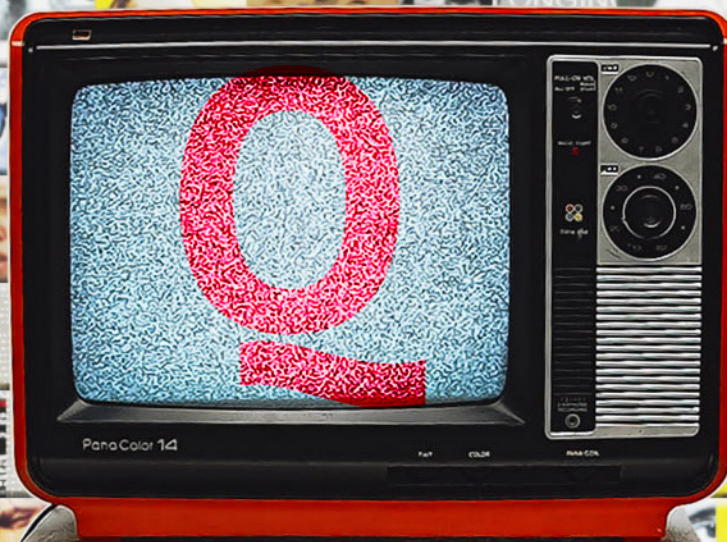




SYNOPTIQUE

An Online Journal of Film and Moving Image Studies



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

Contents

Introduction	4
Synoptique Editors	
RECEPTION STUDY: <i>The Last Temptation of Christ</i> (1988).....	5
Michael Baker	
FURTHER READING: On Mel Gibson's <i>The Passion Of The Christ</i> (2004).....	13
<i>assembled by</i> Colin Burnett	
FILM REVIEW: <i>Monster</i> (2003).....	15
Laurel Wypkema	
FILM REVIEW: <i>The Blue Butterfly</i> (2004) + A Smattering Of Thoughts On Some Recently Viewed Films.....	17
Colin Smith	
CRITIQUE DVD: Henri Georges Clouzot <i>Encore Plus Noir</i> Sur Dvd.....	20
Michael Baker	
DVD REVIEW: <i>Day Of The Dead</i> (1985).....	22
Friedrich Mayr	
BOOK REVIEW: <i>Gender And Society In Contemporary Brazilian Cinema</i>	24
Isabelle Lavoie	
INTERVIEW With Kim Longinotto.....	28
Michael Baker	
Dr. Vornoff's Corner #001	33

Introduction

Synoptique Editors

This is Synoptique, a new journal about film and film studies.

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.

RECEPTION STUDY: *The Last Temptation Of Christ* (1988)

Michael Baker

Few topics stir public debate as wildly as religion, and even fewer are sure to turn Hollywood on its ear. The Passion Of The Christ (2004) is an ultra-violent religious epic concerned with retelling the last twelve hours of Jesus Christ's life—written, directed and produced by Mel Gibson—and Jewish leaders claim the film incites hate by reviving the debate over whether or not Jews were to blame for Christ's death. Some are pointing to Gibson's own faith (as a member of a devout Catholic sect) as his motivation for producing the film, a charge he vehemently denies. The issues are complex, the opposing sides are prepared for a bloody ideological battle, and everyone has an opinion. So now seems to be the perfect time to revisit the occasion of Hollywood's last—and largest—religious flare up surrounding the issue of a filmed adaptation of the story of Christ.

Peu de sujets agitent autant les débats publics que la religion, et encore moins peuvent se targuer de déstabiliser Hollywood. *La Passion Du Christ* (2004), écrit, réalisé et produit par Mel Gibson, est une épopée ultra-violente qui se donne pour mission de raconter à nouveau les douze dernières heures de la vie de Jésus Christ. Les dirigeants Juifs affirment que le film incite à la haine en ravivant le débat de la responsabilité juive de la mort du Christ. Certains évoquent les convictions personnelles de Gibson (il est membre d'une secte catholique fervente) comme motif principal de la production du film, accusation que celui-ci nie fermement. Les problèmes sont complexes, les clans opposés sont prêts à s'engager dans un combat idéologique sanglant, et chacun a son opinion. Voilà donc le moment idéal pour revoir le dernier – et plus grand – éclatement religieux entourant l'adaptation cinématographique de l'histoire du Christ.

In the summer of 1988, Universal Pictures announced its plans to release *The Last Temptation Of Christ*, a film suffering in development hell since its original home—Paramount Pictures—quashed production in 1983 amidst budget concerns and a negative letter-writing campaign.⁽¹⁾ The campaign, spear-headed by the religious-right of the southern United States and led by fundamentalist leaders, opposed the theme of Nikos Kazantzakis' original novel upon which the screenplay was based. The first from American auteur Martin Scorsese since his 1986 box-office hit *The Colour Of Money*, *The Last Temptation Of Christ* was intended to be an art film for the academic set and the director's small legion of dedicated cineastes; one of those pictures for which studios are prepared to take a loss in exchange for critical praise and the prospect of Oscar nominations.⁽²⁾ In this account of Jesus' life, he is given the opportunity to refuse his role as saviour in exchange for the regular life of a man. Although the story involves the consummation of his marriage to Mary of Magdalene, it is not designed as a morality tale and instead acts as a character study of this fictional godhead. Despite this, by the first week of July, lines of protest had been drawn that stretched from one corner of the country to the other.

Vehemently opposed to the notion that Christ could be depicted enjoying pleasures of the flesh and accompanied by the misconception that the film portrayed Jesus as a homosexual, the Bible-belt of middle-America and the fundamentalists of the central southern states were preparing for battle to censor Scorsese's First Amendment right to free speech. Critics and newspaper writers, however, were positioning

themselves as the non-partisan voice of reason, prepared to defend the filmmaker either by engaging in the debate directly or choosing to ignore it in favour of cool-headed, academic critiques of the film. Over the course of the summer, a continent of Christians would be asked to disrupt the release of the motion picture, while only a vociferous few would follow through with creating what would become a spectacle for many. In the process, the meaning of the film would be distorted and its value as an art object temporarily tarnished.

The thirty-minute segment that initially sparked the protests was a dream sequence involving the marriage of Jesus to Mary of Magdalene. Appearing in the closing moments of the film, the segment shows Jesus being offered the opportunity to step down from the cross and resume the life of a normal carpenter without his obligations to God. Clearly marked as a dream-state and nullified by his decision to remain on the cross to open the gates of Heaven, Jesus is portrayed in such a manner that both dogma and the expectations of the Christian community are served.⁽³⁾ As is obvious from the literature circulated by the fundamentalist groups (see Appendix A), protestors chose to remove the contextual frame within which this sequence occurs and charge the filmmakers with blasphemy and anti-Christian/ pro-Jewish intentions. An earlier sequence involving Jesus' visit to Mary's house of prostitution is not just misrepresented by the protestors, but entirely fabricated as they claim the conversation involves his solicitation of sexual favours. As for the ill-conceived notion that Jesus is depicted as a homosexual that surfaced during the protests of 1983, they were completely abandoned during the summer of 1988.

The trajectory of *The Last Temptation Of Christ* traced from its original conception in the early-80s to its eventual release at the end of the decade occurred against the backdrop of President Ronald Reagan's tenure in Washington and a time in Hollywood defined by Robert Sklar as the "Age of Reagan," characterized, first, by widespread conservatism built upon the narrative templates pioneered in the 1950s and, second, by a focus on the profitability of the product.⁽⁴⁾ The Golden Age of American cinema of the 1970s—in which critical acclaim, awards, and huge box-office grosses went hand-in-hand—was a distant memory; the 1980s were an era dominated by the corporate conglomeration of film studios, rendering the artistic merits of a film and its financial success mutually exclusive. In keeping with this return of right-wing ideologies to the national landscape, the face of Hollywood likewise took a turn towards the right. As politics returned to the

conservatism of the 1950s, so too did filmmakers who moved away from controversial subjects and instead sought inspiration in the commercial popular culture of that era. Hollywood's return to the morals of the 50s during the Age of Reagan not only made the production of films like *The Last Temptation Of Christ* difficult, but served as a rallying point for fundamentalist opposition in a market largely free of such controversial material. In this climate of corporate concerns, the threat of thin boxoffice receipts in the wake of picket-lines and mass boycotts ultimately forced Universal to advance the release of the film from its original date in the fall to 12 August 1988 with the hopes it would circumvent the ability of protestors to properly mobilize. Ironically, it was precisely this anxious decision that secured the film's financial success, if not its acceptance by critics as an engaging and entertaining portrayal of one of history's most misunderstood, yet influential, icons.

MOBILIZATION OF THE RIGHT

To explore the dynamics of the religious-right in the United States over the last two decades is a lofty endeavour, and it would not necessarily serve to illuminate the matter of their opposition to *The Last Temptation Of Christ*. However, if one accepts that this offensive position was firmly held on behalf of the protest groups, sparked by their belief that Scorsese's film was 'blasphemous' and funded by Christian-hating Jews (as Lew Wasserman—chairman of MCA/Universal—was so crudely labelled by right-wing leaders like Methodist Minister Donald Wildmon), it is important to recognize that the changing political climate of the United States during the 1980s provided the New Right with social power essential for mobilizing its followers so effectively when the debate began in 1983.⁽⁵⁾ A shift in wealth to the southern United States following an economic boom in the early-80s — produced by Reagan's deficit spending which eventually resulted in a complete economic collapse, culminating with the stock market crash of 1987—reinforced long-standing ties between conservative religious groups such as the Christian Coalition of America and the Republican party. This power-position within the American political sphere provided them with the opportunity to propagate a platform that consisted in part of homophobic and anti-Semitic thought and the reunification of church and state:

By 1978, the New Right was becoming a powerful force in American culture and politics... The movement was given a unified philosophy through the combination of a rehabilitated classical free market economic theory

(Friedman and Laffer) with the new fundamentalist evangelism of the likes of the Moral Majority's Jerry Falwell... By 1980, the New Right had been united into a religious crusade to restore the free market and the social discipline it required through the destruction of its two greatest opponents, the New Deal federal government and the Soviet Union.⁽⁶⁾

Rallying around the claims of protest organizers such as Wildmon and Bill Bright (leader of the Campus Crusade For Christ and the man who offered Universal ten-million dollars to destroy all existing prints of the film before it could be exhibited to the public), right-wing Christians from the United States and Canada offered their time and money in the pursuit of ridding North American screens of Scorsese's controversial film.

Since the story of Christ is of great spiritual and economic value to the religious community, it is possible to read their reaction as an aggressive attempt, not only to protect, but to profit from Universal's decision to bring this controversial story to the screen. As an economic engine, the protest leaders presented the film as an attack on the church, which inevitably required an injection of cash into congregations in order to continue defending the good name of its saviour. Reports in publications as diverse as Time Magazine, The Christian Science Monitor, and The Canadian Jewish News acknowledge that the film was continually mentioned during televised appeals for money.

As the 1980s drew to a close, a distinct shift towards the left occurred on the American political scene which seriously hindered the possibility of the protest achieving the ban of the film. Although the White House would remain in Republican hands, the Congress was lost to the Democrats during the 1987 election of George Bush. Furthermore, the influence of religious-right groups was greatly undermined by the televangelist sex scandals of 1986 and 1988. As a tool to regain ground following these scandals, *The Last Temptation Of Christ* prompted the remobilization of many American conservative groups. With their numbers significantly reduced, however, the public no longer seemed willing to join them on the crusade. It is interesting and important to note that political theorists and cultural observers at the time point to 1988 as the beginning of a new political era that disavowed the conservatism of the Age of Reagan:

If 1971 signalled the onset of that edgy rightist tone that would characterize the conservative movements of the

late seventies and early eighties, 1986-87 signalled the end of conservative hegemony. Ronald Reagan finally began to lose power, Congress passed into the hands of the Democrats, rendering him even more harmless, and the Iran arms-for-hostages/ Contra-supply scandals ruined his credibility and his popularity as well. Within his own ranks, divisions had been evident throughout his reign between the hard-line New Rightists and the more traditional conservatives. It was already evident by the mid-eighties that the Right's united front would no longer hold.⁽⁷⁾

Ultimately, the question of whether or not the protestors could successfully stop the picture's release was rendered moot; they would not enjoy the same success they had in 1983. It could be said that a relatively small number of far-right fundamentalists drew a disproportionate amount of attention during the summer of 1988, but the fact remains that the political climate of the United States during the 1980s gave leaders of the right-wing religious groups a form of access to the media (and to their arguments an air of legitimacy) that was not in place ten years earlier. Furthermore, the state of American economics in Reagan's first term in the Oval Office contrast so greatly with that of his final year in office that it serves to elucidate the viability of Scorsese's project in 1988 as opposed to 1983. Reduced budget and short shooting schedule aside, the booming state of the film industry afforded Universal the opportunity to show its faith in an auteur such as Scorsese while simultaneously being prepared for a box-office failure.

