go, or could pay to go, even if they had the inclination. (I should also note here that I was not one of these people, as I was around ten years old when Criterion started manufacturing laserdiscs and actually thought that laserdiscs were LPs of film soundtracks for about five years after that, especially whenever I saw a rack of laserdiscs in a record store.)

However, with the widespread and ever-growing DVD format, The Criterion Collection's reputation, while still somewhat exclusive (their prices alone demand an excess of expendable income, if one is to keep up with their ever-growing catalogue), has lead to another problem: an inability to determine whether or not someone, when discussing a film already released on the Criterion label, actually possesses a knowledge of the film or whether they've simply spent a weekend locked up with the disc(s), only to emerge as a slightly deceitful expert of whatever film they've chosen. Granted, with the number of films out there, it is tempting to claim expertise in as many realms of film history as possible, and to use The Criterion Collection as your crib notes is hardly an unforgivable offense.

What seems to be happening, at least in the realm of Criterion DVD reviews, is that most reviewers are having difficulty admitting whether or not they were actually familiar with the film, and the history surrounding the film, before they sat down with the disc and its extras to review it. Or was the DVD, in fact, an introduction to a whole new world, and in turn how did this new experience reflect/affect their impression of the DVD?

I am bringing up these points because I, myself, feel a bit of trepidation writing about By Brakhage: An Anthology, without ever having seen a Stan Brakhage film. Hopefully, my lack of context will offer, at times, a fresh perspective on a two-disc collection that most reviewers have summarized as "brilliant," "necessary," and "masterful," without ever attempting to be critical or dissect the works themselves, even though the collection consists of twenty-seven films of varying length, quality, and style, from a period of forty-seven years.

My first impression of Brakhage, based on the few photographs I had seen was that he bore a striking resemblance to Jack Horner, the Burt Reynolds' character in Boogie Nights. However, once I had seen The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes, I decided that jokes at Brakhage's expense were probably not such a good idea, as he seemed more than capable of hurting me with his films, even from beyond the grave.



Brakhage and Horner, together at last.

Now, having watched all of the films on the two-disc set, I can say that The Act of Seeing with One's OWN Eyes stands out as one of the set's true masterworks. I can almost guarantee that I will never see this film again, as it deals exclusively with the graphic nature of autopsies, and the matter-of-fact nature of the people whose job it is to dissect cadavers, in order to locate causes of death. That said, the film plays eerily like an educational classroom film, as if we are somehow supposed to be learning something from the images before us. Minus a voice-over narration track or any soundtrack whatsoever, the question remains: What could the lesson here possibly be? Live well? Die well? Take good care of your body? Don't take care of your body because the living will have their way with it once you're dead, anyhow?

The viewer rarely, if ever, sees the face of the cadavers, while only seeing the hands and the clothed crotches of the living people whose job it is to work on the dead. The first dead body we see has a massively swollen scrotum, stretched and red, but due to what? Wong Kar-Wai stated that In the Mood For Love was a suspense thriller disguised as a romance story; Brakhage has created a mystery (possibly a murder mystery) out of what, on the surface, appears to be an experimental documentary. Constantly, the viewer is left wondering, "How in the hell did that person die?" or, in one case, "Why is part of that person's foot missing?"

While most of the bodies come into the morgue in decent shape, others are heavily mutilated before the autopsy even begins. By the end of each autopsy, it doesn't really matter what shape the bodies were in, as every body ends up in a state beyond repair. As an exclamation point to what is already borderline unbearable for the viewer, late in the film a body appears as a literally faceless death mask. Its skull has been washed and dried out, presumably accomplished through the artificial orifice of where its face has been cut off.

Interestingly, the viewer is also made privy to the practicality of autopsies, in that one is allowed to see the cavities of torn open bodies washed out, needles drawing fluids from the insides of skulls, as well as from organs, and the clichéd, but never more startling than seen here, tagging of the toe. Only when bodies are turned over or onto their sides does one really feel the impact of death. The bodies are thoroughly stiff when turned, while the skin on the asses of the cadavers is obviously devoid of blood and lifeless, as it remains in a flattened position, pale and conforming to whatever surface it has been lying on.

The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes also reveals a trend which is frequent in Brakhage's work, or at least in my experience of watching it, which is our curiosity about Brakhage's physical location during the making of the film. With his painted and scratched films, I imagine Brakhage as he no doubt painstakingly slaved away, while in films involving his family and/or his home, I find myself imagining the atmosphere and feelings surrounding the filmmaker as he worked with and around his loved ones. In the case of The Act of Seeing…, I can't imagine Brakhage spending weeks filming cadavers, which he did, and more to the point, I can't imagine the process of editing the footage. The idea of creating a pace and a rhythm to butchered bodies, albeit as a means to an end, seems like an unenviable task, especially when one considers that the physical act of simply watching the film is difficult enough. Of note, The Act of Seeing… ends in a subtly smart-ass fashion, not unlike much of Errol Morris's more ironic work. A doctor, having presumably performed an autopsy, stands alone while filling out a medical report, completely calm, as if to say, "you couldn't handle thirty minutes of this? This is my job, every single day."

By Brakhage: An Anthology is divided into four periods of the filmmaker's career. Five films, beginning with Desistfilm in 1954 and ending with Mothlight in 1963, showcase Brakhage's beginnings as an experimental filmmaker. The standout of this period is Window Water Baby Moving, a film about pregnancy and birth, culminating in a montage sequence of the birth of one of Brakhage's own children, intercut with several images of bald (newborn) and shaved (his wife's) vaginas, as well as the smooth surface of Brakhage's formerly pregnant wife's stomach. The film reflects a larger consistency about Brakhage at his best, which is that whenever the filmmaker is desperately attempting to physicalize that which he does not understand, these mysteries inevitably become more mysterious. Of course, Window Water… also deals explicitly with two of Brakhage's lifelong obsessions: the relationship between birth and death, and the impossibility of comprehending death while still alive.

In other films from this earliest period of Brakhage's career, the director displays an editorial virtuosity which would become the norm in his subsequent work. However, films such as Wedlock House: An Intercourse, as well as Desistfilm, remind the viewer that in some instances, the audacity of experimentation needs the resistance of a narrative context from which to emerge. Otherwise, experimentation can simply appear as fragmented nonsense. That said, I have no doubt that even these early films, in which Brakhage is clearly refining his craft, are porous enough to have brilliance or profundity projected upon them by anyone willing to look long and hard enough.

Besides The Act of Seeing…, three other examples of Brakhage's work from the early 1970s are included, two of which remain highly original and endure to this day. Eye Myth is an eleven-second painted film which briefly reveals people that were filmed on a city street. The contrast between Brakhage's painstakingly painted film and the people being filmed in the actual world, creates an effect that I wish Brakhage would have attempted to achieve more often in his painted films. In many cases, contrast is exactly what makes Brakhage's work dynamic and exciting, whether it is the contrast between sound and image, or the contrast between the filmmaker's isolated techniques and his work in the outside world. In an overall sense, there is a rough division between all of his work on the two-disc set: the contrast between documenting what goes on behind a human being's eyes (thoughts, emotions, feelings), and what is going on of interest in the world beyond one's eyes (as he documents repeatedly in his non-painted films).

Fifteen films, more than half of the entire anthology, document Brakhage's work from 1986 to 2001 (he died in March of 2003). During this period, Brakhage moved heavily into his unique style of painting on film, with limited success. The best films of this period are Nightmusic, Dark Tower, and Delicacies of Modern Horror Synapse. Nightmusic, painted on IMAX film stock, is one of the few films that obviously suffers from not being projected in its original format (Brakhage's epic Dog star Man, mostly because of its duration, also suffers from not being projected on film in a darkened theatre). Only thirty seconds in length, the film creates an effect which I'll call a "light of God" effect. Light shines through and off of the film, creating amazing results. Brakhage used this technique repeatedly, most notably in untitled (for Marilyn), Delicacies of… and Dark Tower. Delicacies of Modern Horror Synapse also creates a textured density in which Brakhage finally accomplishes what he repeatedly attempted throughout his career: he effectively conveys feelings by painting on film. The process for making this film, which is explained in the DVD's supplementary material, is what presumably led Brakhage to succeed where he had failed in the past.

Stellar starts off incredibly, due largely to pacing and content that is unlike Brakhage's other works on the disc. It quickly dissolves into the frenetic pace common in Brakhage's other painted films. The film was meant to be Brakhage's interpretation of the cosmos, capturing the effects of interstellar images via paint on celluloid. After a few brilliant seconds, I found myself wishing that Brakhage had actively attempted to transcend the natural flickering of film at 24 frames-per-second, and made the pace of his painted films more distinctly his own. It's as if the stylistic techniques of his painted films were determined by the mechanics of projection, and not his own willed process. Granted, Brakhage's style in the painted films draws attention to and reconfigures the mechanics of projected film, which a viewer rarely thinks about. However, after a few of these films, I think it's safe to say that we get Brakhage's point about mechanics, relating to the production and presentation of art.

As one moves through the supplements on By Brakhage: An Anthology, one notices that Brakhage is introducing himself as a person, even as he introduces us to his work. Based solely upon footage of Brakhage speaking and reading onscreen, as well as the audio-only captures in which he "remarks" on each and every film included in the set, he comes across as extremely amicable, thoughtful, unpretentious, and genuinely interested in getting at something new and original in his work. Based on the disc's supplementary material, a strong sense is given that Brakhage, sadly, knew that this two-disc set would be his legacy. Consequently, he wanted to offer as many clues as possible about his life's work. Unless Criterion or another company decides to release a follow-up collection, for many viewers, these twenty-seven films will define Stan Brakhage as a filmmaker. It's an impressive collection. [fin]

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eXistenZ - le corps comme espace technologique

par Martin Legault et Angelune Drouin

5 April 2004 | 3986 words

L'Eucharistie ! Le sang et la chair de l'hommefaits cinéma. Il faut préciser qu'au cinéma on est encore dans la représentation de la chair. Cen'est pas la chair réelle. Je dirais que c'est une imagede la chair, une réflexion de la chair, ce qui en faitdonc toujours, à l'évidence, une abstraction […]C'est un miracle de la volonté que d'être capablede croire que le vin est du sang et que le cinéma estun corps humain.
- **David Cronenberg**

Le simulacre n'est jamais ce qui cache la vérité— c'est la vérité qui cache qu'il n'y ena pas. Le simulacre est vrai.
- **L'Ecclésiaste**

L'œuvre cinématographique de David Cronenberg nous convie de façon récurrente à un jeu d'illusions qui cache un monde technologique aliénant (Videodrome, The Fly, Crash). Avec eXistenz, le cinéaste canadien nous fait une brillante démonstration de l'influence de la technologie sur l'homme à travers l'image, au niveau corporel et identitaire. Les thèmes qu'affectionne le roi de l'horreur intérieure réapparaissent dans eXistenz à travers une mise en garde contre cette obsession de l'homme à vouloir pousser la technologie au-delà de ses limites, le propulsant vers sa propre annihilation. Cette mise en garde est renforcée par l'illusion de la forme que prend son oeuvre construite d'une suite de mises en abîme. En effet, Cronenberg situe ses personnages au cœur d'enchevêtrements perpétuels d'un jeu à un autre, repoussant les contours de la réalité. Cet enfoncement plonge le spectateur dans un questionnement continuel face aux images qui lui sont présentées.

Le texte qui suit se veut une démonstration de l'influence de la technologie sur l'image et sur l'être humain à partir des réflexions de Cronenberg, illustrées dans son cinéma et plus particulièrement dans le film eXistenz. Nous verrons comment la culture du jeu qu'il expose est en lien direct avec une présentation de l'image-simulacre et entraîne la reconstruction du corps humain et de son identité sur une base factice. Conséquemment, nous serons à même d'observer le fonctionnement de la culture du jeu dans le film. Dans eXistenz, le simulacre se manifeste à travers le jeu virtuel et c'est pourquoi il se fait d'abord et avant tout «image».

*Construction narrative d'*eXistenZ

Cronenberg nous dirige avec son film à l'intérieur d'une réalité qui semble des plus véridiques, du moins c'est ce que les premières scènes du film semblent indiquer ; cependant plus la narration se déploie, plus nous nous retrouvons dans un espace qui dépasse toute forme de réalité, plus qu'un cyber-espace : un lieu que Baudrillard nomme *hyperréalité* et qui a comme niche les entrailles du simulacre, flottant entre l'imaginaire et la réalité :

Il ne s'agit plus d'imitation, ni de redoublement, ni même de parodie. Il s'agit d'une substitution au réel des signes du réel, c'est-à-dire d'une opération de dissuasion de tout processus réel par son double opératoire, machine signalétique métastable, programmatique, impeccable qui offre tous les signes du réel et en court-circuite toutes les péripéties. Plus jamais le réel n'aura l'occasion de se produire […][1]

Le premier jeu virtuel proposé au spectateur est «eXistenZ», inventé par une férue de la cybernétique. Cet univers est une pure illusion créée par le réalisateur, car eXistenZ est en fait le *deuxième* jeu présenté au public : il y a ici dès le début du film une mise en abîme du jeu, faisant partie intégrante d'une plus grande instance virtuelle, transCendanZ. Ce que le spectateur croit d'abord être la réalité, soit le moment à partir de la présentation d'eXistenZ dans l'église désaffectée jusqu'à la fin de la séance virtuelle de transCendanZ, est en fait un immense simulacre. En outre, le réalisateur laisse même planer le doute par la suite, le film se terminant sur une réplique qui remet en question la validité du réel : « Tell me, are we still in the game ? ».

La structure du film nous renvoie donc à la conception de Baudrillard, l'espace ludique dans lequel évoluent les personnages se voulant un *double opératoire* de la réalité. Une reproduction idéale d'un modèle de la réalité où les signes du réel sont substitués par une création quasi parfaite de ses signifiants qui n'est qu'illusoire. Cette *machine signalétique* ne permet pas aux événements de se produire dans la réalité qui, envahie par le simulacre, est annihilée. À travers cette construction narrative, Cronenberg nous démontre bien que toute forme de représentation du réel est illusoire et le fait que le sujet considère ce simulacre comme étant réel annule toute forme de réalité, «Nothing is true, everything is permitted[2]».

L'espace symbolique du simulacre

En plus de se constituer à travers la structure narrative, le simulacre se constitue également à partir des décors, de la construction des lieux et de la temporalité. L'image-simulacre s'impose dès le début du film avec l'aspect organique et terrestre des fresques présentées pendant le générique, qui sont pourtant de pures créations numériques. Les premiers éléments qui témoignent de cet univers hyperréel sont les décors, autant constitués d'éléments futuristes que d'éléments archaïques, venant briser l'unité structurelle et le réalisme des images. Le meilleur exemple est le moyen de transport utilisé par Ted Pikul, le garde du corps d'Allegra Geller, pour fuir l'attaque meurtrière dont elle est victime durant la présentation de son jeu. Il s'agit d'une automobile dont l'esthétisme rappelle les années 60 et qui détonne face à la technologie qui nous est présentée tout au long de la diégèse filmique : structure très carrée, couleur terne et volant disproportionné. Nous sommes face à des images paradoxales : une automobile archaïque contrastant avec un téléphone cellulaire rose à l'apparence organo-futuriste.

De plus, toujours dans cette séquence, les paysages que l'on voit défiler derrière la voiture sont en fait un simulacre de décor, car il s'agit d'une image fixe projetée sur un écran à l'arrière-champ. Ces éléments sont presque imperceptibles au premier visionnage du film, mais leur discordance contribue à l'atmosphère hyperréelle d'eXistenz. En outre, les personnages ont pour espace physique des lieux figés et typés : l'église, la station d'essence, le chalet, la «Trout Farm », le restaurant chinois. Ces endroits génériques correspondent à ce qu'on voit généralement dans un jeu, c'est-à-dire qu'ils possèdent leur spatio-temporalité et leurs fonctions propres et autonomes. La temporalité est un autre élément qui contribue à symboliser le simulacre dans le film : elle est non-linéaire et s'établit à la manière des jeux virtuels par des passages entre des tableaux possédant leurs propres règles. Elle est ainsi le reflet de l'aspect virtuel du simulacre, dans lequel le rapport au temps n'est plus une donnée liée à un contexte réaliste, mais plutôt une temporalité reconstruite :

> […] il n'y a plus de double, on est toujours déjà dans l'autre monde, qui n'en est plus un autre, sans miroir ni projection ni utopie qui puisse le réfléchir, la simulation est infranchissable, indépassable, mate, sans extériorité, nous ne passerons même plus «de l'autre côté du miroir », ceci était l'âge d'or de la transcendance.[3]

Personnages virtuels : dédoublement identitaire

À l'image de la structure narrative, l'attribution des rôles dans l'univers du film et dans celui du jeu introduit une autre forme de mise en abyme. Ainsi, les participants à TranCendanZ jouent et s'investissent comme les acteurs du film eXistenz, c'est-à-dire qu'ils tiennent un rôle dépassant l'aspect ludique et sans conséquence du simple jeu. Cette image vivante, dans laquelle ils vivent une portion de temps atemporel, n'est en apparence qu'un jeu mais elle devient une réalité plus vraie que virtuelle.

Somme toute, l'identité des personnages se transforme dans une dynamique de dépendance à cet univers simulé. Par le jeu, les personnages se redéfinissent, s'affirment, entrent en contact et se reconnaissent mutuellement en adhérant à la conception idéale qui leur est imposée. Leur double qui est projeté dans le jeu a comme fonction non seulement de faire évoluer leur quête identitaire, mais de leur recréer une nouvelle identité. À ce sujet, on remarque que plus Ted progresse dans le jeu, plus il devient un individu sûr de lui-même, en toute possession de ses moyens, ne reculant plus devant ses pulsions sexuelles et meurtrières.

