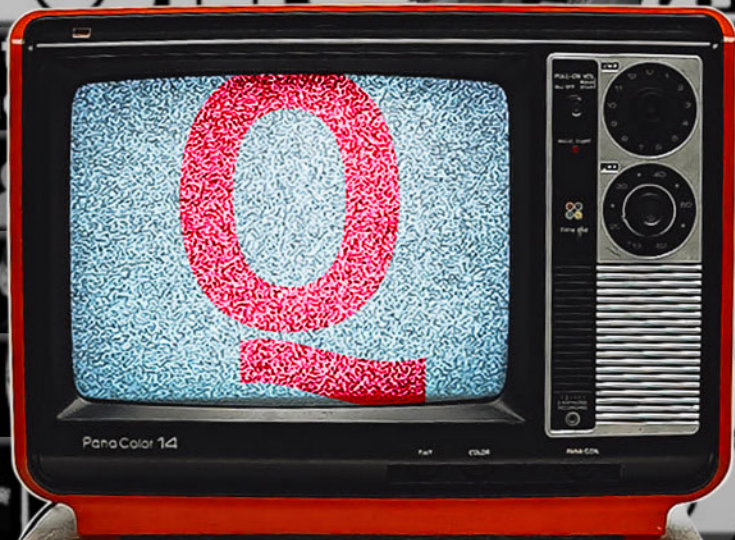# SYNOPTIQUE

An Online Journal of Film and Moving Image Studies

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SYNOPTIQUE

An Online Journal of Film and Moving Image Studies

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Contents

Introduction

Synoptique Editorial Collective

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

Nouvelles vue sur le cinéma québécois
edited by Bruno Cornellier presents its summer-autumn 2004 edition on Sexe, sexualité et nationalité

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

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

We wanted to create an online resource of student work at Concordia. For students at Concordia. To give expression to the intellectual character of M.A. Film Studies at this University by publishing what was rapidly becoming a lost history of ideas. Students work here for two years, take classes, write theses, go on their way, leave faint traces, might never take a stand or apportion an opinion. We wanted to discover what tradition we had inherited, what debates we were continuing, which debates we weren't inventing. But what began as a way to provide a continuity of ideas between years for Concordia M.A. Film Studies students, has been

expanded to recognize the play of influence and the fluidity of thought as it accounts for a discourse that links our classrooms to Montreal, and Montreal to the world. So that we might recognize again these ideas if we should pass them by. So that we might see what we missed or took for granted when we thought they were ours.

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

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

and sensibility has developed… this is education. This long process of education. We've been thinking about the polyphony of educations in these communities. The desire to get better. How art and life make sense.

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

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

Publier – publier avec auto-réflexivité – un travail relié au thème d'un cours universitaire ou s'exprimer encore une fois sur un vieux sujet familier, ne consiste pas simplement à revisiter une fois de plus le nouveau cinéma allemand ou le documentaire canadien; c'est

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

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

Susan Sontag's Readers: *Respond, Remember, Re-Read*

Colin Burnett

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

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

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

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

Interpretations *French Cancan (1955)*

What you are about to read is the result of an assignment that was done in the context of a graduate seminar (FMST 630D) at the Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema on the theory and practice of interpretation. In the second week of class, I asked students to produce a short interpretation (3 double-spaced pages) of Jean Renoir's 1955 FRENCH CANCAN. The film was chosen for no particular interpretive reason except that I enjoy Renoir's work, hadn't seen that film for years, and feel that students don't have a lot of opportunity to see Renoir's films anymore. In any case, I had to choose a film therefore why not this one? The idea was to gauge the student's implied knowledge of interpretation at the beginning of the course. There were two rules to follow. First, the students were free to consult any source except material written about this particular film. Secondly, they were asked to write the assignment in groups of two—that way, interpretive conflicts might come out in the open and would require taking stock of or resolving in a dialogic manner. The following week the students returned with their interpretations. We read all of them (what is presented here is a sample of the work) after which time I proposed a series of 8 questions to help us investigate and debate the presence of any implicit (or, in certain cases, explicit) interpretive theory in their work:

1. What was the aim of your interpretation?

2. Do you consider your interpretation to be correct/valid?

3. What is the object of your interpretation: is it the film, the filmmaker's intentions, or your own reaction to the film?

4. Do you consider your interpretation to be subjective or objective?

5. How would you consider verifying whether your interpretation is an adequate representation of its object?

6. Did you consider or try to reconstruct the filmmaker's intentions (or world view) in interpreting the film?

7. Did it matter to you that the film was French, that it was made in the 1950's, or that it was about turn-of-the-century France?

8. Could a 1950's audience have interpreted the film in the same way as you and is this relevant?

Without giving out too much information about the class, I would say that in the end, the debate showed the importance of distinguishing between what, elsewhere, I have called the cognitive/symbolic and affective aspects of the interpretive act. Whereas Renoir is an object in which I have invested affectively for a long time (I am fond even of what some consider to be his worst films), the discussion led me to see that this was not so much the case with the students. This dis-affection manifested itself mostly in discussing the second of the 8 questions. Here, a majority of students seemed to adopt a relativistic perspective (one interpretation is as good, correct, valid as another). While the academic environment of contemporary reader-response theories as well as the sociology of the classroom may partly explain this attitude, one should not discount the importance of affect or desire in interpretive practices.

-Martin Lefebvre

Tilting at Can Can: *French Cancan* (1955) and *Don Quixote* by Owen Livermore and Gareth Hedges

The recurring image of windmills throughout Jean Renoir's *French Cancan* (1955) reveals something of a quixotic trope in the idealism of its central figure, Henri Danglard (played by Jean Gabin). The red windmill, of course, has a historical correlative as the defining characteristic of the actual Moulin Rouge, but Renoir's Moulin Rouge is an artistic creation and is presented as such.

The mill's construction functions within the narrative as a framing device, providing orientation as a repeated establishing shot and giving visual form to Danglard's quest. Significantly, we see only the indices of its construction in long shots assumed through associational montage to be from the perspective of the small café across from the Moulin Rouge. The entire chronicle of the Moulin Rouge is seen largely from this café which acts as the site of a reflexive critical voice, in the form of the patrons' commentary and gossip about the film itself. Danglard's own affinity for café society is established within the film twice; he is there drinking absinthe when he first sees Nini (Françoise Arnoul) after the dance at la Reine Blanche and when we learn that he had begun his career as a sommelier in a café. The back and forth between the scenes of the café patrons and the action at the theatre harmonizes with the film's utilization of backstage and audience perspectives during performances, a position best exemplified by Danglard's place in the narrative.

There are at least two other oblique references to Cervantes's *Don Quixote* in *French Cancan*. First, when Lola (María Félix) tries to fight the debtor as he presents Danglard with a summons, Danglard dissuades her by saying that she is "tilting against windmills." Danglard's reprobation of Lola does not prevent him from giving into a similar quest—building the Moulin Rouge, and his remark betrays a familiarity with Quixote's fixation. "Tilting" suggests the medieval sport of the same name in which two knights on horseback charge each other with lances in an effort to unseat one another. Second, shortly after this scene, Casimir (Philippe Clay) serenades Danglard in mock heroic fashion. One refrain calls for soldiers to "charge the windmill." This sequence occurs after Danglard has met with Nini a second time, in the scene where Danglard talks with Casimir about his plans for la Reine Blanche. Like Sancho Panza, Casimir potentially has great insight into Danglard, and this comparison comments directly on Danglard's plan.

Beyond these allusions, Renoir treats Danglard's quest to build the Moulin Rouge in quixotic terms. When he tells the Baron (Jean-Roger Caussimon) that he would rather live in a hotel than reclaim his possesions, Danglard effectively renounces worldly goods and embraces the transience implicit in quests. He defines the nature of his venture quite explicitly to Casimir, telling him that he wants to provide "a taste of the low life for millionaires—adventure in comfort." In its impracticality, Danglard's quest is quixotic rather than romantic or idealistic. This reinforced by his struggles to build the Moulin Rouge, especially those surrounding issues of finance. The financier Adrien even calls Danglard an "illusioniste." This quality in Danglard— that of dreamer, idealist, or quixotic hero—gives him a unique agency within the film, reflected in his role as mediator between the classes. In the opening sequence in the film, Danglard's movement between the backstage and audience as he to tries to encourage the shy whistler he has hired is echoed by the camera. Cutting between both sides of the stage, it privileges neither audience nor the backstage but presents performances from both perspectives equally. Similarly, Danglard calls for intermingling between classes in the theatre. While his plan does not demand for a total dissolution of class boundaries, it does propose a dialectical relationship between classes. Unlike the Baron or Prince Alexandre (Giani Esposito), Danglard does not have a title and his place within society is ambiguous. Given that the film deals with these concerns explicitly, it is not suprising that Renoir was no stranger to the financial difficulties of artistic production [1]. As Danglard explains how he has bought la Reine Blanche, the camera pans back to reveal the bare walls of his home, which earlier had been opulently lined with art and other finery. This subtle cinematic gesture provides visual evidence of Danglard's financial reality and strengthens the insignificance of capital to Danglard.

The depiction of the artist, exemplified in *French Cancan* by Gabin's Danglard, can be interestingly compared to the now canonical *La Regle Du Jeu* (1939) and the character of Octave, very notably played by Renoir himself. In Octave, Renoir portrays an aging, bumbling failure that lies to himself and others about his unrealistic desires. In Danglard, we see a man determined to bring a spectacle to the stage at any cost, up to and including his own well-being. Failure is never far away from Danglard, and is all but written on the fate of his protégé Nini, whose double is Prunelle, the bygone Queen of the Can Can who now begs in the street. However, unlike Octave, Danglard remains undaunted and is the centerpiece of the film—the one in charge of establishing the Moulin

Rouge, with no money but with wealthy (yet cautious) backers at his whim. This difference is understandable, given that *La Regle Du Jeu* was conceived in a much more pessimistic time in French history when the unwillingness of Europe to intervene in the activities of the Fascists inspired Renoir to compose a tale where the bourgeois blissfully retreat to the countryside and play selfish, childish games.

As opposed to *La Regle Du Jeu, French Cancan* posits an optimistic view of youth with the idea of the stage as a magical, transcendent space inspired by the innocence and the energy of the young workers dancing *la chalut* in la Reine Blanche. It is at this working class dance hall that Danglard first meets Nini, a young impressionable laundress who sucks her thumb. The dance hall is constructed as a transgressive site with its counterpoint being the unpalatable reality of the mundane. It is not surprising that there are many in the film who dream of a life as a performer, including both Casimir who, given the chance, drops his life as a public servant to become an entertainer and the whistler who goes from painting houses to painting his face. Those unhappy souls who look on from the sidelines need only join in to be caught up in the euphoria and forget their problems and fears, if only for a while.