REACTION

Critics played an awkward role in the media frenzy that quickly engulfed *The Last Temptation Of Christ*. With the position of the Christian fundamentalist groups well-publicized and widely known, critics were forced to explain—using their reviews as a tool—why there was such a frenzy surrounding the movie and how it was related to the content of the film. On broad terms, there seemed to be three distinct voices found in the reviews from August 1998. Some writers took a historiographic approach to recounting the beleaguered production of the film and its opposition from fundamentalist groups. These reviews merely summarized the major plot-points of the story and did little to provide any insight. Other critics, specifically those from the realm of scholarly journals, dealt with the film on strictly textual terms and placed it within the discourse of biblical epics or discussions of Scorsese as auteur. Lastly, there were those reviewers who chose to confront the religious aspects of the text and situate it

within the larger realm of Christian and Jewish ethics and mores. The opinions of religious leaders who had screened the film and found value in Scorsese's fictional portrait were often cited in these reviews as if to lend legitimacy to its critical position.

A rather disproportionate amount of the reviews for *The Last Temptation Of Christ* employed an exclusively historiographic method and said nothing about the textual elements of the film⁽⁸⁾—these reviews were essentially regurgitations of the production notes forwarded to the press. Several writers, however, chose to frame their discussion of the troublesome path it took to the screen with an acknowledgement of the quality of the production and the artistry of Scorsese's direction:

We constantly lament the fact that film-makers refuse to take risks anymore. That art has taken a back seat to mindless escape at the movies. But no sooner does a director attempt to chart bold new frontiers than all hell breaks loose.... If audiences choose to risk the foray into sensitive terrain, the rewards are rich.⁽⁹⁾

The themes of these pieces accentuate the controversial nature of the film and the 'sensitive terrain' it explores, but they serve another important purpose: readers who were concerned with the possibility of the eruption of violence at the theatre-based protests, but genuinely interested in seeing the movie, were provided with further motivation to cross picket lines. However, it is unlikely readers already intent on boycotting the movie would have been persuaded to think differently by reviews such as these.

By 1988, scholarly journals and the academic community were already in the habit of immediately acknowledging all of Scorsese's work, and *The Last Temptation Of Christ* was no different. Although there were those who felt his desire to participate in the canon of Christ's story was becoming a case of Hollywood's habit of drawing too much water from the same well, there were others who felt Scorsese had finally realized his masterpiece:

Scorsese's film is plenty acute, and in its way reverent, as an exploration of the Jesus legend. You need look no further than the title to find the answers to two major points of debate of this severe, coherent, passionate, and beautifully made film.⁽¹⁰⁾

In keeping with the style of most academically-oriented film journals, discussions similar in tone to Corliss' thoroughly explored the textual side of *The Last*

Temptation Of Christ and examined its significance in relation to both Scorsese's filmography and the broader scope of more conventional accounts of biblical stories. Remarking specifically about the characterization of Jesus and the performance of Willem Dafoe, many academics felt this very 'human' portrayal of God was complimented by the strong supporting cast of American actors. Many critics took note of Scorsese's almost pedestrian portrayal of the Christ figure, given its controversial roots, and applauded the film for its overall merit but noted it was "excruciatingly balanced":

The Last Temptation Of Christ is certainly not the last word on Jesus, whose life is open to wide areas of interpretation. Scorsese's version, while hurtful to a handful of Christian zealots, is but the latest cinematic accounting of one of the great, most quixotic figures in the annals of human history.⁽¹¹⁾

There were many non-Christian religious groups willing to offer an interpretation of the film, and their language is very similar with the tone found in Kirshner's account. Specifically, they focused neither upon the text nor the protest, but rather upon the inspirational figure that was at the centre of both. Many commentators indirectly echoed the thoughts of the public and private figures tied to the project: the stubborn approach taken by the fundamentalists to disseminate their opinion created two diametrically opposed groups whose widely publicized clash slowly expanded the audience interested in seeing what all the controversy was about. Universal's original distribution plans considered *The Last Temptation Of Christ* a small, arthouse picture that would have been limited to film festivals and key metropolitan centres.⁽¹²⁾ As a result of the negative publicity, Universal advanced the release date to mid-August—the tail-end of the industry's blockbuster season—in an attempt to catch protestors off-guard with regards to the mobilization of picket-lines and prayer vigils. Many film festivals, however, including New York and Toronto, were hesitant to showcase a picture that would already be in circulation. Instead, it was given a platform release whereby prints were offered to non-major North American cities following its initial release in August in select cosmopolitan centres. It could be argued that a vast majority of the movie-going public would never have been in a position to see the film if this clash had not ultimately altered the release date of the film and expanded its distribution.

Lastly, there was reaction from religious leaders who chose to see the film for themselves before passing judgement on it. Although there were many

who disapproved of the film on moral grounds, a surprising number felt the film could be an important tool for Christians in reaffirming their faith. The New York Times collected responses from leaders of the Presbyterian Church who attended a special screening of *The Last Temptation Of Christ* before its official release. Rev. Charles Bergstrom, a Lutheran minister, said the film was “much more accurate than some Christian films I’ve seen.”⁽¹³⁾ Others, such as Rev. Paul Moore, the Episcopal Bishop of New York, was outright flattering in his pronouncement that he would recommend the film to his parishioners:

The movie is artistically excellent and theologically sound. Miracles were depicted... and Christ was portrayed as He was defined at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D.: ‘At once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man.’⁽¹⁴⁾

Ironically, fundamentalist leaders and members of the Moral Majority were the first group to be invited by Universal to screen the film;⁽¹⁵⁾ it was hoped goodwill could be fostered between the two groups as the Christian leaders realized much of their censorship campaign was based on misinformation and harsh generalizations about the screenplay. This invitation was refused, however, and the protests continued despite the fact none of the leaders of the movement had actually seen the film and continued to base their protest on a version of the script written almost ten years earlier.⁽¹⁶⁾

AN OPPORTUNITY TO RESPOND

The Last Temptation Of Christ, originally targeted at a small audience of art-house followers, grossed \$8.3 million in the domestic United States and recouped its cost of \$7 million.⁽¹⁷⁾ Although not a runaway critical hit, it re-confirmed Scorsese as a marquee filmmaker and fortified his relationship with Universal that continues to this day. Excellent opening weekend figures were the result of both anxious cinephiles and the presence of individuals who believed their ticket sales would be perceived as a gesture against the censorship campaign.⁽¹⁸⁾

Upon its initial release on home video in June of 1989, MCA opted to forego any promotion and allow it to enter rental outlets quietly. Blockbuster Video, however, the continent’s largest retail chain, refused to stock the movie and the debate over censorship resumed once again, but this episode was quickly forgotten and the film was essentially relegated to North America’s

repertory circuit.⁽¹⁹⁾ In 1997, Criterion Collection—an independent licensee of a major foreign works and contemporary classics for home video distribution—invited Scorsese, screenwriters Paul Schrader and Jay Cocks, and lead actor Dafoe to participate in the recording of a commentary track for the laserdisc and DVD re-release of *The Last Temptation Of Christ*. Criterion offered the artists an opportunity to respond to the accusations and actions of the religious groups who had done so much to bias audiences in 1988. The filmmakers had refused to remark on the religious furor surrounding *The Last Temptation Of Christ* upon its original theatrical release, but the film’s ten-year anniversary and the proposed DVD commentary provided an appropriate atmosphere for sober second thought on behalf of its creators. Scorsese and Schrader are particularly pointed regarding Wildmon and Bright’s charges of blasphemy. Explaining that the factual element of their depiction of Christ is rooted in dogma, both director and screenwriter claim an intentional confusion of terms was perpetrated by the religious leaders in order to muddy the debate. By pronouncing the film as ‘blasphemous,’ fundamentalist Christians would have been labelled sinners for seeing the film; with this very simple tactic, leaders such as Wildmon and Bright could be sure their congregations would not see it for themselves and realize the falsehood of their harsh generalizations concerning its fictionalized account of the Passion of Christ. This would have cleared much of the misunderstanding and significantly reduced the number of protesters. In the end, however, their ability to mobilize beneath the banner of the New Right, supported by the Republican power-structure of the United States during the 1980s, assured groups such as the Christian Coalition of America and the Campus Crusade For Christ a partial, although fleeting, victory.

Michael Baker is completing his Masters degree in Film Studies at Concordia University. His central area of research concerns theoretical, stylistic and social examinations of documentary film.

FOOTNOTES

1. Steve Jenkins, “From The Pit of Hell,” *Monthly Film Bulletin* 659 (December 1988): 353.
2. Aljean Harmetz, “How Studio Maneuvered ‘Temptation’ Into a Hit,” *New York Times*, 24 August

1988.

3. Harmetz, "New Scorsese Film Shown to Religious Leaders," *New York Times* 15 July 1988.

4. Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America* (New York: Vinatage Books, 1994) 342, 351.

5. Andrew Carroll, "ADL, evangelist at odds over Temptation film," *The Canadian Jewish News*, 01 September 1988. 13.

6. Michael Ryan & Douglas Kellner, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) 10-11.

7. Ryan & Kellner, 263.

8. File # 97114 at Mediatheque Quebecois includes over one hundred articles, clippings, and essays concerning *The Last Temptation Of Christ* including reviews from the time of its original release in August 1988; further articles and reviews were compiled from a number of databases accessed online, 13 November 2001.

9. Bill Brownstein, review of *The Last Temptation Of Christ*, *Montreal Gazette*, 12 August 1988.

10. Richard Corliss, "Body... And Blood," *Film Comment* 5 (Sept-Oct 1988): 34.

11. Sheldon Kirshner, "Last Temptation of Christ stirs deep feelings," *The Canadian Jewish News* 18 August 1988.

12. Aljean Harmetz, "How Studio Maneuvered 'Temptation' Into a Hit," *New York Times*, 24 August 1988.

13. Aljean Harmetz, "Film on Christ Brings Out Pickets And Archbishop Predicts Censure," *New York Times* 21 July 1998.

14. Harmetz, 15 July 1988.

15. Harmetz, 15 July 1988.

16. It should be pointed out that several dates pertaining to the draft version in possession of the fundamentalist groups and their reasons for refusing the invitation to screen the film outlined in the boycott information (Appendix A) are seemingly inaccurate and conflict with accounts later offered by advisors Tim Penland and Dr.

Larry Poland in articles printed in the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Toronto Star* available from Mediatheque Quebecois.

17. Figures obtained from crossreferenced box-office receipts available at All-Movie Guide, Hollywood Reporter, Internet Movie Database. Online. 11 November 2001.

18. Aljean Harmetz, "How Studio Maneuvered 'Temptation' Into a Hit," *New York Times*, 24 August 1988.

19. Chris Koseluk, "Christ Comes Home – Quietly," *American Film* 9 (July-Aug 1989): 12.

APPENDIX

Copy of the original information pamphlet issued for letter-writing campaigns and the organization of boycott obtained from The Associate.com resource directory, "Christian Ethics and Issues." -11 November 2001

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"*The Last Temptation Of Christ*"—FACTS

Origin of the story:

. Nikos Kazanizakis wrote a fictional novel, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, for which he was reportedly excommunicated from the Greek Orthodox Church.

The history of the film version:

. Paramount Studios dropped the project in 1983 due, in part, to pressure from Christians. Director Martin Scorsese sold the idea to Universal Studios and produced a 10 million dollar version, *The Passion*, which was finished in June 1988.

Basis for evaluation the film's content:

. The original novel, two versions of the script by Paul Schrader (one of which was represented by Universal as the "shooting script"), and an eyewitness account of the film as shown to Universal "insiders" provide the basis for evaluation.

Content of the film that is offensive to Christians:

1. Mary declares that her son, Jesus, is "crazy" and "not well in the head."
2. Jesus is depicted as having "brain fever," "struggling over his sins," lust driven (especially for Mary

Magdalene), confused, bedeviled by “nightmares and hallucinations,” not able to answer basic questions about His identity, and shocked by His own magical powers.