Ce dédoublement identitaire se révèle dès que Ted pénètre dans l'univers virtuel : il s'éprend de l'image de lui-même tout comme l'enfant qui s'admire pour la première fois devant le miroir : "I feel just like me", s'étonne t-il. L'individu incorpore donc à l'intérieur de lui-même cette conception idéale promulguée par le jeu, provocant du même coup une transmutation de sa propre identité. Le jeu est plus qu'un miroir, il dépasse le simple reflet auquel nous pouvons nous identifier et s'avère être un lieu d'action. Le meilleur exemple de cette hypothèse est le moment où Ted — dans les séquences qui suivent l'entrée dans eXistenZ — ressent le besoin de regagner ce qu'il croit être son propre corps, sa réalité, sa véritable identité dont il craint avoir perdu la trace, malgré l'intensité des sensations qu'il ressent dans le jeu. Toutefois, lorsqu'il se retrouve dans l'espace apparemment réel du chalet, il n'est plus certain de la réalité de son environnement. En perdant les référents du réel, il a perdu ses référents identitaires.

Pour sa part, Allegra ne désire qu'une chose : retourner au plus vite dans eXistenZ pour y retrouver le double d'elle-même qui a maintenant plus de valeur à ses yeux. Sa véritable identité a donc perdu toute préséance sur le jeu. Sa construction identitaire n'a de sens et d'unité que dans l'univers virtuel. Sa vie pivote autour de cet environnement, elle n'a aucune emprise sur un quelconque réel. Cronenberg démontre bien par ce personnage qu'il n'y a aucune réalité possédant une valeur absolue, la seule réalité possible en est une simulée.

De corps médiatif à corps technologique

Dans la perspective classique (même cybernétique), la technologie est un prolongement du corps. Elle est la sophistication fonctionnelle, un organisme humain, qui permet à celui-ci de s'égaler à la nature et de l'investir triomphalement. De Marx à Macluhan, même vision instrumentaliste des machines et du langage : ce sont des relais, des prolongements, des média-médiateurs, une nature idéalement destinée à devenir le corps organique de l'homme. Dans cette perspective «rationnelle », le corps lui-même n'est que médium[4].

Cronenberg présente non seulement une redéfinition psychologique de l'individu à travers une nouvelle technologie organique, mais aussi une redéfinition du corps. Cette thématique est récurrente dans l'œuvre du cinéaste, qui élabore différentes conceptions du corporel et du technologique, le rapport au corps que l'homme entretient étant, selon Cronenberg, intimement lié à l'évolution technologique. On n'a qu'à penser à la façon dont le réalisateur présente la machine; comme un prolongement du corps dans Videodrome et comme une reconstruction corporelle dans Crash.

Avec Videodrome, le corps se soumet à la machine qui devient un instrument organique au service de la technologie. Dans la vision prophétique de Videodrome, l'être humain, caractérisé par le personnage de Max Renn (James Woods), est présenté comme une victime entièrement contrôlée par une nouvelle entité technologique suprême, alors que dans Crash, les personnages se soumettent volontairement à la technologie pour accéder à de nouvelles expériences, l'intégration des pièces de la machine redéfinissant mécaniquement les composantes et la fonctionnalité du corps

Le film eXistenz s'inscrit dans la même continuité, mais l'idée d'absorption de la technologie par le corps y est développée de façon dialectique : la fusion qui s'opère entre le corps et la technologie s'établit sous forme de mouvement de l'un à l'autre; ils sont autonomes tout en étant interdépendants. Alors que dans Videodrome et Crash la technologie agit unilatéralement sur le corps, dans eXistenz elle intègre jusqu'à l'organicité du corps autant au niveau de sa matérialité que de sa fonctionnalité. Le réalisateur dépasse ainsi la réflexion présentée dans les deux films mentionnés précédemment, car l'influence de la technologie n'est plus unilatérale.

Cette interrelation corps/technologie se manifeste notamment dans les artefacts du jeu. Le *game-pod* (la console du jeu) possède toutes les caractéristiques d'un être vivant. Il est à la fois perçu comme le prolongement du corps et comme un corps indépendant. En outre, il est dénué de toute spécificité technologique : on ne retrouve pas l'esthétique mécanique, froide et futuriste qui a cours habituellement dans le cinéma de science-fiction. La technologie d'eXistenz est donc paradoxale, puisque sa constitution renvoie à l'organicité et au biologique qui, par définition, sont opposés au technologique. D'ailleurs, Cronenberg mentionne dans les entretiens avec Serge Grünberg sa volonté d'élaborer une nouvelle conception de ce qu'est la technologie :

Il n'y a pas de radios, de téléviseurs, pas de téléphones sauf le téléphone rose. Je ne voulais pas que ce soit trop évident, mais je voulais supprimer ce que la plupart des gens considèrent comme de la technologie pour faire ressortir d'autres types de technologie : une forme de biotechnologie[5].

Cette nouvelle conception futuriste révèle une fusion avec le cycle de la nature; l'évolution de l'humanité n'est plus limitée aux découvertes et à l'avancement techniques, mais s'élabore à travers de nouvelles fonctionnalités du corps humain. Le corps devient donc cet objet hybride qui porte les progrès techniques en lui.

Renaissance à travers la biotechnologie

Car tout est là, dans le branchement. Il ne s'agit ni d'*être* ni même d'*avoir* un corps, mais d'être *branché* sur son corps. Branché sur le sexe, branché sur son propre désir. Connectés sur vos propres fonctions comme sur des différentiels d'énergie ou des écrans vidéos. Hédonisme branché : le corps est un scénario dont la curieuse mélopée hygiéniste court parmi les innombrables studios de reculturation, de musculation, de stimulation et de simulation […][6]

Pour mettre en marche le jeu virtuel, les participants doivent intégrer corporellement la console de jeu par l'entremise d'un cordon de connexion représentant un cordon ombilical. Pour ce faire, un nouvel orifice est créé : le *bio-port.* Celui-ci constitue une nouvelle entrée organique dans le corps permettant l'activation du jeu virtuel. Plus qu'un simple orifice, le bioport tient lieu d'organe sexuel. Tout au long du film, Allegra agit avec le bio-port, le cordon de connexion et la console comme avec de véritables objets sexuels. De plus, elle introduit le rituel du jeu comme un acte sexuel; son langage corporel est très évocateur à ce sujet.

À cet égard, Jean Baudrillard mentionne, concernant les pratiques sexuelles des personnages dans Crash [7] : « La jouissance (perverse ou pas) a toujours été médiatisée par un appareil technique, par une mécanique d'objets réels mais le plus souvent de phantasmes, elle implique toujours une manipulation intermédiaires de scènes ou de gadgets[8] ». Par contre, dans eXistenZ la médiation est atténuée par le fait que le corps a intégré à même sa structure biologique une partie des gadgets technologiques. Ici, la technologie comme outil de jouissance n'est pas nécessairement une fin en soi (comme dans le film Crash), elle fait partie du processus de transmutation du corps et de ses fonctions.

Avec le bio-port, le corps se donne une nouvelle naissance, une porte d'entrée dans un univers créé de toutes pièces par le simulacre. Le simulacre introduit par le jeu modifie le rapport au corps, ce dernier devenant la *source* de l'accessibilité aux réalités simulées. Le corps demeure médiatif car c'est à travers lui qu'on accède à la connaissance simulée par l'accession à tous les niveaux de réalité du jeu. L'image-virtuelle est donc créée par le corps. En outre, c'est l'individu qui prodigue la source d'énergie nécessaire au jeu et qui permet l'émergence de l'image virtuelle, car celle-ci est entièrement générée par le corps. Celui-ci est à la fois la source énergétique et l'espace de projection — il est utilisé comme un remplacement de l'écran cathodique. Le danger d'intégrer ce type de technologie à même le corps, c'est qu'elle ne permet plus aucune distance entre la réalité et le virtuel. Les participants ne peuvent plus distinguer ce qui fait partie du jeu et l'espace occupé par leur corps. Le jeu *devient* le corps, il y a donc une impossibilité à établir des paramètres distinctifs entre l'imaginaire et le réel.

Le fait que les personnages créent une relation de dépendance au jeu, perdant la notion de réel, les mène vers une impasse psychologique. La scène finale vient expliquer toute l'influence de la technologie sur leurs personnalités, quand, à la fin du jeu transCendanZ, Allegra et Ted ramènent dans l'espace pseudo-réel tout l'univers fantasmatique qui a reconstruit leur identité.

Quête existentielle et culture du jeu

Et sans doute notre temps …préfère l'image à la chose, la copie à l'original, la représentation à la réalité, l'apparence à l'être… Ce qui est sacré pour lui, ce n'est que l'*illusion*, mais ce qui est profane c'est la *vérité.* Mieux, le sacré grandit à ses yeux à mesure que décroît la vérité et que l'illusion croît, si bien que *le comble de l'illusion* est aussi pour lui *le comble du sacré*.[9]

L'image-simulacre s'articule dans le film à travers la structure narrative et détermine les lieux, la temporalité et les personnages — dans leur nouvelle constitution psychologique et corporelle. Il semble évident que pour les personnages, cette image-simulacre s'inscrit dans la recherche d'une vérité existentielle. Les implications des transformations corporelles par la technologie mettent inévitablement en place un questionnement philosophique qu'on ne peut éluder. Le vécu dans le simulacre, en se constituant comme vécu réel, exige non seulement une redéfinition identitaire autant psychologique que corporelle, mais aussi une redéfinition sur la base d'une quête philosophique pour trouver sens à son existence.

Le titre même de cette œuvre filmique renvoie à la terminologie existentialiste, que ce soit celle de Heidegger ou de Sartre. L'existentialisme de Sartre place l'être humain au centre d'un monde d'intersubjectivité, dépourvu d'une instance supérieure et de tout déterminisme. L'individu est seul face à une réalité individuelle et sociale dans laquelle il évolue avec l'entière responsabilité de la définition de son identité par l'action.

Cette idée rappelle étrangement le jeu eXistenZ dans lequel les personnages ne poursuivent aucun but déterminé d'avance. C'est à force de jouer qu'ils découvrent leur identité et leurs aspirations : «You have to play the game to find out why you're playing the game». Pourtant, a-t-on déjà vu un jeu dont le but est inconnu dès le départ?

Mais les traces les plus évidentes de cette philosophie se retrouvent surtout dans le discours des personnages, dans leur vision du jeu et leurs réactions face à eXistenZ. Le fait que Ted Pikul refuse le monde virtuel, y voyant une atteinte à son intégrité, apparaît complètement absurde à Allegra Geller. Pour elle, Pikul réagit typiquement comme quelqu'un qui passe à côté de sa liberté, qui tente d'échapper à lui-même en n'assumant pas les responsabilités de son existence. Finalement, un *lâche*, au sens où l'entend Sartre : «Les uns qui se cacheront, par l'esprit de sérieux ou par des excuses déterministes, leur liberté totale, je les appellerai lâches […][10] ». L'identité, forgée de valeurs comme la liberté et l'action est donc encore une fois forgée entièrement dans le jeu, dans le simulacre.

À la station d'essence, lorsque Pikul refuse de se faire charcuter pour accéder à eXistenZ, le discours que lui tient Allegra est assez révélateur : «This is the cage of your own making which keeps you trapped, pacing about in the smallest possible space forever. Get out of your cage, Pikul, break out now!». Pour Allegra, c'est le jeu, la pleine entrée dans eXistenZ qui représente la puissance et la liberté. Selon elle, la vie de Pikul ne peut passer à côté de la prise en charge des possibilités qui lui échappent, et cette prise en charge se fait par eXistenZ. En exhortant Pikul de la sorte, Allegra lui tient un discours existentialiste soutenant que l'être humain est responsable du dépassement de sa condition.

Pour Allegra, le jeu est le lieu qui lui permet d'accéder à une libération ; il représente quelque chose d'extérieur par lequel elle peut atteindre un autre univers, idéalisé. Plus tard, lorsque Pikul demande à Allegra de l'appeler Ted, elle lui répond "May be afterwards", en faisant allusion à l'expérience virtuelle qu'ils s'apprêtent à vivre. Cette réponse est catégorique : c'est seulement au moment où Pikul aura accepté de jouer dans une transposition fantasmatique de la réalité et de ses contraintes existentielles qu'Allegra sera en mesure de reconnaître son identité.

La transcendance impossible

[…] nous rappelons à l'homme qu'il n'y a d'autre législateur que lui-même, et que c'est dans le délaissement qu'il décidera de lui-même […] ce n'est pas en se retournant vers lui, mais toujours en cherchant hors de lui un but qui est telle libération, telle réalisation particulière que l'homme se réalisera précisément comme humain.[11]

Là où Cronenberg bifurque face à la pensée de Sartre, c'est lorsqu'il s'agit de transcendance. Selon la théorie existentialiste, la transcendance n'est pas extérieure à l'homme, mais «[…] constitutive de l'homme – non pas au sens où Dieu est transcendant, mais au sens de dépassement […] l'homme n'est pas enfermé en lui-même, mais présent toujours dans un univers humain […]»[12]. Dans le film eXistenz, la transcendance doit passer par la technologie, donc par une certaine matérialité.

En présentant ses deux jeux dans un lieu sacré inactif, Cronenberg déconstruit les signifiants traditionnels de la spiritualité, tout en démontrant que la religion est remplacée par un culte technologique. Si les personnages possèdent en eux les possibilités de transcender leur condition, cette transcendance demeure vouée à une médiation par la technologie dans un univers simulé. L'homme est donc tout aussi responsable de la transcendance de sa condition, mais ne peut y arriver sans le support virtuel du jeu. D'où l'institutionnilisation d'un véritable culte du jeu digne des plus grandes religions. On se retrouve donc, dans eXistenz devant le pathétique paradoxe d'une religion construite à partir du corps et de la technologie, bref de l'atteinte d'une certaine spritualité par le biais de la matérialité.

Devant le paradoxe de se dédoubler dans un simulacre et d'en faire une pratique culturelle ritualisée, les individus sont amenés à une forme d'aliénation. Non seulement ils sont atteints individuellement par cette pratique, mais celle-ci, devenant collective, accentue l'effet de réel du simulacre :

L'aliénation du spectateur au profit de l'objet contemplé (qui est le résultat de sa propre activité inconsciente) s'exprime ainsi : plus il contemple, moins il vit; plus il accepte de se reconnaître dans les images dominantes du besoin, moins il comprend sa propre existence et son propre désir.[13]

Cette citation tirée de *La société du spectacle* de Guy Debord témoigne bien des implications du processus d'identification au jeu par les personnages: la projection de leurs fantasmes et de leur quête existentielle dans le jeu les a conduit à une perte du référent de la réalité. Les personnages construits dans le simulacre par la technologie sont complètement déconstruits dans la réalité. Cette constatation entraîne un questionnement sur le statut du spectateur et les processus identificatoires inhérents à la cinématographie traditionnelle.

Avec eXistenZ, David Cronenberg redéfinit donc, au-delà de l'influence dévastatrice de la technologie sur l'être humain et de l'obsession de ce dernier à repousser les limites des expériences de la vie, notre rapport à l'image et conséquemment au cinéma. La représentation doit être vue maintenant, non pas dans un rapport référentiel ou dichotomique à la réalité, mais comme quelque chose d'analogique, d'équivalent. La façon dont Cronenberg situe l'image la positionne en quelque sorte comme une nouvelle possibilité du réel, comme faisant partie intégrante de ce qui peut être considéré comme réel et l'englobant définitivement, créant un univers simulé : «Alors que la représentation tente d'absorber la simulation en l'interprétant comme fausse représentation, la simulation enveloppe tout édifice de la représentation lui-même comme simulacre[14].» L'image devient donc, par la magie du cinéma, le réel. [fin]

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[1] Jean Baudrillard. *Simulacres et simulation*. Paris, Éditions Galilée, 1981, p. 11.

[2] Citation tirée du roman Naked Lunch de William Burroughs.

[3] *Ibid*, p.183.

[4] *Ibid*, p. 163.

[5] Serge Grünberg. *David Cronenberg, Entretiens avec David Cronenberg*. Paris, Cahier du cinéma, 2000, p. 172.

[6] Jean Baudrillard. *Amérique*. Paris, Éditions Grasset et Fasquelle, 1986, p. 38.

[7] L'auteur fait ici référence au roman de J.G. Ballard duquel le film est inspiré.

[8] *op. cité*, BAUDRILLARD, 1981, p.170.

[9] Guy Debord, *La société du spectacle*. Paris, Gallimard, 1992, p. 13.

[10] Jean-Paul Sartre. *L'existentialisme est un humanisme*. Paris, Gallimard, 1996, p. 70.

[11] *Ibid*, p.76-77.

[12] Ibid, p.76

[13] *Op. cité*, DEBORD, 1992, p. 31.

[14] Op. cité, BAUDRILLARD, 1981, p.16.

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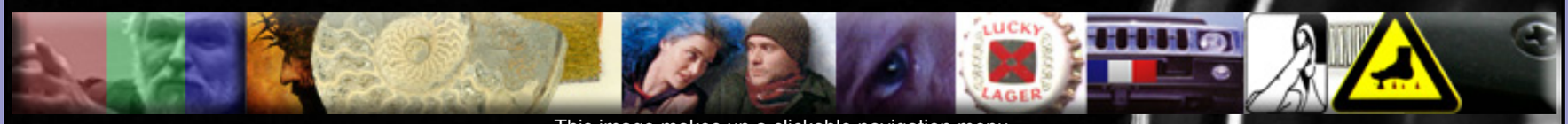

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Further Reading: *The Passion of The Christ* **(Part 2)**

compiled by Colin Burnett

26 April 2004

As promised, we present you the follow-up to last month's "Further Reading" entry on *The Passion of the Christ*. Offering a collection of internet reviews/ commentaries on what has become nothing short of an 'event' movie, the first edition of "Further Reading" also pledged to monitor a few high-profile or notable American critics who had not yet responded to the film as of the publication date of the first "preview" edition of *Synoptique*. Here are some of the noteworthy findings.