As a technicolor studio spectacle with raucous dance numbers, the Hollywood influence is deeply intertwined with the film's incarnation of the backstage musical genre. Even the conveniently anglocized name of the reinvented new act (the "French Can Can"), suggests some degree of Hollywood pedigree. On a visual level, the elaborate sets facilitate a whimsical and nostalgic depiction of Parisian street life as opposed to a realistic one, with organ grinders, children, businessmen and workers happily mingling in the bustling street. The adoption of the musical genre is hardly surprising, due to many developments in Renoir's life, including five years spent operating in Hollywood before the making of *French Cancan*. Perhaps indicative of Renoir's psychological distance from post-WWII France, the world of *French Cancan* is not interested in a reality per se but a Paris of the imagination that can only exist on a backlot.

We return again to the idea in Renoir's film of a preferable or quixotic reality, residing in the imagination, and, when conditions are right, on the stage. Prince Alexandre's suicide attempt and subsequent plea for a makebelieve memory of Paris invokes a similar comparison to the conclusion of *Don Quixote*, where the peasant girl admits to the aged and dying Quixote

that she is the fair maiden to whom he has pledged his life. Similarily, the final performance—a realization of a dream for Dangland—has him sitting backstage, tapping his feet and imagining the festivities, seemingly not wanting to ruin the perfect illusion in his head with the illusion he has created in the Moulin Rouge. Like the Cervantes novel, Renoir asks us to consider the perfect beauty of memory and imagination, and question the perceived folly of tilting at windmills. However, it can be said that Renoir goes one step further, cementing Danglard's fulfillment of the illusory *French Cancan* in tangible terms as Danglard joins his audience before the final curtain.

ENDNOTES

1   See the Orson Welles' obituary of Jean Renoir ("Jean Renoir: 'the Greatest of All Directors'") from the *Los Angeles Times*, 18 February 1979: 1, 6.

Assumption of Intention in Renoir's *French Cancan* (1955) by Janos Sitar

Jean Renoir's 1955 film *French Cancan* is a backstage musical that depicts the events that lead to the opening of the world famous Moulin Rouge music hall. However, the film should not be taken as a strict attempt to depict the historical circumstances that caused the Moulin Rouge to open, but rather as a film that uses that historical situation to make a commentary about French cinema at the time of its production. Within the context of the film the Cancan is not only a dance, but an emblem of French popular culture that functions as a metaphor for another French product of 1896: the cinema. The return of the Cancan in *French Cancan* is a veiled cry for a return to a cinematic heritage that had fallen out of fashion as surplus Hollywood films flooded France after the turmoil of the Second World War subsided.

The emphasis on the present rather than the past can be found in the film's treatment of historical information and persons. In particular, absences force a consideration of the film's present rather than the actual past. Absent from *French Cancan's* mise-en-scene are two of the most famous features of the Moulin Rouge at the time of opening: the large elephant to the side of the windmill and the donkey rides out back. These changes force a consideration of the film's present and the selection of the windmill as the single piece of iconography for the period. Historical characters are also notably missing,

in particular those of Joseph Oller and Charles Zidler who co-operatively opened the Moulin Rouge in 1889. Their replacement with the single character of Henri Danglard (Jean Gabin) is significant because it enables a reading of the film that focuses on Danglard and the creation of the dance spectacle as a metaphor for French cinema in the 50s.

When speaking of absence I do not mean to denounce *French Cancan* as a film because of its historical inaccuracy like Lael Ewy does when writing about Baz Luhrmann's 2001 film on the same subject. One need not look past the title of Ewy's piece "Moulin Rouge, the Erasure of History, and the Disneyfication of the Avant Garde" in order to understand how Ewy feels about the inaccuracy of historical information in film. Rather than take the same stance, I suggest that it is important to look at how those absences work in relation to the film's content and style to comment on cinema in its own time period.

In discussing the importance of juxtaposing historical detail with fiction, it is necessary to identify that one character, Nini (Françoise Arnoul), is a historical reference to the dancer known as "Nini of the beautiful thighs." Particularly striking about the character of Nini is the way in which she is contrasted to the character of Lola de Castro (Maria Felix) throughout the film. Nini's youth and inexperience in professional dancing and sex is a sharp contrast to the older Lola who expertly wields her sexuality and professional experience from the film's opening scene. Another sharp difference between Nini and Lola is the way Nini is the source of inspiration for Danglard's revival of the Cancan. This immediately creates a sense of cultural and artistic opposition between Nini and Lola, as Nini represents the return to French culture while Lola is the ultimate presence of non-French culture in the film.

In the opening sequence Lola is the star of Danglard's "Chinese Screen" as an exotic belly dancer who flirts and teases the men in the crowd. Her presence as a non-French character is emphasized when she flies into a rage and begins yelling in Spanish at the men who serve Danglard with papers from the Baron Walter. I do not want to make a claim for a strict reading of Lola as the exotic other as per the work of Edward Said, but rather that Lola represents a general fluidity of culture that is present throughout the film. While she is central to the film through her opposition to Nini, this opposition is produced in relation to a multiplicity of cultures. Lola shifts from being a belly dancer to being the principal dancer in the Russian performance before the climactic

Cancan number. And while Lola appears as a different and sexual figure throughout the film she never fully takes away from Nini's appeal: Paulo, Danglard and Prince Alexandre are all in pursuit of Nini's affections. Probably most significant about the contrast between Nini and Lola is the fact that they resolve their differences and work together in the Moulin Rouge, but performing different types of dancing.

The title of the US release is helpful in further noting the emphasis on French culture. For the American market the film was renamed *Only The French Can*, meaning the studio replaced the English title of the film with a different English title. This new title places an emphasis on the oddity of the original title of the film that is taken from Danglard's "new" name for the Cancan as he is told that only dances with English titles are popular now. The title builds a relationship between the content of the film and the social circumstances surrounding the film's production. It appears that Renoir is making a commentary on the flood of English language films that came into the French market in the period after the Second World War. This flood of American films is not something to be taken lightly as the directors of the French New Wave like Jean-Luc Godard and Truffaut often cite the importance of American films in the development of their conception of cinema. Renoir's commentary on the cultural climate of France in 50s is evident as *French Cancan* indicates that only with an English title will a French film find an audience.

This association between the film's content and its social environment also creates an association between the character of Danglard and Renoir whereby Danglard operates as a metaphor for the film's director. Danglard throughout the film functions like a director as he seeks the financial resources, cast and space in which to create his spectacle. Most significant is the spatial relationship between Danglard and the actual performance of the Cancan during the climactic scene. Danglard sits backstage, listening to the crowd cheer as the show sweeps them away. However, Renoir unifies Danglard and the performance by cross cutting between his reaction shots and the actual performance. This absent form of seeing is significant because it creates a unity between two spaces that are physically separate. Here cross cutting functions as a metaphor for the comparison between the two time periods. The film is asking us to look back, but to a fictive and creative past in order to build an artistic future—one that is not afraid of outside influences or changes to artforms like film. In this case, the concern with dance functions a metaphor for the cinema. *French Cancan* cuts between

two disparate spaces to create a unity. These disparate spaces merge to create a new past that will create a new future that recognizes the past but has to acknowledge changes in taste regardless of how superficial they may be.

It was always there. Someone else might have changed the names and the parameters may feel a little strange, but take that step and then another. Stretch yourself. Wherever the feet go the eyes are soon to follow.

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A Duet with *French Cancan* (1955) by Jodi Ramer, Adam Rosadiuk

This film needs to be seen a few times. Most frames provide branching paths of attention, and we make early, clumsy choices, skewing us from clever details, and off early by degrees we can pass by miles—with only a vague memory of vertigo—life-size fireworks, whole life-defining moments. We come back to the film as crude tourists, wiser now about how easily conned we are by a little sleight of hand, by an eye line, by the flash and passing of a churning skirt. The shwoozy movement through frames composed in depth, the longish takes, can rightfully be described as hypnotic and overwhelming: so much so that an insert shot of a character looking meaningfully off screen, a sudden halt in a stream of rhythm and rests, is for the first-time viewer, tantalizingly just outside the realm of significance. The real kick in Renoir's films is the perceived struggle between a flow of images and forces of narrative and character. Because it takes effort to try to piece these things together, it can get boring, and the slip of one's mind from character and narrative into the bleeding of colours from frame to frame makes us easy victims to the shock of sharp contrasts. The first experience of a Renoir film, if we enjoy it at all, is an experience of beauty and the beauty of quiet and private oddness: details at the edge of a film, like a belly dancer who retrieves her scarf from the stage floor with a sly sleight-of-toe.

And there is also the ease and grace of the photography.

On first viewing you might remember clearly, for instance, the woman in the green dress in the back of the frame, the contentment of her complete suspension in the moment, angled against the young baker, Paulo (Franco Pastorino), in the foreground, tormented by the moment's stubborn claims upon his future. The second time you see this sequence, you might notice the woman in the green dress several shots earlier, her ¾ profile glimpsed in the blurred background of the waltz and glimpsed again and passed between the spaces of turning and returning bodies. Indeed, it is appropriate that she should then occupy the frame with Paulo, who likewise is tumbled by the crowd into the back of the frame when Nini (Françoise Arnoul), his lover, chooses to waltz with Danglard (Jean Gabin), the distinguished gentlemen from the upper-class. That the woman in the green dress should be found in the same frame as Paulo, and remain in that frame after he leaves, might remind us of a much more successful chance encounter: when the red-haired woman and the mustachio-ed commandant at the absinthe bar are literally thrown together by the explosion of the White Queen. Unlike Paulo and the woman in the green dress, the Montmartre bar patrons are inseparable afterwards. To see the woman in the green dress, on the second viewing, earlier in the film than we expected is to experience the cleverness of this constructed world, is to feel the accidents and coincidences of aleatory beauty that suddenly become less like the careful posturing of the gorgeously selfconscious, but more like the inevitable mathematics of permutations and combinations of elements.

Renoir's figures are in circulation, are shook up, and settle where they may. The fact that particular moments become essential to significance has more to do with our linear experience of events and our crudity as viewers than calculation on Renoir's part. Thus, Renoir's films ask a lot of our abilities to interpret characters, to 'read' what people really mean. There are moments in this film that we will find ourselves drawn to, moments that seem 'important', 'significant', or just 'odd', and these are the moments that will provide us with the stuff of interpretation. That we will then find the clues to the essential moments in multiple frames—as if they were waiting for us—in the little details we missed, is the sly magic of the show. This is the experience of interpreting art like biography: when all our choices make sudden crystal sense in retrospect.

The film's climax comes when Danglard speaks in such a way and at such a time that we're awfully tempted to think he's speaking for the director: i.e. that he's speaking to theme. He's yelling at our ingénue to suck it

up and get on with the show, revealing in a very brutal way the logic of his infidelities, his nature as a creator, and the importance of art over the individual while all the while using art to affirm his personal selfishness. There are many reasons, however, that we must resist a blunt reading of this moment; not the least of which is the film's genuflection to French generic convention and to the back-stage musical's imperative to above all else go on with the show. But, nonetheless, the moment is indeed emphasized, and must be taken into account if we are going to uncover some sort of ordering principle for the film, something to guide our retrospection.