3. There are clear references to a youthful sexual encounter between Jesus and Mary Magdalene in which Jesus did not lose his virginity.
4. Jesus is shown waiting in line at Mary Magdalene’s brothel and entering the darkened room where she lies naked.
5. One scene shows copulating snakes, one of which speaks to Jesus in Mary Magdalene’s voice.
6. In a dream sequence Jesus marries Mary Magdalene and has sex with her, kissing her on or near her breasts, as an angel is invited by Jesus to watch.
7. Jesus convinces Judas to betray Him.
8. Jesus declares to Mary Magdalene, “...Woman is God’s greatest work. And I worship you. God sleeps between your legs.”

Efforts to work with Universal to alter the film:

. Before the contents of the film were really known, Universal hired a film producer and film marketing expert, Mr. Tim Penland, a believing Christian, to “build bridges to the Christian community.” Mr. Penland was joined by a “secret consultant,” Dr. Larry Poland, with expertise in the dynamics and structure of the evangelical Christian community. Universal promised to invite Christian leaders to a mid-June screening “far in advance of the release date” and sent invitation letters confirming this. Martin Scorsese assured questioners that he was making a “faith affirming” film and that Jesus would be depicted “as sinless, as deity, and as the saviour of the world.” Based on these assurances, Christian leaders agreed to “hold their fire” on the film until its contents could be more clearly determined.

Breakdown of relations with Universal:

. As the date of the screening for Christian leaders drew near, Universal “waffled” on its commitment. A “bootleg script” was spirited out of Universal by a studio employee and fell into the hands of Christian leaders. Universal execs then declared that “the Christians can’t stop us from releasing this film.” Mr. Penland, true to his original statement to Universal that he would terminate his relationship “the minute it was

determined that the film was blasphemous to Christ or it was viewed as destructive to the cause of Christ,” resigned effective June 12, 1988.

Indications that Universal hopes to profit from the Christian controversy:

. The executives at Universal decided to make prints of the film in 70 millimetre, instead of the usual 35 millimetre, so it could be shown in the biggest theatres in America. They screened the finished script in early June for their distribution people with indications that they expected a box office bonanza. They are adjusting the timing of the release apparently to capitalize on the height of the controversy.

Present state of protest by Christians:

. Christian leaders have refused to attend any screening by Universal based on the disclosures of the content. They are mounting a nationwide effort involving hundreds of Christian groups and costing millions of dollars to mobilize national pressure to stop the release of the film. They don’t want impressionable viewers to receive a twisted view of Christ that will keep them from faith in the historic Jesus.

TO PARTICIPATE IN THE PROTEST:

1. Pray!

- For the key figures at MCA-Universal listed below, that God will show Himself to
- them in a powerful way, convincing them to kill the film.
- For Christians employed by various divisions of MCA-Universal that they will
- have the boldness to stand against this release at every level.
- For judgement on those perpetrating blasphemy against our Lord.
- For protection of those who might have their faith stolen by this film.
- Thanking God for turning this situation into a great victory for the faith.

2. Create pressure on key figures to stop the release—lovingly but firmly. Call or write more than once:

- MCA-Universal, 100 Universal City Plaza Blvd., Universal City, CA 91608
- MCA-Universal headquarters phone: 818-777-1000
- Lew Wasserman, MCA Chairman of the Board (at Universal City)
- Sidney Sheinberg, MCA President (at Universal City)
- Tom Pollack, Chairman of the Board, Universal Pictures (at Universal City)
- Eugene Giaquinto, head of the home video division
- Felix G. Rohatyn, Investment Banker, MCA Director
- Robert S. Strauss, Former Chairman, National Democratic Party, MCA Director
- Donald Trump, New York developer, major MCA shareholder and possible MCA buyer

3. Contact heads of local divisions of MCA owned businesses indicating that you will not patronize their businesses if Universal releases a film defaming your Lord. Ask the local managers to protest the release to the heads of MCA.

- Universal Studios Tour, restaurants, gifts shops, and hotels (at Universal City)
- Universal Studios, Orlando, Florida
- Cineplex Odeon theatres nationwide
- Universal distribution centers in major cities (consult white pages)
- WWOR-TV Secaucus, NJ
- LJN Toys
- Spencer Gifts - located in many shopping malls and retail centers nationwide
- Intrigue retail jewellery stores and kiosks
- A2Z-Best of Everything Shops

4. If the film is released, organize a prayer vigil at the theatre, witness to those attending and share materials that give the true picture of Christ.

5. If you are an employee of MCA-Universal, protest to your superiors about this film and, if led to do so, threaten resignation if the film is released.

This fact sheet is provided by Mastermedia International, 2102 Palm Ave., Highland, CA 92346, 714-864-5250. Duplicate and distribute this information. [end]

FURTHER READING: on Mel Gibson's The Passion Of The Christ (2004)

assembled by **Colin Burnett**

Mel Gibson's *The Passion Of The Christ* (2004) is on everyone's lips. For this reason, the first installment of "Further Reading," a monthly, theme-based bibliography of sources for the devoted film reader, offers a collection of English language reviews by the critics that are largely considered the continent's most visible and therefore influential, not to mention other articles and pieces of commentary that are of interest for what they say or who they're written by. I have further limited my selection to critics whose work is available free on the web, which is to say that accessing their work does not require a subscription to the publication in question. Note that reviews by other top American and Canadian critics, Jonathan Rosenbaum (Chicago Reader), Godfrey Cheshire (Durham Independent), Stanley Kauffmann (The New Republic) and so on, will be listed here if and when they appear. In addition, feel free to contact Synoptique editors should you come across reviews in English (or French) that are worthy of note but that have been omitted. In the spirit of dialogue that this publication seeks to establish with the reader, I encourage you also to write a short paragraph elaborating upon your reasons for selecting the piece, which we will then publish alongside the suggested source. On a final note, it's my belief that this list makes for a good companion to Mike Baker's reception study of *The Last Temptation Of Christ* (Martin Scorsese, 1988), appearing elsewhere in this Preview edition of *Synoptique*. Measuring the frontline responses toward the current film against Mr. Baker's account of those that appeared in the context of Scorsese's, certainly gives a basis for developing some interesting ideas about where (North) American film culture is, has been, and where it might go when

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FILM REVIEW: *Monster* (2003)

Laurel Wypkema

Let's get right down to it: I didn't like *Monster*. Director Patty Jenkin's first feature film is based on the true story of a seriously down-on-her-luck prostitute, Aileen Wuornos, and her murderous, increasingly deranged rampage on her johns from 1989 to 1990. You may or may not remember Wuornos, who is, as the press kit claims, the first American female serial killer to be put to death for her crimes, but you certainly know the movie I'm talking about – it's the one with Charlize Theron as a flabby, puffy-eyed, shifty lesbian psychopath. Unfortunately, the movie stumbles under the weight of its task. It is so caught up in being a movie that it doesn't let itself breathe its own story. The first line of the film (unfortunately and confusingly) is Theron's in-character voice-over: "I always wanted to be in the movies." Sure, it's every girl's dream – princesses, actresses, whatever – but this first line juts out at a dangerous angle and the film then fails to reference it at any later point except to suggest that perhaps Wuornos' real-life dream is finally being realized, however indirectly (no matter that it took her own death for her story to be told on the silver screen). Dangling high above the movie without a net, this opening line sets us up for an hour and a half of self-conscious, persistent and ultimately failed attempts to draw its audience into a story that could (and should) be able to tell itself.

Theron is already winning accolades and tiny statuettes for her astonishing transformation and whole-hearted performance, and the hype, I must admit, is well deserved. (Her Oscar victory, however, is further evidence that the Academy is notoriously in love with 'Beauty make-believing Beast'). Theron is startling and unrecognizable, dirty and fascinating. But it isn't simply

this regressive metamorphosis that is so gripping. It is the guttural, deep-seated performance that bubbles up from the pit of Theron, moaning and thrashing around; desperate, despicable, and beautiful in its sweaty, pleading need for you to believe its accuracy.

That Jenkins manages to distract us from the conventional beauty of an already good actress, however, and lets her loose in a role where she can scream her lungs out (and swear, smoke and pump her fists like a longshoreman) doesn't mean the director should be applauded. We shouldn't care what lengths the make-up artist went to, mussing up Theron's hair and getting that sallow, boozy complexion reeking of authenticity. Jenkins zeroes in on her shining star, catching every nuanced gesture, every flamboyant outburst with careful framing and harsh, reverent lighting. But that's because it's the only card she's holding. Theron, strutting around with a wide, unbecoming gait and a whiskey-soaked accent, is the bloody, beating heart trapped in a movie made of clay. She is the brilliant core of an inexcusably uninteresting film.

My disagreement is not with the film's aesthetic or thematic interests. Jenkins has crafted a solid piece of cinema, at least as far as surface values go. The whole film is dingy and eager to show you its true-to-life-ness. In fact, many of the film's key scenes were shot at the actual locations Wuornos committed her crimes. Her derelict apartment has to fit appropriately into the life of a social castoff. The result finds the setting accordingly waterstained and shabby. Truth be told, everything in the film looks uncouth and speaks to a downtrodden life – but it does so uncomfortably.

Despite its earnestness, the story never really inhabits the precisely-constructed world of the film. It lacks immediacy. It wants for gritty veracity. It yells and bleeds and stinks, but these are hollow attempts and they cannot match the intensity of Theron's performance. The film thus leaves its wild main character hanging in a dead world, parched of any real meaning or social commentary. Theron's sober direct address into the camera's lens, as the film begins to close, is meant to pierce our popcorn souls and resonate with us all the way to the theatre's lobby, where we surely will discuss the ticking clock of America's corrupt social hierarchy and the two tones of Wuornos' outrageous and heartbreaking story. But her tired look back at us as she is pulled towards death and the inevitable manifestation of her destiny is a last-ditch effort. It reminds us, yet again, that we are watching a very sad movie about Aileen Wuornos – the person, the monster, the woman. Why is Patty Jenkins beating us over the head with a trick that screams of desperation when she has an ace in her pocket named Charlize Theron? As viewers, we shouldn't need this.

FILM REVIEW: *The Blue Butterfly* (2004) + A SMATTERING OF THOUGHTS ON SOME RECENTLY VIEWED FILMS

Collin Smith

Good live action family movies are a rare breed, perhaps as rare as the titular figure of Léa Pool's new film, *The Blue Butterfly*. The Canadian director has almost succeeded in capturing the elusive quality that made recent films like Sayles' *The Secret Of Roan Inish* (1994), Cuarón's *A Little Princess* (1995), and Noonan's *Babe* (1995) such masterpieces. Unfortunately this film often retreats into clichéd family movie conventions that keep it from becoming as memorable as the best of this genre.

The story is of a young boy (Marc Donato) who is dying of cancer and his quest to capture the rare Blue Morpho, a butterfly of exquisite beauty and, as he believes, magical power. He convinces a jaded scientist (William Hurt), who coincidentally needs to reconnect with his own inner child, to take him from Montreal to the rain forests of Central and South America in this search. The butterfly is quite obviously intended to represent their dreams and what is just out of their grasp.

Pool skims the surface of their desires but never delves too deeply into the pain each is suffering. She also timidly explores the consequences of the visit these Northerners pay to the jungle in their attempt to capture and take away such a unique thing of beauty, but her analysis of these issues remains fairly benign. She seems afraid to go too far into that jungle, instead following their adventures at a safe distance so that no one is too threatening.

The assumption that a family film must be non-threatening is the most disappointing aspect of this

film. Recently, Pixar's extremely popular comedies have proven that family films can challenge the status quo. *A Bug's Life* (1998) presents an attractive socialist argument; *Monster's, Inc.* (2001) attacks corporate capitalist greed; and last year's *Finding Nemo* argues that we can't protect our children from the world—we have to let them live it. The best children's movies don't hide the big scary world from their audiences; they open it up and spark something magical. Unfortunately, most of the movies aimed at children ignore this call in an attempt to remain as accessible and safe as possible.

The Blue Butterfly ultimately fails to give its audience enough credit. Children can be very perceptive, yet this film falls into the trap of talking down to them. Characters often say exactly what they are thinking, as if they are trying to make their motivations crystal clear. Rarely does the dialogue sound like it is spontaneously said, instead coming off as code intended to distinguish the characters and sketch them out in narrow, easily distinguishable lines.