For those interested in tracking the views expressed by various authors on the film from perhaps the world's most important daily, check out the *New York Times*' online "Spotlight," which provides access to material published in those pages dating back to March 2003. Beliefnet also amasses a compendium of writings from both scholars and readers of the webzine, publishing perhaps to the reader's greatest benefit some in-depth theological debates between biblical experts. As for the critics writing for other important 'secular' publications, Jonathan Rosenbaum of the *Chicago Reader* writes only a "capsule" review, but uses his minimal space to blast the film not for the anti-Semitism and homophobia that most critics are charging it with, but for its "general disgust for humanity." In his review, *Durham Independent Weekly*'s Godfrey Cheshire does what he seems to do best, provide context, framing his evaluation of Mel's "retrograde" flick in a discussion of "Harmonia Abrahamica," Iranologist Henry Corbin's term for the continued search for the "essential commonalities shared by Judaism, Christianity and Islam." However, one of the peaks of the entire critical landscape (thus far) belongs to *TNR*'s Stanley Kauffmann. Obviously aware of what has been lacking from critical discourse on *Passion*, he writes the piece that you would expect to read given how director Gibson has responded to criticism over the film's content. If Gibson defends his film by claiming that it follows the Gospels closely, then should we not check the Gospels themselves for what is said instead of accepting the director's word 'on faith'? Kauffmann does just this (as does *National Review*'s Michael Novak), showing which elements of the film are 'the Gospel truth' and which are the 'truth' as told by Gibson and his co-writer, Benedict Fitzgerald. (Unfortunately, Kauffmann's review is now available online only to those with subscriptions to *The New Republic*. I provide the reader with the bibliographical information nonetheless, in hopes that he/ she will seek out a copy of the review at a local library.)

It is my belief that the critical reception to *Passion* demonstrates to what degree North American English-language front-line criticism forms an intriguing body of film writing even in these times of so-called 'crisis.'

NOTE: The following links all open new windows.

Bowman, James. Rev. of Passion of the Christ. jamesbowman.net (February 25th, 2004)
http://www.jamesbowman.net/reviewDetail.asp?pubID=1489.

Cheshire, Godfrey. "The Temple of Narcissus." Durham Independent Weekly Online (March 3rd, 2004)
http://www.indyweek.com/durham/2004-03-03/movie.html.

Gibby, Sian. "Ecce Homo?" Slate (February 26th, 2004)
http://slate.msn.com/id/2096185/.

Kauffmann, Stanley. "Gibson's Offering." The New Republic (March 22nd, 2004)
Available only to subscribers at https://ssl.tnr.com/p/docsub.mhtml?i=20040322&s=kauffmann032204.

Lott, Jeremy. "The Passion and the Fury." The American Spectator (Feb 25th, 2004)
http://www.spectator.org/dsp_article.asp?art_id=6208.

Macomber, Shawn. "Ash Wednesday at the Movies." The American Spectator (February 26th, 2004)
http://www.spectator.org/dsp_article.asp?art_id=6214

"Mel Gibson's Passion of the Christ." Beliefnet (various undated articles)
http://www.beliefnet.com/index/index_525.html

Novak, Michael. "Brother Gibson's Passion." National Review Online (February 25th, 2004)
http://www.nationalreview.com/novak/novak200402250908.asp

Rosenbaum, Jonathan. "Capsule of Passion of the Christ." Chicago Reader (not dated)
http://spacefinder.chicagoreader.com/movies/briefs/25486_PASSION_OF_THE_CHRIST.html

"Spotlight on The Passion of the Christ." New York Times (postings dating from March 9th, 2003 to March 15th, 2004)
http://www.nytimes.com/ref/movies/PASSION-REF.html

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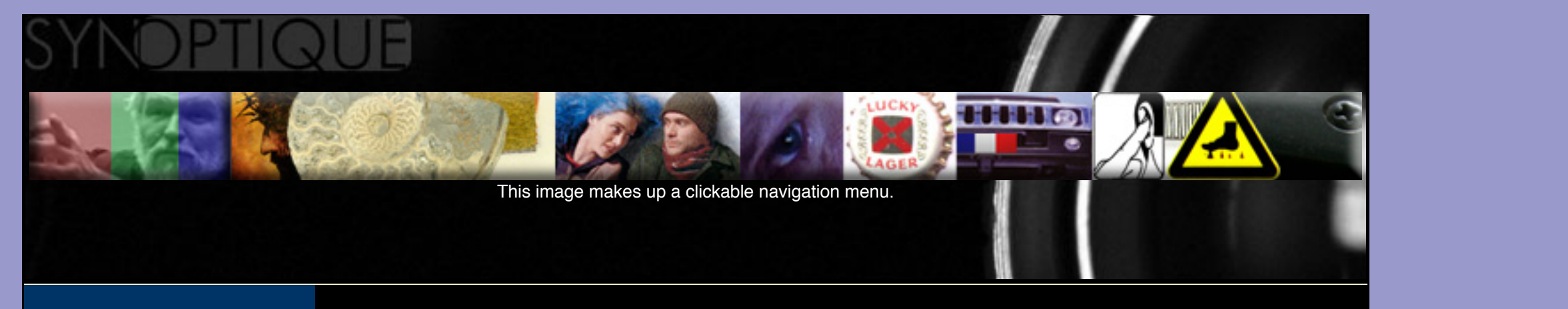

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The Pillow Book : le corps médiateur

par Caroline Martin
26 April 2004 | 6797 words

Synopsis : Nagiko fête ses quatre ans et pour célébrer sa naissance son père trace sur son visage un vœu d'anniversaire. Alors que cette journée heureuse tire à sa fin, la mère de Nagiko lui lit les *Notes de chevet* de Sei Shônagon, une dame de la cour ayant vécu il y a plus de mille ans. C'est pendant cette lecture que la fillette entrevoit par l'interstice des panneaux de papier une relation homosexuelle entre son père et son éditeur. Bien des années plus tard, Nagiko entreprend à son tour d'écrire ses propres notes de chevet. Après un mariage raté, un incendie, une carrière de mannequin décevante et une poursuite de l'amant idéal soldée d'échecs, elle rencontre finalement Jérôme, un traducteur d'origine anglaise. Avec lui, elle s'épanouira tant au niveau de sa carrière d'écrivaine que de sa vie sentimentale. Découvrant que l'éditeur de son amant anglais est le même qui exigeait autrefois des relations sexuelles à son père, elle décide de venger cet affront et envoie treize livres écrits à même la peau du corps de treize hommes. Malheureusement, ce chantage tournera mal pour ses trois protagonistes qui devront souffrir d'une lourde perte.

> « Le texte ne « commente » pas les images. Les images n' « illustrent » pas le texte: chacune a été pour moi le point de départ d'une sorte de vacillement visuel, analogue peut-être à cette *perte de sens* que le Zen appelle un *satori*; texte et images, dans leurs entrelacs, veulent assurer la circulation, l'échange de ces signifiants : le corps, le visage, l'écriture et y lire le recul des signes. »[1]

Ce point de départ de la réflexion de Barthes développée dans son livre *L'Empire des signes*, sorte de fantasme occidental sur l'Orient et plus particulièrement sur le Japon, se rapproche étonnamment de la perspective à travers laquelle Peter Greenaway aborde son questionnement sur le signe, et sur la culture orientale, dans son film The Pillow Book. Cette ressemblance de point de vue est telle qu'il est légitime de se demander si Greenaway a lu ce livre de Barthes et si l'idée de cette réalisation cinématographique n'est pas inspirée, en partie à tout le moins, de cette lecture. Cette réflexion sémiotique se développe dans le film grâce à une expérimentation particulière du traitement de l'image et du son. De son côté, la trame narrative, très complexe dans son explosion du temps et de l'espace, explore les diverses médiations rendues possibles par l'intermédiaire du corps et de la littérature. Suivant les divers épisodes du récit, c'est d'abord la mémoire investie dans le corps, médiateur du temps passé, présent et futur, qui refait surface afin de permettre l'éclosion et l'évolution de l'identité du personnage principal. La lecture et l'écriture des *Notes de chevet* permettent d'entreprendre cette recherche identitaire, d'abord par la voix de la tradition féminine que représente ce type d'écriture, ensuite par l'éveil sensuel et sexuel qu'il déclenche. D'autres facteurs influencent fortement cette découverte de la sexualité et du rapport étroit qu'elle entretient avec la littérature, notamment la scène primitive à laquelle le personnage assiste le jour de son quatrième anniversaire de naissance. Ce lien indestructible entre littérature et sexualité se répercute bien des années plus tard lorsque qu'elle entreprend sa recherche de l'amant/calligraphe idéal, recherche qui la mène également à une considération du corps comme objet de mémoire et de médiation. Par la voix et le geste, le corps donne accès à une mémoire du passé et aux restes de la tradition orale toujours présents dans cette société millénaire fondée sur la naissance de l'être humain par l'écriture, en d'autres mots, un empire de signes.

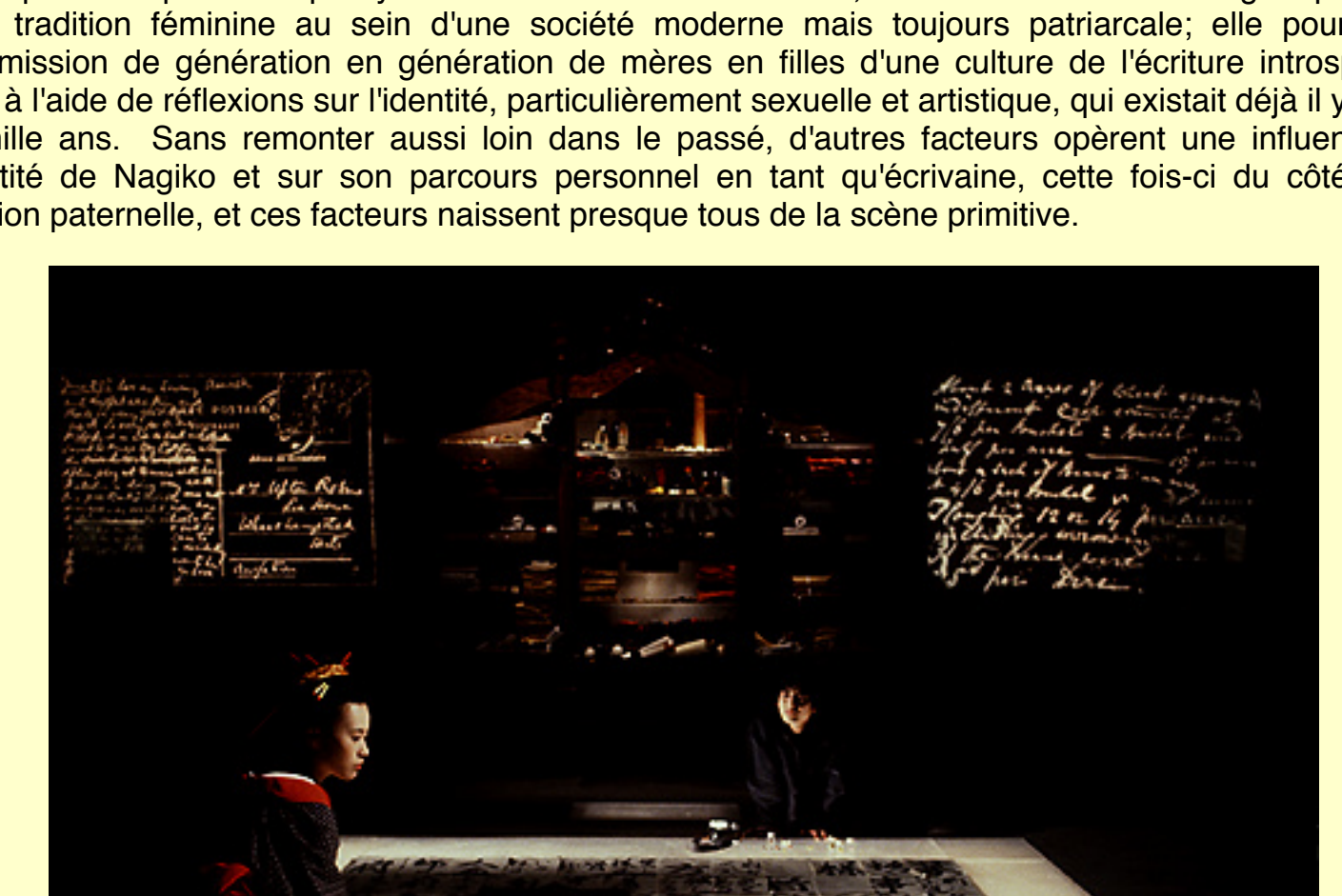
The Pillow Book : la tradition féminine de l'écriture du corps

Avant même d'aborder la question de la médiation du corps, l'ampleur de l'espace narratif consacrée à la lecture et à l'écriture des *Notes de chevet*, par Sei Shônagon et Nagiko, mérite une brève réflexion. Dans la mesure où ces textes agissent en tant que moteurs de la narration, et éventuellement de la mémoire, leur étude permet d'introduire la question de la lecture et du livre et de leur nature médiatrice.

De prime abord, le titre du film de Peter Greenaway fournit un indice substantiel quant au lien qu'il tisse entre littérature (*Book*) et corporalité (*Pillow*), mais ce n'est qu'au moment où la définition de la nature de ce livre s'impose au spectateur que le rôle de la lecture et de l'écriture prend toute son ampleur. Cette première lecture de Sei Shônagon par l'intermédiaire de la mère met en place dès le début du film une subtile mise en abîme dans laquelle cette dernière lit les *Notes de* ***chevet*** au **chevet** de sa fille. Plus tard, cette concordance entre le passé et le présent, superposée à l'écran à l'aide d'un travail inventif sur l'image, passe tout naturellement de la lecture à l'écriture.

La nature littéraire des *Notes de chevet* peut d'emblée se rapprocher du journal intime tel que la société occidentale le conçoit, mais en dehors du fait qu'il s'agit dans les deux cas d'une écriture au « je », les rapprochements demeurent plutôt difficiles à établir. Le journal intime fonctionne sur un mode narratif linéaire (inscriptions dans le temps réel par des dates), par le récit des actions les plus infimes de la journée ou de la semaine et les réflexions et réactions, majoritairement émotives, qui en découlent; c'est en quelque sorte un retour de la conscience sur les événements vécus dans le quotidien. En comparaison, les *Notes de chevet* se présentent sous la forme d'une écriture constituée de fragments, de notes, et plus précisément de listes d'objets, le plus souvent éphémères, classés par titres et sujets. Ces listes peuvent décrire à la fois des articles de « couleur indigo » et des choses qui font « battre le cœur plus vite », puisqu'en définitive ce qui tend à être mis de l'avant est le rapport sensoriel de l'individu avec son environnement immédiat, concret. Cette caractéristique permet au spectateur de franchir le premier pas qui le sépare de l'univers de Nagiko, et de Sei Shônagon, dans lequel littérature et sensualité sont intrinsèquement liées. Cette médiation entre le corps et l'écriture, décrite par la nature même des *Notes de chevet*, ne cesse par la suite de se complexifier dans les nombreux épisodes de la vie de Nagiko.

Plus proche de la poésie que du récit à proprement dit, ce type de lecture, et en définitive d'écriture, participe à l'éclosion de l'identité de cette femme. À propos de l'expérience de la lecture poétique, Paul Zumthor écrit justement : « Ma lecture poétique me met au monde […] je découvre qu'il existe un objet hors de moi […] je me heurte à une chose. »[2] Cette réception de la lecture « poétique » se manifeste de manière encore plus saisissante puisqu'il s'agit là bel et bien de la rencontre de Nagiko avec un objet, à savoir le livre de Sei Shônagon. Ce heurt nécessaire entre l'individu et le monde qui l'entoure se matérialise littéralement dans l'écriture des *Notes de chevet* de Nagiko, mais, à l'inverse de Sei Shônagon cette rencontre s'inscrit sous le signe de la brutalité et de la souffrance. Ses premières expériences aux conclusions négatives (mariages, aventures amoureuses, créations littéraires) laissent une marque à la fois dans son écriture et dans son corps, les deux médiateurs de son expérience de la vie. Cette tradition de l'écriture des *Notes de chevet* possède donc cette particularité d'une médiation de l'expérience par le corps ayant comme résultat la création, c'est-à-dire l'écriture. Nagiko perpétue cette tradition féminine au sein d'une société moderne mais toujours patriarcale; elle poursuit la transmission de génération en génération de mères en filles d'une culture de l'écriture introspective bâtie à l'aide de réflexions sur l'identité, particulièrement sexuelle et artistique, qui existait déjà il y a plus de mille ans. Sans remonter aussi loin dans le passé, d'autres facteurs opèrent une influence sur l'identité de Nagiko et sur son parcours personnel en tant qu'écrivaine, cette fois-ci du côté de la tradition paternelle, et ces facteurs naissent presque tous de la scène primitive.