We'd argue that this climax introduces ideas that must be put to the test during the denouement, where we find real answers, and real questions. As the cancan rages on, we see in rapid succession, very near the end of the film, a series of close ups of our successfully coupled characters, all smiling. How do we read this gesture towards closure? Do we actually buy, for example, the suddenly strong indication that Paulo may couple with Nini's laundress friend? What can we assume from these last shots? Should we be content to leave these characters as they are, happy in the moment, invest nothing in them as anything more than characters? The film gives us clues to give us pause. There are at least two notable omissions from this final montage: the ridiculous soldier, the Captain (Michel Piccoli), in love with Lola; and Prunelle (Pâquerette), the faded cancan dancer now living on the street.

The absence of Prunelle from the closing moments might remind us that she very well may represent Nini's future—Danglard seems to underplay the significance of introducing Prunelle to Nini as the old "Queen of the cancan" the same evening he crowns Nini as the new. But this is not lost on Nini. And it should not be lost on us that when Danglard passes Prunelle some money she calls him a "Prince". Danglard has been called a "Duke" before: are we meant to consider the relationship between Danglard the showman who wins and tosses away Nini's affections, and the actual Prince, Prince Alexandre (Giani Esposito), who, bound by the demands of office and breeding, cannot win her? And we might be reminded that the stage 'throne' on which the Prince attempts suicide is the same throne Danglard sits upon backstage as the Cancan gets under way, and from where he seems to conduct the action. We might also be reminded of another scene, important to both Danglard and Nini, when Danglard admits he worked as a waiter before he was a showman—in this way, is Danglard also suggesting his parallelism with Paulo, who Alexandre envied, the working class nephew of a baker

and the other competitor for Nini's love? We can tease out a lot from this realization, not the least of which is the suggestion that there may be a profound fluidity with which these genre characters can move between their generic types. Thus we cannot be too certain that we *know* how to read the last images of *French Cancan*—we can't trust that genre, that the theatre, will save these characters from misery.

Because the film, by its structure, attitude, and tone complicates any experience of closure, Danglard's role as an artist figure must be reconsidered—and, by implication, our sense of the artist-figure must meet some revision. How responsible is Danglard for 'creating' Nini? Just as the paths we follow through the film are individual but out of our control, so too does the film suggest that its characters are both responsible for their lives but also blissfully sensitive to the moments when responsibility is lifted, when they can submit to the moment, when the moment is created by someone else. Indeed, the tension here is between coincidence and self creation—what does it mean to live a life self created, how much of your grand gestures are coincidence, timing, fate? How often are the most perfect moments those of the drunken man at the end of the film, outside the Moulin Rouge, who inadvertently takes the bow for the entire film, and that glory passed, totters off-screen as the credits roll? This film of small details creates characters out of constellations of memory, from which we are asked, with a palmist's touch, to divine a plausible future. Because there is nothing less at stake than the future happiness of these characters, the onus is on us to be delicate with our interpretation. The film by its structure, by the rewards of multiple viewings, and by its emphasis on the character's final moments, forces us to be fair.

Jean Renoir's *French Cancan* (1955): Love and Performance by Lysandra Woods and Santiago Hidalgo

A bunch of characters from the late nineteenth century decide to get involved in complex inter-relationships, such that it results in a humorous drama revolving around dance and love. And of course, under the conventions of the musical, this admixture channels the sexual energies of attraction and desire into the dance; questions of who is a "good dancer" and who is not are loaded judgments not only of dance floor prowess but of sexual compatibility and even destiny. Good dancing

transcends the putative limitations of gender, class, and age. You either have the skillz or you don't.

French Cancan establishes its interest in sexuality, performance, and sexual performance in the first act. It also establishes a self-reflexive take on theatricality, spectacle, and consumption, as diffused over an assortment of personalities and types. The Paris here is an imaginary site of often American-made stereotypes, conjuring the necessary, ideal space in which love can flourish, but this sentimentalized image is undercut by a resolutely French sensibility, ensuring that bittersweet ironies and a gentle world-weariness, even a quiet perversity, will finish the day. Sex will triumph here, not love, and perhaps we are all the better off for that.

Yet, the mere mention of love provokes this reader into a state of quiet euphoria. Take one: Danglard (Jean Gabin) on the promenade, arm and arm, with his paramour. Take two: "What are your conditions," (for love?). Conditional on the response of Lola (María Félix), Danglard throws himself back to Nini (Françoise Arnoul), a younger version of himself (why do I say "younger version"—isn't he more like Lola?). Despite her flagrantly promiscuous persona, Lola yearns for a traditional engagement with love, characterized by singularity and marriage. Nini, on the other hand, becomes the mirror other of Danglard; indeed, he fashions her as such, and she complies, first hesitantly, then willingly: she morphs from ingénue to figurative whore, and she and we both have the more fun for it. The problem with pure, uncomplicated good love—so damn boring for those not directly involved.

As you may have noticed, the film applauds this choice. The baker and the prince should by 50s musical conventions have claims on Nini; their offer of domesticity and adoring comfort both fall short to the demands of this high-spirited lass. And we know that neither would make a fruitful match, for their image of love pales in comparison to the thrill of performance, done in the end not for Danglard, but for herself, for the sheer ecstasy of being devoured by the crowd. The crowd, the public, the mass audience are a fickle bunch, as the peripheral figure of the now dissipated and destitute ex-showgirl reminds us, but nonetheless Renoir upholds Nini's choice of their ephemeral applause over a basic heterosexual union (which is a more honest closure to the energies of the musical itself).

The musical is inherently about love and coupling, but it is also about talent and performance; or, about positioning love as a performance, a performance in which you need a perfect and perfectly adept partner. Again, note the hilarious discourse throughout the film on the pivotal question of: "Who can dance and who cannot." Notice that the baker finally ends up with Nini's boring friend who has the dancing skills of a joint-less marionette. In *French Cancan,* performative abilities are expressed predominantly via women (Nini, Lola). Danglard's assistant, in a sort of sidekick Donald O'Connor role, is the exception, but he is also represented as effeminate and theatrical, i.e. gay. Tellingly, the unsuitables are completely bereft of authentic performative abilities such as when the prince attempts suicide as a form of publicizing his despair, but ultimately fails—he lives. Although he does manage to create for himself an aura of melodramatic excess, he is quickly pushed to the margins of the main spectacle; devoid of relevant performative skills, the prince is forced to play the role of misplaced lover, a being that holds absolutely no cache in the euphoric, sexual and therapeutic ritual known as the *French Cancan.*

And why should he be allowed to participate? Indeed, the film cannot accommodate every stereotype, though it makes a noble attempt. In doing so, role reversals are handed out like cotton candy at the fairgrounds, momentarily sweet but ultimately devoid of substance. As it has always been, female sexuality is at the center of the spectacle. But sexual hysteria is uncharacteristically transferred to the male characters. Maybe this is a French thang? At first, it appears that Nini has lost her virginity to the baker. Later, we understand that virginity is far from pure, more like a commodity to be wielded when the time is right, than a treasure to be held tight. The only character that interprets virginity as virtue is the Prince, but this interpretation only leads him astray in navigating through the treacherous landscape of fin-de-siecle Paris. Ironically, the baker is in fact the one that loses his virginity, robbed by a precocious femme fatale manqué that saw him as nothing more than a practice run. The baker is smitten and believes that they are now married; only in red state America can sex be interpreted as a sign of eternal commitment, and even there, this idea is tenuous. The entire supporting cast partakes and shares the collective American dream, only for it to be supplanted by another, the French Cancan.

Watching this film today is a double exercise in nostalgia; that is, in the 50s this film is already nostalgic for an earlier era of decadence and elegance, for an imagining of an earlier France at a time when she had irrevocably lost her position as a world power, and at a time when the film industry was saturated with American product.

French Cancan is obviously aware of this saturation and is attempting to appropriate it for its own ends, to ends that are specifically French, even if at times the hollow feeling of the film suggests a lack of production values in comparison to American product. From a perspective on the other side of the new millennium, this film, in all its grotesque and glorious Technicolor, is a nostalgic viewing, an elegy for a golden age of filmmaking for genres that have disappeared, and for a French auteur whose quietly ironic sensibility is not exactly equipped to deal with the global pull of American optimism. But these are the very tensions that leave the film compelling. Much like love, if all had fit together easily, the result would have been nice but bland.

All of the writers are frequent contributors to Synoptique. Owen Livermore has contributed essays on the cinema of Takashi Miike in Synoptique 6, and the reception of *Starship Troopers* in Synoptique 3. In addition to his editorial duties, Gareth Hedges has supplied numerous splinters to Synoptique. Janos Sitar, principally responsible for previous Synoptique layouts, wrote on *Troy* in Synoptique 3. Jodi Ramer penned "Post-Feminism and Boredom" for Synoptique 4, "The Construction of the 'Hitchcock Blonde'in *Marnie*" for Synoptique 6, and "Tippi Hedren: Actress as Model" for the current edition. Adam Rosadiuk is Synoptique Editor-in-Chief and Designer and the author of "Notes on Style and Design" in Synoptique 6. He also contributes to this edition's "Style Forum" article. Lys Woods has contributed many articles to Synoptique, including a piece "On the Geek" in the current edition. Santiago Hidalgo, in addition to a book review in Synoptique 3, has also worked in an editorial capacity for the journal.

Style Forum Part 1
Contexts & Confessions

Colin Burnett, Brian Crane, Adam Rosadiuk, Dr. William Beard

Editor's Note: Synoptique's Style Forum was conducted on Concordia's MA Film Studies Message Board between January 28th and February 12th, 2005 in an effort to both assess the contents of Synoptique's Style Gallery and ascertain the points of intersection and conflict between the pieces written on style by the three contributors in Synoptique 6. Presented here is the outcome of this exchange in three Parts. These Parts both represent a 'best of' compilation of the postings made on the Board and follow the chronology of these postings as best as possible. Simultaneous postings are acknowledged in these documents and should be considered by the reader. Each Part has a Summary to guide the reader through the Forum's salient points.

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William Beard is Professor of Film/Media Studies at the University of Alberta. He is author of Persistence of Double Vision: Essays on Clint Eastwood and The Artist As Monster: The Cinema of David Cronenberg, and editor (with Jerry White) of North of Everything: English-Canadian Cinema since 1980.

Brian Crane is a PhD student at Université de Montréal and the author of "On Film Style" and "The Why and the How of Movie Trailers," both for Synoptique.

Adam Rosadiuk completed his B.A. at the University of Alberta with a major in Film Studies and a Minor in English. He is currently finishing his Master's Thesis, at Concordia University, on Political Philosophy and Terrence Malick's THE THIN RED LINE. His advisor is Dr. Catherine Russell. He is the author of "Notes on

Style and Design," which appeared in Synoptique 6.

Colin Burnett, who holds his Master's in Film Studies from Concordia University, has written on Bresson for Offscreen and Robert-Bresson.com. His contributions to Synoptique include "Silence is Golden: The Ferguson- Farber Affair" and "Style as Sample." His essay, "An Eye for the Exemplary: The Film Criticism of Susan Sontag," appears in the current edition of Offscreen.