The film is shot in a safe and predictable manner as well. In the same way that Pool avoids the beautiful complexity of the issues surrounding a dying child and the guilt a father feels when he knows he's failed, she rarely explores the dangerous splendor of the rainforest. The moments when we get a good sense of the world these people are lost in are few and far between. The rest of the time the characters appear in the kind of easily digestible head shots that we see regularly on television, and in this way the composition doesn't allow us to enjoy the natural majesty that her characters find themselves in. We therefore never get

a real sense of the scope of the danger, the hope or the desperation they are living. Only once, near the end of the film, are we given a chance to feel the power of the landscape and the wildlife of the area, but that moment is shamefully fleeting and quickly dismissed. The one exception to this is Pool's National Geographic-like fascination with the insects of the tropics. She grants us small glimpses of this magical world by frequently cutting to extreme close-ups of the creatures, generously giving each species an opportunity to show a unique personality. The film truly comes alive at these moments and it is these vignettes which we will remember long after the plot and characters of the film have fallen away. It's certainly unfortunate that the people are given much less of an opportunity to make an impression.

The Blue Butterfly tells a simple story that both children and adults can enjoy, but it fails to take us to new places, to create a memorable world or to challenge our assumptions. While the film may inspire young people to become insect enthusiasts, it is doubtful the film will inspire them to follow their dreams. Thus the metaphor of the blue butterfly fails. In the end, it probably wasn't the butterfly our young hero was after; it was something bigger, but we aren't given the chance to see that.

Here's a smattering of thoughts about some of the films I've seen so far in 2004:

City of God

Fernando Meirelles
Brazil
2002

This two-year-old piece is devastatingly beautiful and perpetually haunting. It's the rare sort of violent film that helps us understand why people act violently, and it accomplishes this both through the story alone and how each character's particular story is told. Thanks to accomplished direction, we're invested in each character and enveloped by the film's complete portrait of a community devastated by political, social and literal violence. There's nothing particularly new here, but the filmmakers' style and technique take us to new places and new understandings.

The Cooler

Wayne Kramer
USA
2003

While most romantic comedies try to reflect the

idealized versions we have of ourselves back at us, this one allows us to enjoy ourselves as we really are. It asks us to love ourselves with all of our flaws and demons. It also recognizes that love, like most of our lives, is really just a crapshoot.

La Grande Séduction

Jean-Francois Pouliot
Canada
2003

This film tries so hard to be cute and charming that it sacrifices all manner of sense. I imagine that there's a great deal of humor to be mined out of a small community attempting to woo an urban doctor to their ways. Unfortunately, said community doesn't resemble anything close to a real village. It's as if the director decided the film needed to be ridiculous to make us laugh. In my estimation, he's committed the highest sin a filmmaker can: he insults his audience.

The House of Sand and Fog

Vadim Perelman
USA
2003

What I loved about this one is that it's not about blame but about how our fears lead us to hurt each other. There are also the intense and rich performances of Jennifer Connelly, Ben Kingsley, Shohreh Aghdashloo, and Ron Eldard. When any combination of these four is on screen together it's impossible not to be riveted.

Les Triplettes de Belleville

Sylvain Chomet
Canada/France/Belgium/UK
2003

Hopefully this will put an end to the ridiculous assertion that 2D animation is dead. Audiences will respond to traditionally drawn animation when the characters are illuminated, the art is stunning and, most importantly, the story is infectious. Belleville shows us just why animation is an important art form and shouldn't be relegated to Saturday morning or to Teletoon.

Shattered Glass

Billy Ray
USA
2003

This isn't a very memorable film but certainly worth watching for the quiet force of Peter Sarsgaard. His

performance is nuanced yet powerful, and all in his eyes. While the rest of the cast, including Hayden Christensen, are competent in their roles, Sarsgaard steals the show.

Dirty Dancing 2: Havana Nights

Guy Ferland

USA

2004

There is no reason why dance can't be as revolutionary as any other art form, but this film is more interested in selling soundtracks to teenage girls than in exploring this potential. The dancing is as safe and mundane as the film's analysis of Cuban/ American relations. While Diego Luna is luminous, his co-star is so unfortunately blond that she disappears in her own blandness, along with the rest of the film.

Whale Rider

Niki Caro

New Zealand

2003

Charming and inspiring despite the fact that this story is familiar and its lessons are redundant. While there's very little that's original about the story, it is crafted in an entertaining and engaging manner.

Bubba Ho-Tep

Don Coscarelli

USA

2002

The best movie to depict Elvis and JFK hunting down a killer mummy that I've ever seen. Really.

CRITIQUE DVD: Henri Georges Clouzot

Encore Plus Noir Sur DVD

Michel Gagnol

“Ce que je souhaite montrer dans un prochain film, c’est que sans l’autre il n’existe pas d’espoir... Le problème, c’est qu’il est bien plus facile de faire un film sur le Mal qu’un film sur le Bien.” Ainsi parlait le cinéaste Henri-Georges Clouzot (1907- 1977), chrétien pessimiste, grand spécialiste des noirceurs de l’âme qui, à l’instar de Kubrick, passait ses acteurs à la moulinette avant de les passer à la caméra, histoire d’en tirer le maximum côté émotions, quitte à faire une scène 50 fois ou à distribuer claques ou insultes pour les besoins de sa cause. “Pour mettre les comédiens dans l’état d’angoisse nécessaire à la scène, il faut être angoissé soi-même. Ce qui importe chez le comédien, c’est qu’il entre dans l’état physique du personnage au moment donné. Là-dessus, je suis incapable de céder. Je ne peux pas supporter qu’on fabrique. Peu importe si la colère que je réclame a d’autres motivations que celle du rôle, il suffit qu’elle soit vraie.” .. Jaloux de son indépendance (il a toujours résisté aux insistances sirènes d’Hollywood) Clouzot reste un cinéaste inclassable. Décriées pour leur sombre vision de l’humanité par les bien-pensants de l’époque et trop académiques pour la nouvelle vague, les oeuvres de Clouzot, par leur intelligente rigueur, résistent pourtant brillamment aux outrages du temps.

Trente cinq ans après la sortie de son onzième et dernier film (le très étrange *La Prisonnière* [1968]), la technologie numérique rend justice à ce cher Henri Georges. Seul hic pour les nord-américains que nous sommes : trois titres seulement sont disponibles en DVD zone 1. Mais, consolation, c’est la très sérieuse maison Criterion, synonyme d’excellence, qui édite les oeuvres en question.

Le Salaire De La Peur [*Wages Of Fear*] (1953) (Criterion #36. Prix : \$34*)

Palme d’or à Cannes, ce thriller pétrolier est le premier succès international pour Clouzot. Même Yves Montand, pourtant piètre acteur à l’époque, est convaincant. Charles Vanel, impérial, se méritera le prix d’interprétation cannois. Première apparition à l’écran pour Vera Clouzot en amoureuse masochiste. *Le salaire de la peur* est un des rares chefs-d’oeuvre dont le remake hollywoodien est réussi (*Sorcerer* [William Friedkin, 1978]). La sortie de ce DVD date de 1999, il s’agit donc là d’un des premiers titres édités par Criterion et ça se sent : la qualité du transfert, en regard de ce qui se fait aujourd’hui, est plutôt moyenne. Heureusement la copie utilisée est plutôt en bon état, ce qui rend le tout amplement regardable. Par contre le son aurait mérité un bon nettoyage et traitement numérique, mais Criterion a comme politique de toujours laisser la piste mono d’origine telle quelle, ce qui me chagrine. Côté bonus : zilt, nada... Il faut se rabattre sur le livret de la pochette où l’on trouve quelques infos pertinentes.

Les Diaboliques (1954) (Criterion #35, prix \$34*)

Le scénario qu’Hitchcock voulait acheter à Boileau et Narcejac, mais Clouzot lui coupa l’herbe sous le pied pour en faire cette formidable adaptation. Certainement un des films les plus noirs jamais réalisés. La qualité du jeu est tout simplement exceptionnelle, jusque dans les rôles secondaires (dont le jeune Michel Serrault, épatant). Simone Signoret est diaboliquement sexy, Paul Meurisse fait une ordure magnifique et Vera Clouzot en épouse chrétienne et cardiaque (un rôle

malheureusement prémonitoire) dont le troublant et transparent déshabillé final marqua bien des mémoires, est la victime parfaite (encore). Par contre, le remake d'Hollywood (*Diabolique* [Jeremiah S. Chechik, 1996]) est une merde objective.

Pour la qualité DVD référez-vous à ce que j'ai précédemment écrit sur *Le Salaire De La Peur*. Avantages et inconvénients sont en tout point semblables.

Quai Des Orfèvres (1947) (Criterion #193, prix \$45*)

Derrière ce policier ultra-classique, se cache un film d'une grande profondeur, laissant entrevoir les angoisses de Clouzot l'humaniste. C'est aussi l'occasion d'admirer ses qualités de dialoguiste : certaines répliques frisent le génie, surtout dans la bouche de Louis Jouvet, immense dans la peau du vieux flic atrabilaire, naviguant en solo dans le milieu du music-hall parisien pour les besoins de son enquête.

D'une facture plus récente (sorti mi-2003), le transfert numérique est impeccable. La copie étant du même acabit, la magnificence de la photo chez Clouzot devient ici une évidence.

Pour les bonus, on se régale : entre autre, Criterion a dégoté des extraits une vieille édition d' "Au cinéma ce soir", émission de télé des années 70, où Clouzot explique sa façon de travailler ainsi que sa vision du cinéma, tandis que Bernard Blier et Suzy Delair nous parlent du tournage de *Quai Des Orfèvres*. Génial.

Pour finir une bonne nouvelle : Criterion annonce pour bientôt la sortie en DVD du premier et délicieusement lugubre opus de Clouzot, *Le Corbeau* (1943). Ô joie!

Voilà je vous laisse avec une dernière citation du maître : "Ce qu'il y a de plus étonnant dans quelqu'un qui pleure, c'est le changement de timbre de la voix."

DVD REVIEW: *Day of the Dead* (1985)

Friedrich Mayr

Day Of The Dead (1985)
101mins
Anchor Bay Entertainment

If you were a wannabe horror film aesthete as I was in the 80s (and still are at thirty-plus, to make it all the more depressing), the only way you could see an unedited, uncensored video copy of George A. Romero's *Day Of The Dead* was from the likes of a wee mom-and-pop video store far and away from the Imperialist Domination of Videotron or Blockbuster. In Calgary my hangout of necessary choice was an unpretentious hole-in-the-wall named Casablanca Video where classics like *The Reanimator* (1985) and *Demons* (1985) were common fare. Recent re-viewings of said titles have, lamentably, proven that not all 80s horror cinema age well. *Day Of The Dead* is another matter. The estranged sibling of *Night Of The Living Dead* (1968) and *Dawn Of The Dead* (1978) was a bust when it was released in theatres and drive-ins in the mid-80s, deemed too gloomy (go figure!) by hardcore Romero zombie fans reared on blue-faced zombies in shopping malls and "They're coming to get you, Barbara!" 's. Video gave it new life, infusing it with the sobering, if pan and scan cropped, smack of downbeat anarchy, a scrumpdelicious flavouring of the apocalypse on a Romero Zombie Earth.

On the whole, *Day Of The Dead* is a downer of a walking dead movie. It presents an end of the world in which the human race has been reduced to a small cadre of semi to full-blown nutty scientists and soldiers hunkered down deep in an abandoned Florida storage mine. Zombies now outnumber the humans by four

hundred thousand to one, lifting this stuff to the likes of the Biblical Four Horseman. Zombie horror doesn't get more joyously downbeat than this. (And no, *28 Days Later* does not count as zombie apocalypse... they're diseased, not dead!)

What I love about *Day Of The Dead* is the bleakness; the film's nihilistic heart is exactly what makes it so much more of a scouring existential ride in comparison to its predecessors (*Night Of The Living Dead* certainly isn't a day at the fair but its 60s datedness and exceedingly low-budget unfortunately undercut some of its quite harrowing thematic and narrative punch). In *Day Of The Dead* there is no hand-wringing over the fate of humankind in the event the zombies win because they've already won. With that solemn fact firmly in place, we begin with a four day countdown to apocalypse, with the floodgates to cinematic paranoia, madness and death already ripped off and thrown in the face of the last remaining human holdouts. All of this and I have yet to mention that the definitive DVD package of *Day Of The Dead*, released late last year, has every proverbial bell and whistle for Romero zombie fans.