1.Le souhait d'anniversaire : scène primitive disloquée

1.1. La rencontre entre le père et l'éditeur

Dans les toutes premières minutes du film, une scène d'une importance majeure se déroule sous nos yeux, et un peu plus tard sous ceux de Nagiko, il s'agit de la journée de son quatrième anniversaire. De manière générale, cette scène se découpe en deux parties, la première pendant laquelle le vœu d'anniversaire est peint sur le visage de Nagiko et la deuxième lorsqu'elle entrevoit une relation sexuelle entre son père et son éditeur. Reprise à plusieurs moment du récit, cette scène peut aisément être qualifiée de scène primitive dans le contexte du film. À plusieurs égards, cette scène rencontre les diverses caractéristiques de la scène primitive telle qu'élaborée par la psychanalyse. De plus, son importance quant à tout ce qui se déroulera (ses choix, ses actions, ses goûts, etc.) dans la vie de Nagiko, participe également à cette définition. Cette dernière assiste, à l'insu de ses parents, à un rapport sexuel entre son père et son éditeur, rapport représenté par la suite, dans l'imaginaire et dans la réalité, comme une agression envers le père. Évidemment, cette scène primitive n'est pas tout à fait « traditionnelle », dans la mesure où c'est l'éditeur qui joue le rôle sadique, habituellement imputé au père, et ce dernier celui de la victime, rôle tenu en temps normal par la mère. Celle-ci ne participe pas physiquement à l'acte homosexuel, mais elle y tient tout de même un rôle actif en tant que complice de ce chantage sur lequel repose la survie de la famille. De manière générale, lorsque les deux parents jouent cette scène de combat, que ce soit dans la réalité ou dans un fantasme de l'enfant, elle déclenche la haine du père, particulièrement chez la fillette, et ainsi provoque la rupture nécessaire pour le développement affectif et sexuel de cette dernière. Cette scène primitive tronquée déclenche dans l'imaginaire de Nagiko un puissant désir de vengeance du père, puisqu'il est perçu en tant que victime, et une haine envers cet agresseur. Comme cet épisode traumatisant se déroule à chaque anniversaire de Nagiko, il se transforme chez elle en une obsession latente car elle ne comprend cet échange sexuel que des années plus tard.

Plus qu'une simple obsession de vengeance, cette scène opère chez le personnage une association entre la littérature et la sexualité, lien renforcé par la lecture maternelle de Sei Shônagon traitant également de ce même rapport. Entre le visuel et l'auditif se tisse un lien indestructible pour Nagiko qui tiendra lieu de base à son développement sexuel ultérieur. Le corps du père, tout comme celui de Jérôme et des hommes des treize livres, s'inscrivent donc dès le début du film comme un agent de médiation, de transmission et d'échange (chantage ou marché) de l'écriture, et ce, principalement à travers la vision de Nagiko. Ce n'est que plusieurs années plus tard, que celle-ci renverse les rôles de cette scène primitive entre son père et son éditeur, lorsqu'elle envoie le dernier livre humain, *Le livre de la mort*, et que le bourreau devient fatalement la victime.

1.2. *Le souhait d'anniversaire*

Précédant le cœur de la scène primitive, c'est-à-dire l'acte sexuel, le souhait inscrit par le père de Nagiko sur le visage de celle-ci revient périodiquement dans le film, soit en tant que souvenirs d'enfance, soit en tant que volonté de Nagiko de perpétuer cette tradition par l'intermédiaire de ses amants/calligraphes.

Alors que la répétition de l'acte sexuel entre le père et l'éditeur forme en grande partie l'identité sexuelle de Nagiko, cette scène du souhait de fête marque plutôt son identité sociale et artistique. Il s'agit avant tout d'une tradition orientale fondée sur les origines de l'homme à travers une vision de la marque écrite comme fondement de l'existence et de l'identité. Quant à l'art de la calligraphie et de l'écriture, elle se transmet par l'entremise des deux parents qui inscrivent symboliquement dans la chair de Nagiko par l'encre une marque que celle-ci transmettra à son tour sur le corps des hommes. L'encre noire devenant soudainement rouge sur le visage de la jeune Nagiko montre à quel point cette identité est une marque au « fer rouge » dans son corps, un signe indélébile de son appartenance familiale et de la tradition scripturale.

La quête identitaire du personnage débute donc très tôt, mais ne peut se développer à son plein potentiel qu'au moment où elle inverse le rituel de cette première trace pour en devenir l'investigatrice. C'est le personnage de Jérôme qui déclenche ce renversement du rôle passif de Nagiko pour qu'enfin l'échange du vœu d'anniversaire redevienne à nouveau source de joie et de bonheur et non plus une éternelle déception de cette quête du père dans ses précédents amants/calligraphes. À ce point du récit, cette scène permet donc de positionner la psychologie du personnage mais surtout la problématique entre l'écriture et le corps et les diverses médiations qui s'opèrent entre eux.

Le lien entre la mémoire et cette scène primitive s'introduit par l'intermédiaire du retour au visage et au corps peint. Ce dernier se transforme par l'instance des répétitions en un rappel mnémonique de cette scène primitive sans cesse rejouée dans le temps. Par ailleurs, la mémoire physique et écrite (le *Pillow Book*) se fait sentir d'abord et avant tout dans la forme du récit, le flash-back, et dans la circularité, l'entrecroisement des événements sans ordre linéaire et dans le médium cinématographique, sur lequel se greffe la musique, la photo, la peinture, la vidéo, la littérature et même la mode, par la performance chorégraphiée des défilés. Cette exploration de la mémoire par l'entremise de différents médias, eux-mêmes médiatisés par le cinéma, implique un questionnement sur le signe, très proche de celui de Barthes mentionné plus tôt, mais pour le moment voyons comment le corps agit en tant que médiateur, notamment par la voix.

2.Le corps : lieu et objet de médiation

2.1. *La voix de la tradition*

Dans un contexte comme celui de la société orientale, la prédominance de la tradition scripturale par rapport à la tradition orale semble aller de soi. Le récit fait à l'occasion de l'anniversaire de Nagiko permet de comprendre comment l'écriture semble de tout temps avoir existé puisqu'elle coïncide avec la naissance du premier homme. Par contre, des restes de la tradition orale apparaissent dans des aspects et des éléments du film, notamment dans l'utilisation de la langue et de la voix. Concernant les langues étrangères et leur réception, Zumthor élabore ce fantasme :

> « Le rêve : connaître une langue étrangère (étrange) et cependant ne pas la comprendre : percevoir en elle la différence, sans que cette différence soit jamais récupérée par la socialité superficielle du langage, communication ou vulgarité…»[3]

Ce rêve étrange, le spectateur de The Pillow Book y plonge avant même d'avoir accès au récit en tant que tel car c'est la voix de l'autre, de la différence, de l'écart entre l'Occident et l'Orient, qui est mise de l'avant dans la scène générique. Des chants masculins graves, vraisemblablement des prières méditatives, dont l'origine paraît remonter à des temps anciens, servent de trame de fond sonore à des idéogrammes. Ce premier lien entre la voix et la calligraphie positionne d'emblée le spectateur dans un entre-deux sémiotique et culturel. D'abord, entre deux médias complètement différents, le chant et l'écriture, dont la réception se fait à partir de deux sens, la vue et l'ouïe, et dont il est quasi impossible pour le spectateur ne connaissant pas cette langue d'établir une relation entre le texte et les mots à l'écran. Ensuite, c'est l'entre-deux de l'Orient et l'Occident puisque ce générique, ce saut entre deux continents, laisse le public face à l'étranger, à cette altérité qui le plonge, soit dans un exotisme lié à un fantasme de l'Orient, soit dans un malaise lié à l'inconnu. Le spectateur habitué de jouer le rôle de médiateur entre ce qu'il voit et ce qu'il connaît, premier pas vers la compréhension, se trouve dérouté face à tous les signes qui lui sont transmis et qui lui demeurent indéchiffrables; « la langue inconnue, dont je saisis pourtant la respiration, l'aération émotive, en un mot la pure signifiance, forme autour de moi, […] un léger vertige, m'entraîne dans son vide artificiel qui ne s'accomplit que pour moi : je vis dans l'interstice, débarrassé de tout sens plein. »[4] Cette distance entre le signe et sa signification, ce « rêve d'une langue inconnue », s'instaure donc dès le générique pour ensuite se développer dans la trame du récit.

Contrairement aux idéogrammes, impossibles à situer dans le temps, les chants entendus semblent provenir de temps ancestraux, sentiment particulier difficile à expliquer, mais à plus forte raison liés à la musique et à la médiation qui est propre à cette dernière. Ici, la voix s'insinue chez le spectateur comme le souvenir lointain d'une culture sans écriture dans laquelle les restes les plus perceptibles demeurent les chants. D'ailleurs, la musique demeure constamment liée au passé dans ce film et fait autant appel à notre mémoire qu'à celle de Nagiko. Par exemple, lorsque celle-ci reçoit son souhait d'anniversaire, une musique populaire, beaucoup moins ancienne que les chants du générique, accompagne le rituel de cette fête. Cette chanson vieillotte stimule la mémoire à trois niveaux, soit : celle des parents de Nagiko à qui elle rappelle leur première rencontre; celle de Nagiko se remémorant ses anniversaires de jeunesse; celle des spectateurs à qui elle rappelle la scène centrale du film. Encore une fois, cette chanson jouée sur un tourne-disque ancien provoque un sentiment de retour dans le passé malgré notre incompréhension des paroles. Cette différence entre les possibilités de ce médium, la musique, par rapport à l'écriture, se répercute ailleurs dans le récit.

Inévitablement, à chaque fois qu'une musique s'accompagne de chants, aucun sous-titre n'apparaît à l'écran pour traduire les paroles, de la même façon que la traduction des textes écrits par Nagiko sur les corps des hommes demeure très fragmentaire. Cet écart, volontaire de la part du réalisateur, oblige le spectateur à demeurer à un niveau de réception purement auditif permettant ainsi de ne pas interférer dans la réception visuelle que nécessite la calligraphie orientale. Une seule exception subsiste à cette règle de l'écart, il s'agit de la chanson en français qui est sous-titrée pendant toute sa durée. Cette apparente digression renforce en définitive cette volonté de représenter le signe auditif dans sa symbolisation et sa transmission la plus pure et la plus directe, puisqu'il s'agit de sous-titres en français. Évidemment, pour le spectateur francophone il n'y a aucun problème de compréhension, mais pour celui qui ignore le français c'est encore une fois un heurt avec une langue étrangère. Le soin porté à la calligraphie de ces sous-titres intègre de manière subtile la possibilité pour cette langue occidentale d'accéder à une beauté graphique comparable à celle de la calligraphie orientale.

2.2. La langue de la mère ; parole de la scène primitive

Outre le chant, la parole et la langue travaillent conjointement à la formation de la problématique concernant la médiation de la littérature et de la tradition. La lecture maternelle des *Notes de chevet* de Sei Shônagon durant l'enfance de Nagiko rappelle la lecture des contes et légendes précédant le moment du coucher des enfants occidentaux, et peut-être aussi orientaux. C'est la première transmission orale d'un texte écrit dans laquelle le rôle de la voix, sa médiation dans le cadre d'une culture très littéraire, exemplifie les reliquats de cette tradition orale. Cette médiation semble d'autant plus nécessaire dans ce cas particulier où l'écriture et la lecture des idéogrammes requièrent de nombreuses années d'études.

Il n'est pas non plus anodin que ce soit la mère qui transmette oralement ce texte à sa fille, puisque comme il en a été question plus tôt, la particularité de l'écriture des *Notes de chevet* provient du fait qu'il s'agit d'une écriture au féminin. Ainsi, avant même que Nagiko puisse écrire ses propres *Notes de chevet*, cette tradition féminine ancestrale se perpétue par la lecture, par la transmission orale d'un savoir culturel. Plus tard, la voix de la mère sera remplacée par celle de Nagiko au moment où elle lira elle-même Sei Shônagon et finalement son propre « pillow book ».

2.3. *le geste « calligraphique »*

Il n'existe pas d'adresse à numéro à Tokyo, c'est pourquoi l'inscription d'un trajet nécessite un dessin plus ou moins élaboré des rues, des immeubles, des points de repères, etc. « …l'échange des adresses une communication délicate, où reprend place une vie du corps, un art du geste graphique : il est toujours savoureux de voir quelqu'un écrire, à plus forte raison dessiner […] même dans cet acte futile [effacer], le corps « travaillait avec plus de réserve que l'esprit… »[5] Cet exemple démontre à quel point l'écriture des idéogrammes implique une vision graphique des signes, un rapport visuel qui dépasse la simple lecture textuelle. Il s'agit de «recréer un objet tel que mon œil non seulement lise, mais regarde; c'est retrouver, dans la vision de la lecture, le regard et les sensations multiples qui sont attachées à son exercice. »[6] Cette implication du regard dans la réception et la compréhension des idéogrammes se transpose dans le geste lors de la création, de l'inscription sur le papier de ces mêmes idéogrammes. Cet « art » de la calligraphie, dans ce cas-ci japonaise, est omniprésent dans The Pillow Book puisque tout acte d'écriture se transforme inévitablement pour Nagiko en acte sensuel et même sexuel. La précision du geste dans le tracé des signes rappelle les caresses de l'amant, la qualité du papier, son odeur et sa texture se comparent au grain de la peau. « Quant au pinceau (passé sur une pierre d'encre légèrement humectée), il a ses gestes comme s'il était le doigt; […] il a la flexibilité charnelle, lubrifié, de la main. »[7] Toute cette implication du corps dans l'écriture, cette analogie constante entre l'acte sexuel et l'acte de l'écrivain participe encore une fois de la récupération des restes de la tradition orale dans laquelle la corporalité et la gestuelle occupent une part importante dans la transmission; tout comme la performance du conteur s'évalue autant par la complexité de sa gestuelle que par ses paroles, la qualité d'un amant pour Nagiko se situe autant dans son habileté de calligraphe que dans ses connaissances et talents au lit. À travers l'écriture des idéogrammes c'est son corps, ou celui des hommes sur qui elle écrit, qui prend vie par les mouvements du pinceau autant que par l'effort et la dextérité requise dans le geste « calligraphique ».

3. Le corps médiateur

3.1. *La mémoire corporelle*

La médiation opérée par le corps ne se résume pas à l'acte d'écriture dans le film de Greenaway, au contraire elle se déroule à plusieurs niveaux et y joue un rôle primordial car cette problématique est le noyau de l'histoire.

Le corps possède ses propres règles de mémoire, conséquemment il n'emmagasine pas les événements mais plutôt les sensations. La scène primitive et le souhait d'anniversaire démontrent bien à quel point le corps de Nagiko enregistre cette expérience pour la transformer ultérieurement en une quête et qu'est-ce qu'une quête menée par le corps sinon le désir. Comme l'héroïne l'affirme dans la narration, elle entreprend cette quête même si elle n'en comprend pas la portée lorsqu'elle se déroule pour la première fois sous ses yeux. Son existence a assimilé ce souvenir « organique des sensations […] comme la trace d'un être à chaque instant disparu, et pourtant toujours [elle-même]. Or, le corps a quelque chose d'indomptable, d'insaisissable… »[8] Cet être « perdu » c'est bien entendu la petite fille portant la marque du vœu sur son visage, cet être innocent qu'elle essaie de retrouver par l'entremise de ses amants. Pourtant, la force de cette mémoire du corps, cette ténacité du souvenir traumatisant de l'acte sexuel entre le père et son éditeur, confirme à quel point le corps possède quelque chose « d'indomptable », « d'insaisissable ».

D'autres éléments, toujours en lien direct avec le corps, agissent sur la mémoire de Nagiko, comme par exemple la mode. De la même façon que l'écriture, la mode couvre le corps de signes, elle développe le côté sensuel d'une certaine forme de médiation fondée sur les apparences, créant une mémoire qui s'inscrit cette fois-ci sur la peau. La mode forme un univers de représentations qui témoigne, de la même manière que l'écriture, de certains usages propres à qualifier, informer, délimiter un langage, qui cette fois-ci est particulier au corps. Tout comme l'écriture, ces usages de la mode sont très anciens.

La première rencontre du spectateur avec Nagiko adulte se produit justement pendant un défilé de mode en Chine. Pleine d'assurance, et même d'arrogance, elle défile sous le flash des photographes et les regards admiratifs des spectateurs. Cette procession de corps couverts de signes, les vêtements, se superpose plus tard au récit de Sei Shônagon décrivant la promenade de l'impératrice et la beauté des ses nombreux atours. Cet art vestimentaire complexe n'est pas récent et le rapprochement entre le passé de la cour de l'empereur et le milieu de la mode actuelle est d'autant plus présent lorsque Nagiko organise un défilé dans un lieu sacré visité mille ans plus tôt par Sei Shônagon elle-même. Ainsi, la mémoire du passé, la continuité de traditions se répercute dans la mode qui, dans ce cas, signifie plus qu'un simple besoin pratique, mais relève d'un art sensuel (beauté des tissus, texture, odeur, etc.) plaçant au centre de son intérêt le corps et la possibilité de le couvrir de signes.

Si la mode développe chez Nagiko son indépendance de la femme moderne, la photo quant à elle marque deux ruptures avec la tradition. D'abord, les innombrables photos prises de Nagiko en tant que mannequin contrastent nettement avec la photo unique et calculée de la famille lors de son mariage au Japon. Nullement gênée par la présence des médias et des photographes, au contraire elle prend plaisir à cet exercice, même lorsqu'elle se trouve en compagnie d'un homme écrivant dans son dos. À l'inverse, le malaise ressenti lors de la photo où elle est entourée de sa famille souriante et de son mari, tout aussi gêné qu'elle, est le point de départ d'une relation vouée à la souffrance et à l'échec.

La photographie sert aussi à médiatiser, puisque c'est par celle-ci que Nagiko tente de publier sa première œuvre sur un corps masculin, cherchant ainsi à accéder à une identité artistique, à son désir d'être écrivaine tout comme son père. Cette médiation entre le corps couvert de signe et sa représentation sur le papier photographique semble en être une de trop puisque l'éditeur rejette cette création de manière expéditive. C'est à ce moment que Nagiko comprend que le meilleur médiateur de son écriture ne peut être autre que le corps lui-même, le corps dans sa matérialité et avec sa puissance physique et sexuelle.