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Part I:
Summary: In the first part of the Style Forum, William Beard, the Forum's moderator "engagé," sets the stage by asking each of the three authors who expressed their views on the notion of film style in Synoptique 6 to develop certain aspects of their positions; Brian Crane challenges Colin Burnett to explain why his conception is worth subscribing to; Adam Rosadiuk, in an effort to get to the phenomenological 'core' of style, introduces a personal anecdote; Burnett responds to Crane and Rosadiuk by trying to demonstrate the common ground to the three positions.

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William Beard (Jan 28th)

Hello Adam, Brian and Colin.

Having read your respective comments on film style with some care, I have come to the conclusion

that they are, if not mutually exclusive, at least incommensurable. This is not surprising, when the topic is so epistemologically ungrounded (no shared definitions for terms like "style," "content," "form," or—in Adam's usage—"design") and so unreasonably complicated by the density and complexity of film in the aggregate. Which is not to suggest we shouldn't have a conversation!

What I've decided to do is to snip a quote from each of your initial comments, and then ask a question or two arising from that quote.

So, for Brian:
You say: "Film is a made thing; it is nothing but style." And later you use the phrase: "…necessary focus on the matter of the film, on its style."

Would it then follow that everything in a film is style, because everything is made, or everything is part of the matter of the film? Is simply making something the same as giving it style?

Now for Adam:
"Design is problem solving. Ideal design responds perfectly to the practicalities of the thing existing in the world."

It is clear that in house-building, design is problem solving. It is clear that the purpose of a house it to provide an enclosed space for living or functioning in, but what is the purpose of a film? What if the design problem a moment of film style is addressing is "how do I get an 'oooh!' from the audience"?

And now for Colin:
"Whereas consideration of form has roots in textual analysis, or the study of a work's means for expressing its content, deliberation about style stands as a product of historical analysis. A feature of a film may be both formally and stylistically significant, but it may also be significant for one of these reasons alone."

Isn't textual analysis, or the means used for expressing content, as historically situated as any aspect of style? Is it possible to say that Bresson's style is Bressonian on account of its historical placement? Also, is it possible to talk about Bresson's style as a sample, or series of samples, without referring to elements such as transcendence that are only truly visible when viewing the work as a whole?

Brian Crane (Jan 29th)

Thanks for getting us started Bill. And I'll open by saying you're now completely on track for this conversation. Our initial impetus for the Style Gallery came when we recognized that our discussions of style were hampered by our various (and generally invisible) assumptions about and definitions of things like "style," "form" and "film." Does talking about style mean you have to cite Bordwell? Or accept a notion of the auteur? Or be socially or politically or institutionally conservative? Do you have to be a man? As absurd as some of this may sound, they are all possibilities that in contemporary Film Studies are (at least) implied, in various degrees and with various degrees of openness, by a turn to "style." The work on the Gallery, etc. has, until now, been largely aimed at getting these hidden factors on the table in all their disorder so that we could restart our initial conversation and try to make headway on or around them. For my part, I do see fairly strong connections between our responses but they may be obscured by the fact that they each take up "style" on such very different scales and each work toward such very different ends. Perhaps this would be something to sort out early on.

Regarding my own response, yes, everything in a film is style. But I'm being disingenuous because I don't think that means that every made thing has an interesting or worthwhile style.

Pointing out that style is all you get in film thus confuses the issue because it uses style to mean both the matter of the film and the thing that draws us to film. But this confusion is productive because it forces us to admit the difference between the two meanings and that each of us only wants to talk about the small subset of films that merit our attention. We know which films these are even if our individual short lists may vary. We also know (though we recoil I think from the dangerous implications we see, perhaps instinctively, nestled in this knowledge) that there is a lot of agreement between our different lists.

To my mind, a meta-critical discussion of "style"—i.e. a discussion of what style analysis should be and the basis it should rest upon—could choose a worse starting point than an assessment of these areas of agreement over films that merit our close attention and of the distance that separates them from those that do not.

Why? Because these differences and similarities are fundamentally differences and similarities in how the

various films are made and work and to what end: i.e. their style.

Adam and Colin offer ways of conceptualizing and proceeding with this work. Am I wrong?

WB (Jan 29th)

Brian: It certainly is a different thing to say that all films have style than that all films have a different style. You could also say all films have length, and you could probably say also that all films have content. So you're still left with the problem of saying what this style is that all films have. To say that films ARE style, that that's ALL they're made of, is a different assertion again—and again requires some definition and clarification.

I agree with you about the usefulness of having some examples. I think all three initial statements could have used some specific applications for illustration, and maybe it's a good idea to do that now. On the other hand, it only gets you a certain way down the road, since my sense is that the discussion is going to be quite different if we use Ozu as an example than if we use Rossellini—or, in some ways even more useful, a movie where the hack director's style is imperceptible from the noise of all the other hack movies around it.

BC (Jan 29th)

Bill, you make a very good point by calling me to task for playing fast and loose with definitions. They're not easy to give, but I'll work on it.

I can say, however, that I don't think "style" should be defined as "authorial style" because 1) it transforms a discussion of style (which to me means something akin to the close analysis of a film text) into a discussion of an author (function) that is ultimately less interesting than (even if it's a part of) the film; and 2) it limits how we might think about (or even see) style elements that cannot be reasonably or usefully traced to an author.

When I say "all you get is style," I mean that films aren't transparent and to get to culture, or politics, or history, or even an author involves navigating the concrete aspect of the film's style (it's color, montage, framing, story construction, story presentation, costuming, etc., etc.) whether it be conventional, authorial, artistic,

or hackwork. How we do that is not obvious, but we do it. And we do it in ways that become visible in the distinctions we make between a film by Ozu and a film by Eisenstein and a film by director X starring that kid from TV.

I think Colin's discussion of the sample may be helpful here because it suggests a way discussions of style might be developed outside of purely authorial or conventional frameworks. I'm thinking specifically of how he treats the fade to yellow clip from *Age Of Innocence*. I recently realized a similar fade to yellow appears in the opening half of *Lost Highway*. Setting these two moments side-by-side as samples seems like an interesting way to see how a particular style moment works in terms of narrative, temporality, character presentation and audience attention (all aspects mentioned in Colin's commentary on the clip). It allows us to ask what is made possible when a common technical feature of film is transformed into a figural trope? As close analysis of style, this is not primarily an examination of authorial style, even if it seems likely lead to insight into two auteurs' work (a point that might be connected to Adam's interest in design).

Am I making "style" into the means to develop a methodology of close reading? If so, is that a mistake? (A genuine question.) Am I erasing an important distinction between "style" and "form"?

Adam Rosadiuk (Jan 29th)

Bill, your question, which included a quotation from me, is:

> *"Design is problem solving. Ideal design responds perfectly to the practicalities of the thing existing in the world."*

> *It is clear that in house-building, design is problem solving. It is clear that the purpose of a house it to provide an enclosed space for living or functioning in, but what is the purpose of a film? What if the design problem a moment of film style is addressing is "how do I get an 'oooh!' from the audience"?*

This is a good point, and one I tend not to take seriously enough generally. This has something to do with my sense of art as being far from decorative, and in fact, having little sensitivity to or appreciation for what must have been art's origins, and what art is for most people: art as pretty things. I think it comes from

just not growing up with a lot of paintings. Art, for me, exists mainly in discourse, ideas, and in miracles of performance with raw materials: for me, weaned almost entirely on the artforms that lend themselves to narrative fiction, these raw materials are most often genre conventions, the technical possibilities of the medium, and the subtle rhetorical possibilities of an argument communicated metonymically. But let's face it—and this speaks to Brian's point about with "Film style is all you get"—we are drawn to art and film for the spectacle. For the fireworks. For the *trompe l'oeil*. For the sleight of hands. Big magic tricks. We may convince ourselves—and I think we're mostly right—that we can tell the crass-but-guiltily-pleasurable-spectacles from the crass-but-numbing spectacles, and both from the highly refined spectacle that is layer upon layer of subtext; but all-in-all this is all still Spectacle. So is that what art is, what film is: an effects generating device? Special effects by special affects?

So, Bill…we're all friends here, and you don't *have* to account for yourself, but I want to put it out there: how much is 'style', for you, about those *wowza* moments? Thus, how subjective is the study of style, and then, if we're going to talk about style, how much do we have to talk about the evolution of technology and technique?

When I'm talking about 'design' I'm talking about relegating all those wowza moments to the special effects of film. Hitchcock films are prefect examples: they seem like consummately 'designed' films: from wardrobe, to storyboards, to music, to publicity. And Hitchcock is famous for talking about playing the audience like playing an organ: push a button, get a response. This is a film as a machine. It really works; it has that energy. Hitchcock, like Welles, has a showman's—a magician's—urge in him. I then want to talk about 'something else' that is not strictly design, and isn't necessarily present in even the most perfectly designed, most technique-ly advanced film. And this 'something else' is much more sublime than perfect technique, though it is intimately related. You seem to want to get away from that, and get back to the pure experience of wowza moments, which are not ontologically different in a commercial film and an art film. Of course, knowing you, I think we'd agree that the wowza moments are much more wowza, and much more frequent, in our "short list of films" (as Brian calls them) that we harbor, and share, and that include an awful lot of canonical art films. I'd say that this short list is more than just convention, and more than just about a community of discourse.

Which comes back to finally just isolating what style

is. And that's why I think if we're going to talk about examples, we should turn back to the Style Gallery. I mean, people pointed to these moments and said "that's style". Can we go to them, forget about the finger pointing, and say, "oh, I see style there too." Can we be witnesses to these wowza accidents, and agree that we saw something pretty amazing?

WB (Jan 30th)

Brian: Yes, it is certainly possible and maybe desirable to discuss style without discussing authorial style. But I do have the instinct to think of style as coming from somewhere, whether it's from the author or from cinematic conventions or from something even broader and more diffuse like narrative tradition. I still don't quite get the notion that when we do cinematic close readings all we are talking about is style. I probably do still want to make a distinction between style and content, but then to repair that split by insisting that they both work towards the same meaning, and even that style should be subservient to content. In close reading I also want to talk about narrative types, formal strategies and theme—and it seems to me hard to encompass these categories under the word "style."

Adam: I understand very much why you want to distinguish "wowza" stylistic moments from things that are more basic to the "design" of the work. I think it's a good idea to do that, and I also think your "design" idea is a highly promising way to do that if you can resolve the question of what it is that is being designed, and how the design principles fulfill or somehow express the purpose of the work. But again, what is the purpose of a film? When you use the idea of "working", it is daring and provocative of you to take this as literally as you do, but you must be aware of how this status (which is identical to a statement about whether the moment or the film is aesthetically successful or not) is in dispute. You say it's working, I say it's not, and that's the end of the discussion, or threatens to be, because the term is referring to a subjective activity inside the viewer that is not universal. As you can see from my post to Brian, I'd prefer to piggyback style—"wowza" moments AND "design" onto some kind of meaning to which everything in the work is contributing. I am aware that this creates its own problems though, because "meaning" then becomes almost as contentious as "work" (but I'd say it's easier to have a detailed argument about).