The Anchor Bay DVD set of *Day Of The Dead* predictably spares nothing and I won't bore you with the exhaustive details, except to say that the packaging alone makes the purchase worthwhile. It unfolds like a piece of Japanese origami, revealing two discs and a miniature legal ruled pad belonging to none other than Dr. M. Logan, a.k.a. Dr. Frankenstein (played so wonderfully by recently deceased Richard Liberty). Inside is a long opinion piece by Michael Felsher, Anchor Bay's webmaster and film information manager,

as well as the fictional “bloodied” notes (“I’m going to need more specimens!”) of Dr. Logan peppered with conceptual drawings of zombies by the film’s design team.

Not too surprisingly, background info abounds in the Behind the Scenes documentary. Romero’s production drawings and ideas for the original and grander \$7 million dollar version of *Day Of The Dead* are displayed. We are told that the budget was necessarily pared down to the grittier \$3-million-dollar mark to ensure a “not-rated” (anything to stave off the snip-happy censoring hounds of Jack Valenti) once the film finally hit screens. *Day Of The Dead* actors Lori Cardille, Joe Pilato and Bub himself, realized by the immeasurable talents of Howard Sherman, are also seen again after all these years, the lot having aged well enough. Savini’s home video movies of the production shoot are also included, comprised mostly of footage of the time-consuming process of applying zombie make-up to actors and the subsequent writhing in pain of said actors as they take the rubber prosthetic makeup off and attempt to leave their real faces intact. There’s even a Wampun Mine promotional video to peruse, which becomes a bit mind-numbing after thirty seconds. Audio commentaries are always a sure bet one way or another and Romero, special effects maestro Tom Savini, Lori Cardille (Sarah) and production designer Cletus Anderson reveal a fair share of entertaining tidbits, such as the employment of the Mister Rogers television crew on the film and the rolling thunder sickness the cast and crew endured as a result of living underground and inhaling lime dust day-in and day-out during the production. You get a sense that they all had fun filming *Day Of The Dead* and that they still enjoy each other’s company all these years later. Good news, considering the fact that Savini’s prop organs and intestines apparently got a tad sour during the shoot, especially when some unknown perpetrator unplugged his make-up department’s refrigerator forcing actor Joe Pilato into partial-dry heaves following the filming of his death-by-zombie demise.

Director Roger Avery’s solo commentary runs a bit like a football game play-by-play. He provides the unqualified, horror-film-geek commentary necessary for a film like this and does it well. Weaned on movies like *Day Of The Dead* while working at Video Archives with a then unknown fellow sales clerk named Quentin Tarantino, Avery provides convincing cinematic comparisons to Romero’s directorial skills, including a suggestion that the opening of the film (a wonderfully realized nightmare dream sequence) is classically Kubrickian. Avery’s *Day Of The Dead* fanaticism gets

the better of him at times, which is also a treat. This is perfectly exemplified when he goes on at length about an allegedly missing scene in the film that sees Dr. Logan rise-up as a freshly-made zombie and reunite with Bub, his trained livingdead pupil. The veracity in his concerted belief that the scene existed and was left on the cutting room floor by Romero however runs into a bit of trouble when he admits that part of his belief in the scene’s existence is based on the fact that it was a recurring dream he had as a young teenager, its genesis the result of a teenybopper late-night frightfest featuring *Day Of The Dead*.

Later in the commentary, Avery also outlines his own contingency plans and zombie doomsday tactics, ones that he would have employed had he been placed underground with the rest of the characters, which include the implementation of fallback perimeter zones and the like. While this certainly provides a kind of adolescent-little boy delight to the whole affair of watching the film again, the delight itself proves miserably fleeting as it is shouldered to one side with his comment that he thinks that the film’s fictional government made a mistake not providing the soldiers of *Day Of The Dead* with prostitutes to keep them happy.

Commentaries and bonus materials aside, the DVD transfer of *Day Of The Dead* itself is superb, perhaps too much so. There is something to be said for grainy, cropped video rentals, foreign to the world and mentality of high-tech digital enhancement, which tend inevitably to work toward eliminating all that delightful grittiness. You don’t want slickness or crispness or clarity for a creature like *Day Of The Dead* where things go bump in the underground night and take a chomp out of your arm. Romero seeks to exploit the underground storage mine set to the fullest, with its flat, antiseptic, fluorescence and haunted-house gloom but the DVD transfer fights it. It seems to take away some of that cadaverous creepiness the film so magically captures both on celluloid and video. That said, technology has its virtues, in its facilitation of clearer perception, for one thing. I must confess that I shudder to think, for instance, of my pre-DVD ignorance of the fact that, yes, that is a rubber chicken being pulled out of the stomach cavity of Captain Rhodes.

BOOK REVIEW: GENDER AND SOCIETY IN CONTEMPORARY BRAZILIAN CINEMA

Isabelle Lavoie

Gender And Society In Contemporary Brazilian Cinema
by David William Foster
Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999, 181pp.

Joueur important dans le contexte du cinéma latino-américain des années 60, le Brésil a connu une baisse importante de sa production cinématographique durant la période qu'a duré la dictature militaire (1964-1985). Le retour à la démocratie a vu naître une nouvelle génération de réalisateurs qui ont tranquillement repris le flambeau des Glauber Rocha, Nelson Pereira dos Santos et Joaquim Pedro de Andrade - qui avaient fait la notoriété de l'inventif et irrévérencieux « Cinema Novo ». Depuis 1985 le cinéma brésilien tente tant bien que mal de regagner sa place sur l'échelon sud-américain face à l'Argentine, le Mexique... et les États-Unis. Depuis la fin de la dictature, le Brésil cherche à reconstruire son identité et cette quête n'est pas sans appeler aussi une redéfinition des genres et des rôles sexuels. Le cinéma contemporain brésilien est devenu un lieu propice à l'illustration de ces changements comme le démontre David William Foster dans son livre *Gender and Society in Contemporary Brazilian Cinema*.

Directeur du département de langues et littérature, professeur d'espagnol, d'études interdisciplinaires et d'études féministes à l'Université d'Arizona, Foster a déjà écrit et publié plusieurs études sur le cinéma latino-américain dont une sur l'Argentine, *Contemporary Argentine Cinema* (1992) et une autre sur les thématiques homosexuelles dans le cinéma et la littérature latino-américain, *Latin American Writers on Gay and Lesbian Themes : A Bio- Critical Sourcebook* (1995). Cette fois-ci, c'est le Brésil donc, qui retient son attention. Touchant

à la fois les problématiques du cinéma national, des études culturelles, de la « Queer Theory », des études sur le genre et des études féministes, le livre de Foster arrive à point nommé. En effet, l'intérêt grandissant pour le cinéma latino-américain, les études gaies « Gay Studies » et le repositionnement des genres au cinéma trouvent ici un point de rencontre intéressant et une base de réflexion qui méritent notre attention.

Privilégiant une approche socio-historique, Foster souhaite par ce livre démontrer comment chaque film analysé entreprend de lire la réalité socio-historique et comment cette même lecture dépend du genre humain et des rôles sexuels inscrits dans cette réalité (p.11). Le cinéma brésilien sert donc ici à Foster de terrain d'expérimentation quant à ses théories sur le genre et les rôles sexuels dans un contexte de redéfinition identitaire après une période de dictature. Le choix du Brésil à ce niveau n'est d'ailleurs pas fortuit. Le contexte politique d'après 1985 (retour à la démocratie) fut propice à de nombreux changements sociaux, à des remises en question du rôle de l'État dans la sphère du personnel et des conséquences de cette intrusion dans les relations hétérosexuelles et/ou homosexuelles.

L'introduction de Foster propose au lecteur un survol historique du cinéma brésilien et de ses différentes époques, une attention particulière étant portée au « Cinema Novo », période qui précéda la dictature et qui se poursuit durant les premières années du régime militaire avant que la censure ne vienne y mettre un frein et ce, durant de nombreuses années. Outre l'aspect historique, Foster en profite pour justifier son choix thématique : « Virtually all these films thematize

gender in one way or another because of the ground-zero importance of gender as an absolute horizon of social subjectivity in Brazil as in all of the West » (p.8). Cette étude du genre passe par l'analyse des conflits, crises et transgressions qui habitent tour à tour la question de l'identité sexuelle. Le livre, divisé en trois chapitres, aborde ces conflits à travers l'analyse de treize films produits au Brésil entre 1985 et 1994 (à une exception près). Le premier chapitre, « Construction de la masculinité », s'attarde aux stéréotypes associés à la masculinité au Brésil. Par exemple, un film comme *Jorge Um Brasileiro* (Paulo Thiago, 1989) cherche à illustrer l'hypermasculinité qui caractérise le genre masculin au Brésil. Pour Foster, l'hypermasculinité qui habite le personnage de Jorge en fait un symbole ; il devient le Brésilien, l'incarnation de toute la masculinité du pays avec tous les excès et les faussetés que cela présupposent puisque nous sommes ici sur le terrain des stéréotypes et des clichés. Cette masculinité excessive en vient à produire, selon l'auteur, une homo-érotisation du corps masculin qui devient involontairement un objet de désir. Pour expliquer les problèmes que peut engendrer ce désir chez l'auditoire masculin, Foster se réfère directement à la culture brésilienne où tout désir homosexuel est considéré comme une déviance d'où l'inconfort de certains hommes face au film de Thiago ; mais aussi de tous les autres films dont parle Foster dans cette section puisque la même problématique y est traitée (p.14). Ce qui d'ailleurs constitue une redondance qui rend parfois la lecture du premier chapitre moins dynamique.

Ce problème ne se pose pas dans la deuxième section, tout d'abord parce que le nombre de films analysés diminue et que les thématiques abordées dans « Construction de l'identité féminine et féministe » sont plus variées. En fait, nous sommes ici en présence de la partie la plus intéressante du livre, celle qui joint le mieux les aspects historiques, culturels, politiques et sociaux qui peuvent surgir lorsqu'il est question de la construction d'un genre sexuel. Son analyse des quatre films dans ce chapitre est directement liée à l'histoire politique du pays et à la période de la dictature. Le retour à la démocratie a permis aux groupes marginalisés (femmes, indiens, gais) de faire entendre leurs voix et de dénoncer la torture, l'incarcération, le viol et les violences de toutes sortes vécues durant cette période. L'auteur a choisi des films qui partent de faits ou de personnages réels associés à l'histoire du Brésil ; Pagu la première féministe, Carmen Miranda, l'exode rural et la torture faite aux femmes durant la dictature. Il a aussi choisi, contrairement au chapitre précédent, des personnages qui ne sont nullement stéréotypés. Dans

son analyse de *A hora da estrela* (Suzanna Amaral, 1985), Foster précise à quel point le personnage de Macabéa est à l'encontre du cliché de la femme brésilienne très sexualisée. Il fait aussi une intéressante incursion dans la culture populaire brésilienne pour expliquer l'impact socioculturel du film sur un auditoire qui, malgré la fatalité du personnage principal, finit par s'identifier à cette dernière justement à cause de ces éléments de culture populaire (radio roman, l'amour romantique et la diseuse de bonne aventure). Ces références plutôt spécifiques démontrent le sérieux de la recherche de Foster au niveau de la culture et de la société brésilienne et permettent au lecteur peu familier avec cette société de suivre l'évolution du discours et de la pensée de l'auteur sans sentir des morceaux du casse-tête lui échapper faute de connaissances encyclopédiques sur le sujet.

Dans le troisième chapitre « Positionnements homosexuels et pouvoir social », Foster veut démontrer comment l'homophobie et sa construction sont utilisées dans l'interprétation du texte social brésilien (p.115). Il met d'abord en garde le lecteur devant l'apparente ouverture d'esprit des Brésiliens face à la sexualité : « Brazilian popular culture and overall social values continue to be driven by versions of homophobia » (p.115). Cette homophobie latente ou non est donc au coeur de ce dernier chapitre et est associée à la notion de punition. Punition de la différence, punition d'un désir tabou qui doit rester cachée. Foster analyse longuement la souffrance que provoque la punition chez celui qui la vit. Dans *O Beijo No Asfalto* (Bruno Barreto, 1981), l'auteur emprunte à la psychologie sociale pour expliquer les menaces et le harcèlement que vit le personnage principal perçu comme un homosexuel depuis qu'il a embrassé un mourant sur la bouche. Une grande humanité émane des propos de Foster lorsqu'il décrit les souffrances vécues par les homosexuels lors d'épisodes de persécution. Le rattachement à la réalité par le biais de la psychologie et de la sociologie insiste le lecteur à une réflexion sur cette problématique, ce qui semble d'ailleurs être un des buts de l'auteur : provoquer une remise en question de notre perception de la notion de genre, qui, dans le contexte actuel évolue à une vitesse folle, les discours s'entremêlant parfois, révélant ainsi la complexité de tout ce qui touche de près ou de loin à l'identité sexuelle. « The famous formulation by Judith Butler in the title of her book *Gender Trouble* is to be understood not as a deviation from presumed gender norm, but as a questioning of so-called naturalized sexual roles (p.141). » Les théories de Butler semblent avoir une place particulière dans le travail de Foster. Il y fait souvent référence et son utilisation n'est ni plaquée,

ni simplement référentielle, mais plutôt active et innovatrice au sens où il intègre parfaitement la théorie à l'exemple cinématographique ou social dont il discute.