3.2. *Le corps masculin médiateur*

Dès les premières images du film, le corps de Nagiko est métaphorique : la peau est la métaphore du papier. Pendant les nombreuses années de la quête de l'héroïne de l'amant idéal, cette situation ne changera guère. Ce n'est qu'à l'occasion de sa rencontre avec Jérôme, très bon traducteur mais piètre calligraphe, que cette dynamique se renverse définitivement. Nagiko passe, non sans quelques réticences, du rôle passif de papier à celui beaucoup plus actif de calligraphe. Abandonnant sa carrière de mannequin, autre rôle passif, elle s'adonne rapidement à cette voie créatrice qui s'ouvre à elle. En définitive, le caractère passionnel de cette nouvelle voie est ce qui va permettre à la passivité de Nagiko de se transmuer en créativité. Le désir de vengeance du père envers l'éditeur ne demandant qu'à ressurgir, le refus dédaigneux de ce dernier quant à la publication de la première œuvre de Nagiko sur un corps masculin (une série de photographies d'un homme recouvert d'idéogrammes) fait naître en elle une détermination sans limite. C'est à ce moment que la médiation de l'écriture par l'intermédiaire du corps masculin débute de manière significative.

Certes, Jérôme demeure le médiateur par excellence dans ce film puisqu'il est l'amant commun des deux parties en conflit (Nagiko et l'éditeur) et son corps est offert en sacrifice tout comme celui du père de Nagiko. De plus, sa qualité de traducteur représente à la fois de manière symbolique et concrète le rôle de médiateur de la langue et de la voix. En contrepartie, son mutisme devant l'éditeur prouve que son corps peut également tenir lieu de médium à la transmission d'un texte.

Les treize hommes/livres envoyés progressivement par Nagiko à l'éditeur jouent dans un premier temps le même rôle que Jérôme, c'est-à-dire agir comme instrument de persuasion à l'édition de ses textes. Suite à la mort de Jérôme, amant commun de Nagiko et de l'éditeur, les hommes/livres médiatisent par leur corps peint un nouveau marché, beaucoup plus morbide cette fois-ci; récupérer le livre fabriqué à même la chair inanimée de Jérôme. Le déroulement de ce marché fondé sur le désir et le plaisir, image inversée de celui contracté avec le père des années auparavant, devient peu à peu pour l'éditeur un chantage auquel il ne peut échapper. Le corps masculin offert au désir représente la matérialité du message tout autant que le texte inscrit sur la peau. Présenté comme un homme de lettre, cet éditeur reprend sous la forme du chantage le rapport intrinsèque entre littérature et sexualité développé par Sei Shônagon dans les *Notes de chevet*. Cette considération de l'écriture comme enjeu sensuel, comme plaisir purement physique, s'éloigne sensiblement de la vision occidentale de l'écriture à son niveau strictement fonctionnel : « …repoussée dans les purs usages, l'écriture [occidentale] ne s'assume jamais comme le jeu d'une pulsion »[9]. Dès l'envoi du premier homme/livre, une tension liée à la jalousie s'installe entre Nagiko et Jérôme, et, en plus du désir de vengeance du père déjà présent au moment même où elle choisit cet éditeur précis. Dans cette optique, il semble clair que tout au long de son écriture des treize livres, c'est un ensemble de plus en plus complexe de pulsions qui travaille à l'intérieur même de son processus créateur. Nagiko use de sa connaissance des faiblesses de l'éditeur, ses pulsions homosexuelles, afin qu'il se trouve fatalement pris à son propre jeu. Son affection pour la littérature le conduit aussi à sa perte, puisque son rapport avec l'objet matériel qu'est le livre demeure très physique, rapport par ailleurs bien démontré dans les différentes scènes où il sent ou lèche du papier, plus particulièrement celui fabriqué dans la peau de son amant.

3.3. *L'art du livre, art du geste*

> « C'est par la papeterie, lieu et catégorie des choses nécessaires à l'écriture, que l'on s'introduit dans l'espace des signes; c'est dans la papeterie que la main rencontre l'instrument et la matière du trait; c'est dans la papeterie que commence le commerce du signe, avant même qu'il soit tracé. »[10]

L'art du livre se présente dans The Pillow Book, non pas seulement dans l'art d'écrire les idéogrammes, mais également dans la fabrication du livre lui-même, dans le choix du papier et de son assemblage. Les outils nécessaires à cet art perpétué depuis des siècles possèdent une importance égale à celle du pinceau qui sert à noircir de mots les pages soigneusement reliées. Tout comme le corps du messager de Nagiko représente la matérialité de ce message, le livre et sa qualité physique tiennent lieu de médiation entre l'écrivain, le lecteur et le texte lui-même. Par l'implication du toucher et du geste dans la fabrication artisanale du livre, c'est encore une fois tout le côté sensuel, tactile principalement, qui se trouve au premier plan dans cet art millénaire. La précision et le soin démontrés à l'écran par les artisans de livres, ainsi que la panoplie d'outils nécessaires permettent un peu plus tard de créer un parallèle avec la fabrication du livre du corps de Jérôme.

Présente pendant tout le film, la métaphore de la peau comme papier et du corps comme livre, devient réalité lorsque Jérôme est littéralement transformé en livre. Pour l'éditeur, ce livre représente un objet sur lequel se transfère son besoin de présence; pour Nagiko, il s'agit d'un sacrilège qu'elle doit venger au même titre que l'abus sexuel fait à son père. Le travail méticuleux fait à partir de la peau de Jérôme reprend les mêmes gestes des artisans fabriquant des livres, renforçant ainsi le lien que Greenaway développe depuis la toute première scène de son film. Même dans la mort, la médiation entre le corps et le livre demeure indestructible.

4. La représentation cinématographique de la mémoire

La médiation à partir du corps ainsi que la mémoire de ce dernier ont été jusqu'ici développées largement. Le cinéma étant lui-même un médium, l'étude des différentes modalités qui permettent d'assurer la médiation cinématographique permet d'aborder la représentation de la mémoire d'un point de vue strictement visuel. Tout comme la calligraphie joue sur son aspect pictural, le langage visuel de Greenaway utilise le même découpage, la même classification de l'information, et de la réalité, permise par l'image. C'est à partir de cette concordance entre le fond et la forme qu'une analyse des divers procédés techniques présents dans The Pillow Book prennent sens.

4.1. *La superposition d'images*

> « En n'importe quel endroit de ce pays, il se produit une organisation spéciale de l'espace […] j'y perçois la conjoncture d'un lointain et d'un morcellement, la juxtaposition de champs (au sens rural et visuel) à la fois discontinus et ouverts. » [11]

Dans le film de Greenaway, les pays représentés sont le Japon et la Chine, mais le véritable voyage se déroule avant tout dans l'image cinématographique et les frontières de cet étrange pays qui sont formées par le cadre de la caméra dans lequel le réalisateur imagine l'espace et rompt avec les conventions. Les premières images du générique amorcent un travail sur la représentation de la mémoire, et ce, grâce à l'utilisation de la profondeur de l'image à travers une superposition des images. Plus tôt, il a été question de l'amalgame entre la voix et la calligraphie dans le générique, afin d'introduire la place qu'occupe la tradition orale et écrite dans le récit. Maintenant, c'est au tour des images de s'amalgamer, de s'enchaîner, mais cette fois pour questionner la représentation de la mémoire.

Dans une multitude d'autres plans, des images sont surcadrées dans le même plan et donnent cette impression de profondeur et de simultanéité entre le passé de Sei Shônagon et le présent de Nagiko. Ce rapprochement crée un aplatissement de la temporalité puisqu'il n'existe plus de frontière ni entre les époques ni entre les lieux, rappelant du même coup le fonctionnement mnémonique humain. La mémoire du passé de Sei Shônagon est donnée à voir à travers la vie de Nagiko, représentant d'une certaine façon le rapprochement que ce personnage établi avec sa propre vie et celle de cette femme, toujours par l'intermédiaire de ses *Notes de chevet*. Celles-ci deviennent au niveau narratif une sorte de « machine à explorer le temps » pour reprendre ici l'expression du réalisateur. De plus, dans ce type de composition en enchâssement une particularité surgit : ce qui placé en avant-plan est secondaire dans l'intrigue et ce qui se trouve à l'arrière plan s'inscrit comme action principale. Ce choix n'est pas non plus très éloigné de ce qui se nomme « mémoire sélective »; certains détails insignifiants restent marqués dans la mémoire alors que certains événements cruciaux de l'existence sombrent dans l'oubli. En définitive, c'est une mémoire formée d'échos lointains, de courts-circuits temporels qui se crée par l'enchâssement d'images, mais aussi par le surcadrage, sorte de contrepoint.

4.2. *Mise en abîme : les cadres dans l'image*

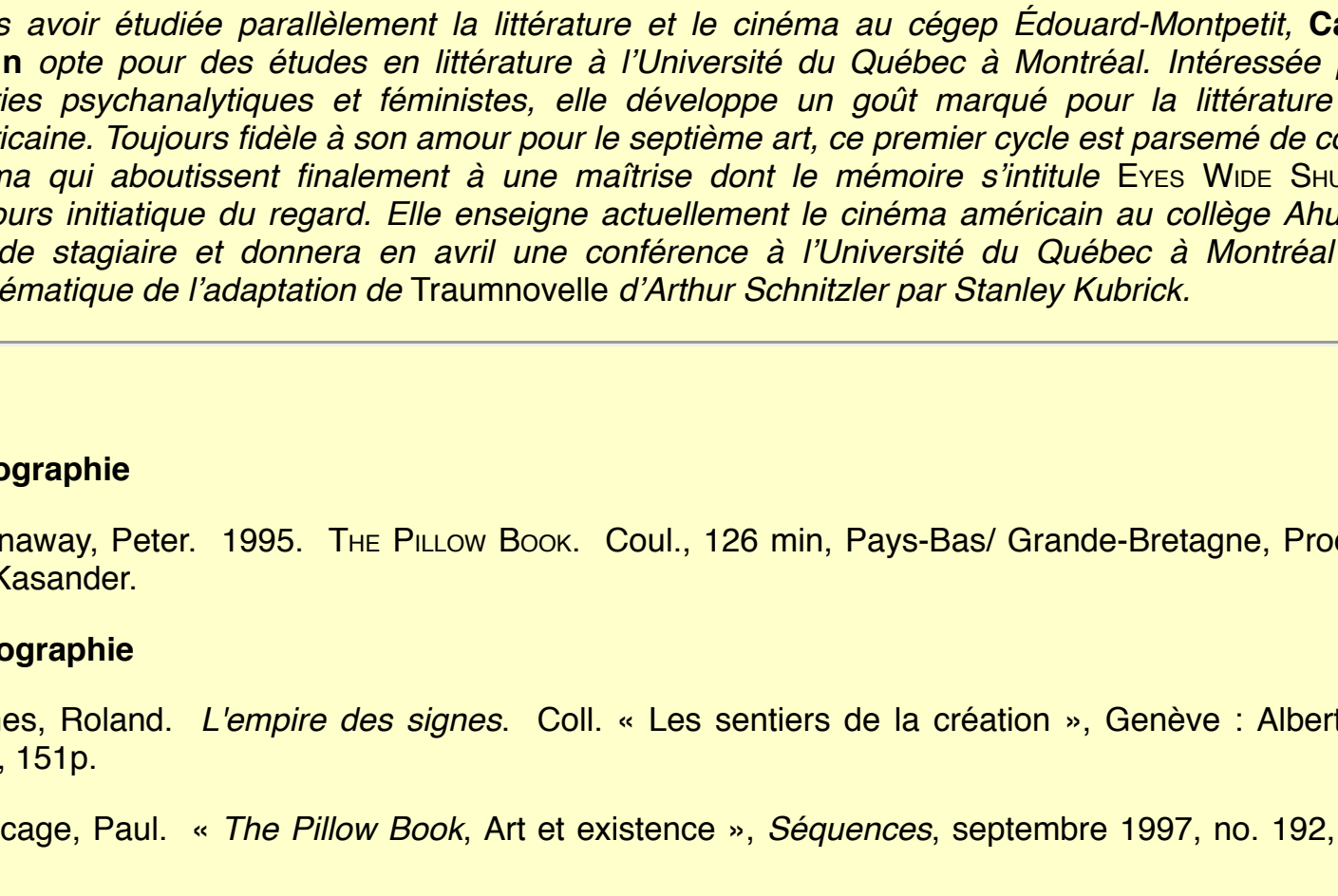
La mémoire de Nagiko, sa capacité à se souvenir, se présente dans ce film à travers une conception de l'art oriental et non occidental. Pour l'Occident, l'œuvre est toujours encadrée, l'image depuis très longtemps se conceptualise à partir d'un cadre précis. Dans l'art japonais surtout, il n'existe pas de cadre matériel, mais plutôt une technique consistant à cerner les images dans l'œuvre entière et donc de la création d'une multitude d'encadrements à l'intérieur de la toile. La calligraphie, cette « écriture idéographique qui semble à nos yeux dériver de la peinture »[12] contribue aussi à l'élaboration de cette mise en abîme de l'image dans l'image par les différentes « fenêtres » qui apparaissent à l'écran. Pour Greenaway, le cinéma se situe constamment au confluent de l'écriture et de l'image.

Dans ces plans, comme dans les superpositions, l'image s'inscrit dans une simultanéité du temps et de l'espace; le spectateur peut voir à la fois ce qui n'est plus là et ce qui n'est pas encore là. Cette « voyance » accordée au spectateur par ces insertions de « fenêtres », voyance également renforcée par le récit en flash-back, dévoile à quel point ce film traite de la mémoire. L'histoire de Nagiko se déroule parallèlement à celle de Sei Shônagon et les liens qui unissent les vies de ces deux femmes (ex : la littérature et la sexualité) montrent comment il s'agit d'une histoire à jamais répétée. Ainsi, l'art pictural et scriptural se présente sous la forme d'une médiation de la mémoire dans le langage cinématographique, tout comme les *Notes de chevet* travaillent la question de la mémoire littéraire et le chant la mémoire traditionnelle orale.

4.3. Le feu : l'oubli et la mémoire

Certaines images ne cessent de hanter Nagiko, par exemple la scène du souhait. D'autres au contraire requièrent d'être effacées pour rompre avec le passé, comme par exemple le mariage. Dans la superposition de plans, dans les « fenêtres » qui se multiplient et dans le montage saccadé et rapide des scènes à Kyoto, c'est une saturation d'images qui envahit le spectateur. Cette accumulation de signes, visuels et sonores, et la nécessité intrinsèque d'oubli qui s'y rattache est la même pour ce dernier que pour Nagiko. La mémoire possède ses propres règles et parmi celles-ci se trouve l'oubli. C'est pourquoi les deux incendies du film surviennent à des tournants décisifs de la vie de l'héroïne: le premier catalyse sa destinée puisqu'il la pousse à s'exiler en Chine, et le deuxième la ramène au Japon où elle donne naissance à un enfant. C'est bien sûr dans l'espoir d'oublier un épisode passé trop douloureux (mariage, mort de Jérôme) qu'elle enflamme ses livres et ses *Notes de chevet*. L'avenir ne peut être envisagé sans laisser derrière soi le poids de toutes ces traces sur le papier, de tous ces signes qui font mémoire du passé, et même si tout semble détruit, la mémoire habite un autre lieu indestructible, le corps. En donnant naissance à l'enfant de Jérôme, c'est en quelque sorte le corps de Nagiko qui commémore leur amour en créant un nouvel être, un corps qui, à son tour, reçoit l'inscription du vœu d'anniversaire par la main de sa mère.

Que se soit par les techniques utilisées dans le traitement des images ou par le choix des actions du récit, Greenaway met en place dans The Pillow Book un questionnement et une étude poussée sur le corps, sur son action médiatrice entre les êtres humains, mais également entre les signes et leur transmission. Également lieu de la mémoire, le corps permet un voyage dans le temps, un retour dans le passé plus ou moins lointain, mais dans un désordre propre aux paradoxes qu'il renferme dans ses recoins les plus sombres. Littérale allégorie du corps comme livre, cette histoire explore les liens qui unissent depuis des millénaires l'écriture et la sexualité, à travers une lecture fantasmatique de l'Orient par l'Occident. À travers l'écriture des idéogrammes, véritable art graphique, c'est un combat des diverses pulsions qui animent les personnages qui se jouent à l'écran. Brûlés ou effacés par la pluie, les signes demeurent éphémères rappelant ainsi le besoin constant d'oubli de la mémoire. Le lien intrinsèque entre le corps et la littérature demeure, pour sa part, inscrit à jamais dans la chair des personnages, soit dans les pages du livre humain de Jérôme, soit dans la peau finalement tatouée de Nagiko.



Après avoir étudiée parallèlement la littérature et le cinéma au cégep Édouard-Montpetit, **Caroline Martin** *opte pour des études en littérature à l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Intéressée par les théories psychanalytiques et féministes, elle développe un goût marqué pour la littérature latino-américaine. Toujours fidèle à son amour pour le septième art, ce premier cycle est parsemé de cours en cinéma qui aboutissent finalement à une maîtrise dont le mémoire s'intitule* Eyes Wide Shut *: un parcours initiatique du regard. Elle enseigne actuellement le cinéma américain au collège Ahuntsic à titre de stagiaire et donnera en avril une conférence à l'Université du Québec à Montréal sur la problématique de l'adaptation de* Traumnovelle *d'Arthur Schnitzler par Stanley Kubrick.*

Filmographie

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[3] Zumthor, p.13

[4] *Ibid.*, p.18

[5] *Ibid.*, p.48-49

[6] Zumthor, p.80

[7] *Op. cit.,* 118

[8] Op. cit., p.86

[9] Op. cit. p.115

[10] ibid., p.115

[11] ibid., p.145

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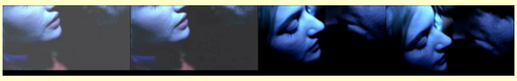
Inter-Review: *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004)

by Jonathan Doyle and Sarah Duda

26 April 2004 | 2158 words

WARNING: The following "Inter-Review" contains SPOILERS. Unless you have access to Lacuna's techniques for the focused erasure of troubling memories, you should refrain from reading this until after you have seen Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind.



Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind
(2004)

Directed by
Michel Gondry

Written by
Charlie Kaufman

Cinematography by
Ellen Kuras

Edited by
Valdís Óskarsdóttir

Art Direction by
David Stein

Starring
Jim Carrey
Kate Winslet
Tom Wilkinson

Jonathan Doyle: Do you have any favorite moments in the film?
Sarah Duda: I'm not big on picking favorite moments but I guess I would choose the part where Joel and Clementine are under the covers in their bed and she says "never leave me Joely."

I liked that scene, too. What did you like about it?
They were so close in that scene. It shows us how much relationships change and how people can change their minds about other people.

I liked that they shot it from under-the-covers, not above the covers, as is the norm. It was a nice authentic touch. There are a lot of those in a movie that would otherwise seem to be about a totally fantastical, unrealistic situation.
Yeah, that's a good point.

In spite of the naturalistic touches, I think Gondry overdoes it a bit on the surrealism. It's appropriate but I think the subtle effects are more effective than the really show-offy, over-the-top stuff. What do you think? Do you like the way they visualize Joel's memories?
Okay. I agree that some of Gondry's stuff is a bit too wild. But, ultimately, yes, I do like the way they visualize his memories because memories screw with your head and every time you remember something it changes slightly. He's showing us how similar memories are to dreams. I think his over-the-top stuff is making that connection. And it is an interesting connection, don't you think?

Yes. Most of it is very good. My only real criticism is that I found the real-life interaction between Joel and Clementine more interesting than the interaction in the memories because Joel's not interacting with a real person in the memories so the consequences of this interaction, if there are any, are unclear.
Actually, I like the way Joel interacts with his memories of Clementine, although I do agree that it's all a bit confusing. It's just that we all have a tendency, I think, to romanticize our memories and so, even though Joel is controlling what Clementine says to him in his memories, it still makes for some pretty touching stuff. It's like he's fighting to remember her in a particular way. I think that Joel's memories tell us a lot about his character and how badly he wants the relationship to work. I would almost say that Joel wants the relationship more than Clementine does and I think that his underdog status, in terms of the relationship, is clear from the beginning. She chooses to forget him, whereas he only does it out of spite.

I think you're right. Joel does want the relationship more than Clementine. Or at least, he's less willing to move on. But actually, we don't know whether or not she tried to stop the erasing process, as he did. Still, I think he's unknowingly exploiting the memory-erasing process, the same way Elijah Wood did. He's able to score with Clementine because of her erased memory. But he doesn't know he's doing this so he's not as creepy as Frodo.
No one's as creepy as Frodo.

If Joel hadn't erased his memory, he wouldn't have got Clementine back.
That's debatable.

Were you confused by the film at all or do you feel, after two viewings, that you have a pretty good handle on it? I've only seen it once but I find myself second-guessing all of my reactions because it has that hall-of-mirrors quality that Adaptation, which I didn't like, also had. By design, it's full of contradictions and the potential for multiple interpretations.
I'm still confused by the movie, even after two viewings, but I'm not really watching it with "let's figure this out" in mind. Sure, things became a bit clearer to me upon the second viewing and I noticed a few things that I missed the first time, like any movie. But I saw it again mainly because I loved the way it made me feel. Like the very fabric of my own personal reality was even more complicated and messed up than I imagined. It was one of those movies that made me feel weird when I left the theatre and walked down the street. I was seeing things differently. That sounds dramatic, totally cheesy. Maybe it was just my monumental hangover playing mind games with me.

Don't blame your hangover. The movie's crazy.
Yeah. That's true.

Would you ever erase your memory? Have you ever erased your memory?
Sometimes I forget things when I drink.

Me, too. But would you ever erase your memory on purpose?
It's easy for me to say, right at this moment, that I would definitely *not* erase my memory because memories make us who we are and all that feel-good stuff. But there have been times, very specific emotionally charged moments, when I could definitely see myself saying "let me get rid of this God-awful memory." I guess it depends on the mood I'm in. What about you?

I'd like to erase my memory of The Life of David Gale. I wonder if Kate Winslet could set that up?
Speaking of Kate Winslet, what did you think of the acting?

I particularly liked Jim Carrey's performance. It's strange, some of the criticism of the film -- there hasn't been much -- is that Jim Carrey's character isn't likable enough. For some reason, there's an expectation that every romantic comedy character must be endlessly lovable. The same criticism was made of Adam Sandler's performance in Punch Drunk Love. In reality, most people have unlovable sides but they still find love. Not every man is Cary Grant. I know I'm not.
And yet, in other more typical Carrey movies like The Mask and Ace Ventura, no one mentions that Carrey's character is not even close to leading man material. But he still gets the girl in those films. And those girls are hot! I think that some people are just looking for cheap ways to attack Jim Carrey for playing a dramatic role.

And the same is true of Adam Sandler. I guess the characters' flaws are more apparent to people in films that are grounded in reality, although Eternal Sunshine is also grounded outside of reality.
I also really loved Kate Winslet in the movie. She plays the "alternative" girl without being too annoying.

She's confident in the way that characters like that usually are but she's also totally insecure which counteracts that in a positive way. One reviewer called her a hippy which I don't get at all. Do you think she's a hippy? Hippies don't dye their hair tangerine, do they?
She's not a hippy by my understanding of that term. She's really just a playful person. I'm just shocked that I didn't hate her. I usually hate the way they portray fly-by-the-seat-of-their-pants people in movies. Like they have it all figured out. No worries, no weaknesses.

It's Valentine's Day the second time Joel and Clementine fall in love. Any thoughts on this? Do you think it's intended as some kind of ironic commentary on Valentine's Day? The first time we see this scene, we think it's a sentimental-first-encounter-set-on-Valentine's-Day thing but at the end we realize something much more unusual is going on. It's actually their second "first meeting" and they've just had their memories of their original relationship erased.
It's interesting. Jim Carrey bashes Valentine's Day in his voiceover but then it appears as though it is the power of that day that brings them to the beach to re-unite. Or maybe not.

What does he say about Valentine's Day?
He says something like "Valentine's day is a greeting card holiday designed to make people feel bad" or something similar.

Charlie Kaufman is a strange guy. He's a cynical romantic, I think. He wants the world to be great but knows it isn't but hopes it might get better but knows it won't.
I definitely think Charlie Kaufman is a strange dude. I'd like to have dinner with him some time.

Spike Jonze and Michel Gondry are inextricably linked, not only because they are respected directors of music videos but also because Charlie Kaufman has written all of their films. Do you have a preference? Jonze or Gondry?
I haven't seen Human Nature. However, based on music videos and, if you want to get right down to it, Being John Malkovich vs. Eternal Sunshine, I'd definitely go with Gondry. What's your take?

On the basis of two films each, I'd say both are 1 for 2. Human Nature and Adaptation both have their strengths but they left me feeling cold and unaffected. I think Eternal Sunshine is a more enjoyable film than Being John Malkovich but Being John Malkovich is more coherent and complete. I have to see Eternal Sunshine again.
I don't think the movie is as crazy as we're saying. I don't think it is any less coherent or complete than Being John Malkovich. What is a complete picture? Movies always end in the middle or they wouldn't end. And I really, sincerely, do not think that the movie is all that incoherent. It makes sense.

I was surprised that Gondry took such a loose approach, formally. Most of the film, even the effects-intensive scenes, was handheld. Was there anything about Gondry's formal approach that impressed or bothered you? I really liked Jon Brion's score.
Oh, yes. I absolutely *loved* the score. It was amazing! I haven't loved a score that much since Edward Scissorhands.

Let's get to the important stuff. Is it just me or is Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind the most annoying title ever? It's fine but it just takes way too long to say.
That's what you get for quoting 'Pope Alexander.'

What would we do without Kirsten Dunst? I'm gonna go out on a limb and say she ad-libbed that line.
Yes. That's pure Dunst. Anyway, what I really like about the film is that it examines the ups-and-downs of a relationship in a totally original way. It's a twisted love story.

I agree. Most relationship movies operate on the hope and assumption that the central couple will remain together forever but, in this film, we see the relationship unfold after we see it break up.
How do you interpret the ending?

It's interesting. On one hand, it's a totally tragic ending. These characters may be doomed to repeat their mistakes but then, maybe they'll learn from the evidence they have of their previous relationship (ie. the audio recordings). Those recordings forced them to say what they were probably unable to say to one another before they broke up.
But then we have that final scene of them running along the beach. There are three shots of them running the same stretch of beach like maybe they will erase and find each other yet again. I guess I'm wondering, do you think that, knowing what they know, they will erase each other again when the going gets tough? She's still impulsive, by nature.

I've heard that the loop ran all the way through the end credits originally but they felt it was too depressing. I think Lacuna may be out of business at the end of the film. But that may also be unhappy, as the characters' happiness at the end is really the result of Lacuna's work. It may be tragic that they can't erase their memories again.
Maybe. I forgot that Lacuna got screwed over by Kirsten Dunst.

Do you think it would have been better for them to just move on to other relationships and learn from their mistakes? It's hard for me to say because movies condition you to want the characters to wind up together, not with some hypothetical character we've never met. But they might have been happier with different people. At the same time, the movie is saying that these people are destined to be together. They did find one another in two completely unrelated situations, as strangers.
I don't know. I wanted them to be together, of course, but I also thought that maybe they should make a clean break because, ultimately, they don't fit together. But that is easier said than done. It's nearly impossible to face the fact that you are not meant to be with somebody because there is always that hope that "we can change."

I liked the way that the structural confusion of the opening was clarified in the end. It seemed totally organic to the idea of the film and not gimmicky in the way that structural experiments often are.
The beginning is the end is the beginning is the end.

That's the end. Or is it the beginning?

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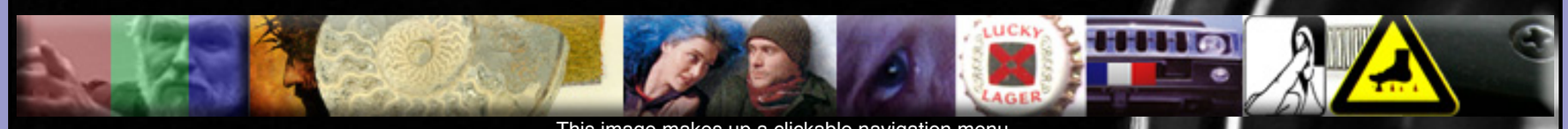

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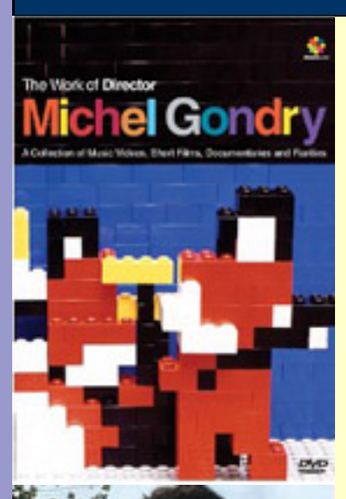
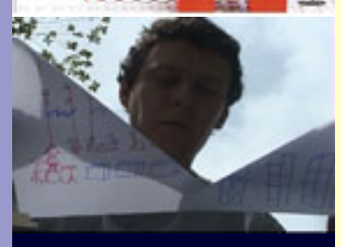
REVIEW: *The Work of Director Michel Gondry* (2003)

by Janos Sitar

5 April 2004 | 1216 words





I am part of the first generation of adolescents weaned on music videos. Those early images of rock stars flitting by the television at an exaggerated rate became forays into a visionary world where musicians, available twenty-four hours a day, were a novelty. And thanks to the Much Music programming cycle you were guaranteed to see something you liked at least twice a day. Figuring out this program loop was essential to taping those few favourite videos for learning the words to songs or trying to copy dance moves by the likes of Vanilla Ice. (Yes. I was that lame.) While the majority of these videos were of fairly bland concert footage, or of one-hit wonders singing directly into the camera from a desert/city/bedroom, there were a few landmark moments.

The Work of Director Michel Gondry is the third DVD release by the Directors Label (a boutique imprint of Palm Pictures) created by Gondry, Spike Jonze and Chris Cunningham. Not that this numbering system really matters since all three discs came out at the same time in the fall of 2003. The Gondry disc is easily the best of the bunch. It is easy to praise this collection when Gondry's ability to be technically proficient, innovative, and aesthetically mind-boggling shines through every item on this disc. The disc interface itself has gone through the process of being Gondry-fied, whereby linear order is rearranged into a series of loops and circles. The main menu screen is probably the first and best example of how Gondry understands the materiality and potential of DVD menu loops. In this menu screen, Gondry is playing a drum beat which cycles in time to make a song. The central melodic element is provided by the two boys who scream at different pitches whenever Gondry strikes the drum they have their head in. This is your introduction to the wacky and surreal world of Michel Gondry. Before you think this is some form of cruel and unusual torture, it should be noted that one of the boys is Gondry's son, Paul, a budding horror film director.

The circular structure of this DVD is evident in the reverse chronology whereby 'side A' covers the years 2003-1996 and includes part two of the documentary I've Been 12 Forever (Age 12-12). While this structure makes some sort of sense insofar as the most recent (and best known) material is presented first, drawing the viewer into the older material on 'side B' (1995-1987), it also has the effect of drawing a circle around the video career of Gondry. The title of this documentary is particularly telling of this circular world where the end is really just a return to the beginning. To top this off, when part one of the documentary ends on 'side B' and the credits pass, a short sequence of a young boy playing basketball begins and then repeats until the viewer stops it. I have to admit that I got suckered the first time I watched this sequence, waiting for several minutes until I realized that it was just a repetitive loop. I quickly came to realize that this is one of the new potentials of DVD technology, whereby seamless loops can be created and run until the player burns out, the viewer gets sick of the repetition, or the power goes out. We are beginning to see the legs of a new medium being stretched out with experiments in temporality and continuation. I like the image of the young boy who is endlessly practicing, repeating actions with no end goal other than to complete the action. He is a suitable metaphor for Gondry who never seems to lose his delight in the action and practice of his craft.

The loop is an interesting way to describe Gondry's work as it has implications in both the histories of film and music. In film, the loop goes back to the phenakistoscope, the zoetrope and the Edison Kinetoscope, that latter of which filled parlors with people eager to see 20 seconds of repeating, motion-based excitement per nickel. In music, though the looping mechanical music box has existed since the late 18th century and the disk-based Symphonion box exploded in popularity during the late 19th century, the loop is often considered a newer concept brought about by electronic music wherein small excerpts from pre-existing songs or isolated drum beats (aka samples) are repeated as a loop via analog or digital sequencing equipment to form the backbone of a new composition. The perfect example of how Gondry represents the loop in both film and music is in his video for Cibo Matto's "Sugar Water" where he visually illustrates the symmetry of the music by constructing a video palindrome. In Gondry's hands a rather simple idea becomes a study in movement and timing whereby the musicians Miho and Yuka end up in the places where they started. To achieve this effect, Gondry made a single-take film which follows Yuka and then Miho in equal halves. To achieve the effect of the palindrome, Gondry employs a split screen where the left side runs forwards and the right side runs backwards in perfect synchronization.

Gondry has a rare ability to actually make the music better with his videos. Kylie Minogue's "Come Into My World" is just one example of a video being so interesting that the song suddenly becomes incredibly enjoyable. It is another one of Gondry's audio-visual loops whereby Kylie Minogue walks around a Paris block only to multiply every time that she passes by the same launderette from which she enters the camera's view. The end result is similar to Zbigniew Rybczynski's Tango (1982) only that with each pass around the block the people who populate the background multiply as well, creating a crowded mass in the streets around whom Minogue performs her song. I like this video because it condenses all the potentialities and multiplicities of people in urban space into one shot. The quotidian tasks and actions of all the people in the video amounts to a depiction of history and inhabitation that is normally invisible. The tangibility of the space and multiplication of people does not show history as a trace ghost presence but rather as an endlessly present and changing action.

Another one of my favourite aspects of Gondry's videos is his ability to literalize material from the song without it being tasteless or obvious. A good example of this is "La Tour De Pise" by Jean Francois Coen, where the whole video is comprised of different signs from around Paris spelling out the lyrics of the song. However, my favourite example of this technique is "Star Guitar" by the Chemical Brothers, wherein the landscape as seen from a train window matches the different beats of the song. What I especially enjoy about this video is that the repetition does not feel forced, but instead becomes unified with the natural landscape and sound field. The train is a perfect setting because it is a technology that operates with regard to the rhythm and synchronization of different component parts. There is a celebration of harmony and motion as it is embodied both by this dance song and its re-situation into the monotony of daily transportation.

Every single video included on The Work of Director Michel Gondry has something interesting and technically stimulating that is worth talking about. So much so that I have started to regard these clips as porno for film formalists: there are so many great explorations into the materiality and possibility of film.