In response to your question about how much I like "wowza" moments, I usually like them a lot if they are embedded in something I can see as meaningful. A lot of "wowza" moments in *Sunrise* and *Magnolia* fall into this category, a lot of "wowza" moments in *Metropolis* and *Kill Bill* don't. Mainstream cinema has never been as "wowza" as it is now—never even been close. But in the action-movie/FX world, "wowza" is all there is: the purpose or meaning of "wowza" is to get people to say "wowza!", and if you asked the filmmakers what all this "wowza" was in aid of, they literally wouldn't understand the question. So it's now getting a lot harder for me to be truly wowed. I am much more responsive to stylistic elements you would classify under "design."

Colin Burnett (Jan 30th)

I'd like first to respond to the questions Bill directed at me and then (space permitting) I'll comment on the other developments thus far.

Inevitably, all forms of analysis, as the product of a given individual who belongs to a given era, are historical. This is a given, though it is not a given that one must subscribe to historicism in order to occupy this position. Implied in my statement, however, is a distinction between exegesis and scholarship. An interpretive critic or commentator will approach a work in a manner quite different from the historian of style or scholar. This is the basic tenet of Bordwell's argument in *Making Meaning*. Before I continue with this line of thought, I'd like to clarify that this distinction is useful only to a point—that it is not absolutely fundamental to a description of the nuances of the practice of studying a work or series of works. Stated otherwise, these are, in practice, cross-pollinating species of inquiry; often exegetes need the findings of scholars in order to offer sound interpretations of a single work and likewise scholars often use the insights and observations of exegetes to fill out their account of patterns in the history of style.

My point is this. A formal reading, as opposed to a stylistic study, is not generally motivated by a need to know how we might be able to identify a work historically. An historian of style, like a Wolfflin or a Bordwell or a Salt, tells the student of art history how he or she can situate a given artwork based on the recognition of certain salient features of the work itself. A banal example of this from sculpture is the body type and posture of the figure. This leads the historian to

consider aspects of a film that may be of little or no interest to the formal analyst. The formal analyst, for her part, is motivated by the desire to grasp the work's meaning as a unity. Take the blue tint to the images in *Velvet Goldmine* (see Gallery). The stylist (at least the stylist of a certain persuasion) will consider the blue images from the point of view of the filters and color stock (its sensitivity and speed) and the such that made possible the effect itself and its characteristics compared to earlier blue tinting, such as that to be found in Joseph Cornell's *Rose Hobart*. The formalist will want to read the significance of the blue images, when we see blue, when we don't, and all this in the grand scheme of *Velvet Goldmine* itself (which may or may not lead to a consideration of the color blue in films by this director or in films of a given genre). While this meaning may not be independent of historical consideration, the exegete has little concern for how and where we might place this piece in the story of art's history. Broadly speaking, a formal analyst wants to know what a given work can tell us about life and how a correct reading can reveal this significance. Another way of putting this distinction is to say that while those interested in form are concerned with art as a product, those interested in style are interested with process. Formal analysis is a hermeneutical activity concerned with the story and expression of a particular film; stylistic analysis is an activity that writes the story of the art itself.

For all these reasons, Bill, I think that 1) in his post from January 29th, Brian is erasing the distinction between "style" and "form" though by no means in a negative sense, because we all do it (pointing out that color fades in *Age Of Innocence* and *Lost Highway* have affinities leads one in two directions [at least]: i) to a study of the means by which the fades were made [did they require different techniques?] and how and when they were used in the films in question; and ii) the different "meanings" produced by the fades in relation to the narratives in question—the denotative and connotative significance of the effect); and 2) I cannot subscribe to the view that "style should be subservient to content" (your 2nd post from January 29th). What "content" are the staging innovations and complexities subservient to in the restaurant sequence in Tati's *Playtime*? In the use of the sounds of a man raking during the confrontation between the Countess and the Priest in Bresson's *Journal D'un Curé De Campagne*? In the use of post-flashing techniques in Altman's *The Long Goodbye*? In the use of digital intermediate (DI) to adjust color timing in virtually every big-to-medium budget film that's now made? I am not implying that one cannot interpret these stylistic choices and their effects as they appear in the

final product, but simply that their broader historical significance (and value) remains unacknowledged if all we do is programmatically force every aspect of style to serve some element of content or narrative, or, alternatively, if we dismiss segments of film or entire films for "failing" to make style serve content. These developments may not even be of interest to the most subtle of close, close film interpreters, but they are indeed part of the artistry of film and should be acknowledged.

As far as your Bresson questions go, Bill, I only have space to reply to them briefly. I believe that by now it is clear how I'd respond to the first. Bresson's style is Bressonian because of its historical placement, which is to say, because of the differences between it and the other film styles around; this must be so because style is an historical thing. I've actually been working quite closely on this issue by examining the techniques used to make Bresson's films and then seeking a means for measuring, on practical terms, the advancements in film practice made by himself and his collaborators. My answer to your second question follows from this. Let's use the example of flashing. There is evidence to suggest that cinematographer Pasqualino de Santis used post-flashing techniques in the making of *L'argent* to even out the contrast of the photography—in other words, to flatten the image. A study of this stylistic feature of this Bresson film in no way requires speculating about the "souls" of the characters.

This post is rather long, but justified, I believe. Let me end with a general observation. Style, no matter how one pitches it, seems to be inextricably tied to *value*—although as I have argued, not to "meaning." Whether one assesses the place of a stylistic feature in relation to the whole that is a singular text, or whether one assesses the place of the same feature in the history of style, an evaluation seems to be tied to the act of pointing that feature out.

BC (Jan 31st)

First, there is a lot of good stuff in what Colin says. One thing I like is the way his discussion points out the process of making as a key difference between texts (an important but unavoidably print-based metaphor in the cinema) and film. Techniques of lighting, possibilities of film stock etc. have no analogue in language use and influence the viewed film in ways that resemble more closely something like under-painting in the visual arts.

So Colin is right to stress the importance of researching and understanding this process and its possibilities at various moments. If style becomes one way to do this, then great.

But, this does not exhaust the practical uses of the term style. These uses (or ad hoc definitions) are far from perfect but I'm not sure it's useful to throw them by the wayside by radically redefining the term down to a highly specific concern that excludes most of its typical uses. My point: we need to talk about definitions and Colin identifies a key but less often acknowledged aspect of what we perceive as style. But this is only a part of what people are pointing toward in their submissions to the Gallery. Defining the term too tightly doesn't make what exceeds Colin's definition (but is evident in the Gallery) go away.

My question back to Colin would be: How would you account for the fact that the blue in *Velvet Goldmine* connects stylistically to a series of intertexts that are traced out by the very particular interweaving of color and emotional tone and content that is every bit as much a part of the story of art as the story of color filters and film stock? You want to name this story of material the boundary between exegesis and scholarship, between hermeneutics and style analysis, but why should I buy that boundary?

BC (Feb 1st)

Or, to restate my question . . .

In the Gallery I see style used in a variety of ways. They are as follows:

Style=authorial signature
(e.g. *Solaris, Les 400 Coups, Taxi Driver*)

Style=excess or decoration
(e.g. *Suddenly Last Summer, Taxi Driver*)

Style=national, genre or industry norms
(e.g. *The Thing*)

Style=stylishness
(e.g. *The Royal Tenenbaums*)

Style=technique
(e.g. *Flowers Of Shanghai, The Age Of Innocence*)

Adam's discussion attempts a fusion of the first and fourth meanings in terms of intentionality, which connects it back to the first meaning. Bill's questions (he hasn't offered a statement) have consistently recalled us (or at least me) back to the first meaning, an initial and still important vector for discussing style in Film Studies. My discussion keeps hanging up on the partiality of all of these meanings, offering as an alternative only my sense that questions of style will be worked out film-by-film through a particular kind of engagement with the texts. (i.e. I keep offering an image of the critic's work rather than a definition of style.) Colin's definition takes up only the last meaning, bouncing it perhaps off of the third.

My question, to Colin and Adam, is what are we to make of these differences (which Bill opened this discussion by calling "if not mutually exclusive, at least incommensurable")? And to Colin, how would you account for (or what would you make of) the fact that the meaning of style that you privilege strikes me as the least important to contemporary (and much of historical) Film Studies?

CB (Feb 1st)

Intertextuality is a "technique" (though I use the term here with some reservation) for *making sense* of references in a given text or series of texts. It is therefore concerned with interpretation— with exegesis. Though it might be said that pointing out the fact that two films are related in their use of blue filters could be an instance of intertextuality, there is a key difference between those who wish to point this out in order to stress how filmmakers developed new uses for the technique and those who are interested in decoding the use of blue in a recent work (by inferring that previous uses are being referred to—consciously, unconsciously—by the recent work). In the latter case, we're talking about meaning that is carried over from one text to another. The historian of style is scarcely interested in such things. Therefore the practices overlap slightly but remain distinct because they are each motivated by a different series of questions. The use to which a given feature is put is different for the historian and for the exegete.

I want to end this post by developing an idea I posited in a previous post. This "exegesis" versus "scholarship" distinction is not an ontological one in the sense that it points to fundamental characteristics that one can use to illustrate the different states of being one is in when

engaged in them (whatever that means). It is, rather, an institutional distinction—one that is useful for the film academic in that it might make her reflect upon the bodies of knowledge that her research or interpretive findings are contributing to. No one would argue that, in writing *Film History* or his essay "Intensified Continuity" or *On the History of Film Style* that Bordwell is engaged in exegesis. Likewise, no one would argue that Parker Tyler in his essay on Chaplin and Kafka, or Susan Sontag in her essay on Bergman's *Persona* or Manny Farber in his essay on *Taxi Driver* are primarily interested in developing ways for understanding the history of style. Now, in picking these three critics, I may have shot myself in the foot in the sense that all three write in ways that, as they describe in great detail the "surfaces" and techniques of the filmmakers, is interesting for the Bordwellian historian of style. But no one would argue that their main goal is not the understanding of the work(s) in question. It is. Exegesis and Scholarship.

CB (Feb 1st)

I just finished posting my response to your initial question and then noticed your new posting.

I like the work you've done here, but can find ways to quibble with it (in ways that I believe build on what you've assembled). You say that mine is the least important to contemporary Film Studies. Now, far be it for me to take offense to such a statement, I do have to point out that a style sample can refer to authorial signature (1), national, genre or industry norms (3), and technique (5). These all would/should be of interest to the historian of style. (2) and (4) differ from the others in that they involve subjective (which is not to say, irrelevant) assessments of how any one of the features pointed out in (1), (3) and (5) can work in the context of a given film. An authorial signature (or sample of it) can be "decorative" or "stylish"; a genre norm (or sample of it) can be "excessive"; a technique (or sample of it) can be "decorative," "stylish" or "excessive." (1), (3) and (5) are processes associated with identification; (2) and (4) are processes associated with description and/or interpretation.

A question (in defense of a Bordwellian notion of style—which, as I pointed out, I am in sympathy with but which I do find a little restrictive): how can you say that "style as technique" is the least important to contemporary Film Studies when the majority of

Film Studies undergrads receive their initiation into the discipline by way of *Film Art*? "Least important"? That's strong … "Most resented"—yes, that fits.