Foster conclut son étude en réaffirmant sa foi en l'avenir du cinéma brésilien qui ne cesse de reprendre l'espace qui lui est dû sur l'échiquier latino-américain. Son positivisme à ce sujet semble grandement lié à l'émergence de cinéastes féminins qui oseront peut-être plus que leurs collègues masculins aborder les questions d'identité sexuelle. Une dernière question éthique paraît déranger l'auteur quant à l'analyse qu'il vient de faire. Comment un étranger peut-il lire une culture de laquelle il ne fait pas partie? La question est essentielle dans la mesure où toute analyse est bâtie en partie sur des impressions et des hypothèses (parfois subjectives) basées sur une lecture du texte filmique et social qui peut s'avérer erroné par manque de références. Et même si les références sont là, comment être certain que l'orientation prise est la bonne? Dommage de poser une question si importante à la fin de l'argumentation. Mise en introduction, elle aurait permis au lecteur d'entrer dans le texte en ayant en tête une certaine idée de l'éthique de l'auteur et de ses propres questionnements quant à sa position d'analyste « étranger » à la réalité présentée. Ceci dit, le fait de discuter cette question éthique, ce qui devrait faire partie de toutes interventions en lien avec l'interprétation d'une culture étrangère, démontre une rigueur et une transparence essentielles à la crédibilité d'un auteur, quel que soit son type d'analyse.

D'approche on ne peut plus pédagogique, *Gender and Society in Contemporary Brazilian Cinema* s'adresse à la communauté universitaire. L'écriture de Foster, à la fois simple et efficace, en fait une référence accessible pour des étudiants de premier cycle comme pour des étudiants des cycles supérieurs, qui y trouveront leur compte grâce aux hypothèses et à la réflexion de l'auteur, qui incitent à une analyse plus poussée de la part du lecteur. Multipliant les exemples, les comparaisons et les liens avec des textes de d'autres théoriciens tels Butler, Foucault, Barthes et Stam, Foster apporte une vision à la fois critique et ouverte d'une problématique qui intéressera les lecteurs des études latino-américaines, du genre et en particulier ceux de « Queer Studies » et des études féministes.

Le principal intérêt de ce livre réside dans l'originalité de son champ d'études. En fait, l'analyse de Foster innove sur au moins deux points. Les lecteurs intéressés par les études latino-américaines seront ravis de finalement trouver un livre qui traite du cinéma brésilien contemporain. En effet, des auteurs tels Robert Stam

avec *Tropical Multiculturalism : A Comparative History of Race in Brazilian Cinema and Culture* (1997) ou encore Ismail Xavier avec *Aesthetics and Politics in Modern Brazilian Cinema* (1997) se sont intéressés au sort du cinéma brésilien mais jamais plus loin que l'époque du « Cinema Novo ». L'étude de Foster vient donc compléter et actualiser le spectre des études brésiliennes au niveau du cinéma. L'autre aspect inédit du livre réside dans son choix de traiter le cinéma brésilien sous la loupe des études du genre. Stam en fait bien un peu mention dans son recueil, mais l'attention est plutôt portée sur l'étude de la race et ce qui s'y rattache. Foster trouve donc ici un espace neuf à explorer et, comparativement à *Brazilian Cinema* (1995) de Robert Stam et Randal Johnson qui ne fait qu'effleurer (en annexe) la cinématographie brésilienne contemporaine (*Lamarca* par exemple), Foster en fait le coeur de son étude. Ce qui ne veut pas dire que tout à été dit sur le sujet, loin de là, mais l'apport de l'auteur aux deux disciplines (études latino-américaines et de genres) est manifeste et, dans mon cas, vraiment apprécié puisque mon intérêt va justement vers ce cinéma brésilien contemporain. Quelques études en portugais ont été publiées dernièrement sur le sujet, mais le texte de Foster est le premier à l'être en anglais et du point de vue de quelqu'un d'étranger à la culture, ce qui est aussi mon cas. L'apport au domaine des études du genre est moins évidente au premier abord, puisque Foster ne réinvente pas la roue avec ses théories et ne peut se comparer aux études plus poussées de Richard Dyer (« The Role of Stereotypes » [1993]) ou de Tessa Perkins (« Rethinking Stereotypes » [1997]).

Cependant, Foster propose une étude qui s'intéresse à une culture qui traditionnellement n'est pas associée à cette recherche d'identité sexuelle. Le Brésil est considéré comme un pays macho où les hommes ne remettent jamais en doute leur sexualité, la lecture de Foster vient remettre les pendules à l'heure en démontrant comment s'inscrit ce questionnement dans le texte filmique des dernières années, reflets probables de ce qui se vit dans la société brésilienne actuelle. Avec ses apports, ce livre reste donc pour moi une référence hautement pertinente qui m'a, en plus, permis de me familiariser avec les études du genre et de penser mon approche au cinéma brésilien d'une façon différente, plus connectée à la réalité sociale du pays.

Les seules réserves qui sont surgies de la lecture de *Gender and Society in Contemporary Brazilian Cinema* sont associées à la longueur du texte et au choix des films. En effet, 164 pages, c'est bien peu pour parler d'une problématique si complexe. L'étude de Foster démontre clairement la richesse de la thématique et le lecteur reste

malheureusement sur sa faim lors de certaines analyses (celle de Vera page 138 entre autres) dont les conclusions sont parfois abruptes et inachevées. L'autre problème en est un de distribution des films choisis. Bien que le texte soit assez complet en lui-même pour que le lecteur retire de sa lecture une satisfaction intellectuelle, il est tout de même difficile d'apprécier à sa juste valeur un livre qui traite de films que vous ne pouvez pas visionner faute de distribution au Canada. Et ici s'inscrit d'ailleurs une problématique dont Foster fait lui-même mention dans son introduction. Le marché brésilien (comme une bonne partie du marché du cinéma dit du « tiers monde ») est surtout intérieur et les films indépendants ont peu de chance de concurrencer les grosses productions américaines, refrain connu et maintes fois décrié par les défenseurs de la culture nationale. Ceci dit, les choix de Foster ont l'avantage de piquer notre curiosité face à une cinématographie nationale méconnue et ainsi nous questionner sur les lois qui régissent cette fameuse distribution d'un quasi-monopole. La force du texte de Foster réside cependant et sans contredit dans sa volonté d'unir cinéma brésilien et identité sexuelle et de présenter ainsi une vision socio-politique et socio-historique d'une thématique identitaire complexe qui prend de plus en plus d'importance au niveau des études filmiques mais aussi dans la société en général.

Comparative History of Race in Brazilian Cinema and Culture.
London : Duke University Press.

Vivant à Montréal, **Isabelle Lavoie** termine sa maîtrise en études cinématographiques à l'Université Concordia. Elle s'intéresse principalement au cinéma latino américain, au cinéma québécois et au documentaire. Elle travaille présentement à la publication d'un recueil d'entrevues effectuées auprès d'une dizaine de réalisateurs de l'ONF liés à la série *Challenge for Change*.

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INTERVIEW WITH KIM LONGINOTTO

Valerie Politis and Lys Woods

INTRODUCTION BY LYS WOODS

Valerie Politis and I had the pleasure to chat with documentary filmmaker Kim Longinotto at the *Rencontres Internationales du Documentaire de Montréal* (Nov. 14-23, 2003). The festival had programmed a retrospective of Longinotto's work, and she ran a master's workshop—discussing her films, showing clips, taking questions, and going far over the allotted time. She is a sort of fixture on the documentary film festival circuit, which is as much a tribute to her outstanding work, as it is to her completely winning persona. I am quite sure that I was not alone in wishing that if anyone did choose to commit my highly flawed, dysfunctional existence to celluloid, it would be Longinotto. Not only would she do my legion of flaws justice, but she would be a delight to hang around with.

In discussing the initial concepts for her films, the phrase, “Well, this friend of mine...” pops up a lot: her films often begin close to home, but she has literally traveled the globe—Iran, Japan, Kenya—shooting them. This local/global split points up the other boundaries Longinotti blurs: between the personal and the political, between ethnographic film and home movies, between social awareness and advocacy. Towards her content, she is never impartial; but she takes sides without taking cheap shots.

The Day I Will Never Forget (2002), her most recent film, is a strangely uplifting and hopeful piece that is to some degree focused on the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) in Kenya. The film is a concentrated look at the front lines of a growing grass-roots activism

(a movement which the mainstream media has tended to overlook and ignore), featuring a range of Kenyan girls, teenagers, and women, who, in various ways, and from diverse backgrounds and training, are empowering their own lives and those of the women around them. And in doing so, they are radically rewriting the social landscape of the country. The film—like the rest of Longinotti's oeuvre—is fascinating, unique, critical, and consummately humane.

Some of Longinotto's other films include: *Gaea Girls* (2000), *Divorce Iranian Style* (1998), *Shinjuko Boys* (1995), *Dream Girls* (1994), *The Good Wife Of Tokyo* (1992), and *Underage* (1982).

INTERVIEW

Val: So, I'd like to start with what inspired you to do this project on FGM.

Kim: Well, about 8 years ago, I made a film with an Egyptian friend of mine about her family. Some of her cousins had been circumcised and some hadn't, and it was something that the family never talked about. Safa, my friend, told me that it was a really defining moment in her childhood. She was 11 when it happened, and she said that it was the moment when she lost her sense of joy. It was her mother who held her down and it was her mother that she loved most of all. I thought after that that I would really like to make a film about it. I hadn't really known how to do it because I really didn't want to just go somewhere and make a film about victims. I wanted to film where there was some hope that something would change. When I read about these

2 girls in Kenya who were taking their parents to court, I thought that that would be a good end for the film and there could be some hope.

Val: And when did you make the decision to go to Kenya? How did that come about?

Kim: It was really weird actually, because usually I would spend ages and ages raising the money. This friend of mine was working at Channel Four and he was just about to leave. He had some money left in his budget, and he rang me and said, "Do you want to do this project?" and I said, "Yes!" It was one of those charmed moments, whereas, for example, *Divorce Iranian Style*, it took me about a year and a half to get the money. It was really hard to get the money. Just so you don't think that I have it easy. (Laughs)

Val: How do you normally go about acquiring the funding for your projects?

Kim: I have a proposal, and I send it to someone at Channel Four and someone at BBC, and if it gets rejected, I send it to someone else. I work through everybody that I can think of in those two broadcasting areas, and if they all say no, I'll wait until one of the people gets changed, because the commission gets changed a lot. It's just being really persistent, because a lot of my films need subtitles. Commissioning editors seem to think that they're not going to be popular, that no one is going to watch them.

Val: And when you first arrived in Kenya, how long did you plan to shoot and how did you make your connections with people?

Kim: Well when I first arrived in Kenya, my friend, Eunice, who works for an anti FGM organization, she'd gone there before for three weeks. She was sent ahead to find out what was going on and arrange to meet people. I think she was a bit daunted when she got there because it hit her how hard it might be to get people to talk. Often people are quite aggressively pro or anti and it might be quite difficult to film. When we got there, we had nothing. In Kenya there is really this sense of difference between different communities. Eunice had been taught from when she was little that the other tribes weren't as good as her tribe, so, when we'd go to a Somali area she'd be very afraid and she'd lock all the windows and say that "They're going to tear the earrings out of our ears". When we met Fardhosa, she gave up work for two weeks and she really helped us.

Val: How did you meet Fardhosa?