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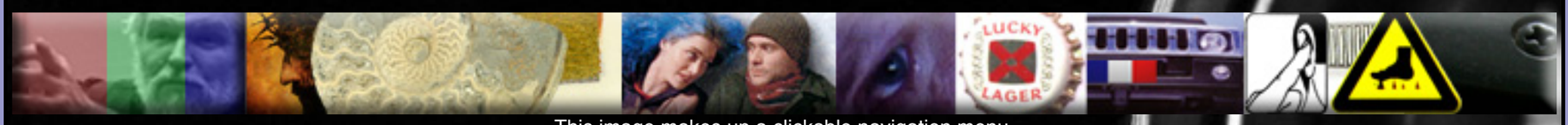

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REVIEW: *Luck* (2003)

by Collin Smith
26 April 2004 | 786 words

LUCK
(2003)

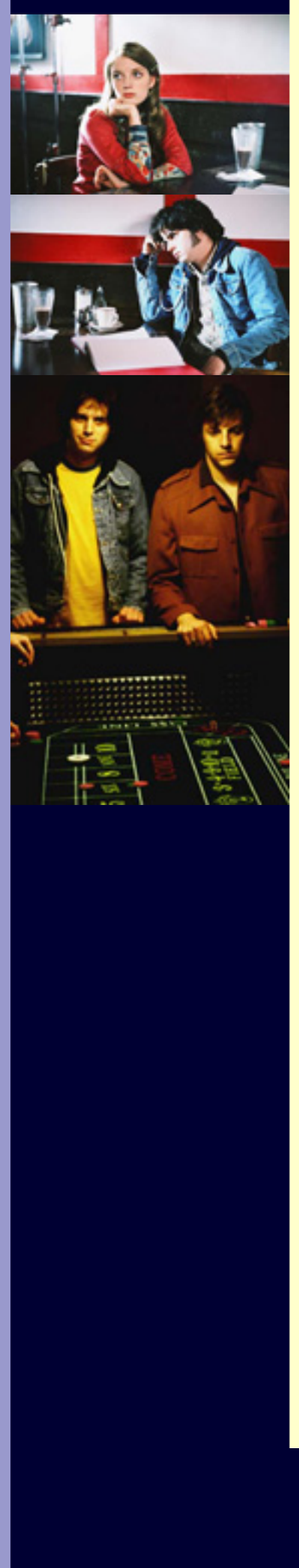
Written and Directed by
Peter Wellington

Cinematography by
Luc Montpellier

Edited by
Christopher Donaldson

Produced by
Susan Cavan
Atom Egoyan
Daniel Iron
Simone Urdl
Jennifer Weiss

Starring
Luke Kirby
Sarah Polley



Peter Wellington may have made the quintessential Canadian guy movie. By adding a healthy dose of self-depreciating irony to equal parts sentimentality for hockey lore and fascination with unattainable women, Wellington constructs a coming of age tale rich in Canadian ambivalence and contradiction. The movie is at once unconventional and non-threatening; simultaneously comic and tragic. Wellington, using a legendary moment of national pride and collective identity creation to tell a story of personal tragedy and loss of innocence, constantly merges apparently opposing ideas, blurring the lines between these solitudes and managing to bring richness to what could have been a fairly bland, straight-forward cautionary tale.

Luck follows the story of Shane (Luke Kirby) as he gambles on his ultimate financial and romantic jackpot during the 1972 Canada/Russia hockey series. Shane's pursuit of the woman of his dreams plays out against the backdrop of his descent into financial ruin due to his compulsive gambling and his stubborn pursuit of elusive luck. In the end, Shane must bet it all against Team Canada winning the gold and, in good Canuck form, manages to both win and lose despite his bumbling.

Beginning at the start of the famous hockey series and inversely following the emotional trajectory of that period, the story climaxes with the Canadians winning and with Shane on the brink of losing it all. A young, unmotivated, suburban, average Joe, he's got a shot at the woman of his dreams, but as the series gets underway, he discovers gambling and his shot at making it big. Team Canada's fortunes have direct bearing on Shane's: they lose, he wins; they win, he loses. Wellington plays the euphoria of the nation against the personal loss of our hero and cleverly inverts our assumptions about the nature of luck.

Rife with these dramatic ironies, Wellington's movie revels in the complexities of contradictory feelings and consistently disconnects the expected emotional response from the event. Shane's fortunes bring him heartbreak; his suffering produces revelation. Canadian films have a tradition of not supplying the anticipated outcome and Luck runs with that convention.

On some level, what we get is an accurate and artful portrait of addiction, but Shane's compulsive gambling is just the backdrop. Despite how well the film makers paint the picture of this destructive yet alluring affliction, Shane's problem is bigger than that: his uncontrollable need to go for broke overwhelms every facet of his life. To the film's credit, we aren't provided a neat resolution; his gambling —financial, romantic—neither brings him ultimate destruction nor does he come out the other side necessarily a changed or better man. Instead, Shane remains an addict—a little wiser for the experience, but still an addict.

Where the film falters is in the portrayal of the object of his affection, Margaret (Sarah Polley). Her role is slight, so there is never any real attempt to fully define her, which makes it hard to understand why she is so significant in Shane's life. This is in stark contrast to how intricately the film portrays his other love, gambling. Polley brings whatever life and intelligence to the part she can in the short time she is onscreen.

Certainly the strongest element of this film is Luke Kirby's performance. This role is the perfect vehicle for his charming neurotic shtick that was so wasted in the silly Mambo Italiano. It also allows him the opportunity to fully create the character and develop a complex set of motivations. Shane is about as real and realized a character that has been seen for a while and this is due to the combination of Kirby's performance and Wellington's skillful script.

Wellington earned a well-deserved Genie nomination for the screenplay. The character of Shane is a writer and his voice-over narration possesses the clever kind of dry wit that is at once accessible and intellectual. However, the strength of the script is in the way the characters speak like real people. The dialogue is littered with beautiful non-sequiturs, pregnant and not-so-pregnant pauses, awkward verbal fumbles and moments of occasional brilliance. Effortlessly, we are brought from humour to pathos and back again.

The story of Team Canada's rise to victory in 1972 is just context for Shane's story. The parallel national obsession provides the perfect foil for his manias. The film makers don't become too obsessed with the historical details of the early 70s and leave most of that to the background. Instead they tell a compelling and funny story of a regular guy dealing with real problems. Luck is the kind of film that's easy to enjoy but hard to forget. In the end, the audience wins out with a rewarding experience at the movies.

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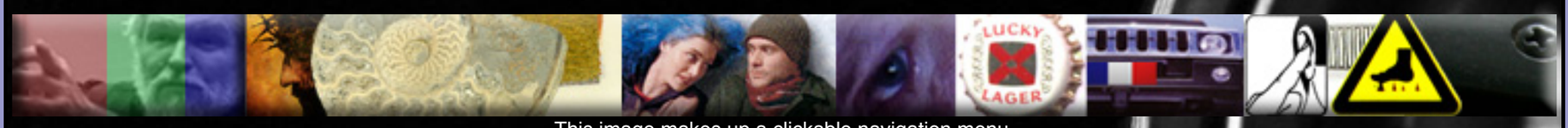

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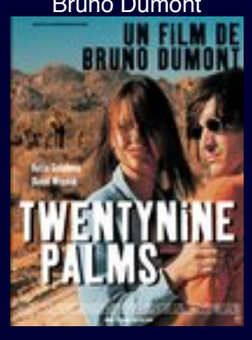
REVIEW: *Twentynine Palms*

"Zabriskie Pointless" or Bruno Dumont's Latest Masterpiece?

by Dan Stefik

26 April 2004 | 1355 words

Bruno Dumont



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So few great films are around these days or at least it seems that way. Where have all the challenging, provocative films gone? Of course, we do have our fair share of contrived, plot- driven features that impress us with their complex chain-of-events and their clever play with time and space. Something to serve-up for some stimulating conversation upon exiting the cinema. David Lynch has become a master of this. Lynch's films (i.e. Eraserhead, Lost Highway, Mulholland Drive) are great conversation pieces, like a provocative museum exhibition that causes a momentary stir but doesn't change the world or its audience. Personally, I am an ambivalent fan of Lynch's work but, more than anything, he reminds me that there is creative potential outside the machine that is the North American film production, exhibition, and distribution industry.

Lynch's characterizations are so radical and illusory – which is obviously part of his ploy and appeal – that there are few moral considerations in his work. In Eraserhead, for instance, the seductress across the hall is exactly that: a deceitful manipulator with no moral conscience. In turn, this makes it easy to view his films (save for his infrequent non-surrealist features such as 1980's The Elephant Man) without personally challenging his moral stance. It's safe to assume that when Lynch fans converge in the lobby after a typically Lynchian experience, they are discussing the multiple levels of narrativity that make his approach so invigorating. Whereas we tend to think of Lynch as provocative and marginal, he is, in fact, rather predictable. He has been compared to Buñuel, though I'd argue that the latter's work is more stimulating.

Surrealism often uses the codes of psychoanalysis in subversive ways, probably as a result of the lack of critical debate (especially in terms of sexuality) in social circles. But the imagery rarely secures a middle-ground for criticism in the realm of morality. Conversely, Hollywood's rather insulting "take me by the hand and show me how to feel" approach allows little space for moral awareness or development.

Enter Bruno Dumont.

I stand by this man and his peculiar visions. And this review, although a preview for most of you, is admittedly an act of critical resuscitation.

I fear that most readers will never see Twentynine Palms (which played at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts on November 8th, 2003) in its true scope, on the silver screen. Local programmers have chastised the film and deemed it (not unlike Vincent Gallo's The Brown Bunny) unworthy of the public's attention. Dumont's previous effort, L'humanité, made headlines at Cannes and garnered the Grand Prix du Jury, while his first and arguably most modest film, La Vie de Jesus, offers proof that his later recognition was entirely justified.

But his Twentynine Palms is a different story altogether. Save for Gaspar Noe's Irreversible, I can think of no more provocative film in recent years. Whereas Noe's film makes the transition from inferno to paradise, Dumont's works the other way around. A slow and steady tension is developed throughout the film, from reality to impending nightmare, as the libidinal release of both principle characters shrouds any possibility of redemption. This aspect is what many spectators struggle with: the idea that David and Katia's pleasure-seeking reality could take a nasty, unforeseen turn. And none of this should be taken literally (after all, where's your sense of adventure?).

So here's the premise: David, a freelance photographer, takes Katia out into the desert to scout locations for a shoot. For the first half of the film the couple engages in a great deal of sex. Eventually the sex gets more aggressive and they have a rather telling argument which manifests in assault. She tries to leave but he's got the Hummer. Their Hummer, not as secure as they'd like to think, gets overtaken by a four-by-four. Three guys get out, assault them both, then force Katia to watch as David is sodomized by one of the men. If that's not enough, upon returning to their hotel, Katia can do little to console David, who is unrecognizable on one side of his face from the beating. He retires to the bathroom and, in a moment of terror…

Dumont shows remarkable restraint. Like Buñuel, his craft appears effortless when, in fact, he is constructing a deeply affecting, subtle relationship between the spectator and the characters. While employing a flaccid acting style that is the trademark of Robert Bresson, Dumont's characters erupt in moments of transcendence. There is no doubt that some critics will dismiss this film as superficial and trite due to its excessive scenes of sex that eventually translate into violence. But history will prove (in my opinion, this is a rather prophetic film) that Dumont's film is dead-on. Whether or not spectators will be willing to submit to what is in actuality a challenge by Dumont, only time will tell. As strange and facile as it may appear (and we all know that appearances can be rather deceiving), this film is deeply affecting, maybe offensively so: these images will nestle in your psyche for days, weeks, even months.

It is worth noting that several years ago a U.S. Marine was convicted of the brutal rape and murder of two girls in the town of 29 Palms where the film is situated, just outside Joshua Tree National Park. The town is heavily populated by both Marines and young families looking to start anew, away from the big cities and their contaminating realities. The one scene where a Marine can be seen sitting outside an ice cream parlour is particularly representative of the nuances that make Dumont's work so compelling. Katia can be seen, in one of those beautiful female POV shots, eyeing the Marine while she and David share a conversation over an ice cream cone. What could she be thinking as she glances at him so unobtrusively? Let's face a simple fact together, one that you can bring into your screening of the film. Women's point of view shots are rare. Period. And usually they offer very little other than the reciprocation of any given male POV (think of countless beer advertisements, though the same holds true for most popular films). But Dumont is interested in the female gaze, and one could say he actually empowers it, if only temporarily, until this woman succumbs to the will and power of her other's gaze. In fact, I'd argue that the film culminates in one of the most powerful female point of views ever registered on film. You'll know what I mean when you see it.

When David looks at Katia it is, more often than not, a desiring gaze, but perhaps filtered through something else. Adulation? Contempt? Dumont is offering us a glimpse into the lives of a couple for whom sexuality is a base pleasure, whether Katia is willing to accept it or not. Do you believe sexuality to be sacred? Chances are you don't. Sex is everywhere, but its meaning depends on how you read it. We tend to overlook a great deal and become less critical as a result. Sex has been woven into the fabric of our daily routines, from television to Hollywood, the internet to your local night club. We all want it but we don't want to think about it or, at least, discuss it. It's taken a long while but we've managed to divorce morality from sexuality. Dumont is trying to re-stitch the discourses of sexuality and morality, which seem highly oppositional and confrontational at this moment. If I told you that we, as typically ahistorical Westerners, were veering much closer to a state of pathology and even further sowing the seeds that might give rise to a marked increase in psychopathic behaviour, would you believe me? See Dumont's film; he might convince you. [fin]

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SILENCE IS GOLDEN: THE FERGUSON-FARBER AFFAIR

by Colin Burnett

26 April 2004 | 3953 words

In 1952, *Commentary* publishes Manny Farber's essay "The Gimp," in which the legendary critic plagiarizes from the equally important, but lesser-known, Otis Ferguson and his two-piece review of *Citizen Kane*, written 11 years earlier for *The New Republic*. I see no reason to mince words here —*plagiarism* is spot on, as I intend to show. Having made this 'discovery' and taken a few moments to digest the portentousness, I contacted the first person who came to mind, David Thomson, author of the infamous *New Biographical Dictionary of Film* and regular "Film Studies" columnist for London's *Independent*.

I had met Mr. Thomson late last summer on the event of a book signing at Paragraphe bookstore here in Montreal. Thomson was also in town for our city's International Film Festival, the 2003 installation of which he accurately described as a "crapshoot." As he concluded his musings on the 'sorry state of cinema' I approached him to have my book signed, at which point he asked me what I 'did.' Anxious to hear his thoughts about academia, I told him that I was in Film Studies, which he responded to by recounting a brief anecdote involving Pauline Kael and the advice she had given him when he was pondering taking a university teaching position. "Don't let them get their hands on you," she said, if memory serves. We then spoke briefly about the low level of respect that contemporary academic film studies has for critics like himself, Kael and Farber, and I added that I'd love to study Farber's criticism, in particular, a lot closer. "Have you ever met Manny?" he asked. (I'm sure my eyes at that very point were twinkling at the possibilities before me.) Naturally I had not, and upon discovering this, Thomson graciously jotted down my mailing address and offered to send me Farber's. "Do with it what you will— Manny would love to hear that his criticism is still read." For this reason I was quite disappointed that, by mid-November, I had heard nothing from him. I therefore decided, armed with my new discovery about the whole Farber-Ferguson-*Citizen Kane* situation, to email Thomson, which in retrospect was probably a mistake if I had ever really intended to get my hands on that address.

This is precisely how the message read:

> I have been studying the work of Otis Ferguson quite closely and come upon an interesting tidbit. In 1941, he reviewed *Citizen Kane* in two parts, long story short in 1952 Farber published an essay called "The Gimp," which, among other things, reviews *Kane*. This review, on pages 78 to 80 of the expanded version of *Negative Space*, shows that Farber, well, plagiarized several complete phrases from the original reviews. Check it out for yourself; I don't think I'm exaggerating. It should be mentioned that Ferguson is not cited or mentioned at any point in Farber's article. Most would take this as evidence that film critics are lazy or unfamiliar with their fellows-you, but my view this case can be used to make some interesting historical remarks about film criticism of the period. Farber probably had a copy of *The New Republic* in which Ferguson's review initially appeared, and, in the course of writing this piece which is ostensibly a discussion of *Kane*, he in all likelihood could not see *Kane* at the time (this, naturally being pre-video—and the 50s, for that matter, which according to my understanding, was a period in which *Kane* was almost never shown). So Farber needed to 'use' some of Ferguson's material. Naturally I'd NEVER use this to 'break the ice' with Farber, although I do think that this is an intriguing subject, and one that has never been mentioned anywhere. I can't help but wonder what he'd have to say about it—not in defense, but in order to give insight into his practices at the time (assuming he remembers). Any statements that he'd have to make about this would be important in piecing together a portrait of the conditions under which critics wrote at the time.

I then suggested, quite generously I believe, that Thomson take up the issue for one of his *Independent* "Film Studies" columns. Thomson never responded in any form and still hasn't.

Because I am well aware that email is not an entirely reliable form of communication, I hesitate to interpret Thomson's silence on these matters too strongly or literally. What I find odd and even unlikely is that no one—not Jonathan Rosenbaum, author of an important essay on Farber; not Myron, reborn Loundsbury, whose *Origins of American Film Criticism* is an indispensable reference source; not Greg Taylor, perhaps American film studies' leading scholar in 'metacriticism;' not David Denby, editor of *Awake in the Dark*; and not Thomson, for that matter—has ever taken notice of Farber's act of plagiarism here. But let's not inflate these findings beyond what they actually are, for as one writer put it:

> It is undeniable, that thousands of feeble writers are constantly at work, who subsist by Plagiarism, more or less covert. It is equally undeniable … that thousands of feeble critics subsist by detecting plagiarisms as imitations, real or supposed.

Written by Thomas de Quincey, these words are cited by Christopher Hitchens in "In Defense of Plagiarism." He adds, "[j]ust as writers should beware of joining the first category, so readers should not be too eager to enlist in the second" (242). The risk of becoming just such a reader is worth taking in order to make the following point. What the whole Ferguson-Farber affair illustrates best is the yawning abyss between academic film research and the practice of front-line film criticism and the underdeveloped state of the academic or formal study of this large body of film writing.