Let me explain why I ask this question. I think that a large number of contributors to the Gallery would say (at least as far as I can tell from the write-ups) that they contributed moments that they thought to be "stylish." (I am not one of them; I happen to believe that *looking* for a style moment in the context of a discussion of what is "stylish" in movies is not the same as *looking* for a style moment that would be of value to a discourse like Film Studies. We're talking about two kinds of looking here.) I therefore think, generally speaking, that the Bordwellian notion of style is a good way to distinguish between style and "stylishness."

BC (Feb 1st)

RE: your quibble with "least important": you raise a good point that may indicate the source of part of the confusion over style in Film Studies. What we teach about film to undergraduates (because it is teachable) does not match what is important to or the center of Film Studies as an disciplinary discourse (but highly unteachable). I'm not sure pointing out the problem gets us very far is responding to it, however, and it certainly doesn't change the status of *Film Art*, etc. in our disciplinary discourse.

AR (Feb 2nd)

If I may interject, let's ask ourselves the question that started the Gallery, and what started this Forum: What are each of us talking about when we talk about style? I see style as a phenomenon, and as a phenomenon it'll only be revealed by personal experience and conversation. We have the raw experiences. I therefore believe that we need to suss out the contours of the phenomenon, and then decide if either

a) 'Style' is usefully ambiguous.
b) 'Style' is un-usefully ambiguous and we either need to limit it, or we need to come up with new vocabulary words.

Either way, we have to know what 'style' refers to.

My entire sense of style as an interesting topic comes

precisely from its ordinary mutability. While a civilian might come up with their own technical definition, this technical definition would only be relevant to that time they gave the definition, and would not really encompass the concept entirely for them: in fact—and this is the point of the Gallery—to give a definition of something like style is probably going to take the form of an example. As it turned out, that is very tricky—rather, people want to talk about something being 'stylish'. I think it's important that it's easier to talk about the concept of 'stylishness' than 'style'. Most importantly, I think that when most of us talk about style—and this speaks to Colin's interest in 'value'—we're talking about what we love about film. This is where I'm in complete agreement with Brian.

Sounds like a segue for a personal anecdote:

I first became conscious of film style—and I suddenly realize that it's a big mistake that we don't have it in the Gallery—while watching Tim Burton's *Batman*. It was the summer of 1989. The Berlin Wall was starting to crumble, NAFTA was on the books, and a young Prez named George Bush was teaching America how to laugh again. I was twelve. I didn't see a lot of movies as a kid, nor did I have much sense of what the big movies were. I sort of remember *Ghostbusters* being huge. And *Back To The Future*. And *Et* was always big, though basically before my time. That summer though, I was completely conscious that everyone absolutely everyone was talking about *Batman*. Kids would sit for hours and just recite scenes. When I finally saw *Batman*, near the end of its run, it was, simply, a revelation. This was the first time that I watched a movie with *awareness*. I realized that this movie didn't *have* to be this way— someone had decided what kind of movie it would be, how it would look, work, feel. It's important to point out that as ignorant about movies as I was, I totally got the look of the film. This is the beauty of pop culture, of Saturday morning cartoons—I'd never seen a film noir, nor a Hollywood film from 40s, or a Hammer horror film, but I understood *Batman's* references. And I understood them as communicating something vastly more significant than the story—a story that I found dissatisfying even at 12. There was 'something' about the film—I wanted to watch it again to find out what. It was this experience, that drove me deeper into film, into what we study in Film Studies. When I saw *Star Wars* I wanted to read the *Star Wars* novelization. But when I saw *Batman* I wanted to find out who made it, how, why, and what it meant.

Needless to say, I think projects like Bordwell's

'historical poetics', at their best, give us incredibly useful tools for understanding the technique of a film like *Batman*. At their worse, these sorts of 'scientific' projects of knowledge creation in the humanities are either reactionary—defanging culture studies by accusing it of violating texts—or, worse, are just afraid of ideas that require good writing to express. I hate bad interpretation as much as the next Bordwellian. But it's great interpretations that make me love to study film.

Colin's piece on "Style as Sample" I think is a great piece—and a promising clarification of how to make specific contributions to film knowledge, without making practical film knowledge the whole horizon of Film Studies. To be honest though, I still don't really understand the metaphor—and I think I'd have to wait for Colin's feature length essay to really get at the issue.

My point: Our three pieces are quite different. Brian's piece was meant to be less a 'position' piece, and more a suggestive and enticing introduction to the Gallery; my piece was meant to synthesize my interest in the technical 'design' of a film with my interest in style's 'something more'; while Colin was responding to his discovery of Goodman's 'sample' metaphor and how that might relate to Bordwell. We each imply certain positions on style, but as three pieces speaking at the concept of film style I'm not sure how fairly comparable they are. That said, I think we all agree that each of us have—through our pieces, and through the Gallery— gotten closer to the idea of film style. I think that for the remainder of this forum, we need to make headway in summarizing our realizations. Realizations about the concept of film style, and how it is used.

And you guys may balk, but I'd love to hear if you had similar encounters with film style (or style in general) as wayward youths. Film studies isn't autobiography—with apologies to Jonathan Rosenbaum—but coming to an understanding of what a concept is ordinarily (before we make it extraordinary) is a communal experience.

CB (Feb 4th)

Let me take a brief detour that I think will address a few points you both mention and demonstrate how our separate notions of style are not as incompatible as it might initially appear. This demonstration may fail, but I think it's worth a shot.

All three of us identify separate (but perhaps in some way(s) related) notions of why style is of value to people (scholars and non-scholars alike)—so this speaks to the value issue. We each bring up contexts of value or of importance: history, beauty and overarching design or the "something else." These contexts are ones in which different people imbue style with value.

I believe that the contributors to the Gallery would be able (if not compelled) to isolate a number of underlying features that while they perhaps contribute to the "construction" (a crude term) of the experience that led them to value and then chose the moment, remained in a number of cases unaccounted for in the write-ups themselves. (This would also go for the ordinary filmgoer, albeit one with an unusually developed sense of why and how films are made. It certainly applies to Jerry White's *Solaris* moment, which is important for what I've said above and will say below.) These features would be the parts that make up the style moments, which incidentally I take to be "wholes" that are greater than the sum of their parts (or Adam's "something else"). But these features retain their separateness—to a degree—as observable, empirically verifiable parts. The features are what I call "samples;" samples that are insufficient on their own to explain away the beauty or design or form of the scene because they merely reveal aspects of themselves. A stylistic feature in this sense might be said to be selfabsorbed— drawing attention to itself because of what it is. Almost out of spite or, conversely, of willing engagement, or, to offer a third possibility, out of some fundamental need to make meaning of this selfabsorption, this gravitational pull, this tendency on the part of the feature to try to seduce the viewer with a salacious wink, we place (another crude term because it implies intentionality) a stylistic feature or a series of them into wider contexts of significance; in this way a feature (or sample) might be said to have two kinds of value: intrinsic and extrinsic. What does this mean, you might ask? Well, let's try to work this out.

The extrinsic value of a sample is the place of the part in the whole—its role; what it contributes to the feeling we get in one of those great style moments; that which we have trouble qualifying and quantifying. As far as intrinsic value goes, in talking about it, I don't think that I'm saying that Goodman or Bordwell or Salt or Burch decodes the riddle of the unqualifiable moment by reducing it (in the spirit of "scientism") to mere totalities (as opposed to wholes) and then by placing the real value in the lap of the features or parts that pass our litmus paper tests for "style." I think we can maintain the extrinsic value (in all its forms: historical, aesthetic, or

that which we call "stylish" or "something more") even as we talk about and develop means for refining our vocabularies to describe the intrinsic value of features on their own. Otherwise put, I really do think that we're all playing for the same team—I really do. In fact, Brian, I'd say that these 'means' help us develop appreciation for the beauty of the features at both levels—macro and micro. As a kind of preface to my own foray into anecdote, I want to mention that my concern for developing an appreciation of the micro level beauty of a feature or sample is entirely motivated by a deep desire—a drive—to refine and continue to refine my appreciation for macro-level beauty, to develop a more "serious" (*pace* Sontag) sensibility for beauty in film, so that I expressly don't miss out on the "something more" to be detected in all films or in films of all shapes and sizes. As recently as two years ago, I'd never have been able to see the beauty—micro-level beauty, beauty of the sample or feature—in either unremarkable and unsuccessful films like *Kill Bill*, Disney's *Black Hole*, *8 Femmes, Millennium Mambo*, Mamoulian's *Dr.Jekyll And Mr. Hyde* and Frankenheimer's *The Train*. What these each lack in terms of "success" or macro-level beauty they make up for with a wide range of micro-level, sample beauty. Moreover, I'd never have been able to discover layers of significance (which is not to say "meaning") in certain Bresson films, or in *Persona* or *Flowers Of Shanghai* or *Age Of Innocence* (each of which exudes macro-level beauty). This really is about finding new ways to be (soberly) responsive to the works I encounter.

Now, the anecdote. Adam first noticed style with the release of *Batman*? I can't put a precise date on my own "awareness" of asking questions about the why, how, and what; it came slowly as I read critics. I am in Film Studies solely due to my interest in the sensibilities that are attracted to the movies, to my desire to figure out these sensibilities, and to emulate the best parts and jettison the problematic parts—in a word, to develop a sophisticated taste for film. Taste as I see it cannot be reduced to a method or set of rules or a context or a series of guidelines; taste is intuitive, which is not to say that it is not a form of knowledge. It is; it's a form of user's knowledge—and filmgoers are users. One particular area of fascination for me is the view—the judgment, or species of judgment—that states that in order for a work of art to be successful, all the parts must fit—must be "necessary" in the eyes of the reader/viewer/listener. In film, this view (and we're all familiar with it) contends that style must mirror content (which we can take to mean "plot") or else all those elements that don't fit are mere "stylization." (This is

Sontag's take.)

This view is attractive, very attractive. While I can't locate when I became aware of style, I can say when I wanted to enter Film Studies, which may be associated to my discovery of style's importance. The very first book I ordered online was in 1998 and it was Mario Falsetto's *Stanley Kubrick: A Narrative and Stylistic Analysis*. That one passage in which he reads the ending of 2001 (pp. 111-118) inspired me instantaneously to consider a career as a film academic. Falsetto makes everything in that scene "fit." Here, plotting has no significance, no meaning, without form (and style).

Critics with sophisticated taste, from Ferguson to Farber to Sontag (I'm sure there are others), however, have all considered or tinkered with the idea that a stylistic feature need not be plot motivated in order to be of value, in order to "fit." This is what, to make a long story short (too late!), led me to Burch and Bordwell and Goodman. This not only opens up new opportunities for research in academia, but leads directly to a very rich array of film experiences that would not have otherwise been available to me. I'm currently, for instance, reading back issues of *Cinefex*. People seem to have a sense of when special effects work and when they don't, but what do the experts, the technicians themselves, say about this? Surely there are other ways of talking about CGI effects than merely to say "that looks real" or "that looks fake." If I can learn to see the way they see, to talk the way they talk, then my film experiences will be all that more rich. Then I'll be able to see the intrinsic value of the visual effects sample from a given film that tends to be dismissed by critics as a general failure, which will enrich my broader estimations of value, of beauty.