Kim: We met Fardhosa because her sister Lima works in London and is a friend of Eunice's, so Fardhosa just came around by chance and told us about her clinic and what she was doing. She'd come to a point in her life when she'd realized that a lot of the work that she was doing in hospitals was actually just patching up the effects that girls had gone through from being circumcised. She thought that it was really important to do something like a film and she said that it was really spooky that we'd come at the time when she was looking for some other way to work. And now she's become much more of an activist, going around and setting up meetings for people to talk. She thinks that one of the main ways for change is to just get people to talk and to get together and realize that there are alternatives and that people are not alone and that they are not the only ones who have doubts.

Lys: The young women who had congregated at the school and were en masse deciding to get a court injunction, was that something that came about from the women talking amongst themselves?

Kim: Yes. The girls talked to a lawyer and explained that if a girl tried to run away, they were jumped on and held down and it was done forcibly. They'd grown up with the thought that there was no escaping it, that that was their destiny, and then you would get married and then you would have 15 kids and there's a whole future mapped out for you. And so it's an incredibly subversive, revolutionary thing to suddenly say, "We don't want this." I think it had to do with that school and all the girls because they weren't all from one village, they were from communities scattered around that were quite sparsely populated.

Lys: So it was the first time that they had a meeting place.

Kim: They were in the school and they had a teacher whom they could say, "Look, none of us wants this to happen, can you contact somebody who could help us?", and that teacher knew someone who came and talked to them and said, "Do you really want to take your parents to court? If so, I'll arrange for a lawyer". So it was the school, really, that saved them. But what I find so interesting is that there are all these different communities and there were all these girls there, during the short eight weeks that we were there, girls hundreds of miles apart from each other saying 'No' for the first time. They were actually running away or standing

up and confronting their mothers, saying “We want a different life. We want control of ourselves”. Because if you think about it, the film isn’t about FGM at all, really, it’s a kind of springboard for a rebellion. Simla had already had it done and had kind of come to terms with it. It was the marriage that she was running away from. Fazir had it done, but wants to protect her sister and wants to actually make some kind of statement to the world, which is why she wrote her poem in English. So there’s this sense of all of them actually reaching out beyond their communities and trying to make a difference.

Lys: It was a nice change, too, from other movies that I’ve seen dealing with FGM, insofar as you don’t want to map a sort of Western feminism onto any sort of female oppression that you may encounter, because that raises problems of its own. It was nice in this film to see a grass roots activism happening with these young women who had such a sure sense of their self and their self worth which seemed to be coming from within these sorts of communities and their friends.

Kim: It’s very much their voices and their stories and them wanting to be in the film. There was a woman last night, I thought a lot about what she said, who said she wished that she could have known more about us and our problems making the film.

Lys : A more self-reflexive film?

Kim: Yes. If anyone says a criticism, I always worry about it. I thought about it, and then I thought really strongly, from the heart actually, that there’s so much about us in the world and there is so little about girls like that, the girls in the film. It’s their film and it’s their voice, and I don’t want people to think about me and what I’m doing there. Hopefully I could be anybody. I think it’s too easy to put people into these kinds of categories. When there’s something as life and death as this, when those girls are outside the court, and their fathers are saying “You should be ashamed and you’re bad”, or “You don’t obey tradition, you don’t obey me”, and we’re standing there, they’re feeling us as their support. They know we’re there for them and we’re filming their moment at the court. So I think that we can often make things too cut and dried and too polarized.

Val: Or complicated in a way that is not necessary and has nothing to do with where you are coming from.

Kim: I think so, but I still worry about what the woman

said.

Val: Are you still in touch with people in the film, and what’s happened to everyone since?

Kim: Simla is still at school, and she’s really struggling and really trying to learn. It has to be really hard for an eleven year old in a class full of six year olds, and they all speak English and you don’t. I think she’s feeling very separate and isolated, and I think that she’s an incredibly brave girl. Fazir saved her sister, and she wants to be a doctor like Fardhosa, and the 16 girls have completely changed their village, and the next lot of girls growing up are saying that they don’t want it done either, so it was a really great victory.

Val: That’s remarkable.

Kim: Yeah, it is.

Lys: There are moments in the film when it’s difficult to watch, because you want these mothers to do more for their daughters, you want these mothers to speak up, and you don’t always get it, and it can be frustrating.

Kim: You’re right about the mothers, but what I found very encouraging was that the sisters that are standing together. Every single time, in all of those stories, it’s a sister who is trying to save her sister. When Simla ran away, the first place she ran to was to her elder sister who hid her and gave her that little bit of breathing space to decide what she wanted to do next. That’s quite a dangerous thing for someone to do. At the court, there were sisters there supporting their younger sisters. I think it would have been very hard for the younger sisters to go if the older sisters had not gone there with them. And then you’ve got Fazir, who had her mother on the defensive, saying, “I’ll only forgive you if you don’t do it to my sister”. She didn’t say, “I’ll forgive you if you buy me a bicycle”, or, “I’ll forgive you if you let me become a doctor, or you don’t make me get married”. What she was concentrating on was saving her sister, and I find that absolutely breathtaking and an extraordinary act of generosity.

Lys: There was a funny sense though, too, when the mothers were with each other, when the husbands weren’t around and they were outside the family unit, that they were very outspoken, very blunt even. There was an outspokenness there that the daughters could recontextualize and take outside of the all-female community into the community at large.

Kim: When you think about it, this has been going on for thousands and thousands of years. It couldn't have continued if all the mothers had said "No, I'm not going to do it to my daughters". It's completely dependent on the whole community being part of it. If all the sisters say that they don't want it, then it can't continue either. That's what's so extraordinary about it. If their mothers are saying, "Well, you're not going to get married, nobody is going to want you if you're not circumcised", and the daughters are saying, "Actually, we don't care", then they've won, because you can't have a society that's split like that. If all the sisters support each other, then they're going to win, and I find that very exciting really.

Lys: It actually alters the social fabric with the entire community and the system within it.

Kim: Once you fight for some form of control over your own body and you have it, then the next step is to say, "I'm eleven and I don't want to get married, I want to stay at school". And as you stay at school and get educated, then you'll want a job, and the whole thing starts changing. And you're not going to have 15 children, and you are going to have more energy and more power to do other things, so, I really do think that it's a revolution. The things that have happened in our communities, the fight for abortion, the fight for contraception, the fight for divorce, all those things are going on in communities all over the world, and they're all connected.

Lys: It was hard not to watch the film and think of struggles that are going on here even as we speak in terms of control over women's bodies.

Val: What was the filming of the circumcision scene like for you?

Kim: It's still something that I feel really uncomfortable about. Fardhosa said before we even started filming that "You mustn't do anything to try and stop it" because Fardhosa had been working in that community for a long time and had convinced that family to do it in the less severe way. What she said was, "If you're going to get too upset, then put the camera down and go out quietly. Don't make a fuss, because if we are not there that circumciser's going to do it in the extreme way and sew the daughter up and the husband isn't ever going to know because he's not going to check." The two operations lasted about 5 minutes, whereas Fazir's lasted about 25-30 minutes. That's the difference. So I had it in my mind that we shouldn't do anything to try and stop it, but at the same time, filming it you felt like

it was an incredible betrayal. It felt like a violence to be there and not do something about it, so it's a very strange mixed thing.

Val: Yet at the same time by being there it had the effects of being less severe.

Kim: Yes, so it's sort of strange. Because they struggled so much and they screamed so much, we just assumed that when we went back the next morning the girls would say, "I'm really angry at Mom". There's this one point when the girl calls for her mother and her mother comes in and holds her down, and that was the thing that haunted Safa for the whole of her childhood. The fact is that the daughters said they wanted it afterward, that they were going along with it and were so keen to be part of and accepted by the community. The circumciser did about 100 girls that day. To say "No" would have meant that you'd become a kind of outcast, and they would have had to have gone the way that Simla went, really.

Lys: Do you have time to answer some questions about your own background...

Val: ...like where you studied and what your experience was like?

Kim: I studied at the National film school, which is just outside of London. It's really quite amazing. When I went there, there were no rules. I suppose I treated it like a therapy thing. The first film I made was about my boarding school, a place where I had been really unhappy. I was very much on my own, one of these weird loners and outsiders. When I actually showed people what it was like, people would look at the film and go, "Oh my god, what a weird place!" That made me feel better. (Laughs)

Lys: (Laughing) Yes, like, oh, it wasn't me, it wasn't me....

Kim: It was such a relief. The second film was called *Theatre Girls*, and it was in a hostel for homeless women. That was another sort of therapy thing because I had lived on the streets a bit when I ran away from home. I sort of feel that I was putting something back. Those were the two films that I made in film school, and then I left and couldn't get money to make films and so I did camera work for a while. That's what I do between films anyway; it's how I make money. I really love doing it.

Val: And what are you working on now?

Kim: Well, there's lots of things that I want to do. Zeba, who I made the two films in Iran with, and I want to go back and do another film. We want to do a film about change. The films that I'm interested in at the moment are films about change, about people standing out and being rebellious, because too often we see films about women being very submissive and knocked down.

Val: Are you interested in doing anything fiction related?

Kim: What I love about documentaries is that it's always more extraordinary than ever writing a script. If I had written a script about Fazir, a nine year old girl from a Somali community, writing a poem in English and thinking about it for some form of audience when she is 8, and holding this poem until this strange woman comes into her life and she grabs her and says, "Come here, I want to read you my poem", I wouldn't have written a script like that. I wouldn't have thought that a girl like that existed, and I would have thought that if I had written a script like that, people wouldn't believe it, do you know what I mean?

Lys: Completely.

Val: It would have been contrived.

Kim: Life always seems to be more extraordinary than you can ever imagine. Nothing really frightens me in life, apart from getting lost while making a film. I don't like documentary films that are just a series of interviews. I like films that are stories, and sometimes it seems impossible. Sometimes it's just by luck you get the story and it leads you to another story. So far I've been lucky enough that the films have worked, but there's always this fear that this is the one that won't work. That's the bad side of documentary, but then the good side of it is when something happens like Fazir. That's what makes it so exciting and compelling, it's like a kind of drug, and you want to do another one. It's a kind of mixed thing; a love/hate thing really.

Dr. Vornoff's Corner #001

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

This column is dedicated to a vastly overlooked and greatly neglected aspect of film production and cinema history: the low-budget independently produced films made between the early 30s and the mid-70s. These shoddy, lurid, and generally weird films have been variously classified as ‘B’ movies, ‘Z’ movies, Exploitation/ Sexploitation films, drive-in fodder, the Paracinema, Sleazoid cinema, Incredibly Strange Films, and guilty pleasures. Regardless of their classifications, these cheap independent films have occupied the netherworld of respectable cinema for decades (late-night movies, drive-ins, grindhouses, etc.). But over the last few years, hundreds of these low-budget gems have been released on DVD, and are readily available in rental and retail stores. MGM Home Entertainment, Image Entertainment, the exalted Criterion Collection, and the eponymous Something Weird Video have issued hundreds of these ‘B’ Movies, drive-in fodder films, Exploitation/ Sexploitation films, and other really strange obscurities. Now with so many films widely available on DVD, it’s opportune to take a serious look at these overlooked and frequently ridiculed works. Usually, low-budget cinematic wonders of this kind are written-off as ‘Camp’ or ‘so BAD they’re GOOD,’ but these less-than-flattering terms only serve to negate the importance of this form of cinema. As a film scholar, I feel it’s time to give these films some much-needed attention. The world of low-budget films has produced thousands and thousands of outlandish, exotic, and downright unusual films, but to date, only a handful of critical and historical texts have taken them seriously.

This column, in my view, is therefore a step in the right direction, expanding the discourse surrounding the netherworld of lowbudget independent film production and serving as a guide to the plethora of recently released DVD’s.

Officially, the works to which I refer carry the name of Exploitation films, a category that can include various forms of low-budget film making, but the undeniable truth is that they encompass one of the largest aspects of film production. A truly transnational phenomenon, the ‘monetarily-challenged’ Exploitation film has been a staple of all national cinemas. Despite their low production values, their amateur (and sometimes drunken) performances, as well as numerous other unforeseen circumstances that have hampered the final product and tainted critical reception, this often-disreputable mode of film production has established its own unique aesthetic code. When the final products are compared with those of more recognizable modes, they’re written-off simply as ‘bad filmmaking,’ but it’s my sense that it’s more valuable to examine these films within this relatively unfamiliar aesthetic code. There is more happening in a low-budget Exploitation film than shoddy production values and overacting, for example. When encountering them, it’s therefore the responsibility of the viewer to forgo his/ her acquired understanding of the cinema. The cinéphile must become as a blank slate, must avoid been thrown off by implausibility or incomprehension, and simply relax, sit back, and enjoy the ride.