It is safe to assume that if Farber and Ferguson had been so-called 'film theorists,' the former's plethrage of several passages from the latter's writings would have been acknowledged (in print) decades ago. Such is the pro-'theory' bias of scholarly research into film culture. With this in mind, I would add that, in the wrong hands, this fact could easily be the source of a slew of dismissive claims about the critic and 'journalistic' film criticism in general. What requires sensitive consideration here is the context in which Farber wrote "The Gimp," for only then can we piece together the historical circumstances that gave birth to the sometimes bizarre or underground creature that was pre-academic film writing. Due to limitations of space and resources, I simply cannot provide an exhaustive account of these elements here. What I will do is provide overdue evidence that this is in fact an act of plagiarism and then engage in (hopefully fruitful) speculation about the reasons for it.

Those familiar with two of the most distinctive writing styles in the history of American movie criticism will be somewhat shocked to hear that the stolen Ferguson phrases meld smoothly with Farber's text. What's not shocking is that the appropriation forces Farber to employ a style equal to Ferguson's overall tone, to his negative take on the film. Ferguson's articles were dead-set on debunking the fervor of Welles-a-mania, yet considering that this has become something of a sport in certain critical circles since the 40s, what distinguishes them is his attempt to demonstrate that *Citizen Kane* is actually a "retrogressor" in film technique (371). Hardly has such a course ever been undertaken, even by the film's most fanatical detractors who at times are willing to admit that despite its overall failure as a work of art, the film is *technically impressive*. Ferguson's attack on *Kane* for drowning the viewer in a series of unoriginal cinematographic devices would be developed by Farber into an important element of the oppositional critical stance for which he would become known.

Ferguson is perhaps the most engaging list-maker I know of. Gregg Toland's camera "here [l]oves deep perspectives, long rooms, rooms seen through doors and giving into rooms *on* Farber; not Myron, reborn Loundsbury, whose *Origins of American Film Criticism* is an indispensable reference source; not Greg Taylor, perhaps American film studies' leading scholar in 'metacriticism;' not David Denby, editor of *Awake in the Dark*; and not Thomson, for that matter—has ever taken notice of Farber's act of plagiarism here. But let's not inflate these findings beyond what they actually are, for as one writer put it: other doors, rooms lengthened out by low ceilings or made immense by high-angle shots where the ceiling seems to be the sky." "The camera loves partial lighting or underlighting, with faces or figures blacked out, features emphasized or thrown into shadow, with one point of high light in an area of gloom or foreground figures black against brightness, with the key shifting according to mood, with every scene modeled for special effects with battens of varying function and power, gobos, barndoors, screens, and what not. But here's the catch: "[t]hese things are all written into the accomplished cameraman's handbook." "There's nothing newer about shooting into lights than shooting into the sun," he adds, "but there is, I suppose, something new in having the whole book thrown at you at once" (369).

Manny Farber uses this same approach to describe how Elia Kazan's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, also commented upon in "The Gimp," "pitches' its style. "There is nothing new about shallow perspectives, figures gazing into mirrors with the camera smack up against the surface, or low intimate views that expand facial features and pry into skin-pores, weaves of cloth, and sweaty undershirts." "But," he continues, mimicking Ferguson, "there is something new in having the whole movie thrown at you in shallow dimension" (76). The main thrust of Farber's article is essentially Fergusonian, even when the latter is not literally present in the form of appropriated phrases. In "The Gimp" is, according to Farber, "the technique, in effect, of enhancing the ordinary with a different dimension, sensational and yet seemingly credible. Camera set-ups, bits of business, lines […] are contrived into saying too much" (73). This is his way of expressing his mentor's disgust for films that rely too heavily upon "tricks" and "symbols" (terms that are, not coincidentally, used by Farber on the article's first page), for filmmakers that don't realize that the main problem of film is always "story, story, story" (365). Farber attributes *Kane*'s gimpiness directly to Gregg Toland's reckless use of camera trickery. "[He] threw into the film every device ever written into the accomplished cameraman's handbook," writes Farber, 'inspired' by his predecessor. Mention of the film's manipulation of "undercranking," "crane-shots," "two-shots," "floor-shots," of "camera angles that had been thoroughly exploited by experimental films" are but a few among many points that he pilfers virtually word-for-word from Ferguson. (See page 370 of the latter's original review particularly.) Speaking the precise words of his 30s counterpart, Farber illustrates that the technique of undercranking is used "to make the people in the 'newreels' clips jerk and scuttle" (Farber, page 78; Ferguson, page 370).

Leaping across to Ferguson's first piece on *Kane* for inspiration (all these previous fragments were excavated from the second), Farber forges the line: "This unpeeling of a tycoon was clearly the most iconoclastic movie in a major studio since the days when D. W. Griffith and his cameraman, Billy Bitzer, were freeing the movies from imitation of the stage" (78). The original Ferguson reads: "The things to be said are that it is the boldest free stroke in a major screen production since Griffith and Bitzer were running wild in the shacklie the camera […]" (363).

Examples could be duplicated *ad nauseum*. That said, most of Farber's borrowings concentrate themselves in one paragraph on one page of the article. But a point that has not yet been made is that Farber's undeniable pilferage acts as a springboard to developing Ferguson's original views further in his *own* words, and in the process, to popularize, renew more pungently, and distill into a single term ("the Gimp") Ferguson's distaste for film techniques that present themselves *as* techniques and therefore compromise the experience of the 'story' itself. With increasing consistency, Ferguson viewed himself as a mouthpiece for film's craftsmen. Welles and Toland had broken the film craftsman's code of ethics that dictates that, in Ferguson's words, "*the devices for illusion* [remain] *always and necessarily hidden in the natural emergence of the illusion itself*" (368; emphasis in source). Farber makes this view his own and gives it an appropriately 'Farberian' twist that reflects his persona as a key figure in underground film culture of the 50s through the 70s: a name with pointedly sexual connotations, as the anecdote that opens the piece demonstrates. In Farber's words, lady golfers of the Victorian era used a device called "gimp" to help their game. Mysteries of the mechanics of the device aside, a "gimp," which was "a cord running from hem of skirt to waistband," would for a brief moment expose the lower parts of the women's ankles and legs when used, revealing "high-button shoes" (71). Film gimpiness works in an analogous fashion, with directors' "Gimp-strings" tugged to reveal to the viewer "curious and exotic but 'psychic' images" meant to distract and imbue segments of film with added meaning.

In the course of making this critical tool more useful, Farber applies it to a wider body of films, including *Sunset Boulevard*, *People Will Talk*, *Detective Story*, *A Place in the Sun*, and *Grapes of Wrath*, among others. He also broadens Ferguson's charge against Welles' film, blaming him for showing "Hollywood craftsmen how to inject trite philosophy, 'liberalism,' psychoanalysis, etc., into the very mechanics of filmmaking, so that what the spectator saw on the screen was not only a fat, contrived actor screaming down a stairwell, but also some exotically rendered editorializing contributed by everyone from the actor to the set designer" (80). Grasping as Ferguson perhaps did not the urgent ramifications of filmmakers' reliance upon the Gimp,' Farber shows that Welles' film might just be the source of contemporary predilection for interpreting and responding to films in the most unfounded, 'conventionalized' ways, focusing on what we 'make' of the film rather than on the film itself. Rather than presenting the viewer with "some intelligible, structured image of reality," these films pepper him with "completely unrelated pellets of message," shocking him "into a lubricated state of mind where he is forced to think seriously about the phony implications of what he is seeing" (71).

On these terms, and by virtue of the insight that Farber himself brings to this issue, plagiarism, if I may be a judge here, is eminently excusable. But if plagiarism consists of claiming another's words and ideas as one's own, then Farber cannot escape the charge—which brings us to the unavoidable question of motivation. I wonder if, in a pre-institutionalized (or even an anti-institutional) environment, lacking in stable and immovable structures of mentorship such as the one in which Farber soon himself in the 50s, 'copying' a practitioner that one considers a predecessor might seem to be a viable option—pedagogically at least [1]. It is, as we know, a common artistic one, and while certainly disreputable in discursive forms of expression, it has been exploited more often than one might think, such as in Susan Sontag's recent novel, *In America*, in which the author annexes some sentences from a novel by Willa Cather for 'literary effect.' (Hitchens' "In Defense of Plagiarism" chronicles other high-profile instances.)

As Greg Taylor illustrates in *Artists in the Audience*, Farber occupied the guise of the critic-as-artist, and therefore operated by his own rules, which could account for his 'quotations' without quotation marks, for his 'informal' appropriation. But these are euphemisms and only serve to patronize the author. In the end, only Farber knows for sure why he did this, and, if I may speculate further, the reasons are probably more practical then the ones offered here and in all likelihood linked to issues of time-constraint and the need to meet deadlines. Would it not be intriguing to hear Farber explain the pressures and intentions, the context itself, behind the act? Surely it would, Mr. Thomson. Silence on this issue has been broken. Now hopefully the controversial author of *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film* will break his while Farber is still around to tell his side of the story. [ttn]

Colin Burnett *is the current Book/ Article Review Editor for* Synoptique. *He has an article on Otis Ferguson in Issue 30 of* Senses of Cinema *and a review of* New Yorker *critic Anthony Lane's* Nobody's Perfect *in the current issue of* Canadian Journal of Film Studies.

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"The Gimp"
NEGATIVE SPACE: MANNY FARBER ON THE MOVIES
(Expanded Edition)
Manny Farber
New York: Da Capo Press, 1998, pp. 71-83.

1. There's no way of knowing from available documents just how well these critics actually knew one another. Working for The New Republic as art critic in the late 30s, Farber had some contact with Ferguson before his death in '43. Farber further indicates, in the interview at the end of Negative Space, that he admired his work:

> "From high school on, I read a lot of criticism. In San Francisco and Washington, I was very conscious of Otis Ferguson and Stark Young; their writing seemed to be the best at the time" (304).

However, he also says that:

> " Ferguson went off patriotically to war in the Merchant Marine and died. The next day I was asking for a job as movie critic. I was never very sentimental in that period: I was ambitious" (355).

Farber's personal account of his formative years as a critic therefore offers little in the way of conclusive evidence. It goes without saying that Farber himself, if he were willing, could shed light on all of this.

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+ Splinter Reviews

26 April 2004 | 1293 words

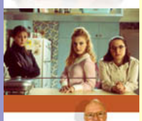
Spartan
There's something I find exciting about going to see a David Mamet film on the big screen. I think it has something to do with the anticipation of going to see a film that I know will be completely different than any of the other films playing in the cineplex. With Spartan, this expectation was fulfilled in spades: it is a film full of terse dialogue and little to no explication. Despite these narrative omissions, the film still manages to be driven solely by plot. What makes this exercise in diegetic brevity interesting is how Mamet's bare-bones storytelling really allows for character development. Without showing us any scenes of internal conflict or reflection, Mamet shows us a marked transformation in Val Kilmer's FBI agent. Kilmer's subtle change of actions is enough to signal his shift from innocuous secret service "go-to man" to empowered man with conscience and agency.
-Dylan Reibling

David Mamet has no personality. He is celebrated for his snappy dialogue and carefully constructed narratives but when is he going to tone-down the macho charade and deal with a recognizable human emotion? Not yet. Spartan is a well-crafted but painfully unimaginative film. The off-putting "humour" of Mamet's previous two films (State & Maine and Heist) is thankfully absent and Kilmer's performance is pleasantly bizarre but, other than that, the film has no pulse. Competent but mediocre.
-Jonathan Doyle

Starsky and Hutch
When it comes to satisfying what would presumably be his core audience (mostly young people expecting wall-to-wall laughs), director Todd Phillips has become a bit of a tease at delivering the goods. With Starsky and Hutch, like Old School before it, Phillips is interested in creating characters that are consistently likeable, rather than a movie which is consistently funny and, as a result, his films end up grossing far less than one would expect from fairly high budgeted, ensemble star-vehicles. That is not to say that Starsky and Hutch isn't full of laughs. It is, especially after the thankless task of setting up the film's tried and true plot is completed during the film's first reel. As well, again like Old School before it, I have a feeling that multiple viewings of this film will probably lead to new laughs that one doesn't even notice the first time around.
-Jason Woloski

Todd Phillips seems satisfied to be the John Landis of his generation. He has no ambition whatsoever. And that's probably a good thing. He has a unique command of the disposable comedy and a rare affection for that genre's demented characters. Unlike earlier Stiller/Wilson collaboration, Zoolander, this film's performances are grounded in reality. Stiller plays it completely straight and, although Owen Wilson's too-cool-for-school routine is wearing a little thin, this is a thoroughly enjoyable, well-crafted comedy.
-Jonathan Doyle

Cheaper By the Dozen
It is shocking that a film that stars Steve Martin and Bonnie Hunt can be this terribly unfunny. It is also shocking that this film is even worse that Bringing Down the House. There was a time when Steve Martin made some of the funniest and smartest movies in Hollywood but it seems that time has long since past.
-Collin Smith



Falling Angels
While this film fetishizes Canadian nostalgia, Smith never allows this obsession to overrun the painfully intimate portrayal of three sisters coming of age in the nuclear age. The art director paints every frame with 60s era paraphernalia, while the sound editor serenades us with clips of *Front Page Challenge* and *This Hour has Seven Days*. However, it is how successfully the filmmakers draw such complete pictures of each disparate and flawed member of this suburban Canadian family that makes this film a real treasure for any era.
-Collin Smith

The Fog of War
It's stunning how timely this film is, let alone how incredibly, innovatively well-crafted. The Fog of War does something almost impossible and that is it allows the viewer to truly empathize and understand the logic of something as insane as war by plucking the mind of an architect of war, former Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara. To hear him explain what Japan endured prior to their atomic apocalypse is just one moment of many more that will render you speechless before the final credits roll.
-Friedrich Mayr

Goodbye, Lenin!
In this mother's day card of a movie, a young German man does everything he can to protect his mother, who has recently awoken from a six month coma, from suffering shock over finding out that the Berlin wall has come down and that capitalism is running amok in a unified Germany. While the sentiment and story are sweet, the premise never really convinces and the humour often feels forced. This narrative flaw unfortunately distracts the viewer from the loving detail paid to German social and cultural developments of the past 10 years and the intimate pain of a family torn apart.
-Collin Smith

Hidalgo
A gun-toting cowboy defeats an axis of eeevile A-rabs. Art imitating life? Perhaps, but Joe Johnston's film is a classic instance of style guiding content. Cinematographer Shelley Johnston's carefully-timed visual 'moves,' in tandem with Viggo's consistent likeability, carry this otherwise muddled piece to the finish line. When I got home, I smothered my dog Butler in a huge hug.
-Colin Burnett

Jack Paradise (Les Nuits de Montréal)
More jazz than film, this biopic doesn't tell much of a story but it brings the music of the man to joyful life. Paradise's story is told as remembrances and therefore the narrative is disjointed but, like his music, quite spellbinding. Noël does what he can with an obviously limited budget by creatively tripping through images, colours, and emotions as any good jazz man would. This riff is light on substance but punctuated by moments of musical brilliance.
-Collin Smith

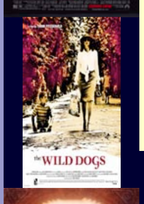
The Ladykillers
Nobody who has seen the trailer for this film wants to see it but, surprise surprise, the trailer has nothing to do with the film. It's not as mean-spirited or hyperactive as you might expect. In fact, after the massive disappointment of last year's Intolerable Cruelty, this is a minor return to form for the Coen brothers. Their flamboyant visual style is back, as is their warped existential worldview. As usual, they rely too heavily on tiresome ethnic stereotypes (if this stuff was funny, I wouldn't mind, but it's not) but they've clearly put more care into this than their previous film. In the end, this "Tom Hanks vehicle" is as dark and absurd as anything else the Coen brothers have done. The final scene is cat-tastic.
-Jonathan Doyle

Osama
The story of a little girl in Taliban controlled Afghanistan who pretends to be a boy to survive, but she isn't the only one pretending. Everyone in this movie is hidden under some disguise necessary for survival. This modest production is rich in emotion and texture but suffers from a lack of joy. Disappointingly, even the most sympathetic characters are so devoid of hope that it is difficult to identify with them. Consequently, the audience is kept at arms length from the humanity of the characters, unable to empathize, left only to bear witness to the tragedies presented.
-Collin Smith

The Passion of the Christ
Fanaticism has no reins—so why are people shocked?
The Holocaust did happen. Sorry, Mel, Sr.
The last shot is too Sunday school.
Did you spot the extra wearing a Timex?
-Colin Burnett

Twisted
One of the worst reviewed films of the year is, in fact, a moderately enjoyable black comedy disguised as a thriller. Ashley Judd plays a cop who appreciates casual sex, heavy drinking, and physically abusing men. When her sex partners start dropping like flies, Judd fears that she's the culprit and is forgetting the murders due to her alcohol abuse. I swear that's the plot. For a real movie. This isn't Philip Kaufman's (The Right Stuff, The Unbearable Lightness of Being) crowning achievement but it's not a complete waste of time either. If for no other reason, see it for Andy Garcia's hilarious Martin Sheen-esque screaming attacks.
-Jonathan Doyle

The Wild Dogs
Unfortunately, more attention was paid to Thom Fitzgerald's other 2003 film, The Event, which was clunky, schmaltzy, and awkward. Dogs is the true masterpiece. It's a biting examination of western imperialism, exploitation, and desperation. It's also a celebration of spirit, which never reduces its subjects with condescension.
-Collin Smith



Hellboy
A "red monkey"-looking superhero with a soft spot for cats, cigars, and milk and cookies saves the world from laughable, octopus-like Nazi-gods by blowing them to smithereens with grenades. Hohum. One wonders if this lame, self-deprecating humour works better on the page of a comic book than it does on the silver screen.
-Jay Poulton

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