The forum is continued in Part 2.

The Actress as Model Tippi Hedren in Hitchcock

Jodi Ramer

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

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

The Birds casts Hedren as a scandalous society girl. We see her go to great lengths to one-up a trivial prank—even if she is developing a torch for Mitch, the gesture *is* frivolous. Has she nothing better to do than to tease potential beaux with extravagant indirection? Certainly Mitch's mother makes pointed remarks—might Melanie be irresponsible, or worse, loose? Yet even before Melanie explains away her past scandals as products of media sensationalism, and as part of a disaffected lifestyle that now wearies her, we know that she simply can't be reckless or shockingly uninhibited. Not because Hedren exudes the fundamental integrity that makes Ingrid Bergman so obviously trustworthy in *Notorious*. It's just that Hedren really seems like a practical girl. Sure, she can be playful, even mischievous, but she's not arch, nor faux-demure, nor complicated enough to be leading an extravagant life. Grace Kelly could be: she's pure Park Avenue; she could jump naked in fountains and be very Brett Ashley about it, charming and breezy and suitably jaded—we know she

could run off and marry princes. Hedren feels like the working woman that she was: a single mother doing commercials on TV and anxious for financial stability until Hitchcock swept in with offers of stardom. The anxiety of her position we don't see, the eager desire to make good and keep everything together despite the impossible pressures of being Hitchcock's new Galatea. These anxieties *could* show. They could be culled for the challenge of playing hysterical women. But Hedren is no method actor; she's a professional. She understands the professional impetus for a woman to present herself in a seemly manner, without excess. With a grace that should appear neither studied, nor so natural as to cast into question the woman's sense of her place [1].

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

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

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

Marnie's falsehoods are also serviceable. She lies to smooth the fraught relationship with her mother; she lies with an earnestness that reads as parodic to anyone who's been put through an interview like Marnie's at Rutland's (and Mark Rutland is plenty amused, himself); at the horse races she lies with an icy insistence in order to deflect a creepy character's suspicious advances. Though Marnie's untruths form a web of deceit

that, the film will tell us, traps Marnie in the center, it's undeniable that she smoothly executes handy fabrications that many of us would be proud to master. We want her to keep lying because she does it so well.

Hitchcock's films suggest that subterfuge is a necessary component of the feminine position. A woman simply has to be cagey to get by in the world. This condition is made literal when our identification and sympathies are with female criminals and spies (*Marnie, Psycho,* and *Notorious, North By Northwest,* respectively, to give just a few examples). We value their shrewdness, and we're made to see that it's absolutely necessary. In *Psycho,* Marion Crane frustrates us because she's a very bad liar. She can't properly give herself over to the needed acceptance of her deception. Furtive meetings with her lover have not prepared Marion for the rigours of criminality; she is already tiring of her double life before she goes on the lam. She attracts suspicion wherever she goes, she puts herself in danger, and she gets caught—but for the wrong reasons, by the wrong guy. Marion's fate—her punishment— is hysterically dire and in no way warranted, especially considering her resolve to confess and finally rid herself of this cumbersome duplicity. In a sense, Marion is doomed because she can neither find fulfillment in the straight and narrow, nor fully give herself over to her transgressions.

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

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

But what appealed to Hitchcock was also subject to his ambivalence. We know that Tippi Hedren was the one who Hitchcock really went crazy about, the one he courted and ruthlessly controlled, the one he menaced. Tellingly, he cast her as the most intractable female within his films, the one who most flagrantly turns the rules of the public (male) sphere to her advantage, who most needs to be brought into line. Hitchcock described *Marnie* as a film about a "cock-teaser." Now, Hitchcock was known to make cute, disingenuous comments, but this statement has an undeniable force. It's easy to imagine that the evident aggression here was targeted at Ms. Hedren herself. Curious to note, though, is how *Marnie* plays out, indeed, as the product of a frustrated sexuality, but not an eager one, for even though the narrative is all about sexual pathology vs. healthy, "normal" sexuality, the film seems to be on the side of frigidity. Female sexuality is at issue, but, curiously, it isn't played out with or upon Hedren's body. Her clothes are far from revealing—her evening gown a glacial tint and cut sharp above the collarbone, her nightgowns downright sturdy. Hedren's manner is crisp, and the treatment of her person in *Marnie* emphasizes this brittle quality, avoids sensualising her. Even when Mark, deciding finally to take what he believes is owed

to him, rips off her nightdress, we see only her shocked face, and her naked legs not much above the knee. After all this modesty, even her feet look truly vulnerable, exposed: it would be a gross violation to see more. Strangely, though Mark continues to force himself upon Marnie he does not proceed until he's covered her up again—significantly in *his* robe: his gesture of protection is really an act of claiming. He changes his tactics, now gently kissing and caressing her face and neck, all of which is shot in close-up, effectively cutting off Hedren's body. Thus, even for a sex scene (granted, a particularly loaded sex scene: for Mark it's tenderness, for Marnie it's rape), Hedren is maintained as a cerebral force, as a woman whose body doesn't even come into the picture, as it were. Her sexual problems are "in her head," and it would seem— directorial intentions aside—that Hitchcock could only bear to represent them as such.

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

Even allowing that Mark might be a sympathetic character, true-hearted in his own misguided way, his macho insistence that Marnie is a "wild animal" that he has the right to "tame" is disturbing, partially because if Hedren is any animal it's a bird, and a delicate one

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

Sometimes it can: Grace Kelly is utterly convincing as an appealingly manipulative aristocrat in *Dial M For Murder*, but the film falters when we're to believe that she has been locked away on Death Row—she carries with her such an essence of unassailable quality that her predicament, on an affective level, must be dismissed (even if the narrative still carries us along). Hedren doesn't create such complications. She acts as if she were modeling emotions; she's opaque. When she is meant to be vulnerable and troubled, Hedren doesn't give us modulated responses, but immediate regression. She simply projects "child": her husky-adenoidal voice climbing to a shrill register, her placid face, already with the finely etched and evenly assembled features of a doll, turning wide-eyed and gap-mouthed. Or she becomes helpless, listless, shocked and still. Hedren's semblances of distress simultaneously evoke sympathy *and* deconstruct the whole cliché of a woman coming apart

under the guiding hand of the male genius. Kim Novak as Marnie would just be morbid—she'd be brooding and wounded, her corporeality tragically at odds with her frigid stance: the film would be lugubrious rather than clinical. But Hedren refuses to be utterly broken down that she may be built back up. She doesn't offer a heart that might ultimately be touched, a soul ultimately restored. She only offers a bright shiny coating, the better to reflect Hitchcock's projections, or ours.

*Jodi Ramer wrote about **Marnie** in Synoptique 6.*

NOTES

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

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

Nostalgia for You, Dear Geek

Lysandra Woods

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

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

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

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

My one consolation is that I am not alone in my nostalgia. *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004) and *Tv's Freaks And Geeks*, significantly both set in the 80s, are high school love letters to the 'old-skool' geek. The geeks who go about their business and their projects with a single-minded vision that leaves them unscarred regardless of how many jock beatings may come their way. And the beauty of it all is their total disregard for the use value of their projects, for any sort of upward mobility, for any validation outside of their own tight circle. Throughout the course of the eponymous film, Napoleon is the subject of a dodgy time travel experiment, learns a dance, and buys a corduroy suit at the thrift shop, all with the total innocence of pure selfish devotion to his own vision, a vision not of himself in relation to others, but of himself for himself. Another word for this selfishness would be, of course, childhood. In high school while the rest of us were desperately trying to mimic adults with our messy sex lives and substance addictions, the geeks made no such overtures to growing up. They remained essentially kids and reveled in their play.

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

> **Neal:** You know that scene in Animal House where Jim Belushi is pledging to the fraternity, and he goes to the party and ends up in the room with the blind guy and the Indian. I feel that's about to happen to us.
> **Bill:** Blind guys are cool. They have supersonic hearing.
> **Neal:** Yeah, you're right. (Now reassured, he looks admiringly at Bill). Blind guys are cool.

As always, Neal receives Bill's transmissions as utterances from an oracle, interpreting them as figurative words of wisdom to be decoded. To Max, Bill's words mean that they will be fine, will persevere regardless of their treatment by the populars. But Bill never intends them that way. His is a stubbornly literal mind. As far as he is concerned, he is just telling Neal the facts: Blind guys are cool. Rooted in a literal world but with the imagination

to dress up as Lindsey Wagner/Bionic Woman for Halloween, Bill is the epitome of the geek, taking up a curious positioning towards the literal and the figurative, a positioning that eschews the metaphorical understanding through which most of us live.

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

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

*Lys Woods wrote about **Basic Instinct** in Synoptique 6.*

A Ménage à trois Gone Wrong Book Review of *Sontag & Kael: Opposites Attract Me* by Craig Seligman

Catherine Russell

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

Sontag is cool, if not supercool, the kind of lofty intellectual that "Kael refers to as inhuman." But, Seligman immediately corrects himself: "In truth, Kael's unfailing wisdom and her unfailing clarity of vision seem more inhuman. Sontag, for all her self-assurance and her maddening pride, has crashed through the world blindly, tripping and falling." He acknowledges that both women deal in ideas, but he's more interested in "what's left over after their ideas," a strategy that might work for Kael, but tends to belittle Sontag's scholarship. He criticizes Sontag's "self-righteousness," her "harshness towards others," her "snootiness" and "humourlessness," and her refusal to embrace her bisexuality and fully out herself. As a gay man,

Seligman's attraction to Kael and Sontag is more of a distorted form of identification. For him, to write like Sontag is to adopt a certain kind of messy ambivalence. Certainly Sontag is a writer who changed and altered her positions over time, tuned to the vicissitudes of shifts in the culture, usually in order to find the counter argument, to find the appropriate critique. Seligman fails to appreciate the subtleties of Sontag's activism, preferring to dismiss some of her interventions on the question of taste as "twaddle." As a portrait of Sontag, she comes out looking just a little smudged.

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

view," an admittedly prescient observation for 1971, if somewhat superficial.

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

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

Despite their enormous differences in taste, in readers and in critical objectives, it's true that both Kael and Sontag pissed people off. But on such different levels! You have to wonder to what extent their orbits even overlapped. Kael annoyed the "young men of Movie" in 1963 with her famous "Circles and Squares" essay on the auteur theory, a theory that she describes as an "attempt by adult males to justify staying inside the small range of experience of their boyhood and

adolescence…" Sontag's bombshell was dropped on Feb. 6, 1982 at Town Hall in Manhattan, during a talk in which she denounced communism as a species of fascism. She intended it to be a critique of the left, but she badly misjudged her audience, who were looking for new strategies of left-wing solidarity in the face of the crisis in Poland. She seemed only to leave herself open to challenges of historical ignorance, and was accused of selling out the left altogether. Seligman defends her by saying that it was a very personal renunciation of cherished ideals, and "they probably didn't know how deeply she had dug herself in with Cuba and North Vietnam." Seligman also relates how virulent was the response to her *New Yorker* editorial following the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001. As the first prominent intellectual to advocate reason over passion, she gained the respect of many, although Seligman chooses to focus on her right-wing attackers.