To inaugurate this column, we begin with a truly exceptional piece: Ray Dennis Steckler’s *Wild Guitar*

(1962). It stars Arch Hall, Jr. and is available courtesy of Something Weird Video on a double feature DVD along with Arch's first film, *The Choppers* (Leigh Jason, 1961). Taken together, they offer the cinéophile an unflinching vision of the life of an American teenager in the early 60s. I need not remind you that this was a very strange period in American history, when Nixon and cigarettes were good, Elvis and seatbelts were bad, and the whole country was living under a halcyon ideology that had yet to be shattered by later events. These two films present typified teen-orientated narratives, except here they're ripped wide open by the astounding, awkward, and jaw-dropping presence of Arch Hall, Jr. "Arch who?" you may ask. Well, Arch Hall, Jr. was a wannabe teen idol who was the star of five films produced by his father's company, Fairway International Pictures. He was also responsible for a number of L.A. pop/rock novelty hits. Does any one remember the songs "Konga Joe" or "Monkey in my Hatband"? I didn't think so. Nonetheless, the two Arches (senior and junior) left an indelible mark on the history of cinema. If you get a chance and can find an old video copy of Arch, Jr.'s *The Sadist* (James Landis, 1963), you are in for a terror treat. This ultra-cheap masterpiece, which sees Arch, Jr. play a psychopath who goes on a pre-*Badlands* murder-spreed, is a triumph in unsettling filmmaking. He gleefully torments and murders a group of teachers in an unprecedented level of sadism that would not be outdone for nearly a decade. Unfortunately, the Arches are also responsible for one of the worst films ever made: the horrendous (and aptly titled) *Eegah!* (Arch Hall, Sr., 1962).

Fortunately for us, we are looking at the first two films produced by the father and son team. Both are generically typical teenpix: a juvenile delinquency film and a Rock n' Roll fantasy. However, *Wild Guitar* and *The Choppers* are, in their presentation of a duplicitous world of bourgeois facades and seedy realities (an image not often presented in the Camelot days of the early 60s), more interesting than their lowly origins would lead you to believe.

In *The Choppers*, Arch and his friends are clean-cut good lookin' all-American teenagers. They drive cool hot rods and like pretty girls. On the surface, they're your typical teens, but underneath, they're living a distorted adolescent fantasy of violence and criminality. Jack (Arch, Jr.) and his buddies, Flip, Torch, and Snooper, are eponymous adolescents, driving around in a poultry delivery truck (complete with chickens) equipped with its own portable chop-shop. Arch scouts potential four-wheeled victims in his customized Bucket T. When

he finds a vehicle along the side of the highway, they chop it up for parts. If you know anything about cars of this period, you will get a kick out of seeing brand new models about to go under the torch, then, quickly masked with an edit, the new car is switched for an old 1953 Kaiser Manhattan ripe for sacrifice to the blazing licks of the blowtorch. The gang sells the hot parts to Moose, a crooked auto parts dealer, played by the human behemoth, Bruno VeSota, who is supported by his sidekick, Cowboy, perennial B-Western extra Britt Woods. Arch and his gang appear as normal American teenagers: clean-cut, pimple-free, and well dressed. And like all good American teens, the gang spends their loot on really cool cars and chasing girls at the "Chick-a-dilly." But each of these all-American teens is a truly fucked up kid beneath the surface, harbouring deep, seething, anti-social behaviour, often bordering on the psychotic. Eventually, the police catch up with them and the film ends with a really great and shockingly brutal shoot-out at Moose's auto wreckers. As the remaining members of the Choppers are carted off to jail, Arch Hall, Sr. drops in to make a cameo as a TV reporter exploiting the sensationalism of this rupture in the all-American ideal.

Visually, *The Choppers* is bleak, shot in a stark realist black and white. The harsh lighting of Clark Ramsey intensifies the endless and desolate landscape and helps the film create an equally desolate look at teen-life in southern California. There's no "Surfin' Safari" in this film; these are profoundly messed-up kids who really believe that they're modern romantic figures living out some great adventure. Throughout the film they speak in their own unique dialect, a cross between Beat poetry and Hard-boiled banter, trapped between art and crime. At first, the dialogue may sound silly, but as the film progresses, it becomes apparent that it's symptomatic of the mythology of the American dream and the distorted reality embodied by the gang.

The bleak and empty world depicted in *The Choppers* is countered by the over-exuberant cinematic vision of *Wild Guitar*, the second of Fairway International's films and the first film directed by novice Ray Dennis Steckler. *Wild Guitar* is an unexpected and unprecedented celebration of film, yet the director's over-enthusiasm has often left audiences and critics out in the cold. Despite the fact that the film has frequently turned up on lists of the worst films ever made, Steckler's uninhibited style marks it as a (cinematic) labour of love, refuting those who hastily dismiss it as the incoherent cinematic ramblings of an amateur. Trained as a cinematographer and on a set for the first time as a director, he holds

nothing back. The film runs the gamut, from film noir chiaroscuro to Hollywood musical, from the Bowery Boys comedies to Surrealist masterworks, and all at the pace of a runaway train. When Vickie (Nancy Czar) does her go-go dance, don't fret the shifting lighting—just sit back and enjoy the shimmying, shapely figure it illuminates.

Wild Guitar tells the story of Bud Eagle (Arch, Jr.) and his rise to pop/ rock teen idol fame. The film begins with Bud arriving out of nowhere—he is literally introduced to us riding his motorcycle along a single dirt track emerging from the weeds and the sand dunes. Presented as naïve and bucolic, he is a modern innocent in the tradition of Capra's greatest heroes (Mr. Deeds, Mr. Smith and John Doe). And like Mr. Smith and John Doe, Bud lands in the middle of a money-grubbing and corrupt America, where he is subject to a number of very predictable coincidences: he meets the girl of his dreams, the bug-eyed Vickie Wells; he gets a spot on a local teen-talent show; and he's signed to a record contract. All this in one night! Unfortunately for Bud, the head of his new recording company is the ultimate 'Payola' slime-ball Mike MacCauley, played by his dad, Arch, Sr., and aided by his henchman, Steak, played by Cash Flagg (Steckler's stage persona). While the script is certainly formulaic, *Wild Guitar* is undeniably strange, perhaps requiring several viewings to sort out what exactly is going on. Poor old Bud just wants to play his guitar and sing songs about Vickie. But MacCauley and Steak have other plans. Although they've signed him to a recording contract, they spend most of their time trying to corrupt Bud with booze and strippers and to destroy his relationship with his odd-faced girlfriend. MacCauley and Steak gave the same treatment to their previous singing sensation, Don Proctor, who, in a great film noir-like sequence, ends up dead at the bottom of a staircase. Along with the murder of Proctor, there's the kidnapping of Bud's girlfriend, a great fistfight between Steak and Bud, and several other inexplicably weird things. Eventually, Bud frees himself from the Svengalilike grasp of MacCauley and the film ends with Bud shooting his own TV promo-video at the beach, dressed in a white dinner jacket and singing and playing his guitar. Vickie joins him and dances around. There are a bunch of surf kids dancing in the sand. At the center is Bud's motorcycle, sporting an eagle feather, the symbol of his fan club. Then, with a jump cut, everyone disappears. The beach is empty, except for the motorcycle. The surf crashes against the tires and the eagle feather blows in the wind.

Wild Guitar is one of the all-time great masterpieces

of schlock cinema, not because the film is 'bad,' which it has often been called, but because it is utterly out of control. Stylistically it careens like a broken roller coaster, thrashing itself all over the place. Steckler had a penchant for mixing genres and styles in his films, his most famous exercise being the horror/ musical *The Incredibly Strange Creatures Who Stopped Living And Became Mixed-Up Zombies!!!* (1967). For his debut, he bounces from a flat realist style to the chiaroscuro shadows of film noir to 30s avant-garde to French New Wave reflexivity with out batting an eye or considering whether or not the audience can follow. The strangest moments come when Steckler presents his homage to the slapstick comedies of the Bowery Boys. If you have never seen a Bowery Boys film, you are in for a treat, or possibly a great disgust. "The Boys" made a series of films from the early 40s to the mid-50s, which ran their "Punch and Judy show" homoerotic relationship through a bevy of formulaic comedy plots. Initially these films were kinda cute and silly, but as "the Boys" grew older and maintained the same personas, the films grew increasingly perverse.

Perhaps the most remarkable moment in *Wild Guitar* is the final shot of Bud's motorbike alone in the surf. The isolated, iconographic image of the motorcycle with the waves splashing the tires raises the film into an entirely different realm. Where did every one go? Has this been just a dream? Or could this be a tribute to the final shot of Jean-Pierre Melville's 1955 masterpiece *Bob Le Flambeur*?

While the DVD release of *Wild Guitar/ The Choppers*, like all SWV releases, is digitally remastered, this doesn't mean that it's a flawless reproduction. Many of these films are taken from the only surviving prints, some of which are irrevocably damaged with scratches, splices or faded color. Nonetheless, these problems are small distractions and don't detract from the pleasure of watching these remarkable anomalies. At times the damage can actually enhance the strange experience.

The DVD is also loaded with great extra features, carefully chosen in order to keep with the themes of the feature films. Included are a mitt-full of related trailers, several short subjects, and a slideshow, "Gallery of Trash-O-Rama Exploitation Art with Radio-Spot Rarities." At times, the extras for these DVD's are more desirable than the features themselves, but with this particular one, it's a win-win deal.

Keeping with the dance fervour incited by *Wild Guitar*, we're offered two of producer/ director Bill Rebane's

Twist-ploitation shorts, *Twist Craze!* and *Dance Craze!*, both made sometime in the early 60s. Shot in Chicago, both feature glimpses of Chicago's 'Café' society enjoying the new dance sensation, "The Twist"—but the 60s have never been seen quite like this! Before the popular imagination was completely usurped by teenage bodies, there was a time when the entertainment world still catered to the middle-aged. The early 60s was a transitional period, a time when the middle-aged and middle-classed began to consume the image of teenagers as novelty—a highly sexualized novelty. And that's what these films are all about: the middle-aged gaze and the youthful spectacle. The more I watch these two films, the more 'twisted' they become. Both feature big fat middle-aged men and women leering at teenagers (mostly alluring teenage girls but there is the occasional sexualized boy, too) gyrating to The Twist as part of cabaret shows and present the middle class as a vision of bloated and bathetic polyester and rayon-clad slime-balls. It's hard to describe these pictures without using words like 'sleazy,' 'lurid' and 'disgusting,' but at a deeper level, these quizzical oddities beg the questions: Who are these people? Why were these films made? And who the hell watched them? Though these questions can hardly be answered, the films can still be enjoyed as really weird leftovers from a really weird period in our not-so-distant past.

To accompany these Twist films, SWV has also included a stolen car flick, *Hot Car*, made in '57 or '58. Another cinematic wonder from the past, HOT CAR is not the story of wayward teens on a joyride but rather a police instructional (read: propaganda) film about the modern techniques of spotting stolen cars and catching car thieves red-handed. This film moves from dull procedure to generation confrontation, and concludes with a great car chase as two old Chevys boot it down a dirt road and then tear up a farmer's field. The best sequence is when a highway patrol officer pulls over a nervous beatnik in a stolen car. "What's in the trunk?" asks the cop. The beatnik panics and runs! *Hot Car* becomes an interesting counterpart to *THE Choppers*, not only because both films deal with car theft, but because *Hot Car* actually supports the bleak vision of middle class America presented in the fictional film. Taken together, they present the average Americans as "babes-in-the-woods," oblivious to the inevitable malfeasance, innocent and unaware of the criminal underworld that surrounds them. In one scene, a woman naively parks her car at the mall, and just like that, the criminal element arises out of the ether to snatch it away. Is it Arch Hall, Jr? Is it a group of professional car thieves? Or is it the disintegration of

the American mythos? I think the latter.

If you're itching for a different cinematic experience and are tired of watching actors strung up with wires in front of blue screens, check out the double feature of teen angst and societal disintegration that is *Wild Guitar/ The Choppers*. However, be forewarned: the world of low-budget films can be very enticing and highly addictive. They're a form of unpolluted, uncut cinematic expression. There is no pretension, no brain-sucking self-indulgence, no directorial masturbation, and no bullshit. They are, in a word, the manifestation of a pure love of cinema.

Until next time,

Dr. Eric Vornoff