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

Who really cares how cool Sontag is? Who cares how smart Kael is? Towards the end of the book, Seligman suggests that it may be about writing and style, and he poses the question of whether criticism might be art, slyly pointing to his own stylized prose. But Seligman's writing is extremely frustrating, as he says nothing without immediately qualifying it or completely contradicting himself in the next paragraph—or changing the subject to Pauline Kael—and it is hardly a model for critical artistry. In the end, his book does make you appreciate how Kael and Sontag managed to carve out such prominent places in the world of cultural criticism. They understood popular culture and the movies so differently though, that it hardly seems fair to push them together simply because of their gender. They were by no means the first or only

women to write about film and popular culture; and yet their careers tended to coincide with the emergence of intellectuals as celebrities, and precisely because they were among the very few women who were not easily dismissed as "feminists," they ranked fairly highly in that culture of celebrity. It will take another kind of study to assess their contributions within the context of arts journalism since the 1960s.

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Lured In HBO's slick series flicks and tele-elitism?

Laurel Wypkema

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

Wonder of wonders, though, the television section at my local video store—previously perused only for dusty *Twin Peaks, Seinfeld And Mary Tyler Moore* covers—has boomed in recent months, making most of these formerly unavailable series deliciously accessible to me and the rest of the section faithfuls who earnestly pick the TV shelves clean every weekend of all the best volumes of *Freaks And Geeks, The Office, The L Word, Six Feet Under, The Wire, Curb Your Enthusiasm, Sex And The City, Carnivàle*—the latter five being HBO series. I have a feeling this is all part of the plan. DVD sales, domestic syndication and series merchandise owe their success to the HBO shtick of letting their terrifyingly well-written, slick shows speak for themselves. Word-of-mouth creates demand based on merit and relative quality so that a dedicated and faithful audience follows behind to eagerly sop up hundred-dollar box sets and contribute to a sprawling online community of forums and message boards. Of course, dozens of

network television shows are also available for rent, brightly packaged with their own slew of makings-of and behind the scenes features—*Alias, Futurama,* and *Gilmore Girls* to name a few—following in the footsteps of their HBO and Showtime counterparts. Somehow—although it is admittedly not all that opaque—the series behind the HBO brand are the standards by which the mere mortals of network television measure themselves against and at the epicenter of which is the notion of quality. And with all the inherent advantages at pay cable's disposal it's no wonder specialty channels define the television industry's cutting edge–and perhaps always will.

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

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

With all these advantages building towards HBO's current roster of completely compelling, beautifully executed series engaging HBO and HBO On Demand

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

It's not TV, it's HBO.

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

I single out *Deadwood* and *Carnivàle* because of their break with HBO's traditional line-up as, shall we say, period pieces. Both center on burgeoning American nation building within autonomous, lawless communities with their own codes of hierarchy and procedures of ritualized justice and discipline. Dusty, often squalid transient life provide the backdrop to both shows as themes of decadence, lawlessness, sexual tension and religious alienation play out among the paradigm of good and evil. These shows, particularly *Carnivàle*, portray themselves as epic and the realization of destiny, fate and identity within the community loom large among a cast of characters whose players are providing the best performances of the year, in film or television. Ian McShane as Al Swearengen and Robin Weigert as Calamity Jane in *Deadwood*, and Clancy Brown as Brother Justin Crowe in *Carnivàle* are completely captivating in their respective roles. McShane and Brown are *Deadwood* and *Carnivàle's* villains and, as villains are wont to do, provide each series with its most riveting dialogue. On the brighter side of the morality spectrum—or at least hovering somewhere in between—Michael J. Anderson's role as carnie ringleader, Samson, is filling out in subtle and fascinating ways in season two where his unfortunately vacuous dialogue left off in season one. Sudden plot twists in the opening few weeks of *Carnivàle's* sophomore season hint at an onslaught of female character development, guaranteeing my continued dedication to the show if for nothing more than my anticipation of the reveal played out between Clea Duval, Adrienne Barbeau and the ever-creepy Diane Salinger.

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

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

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Packing up the Past, Packing for the Future A Personal Response to Tulse Luper Suitcases

Zoe Constantinides

Zoë Constantinides offers a personal (and anxious) response to Peter Greenaway's spacious *Tulse Luper Suitcases*. Her elegant and thoughtful analysis of Greenaway's unrestrained intertextual project struggles to come to terms with unanswerable questions of anxiety, megalomania, and (begrudgingly) post-modernity itself.

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

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

In *The Falls*, the slow unravelling of the film's closed hermeneutic system gives the viewer an opportunity to binge and purge on all life's questions that will never be answered. With testimony and clues from 92 biographies, the viewer still can't help but fail to solve the film's central mystery: what is the VUE (Violent Unknown Event) that has afflicted 19 million people with a variety of bizarre symptoms? Tulse Luper's 92 suitcases will similarly renege on their promise to reveal the secrets of our hero's life. But *The Falls* provides reassurance that is very much lacking from *Suitcases*: the world of ornithology and directories is ruled by stable systems. Numeric, alphabetical, taxonomic systems. It may all be an elaborate, apocalyptic ruse but it's an impeccably organized one that conjures the warm fuzzies that only cold order can. The film's systems may be arbitrary, but in a tautological way, they work: they soothe anxiety.

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

The Tulse Luper Suitcases made me think about post-modernity, which is something I had hoped never to think about again. Inescapably, however, this film screams post-modern. From its exploratory manipulations of the digital medium, to its exuberantly discontinuous narrative of the 20th century, to its G.K.

Chesterton refrain, "There is no history. There are only historians," this is a film about These Post-modern Times. In fact, perhaps Greenaway's project can be seen as a parody of post-modernism/post-modernity itself.

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

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

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

Tulse Luper, or Tulsey as I feel inclined to call him, possesses a similar power to mesmerize. Tulse (JJ Field) is a drifter and prisoner, a man who seems to have little agency over his surroundings or fate. Yet, despite his odd lack of defining characteristics, he manages to be disarmingly charismatic. His shy charm is enough to carry nearly six hours of the film (until he suddenly ages from a young man to middle age,

now played by Stephen Billington). Perhaps it is only the work of fiction that can strike such a fine balance between humility and allure. Perhaps the best purveyor of human ardour is artifice.

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

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

NOTES

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

thematic concerns, especially in relation to history and modernity.

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

Sisterly Reviews Lemony Snicket's: A Series Of Unfortunate Events

Andrea Ariano and Tanya Boulanger

In this series of reviews, our resident sister act of Andrea Ariano (age 24) and Tanya Boulanger (age 11) offer a commentary of the same film, in this case, a current film: *Lemony Snicket's: A Series Of Unfortunate Events* (2004). In later editions, the sisters will look both to the past and the future to investigate the ongoing process of cinephilia, shifting tastes, and memory.

Lemony Snicket's: A Series Of Unfortunate Events is Exactly That by Andrea Ariano

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

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

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

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

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

Though *A Series Of Unfortunate Events* is a children's tale, it presents a pessimistic view of the world that might only be appreciated by its adult viewers. Unfortunately, the repetitive plot tends to take away from its beautifully stylized and dreary world. As a Tim Burton enthusiast I am anxious to see whether this summer's *Charlie And The Chocolate Factory* will strike a better balance between cynicism and adult/child spectatorship.

Lemony Snicket's: A Series Of Unfortunate Events is a Must See! by Tanya Boulanger

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

Squalid Infidelities: *Worshiping Surface with Eyes Wide Shut*

Randolph Jordan

In his second installment, Randolph Jordan disusses the issue of marital and audio fidelity, this time as exemplified in the film *Eyes Wide Shut*.

When I went to see EYES WIDE SHUT for the first time it left me empty. I wasn't drained from having been through an intense experience. I was simply empty, as though my innards had been beamed to some distant planet leaving behind a hollow shell, a perfect transference of Tom Cruise's "performance" onto my very being. I became Tom Cruise, mentally wandering the streets of a cardboard New York, desperately trying to connect with all that I was presented with on (and off) screen. Like poor Tom, however, I was thwarted by another distanciating interruption each time an interpersonal connection loomed. Interestingly enough, each of his interruptions can be tied to the diegetic presence of sound reproduction technology. In this way, the film places its overarching concern for the issue of marital fidelity alongside fidelity issues that arise in film sound theory. But as we saw in this column's inaugural edition (http://www.synoptique.ca/core/en/articles/squalid), the concepts and ideologies at work when thinking about fidelity are far reaching and diverse to say the least. So what is the major fidelity issue that can be pinned down in Kubrick's last film?

Eyes Wide Shut deals with the question of whether thinking about cheating on one's partner has the same effect on a relationship as doing it. The film problematizes the idea of mental infidelity in interesting ways. Nicole Kidman admits to Tom that she was once so tempted by another man that she was ready to give up her marriage and family for one night of passion. This suggests that Tom's reaction to her cheating would have been to break up with her immediately. So the fact that they don't break up over Nicole's temptation of years past suggests that there IS a difference between the desires that lurk in her mind and the actions she takes in the world outside. But wait…if this is so, then why does Tom respond to her inaction by trying to get laid? Is that even what he is doing?

The film ends with an interchange between the two in which it is decided that the events of a single night, or even a lifetime, can never be understood as the whole reality of their relationship. And, similarly, that a dream is never just a dream. There is a deliberate conflation here between thinking and acting, between dream and reality, which revolves around the basic question of where one draws the line of marital fidelity that cannot be crossed. If the line between the binaries of dream and reality is unclear, there emerges the potential for other possibilities outside of this binary construct. With this in mind, where is the line of fidelity to one's partner for Tom and Nicole in this film? Does the blurring of this line result in them breaking free of their established notions of monogamy? And how is the blurring of boundaries represented in the film's formal and aesthetic strategies?

I suggest that the film's exploration of the location of this line is mirrored by it's distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic music, a distinction blurred by the presence of sound reproduction technology within the narrative. Each time Tom gets further separated

from Nicole through potential sexual interaction with someone else there is sound technology close at hand. The relationship between the idea of separation and the technological reproduction of sound has a long history, but has been perhaps most clearly stated by R. Murray Schafer, the founder of acoustic ecology [1] and the World Soundscape Project [2]. Before fleshing out these connections in the film, it will be useful to understand Schafer's line of thinking.

Schafer coined the term schizophonia which he describes as "the split between an original sound and its electroacoustical transmission or reproduction" (90). In *The Tuning of the World*, Schafer discusses the role of reproduction technologies in creating a disjunction between original sounds and their propagation through space, and the effect this disjunction has on humans within their sonic environments. One of Schafer's main concerns is that with the creation of sonic environments through technologies of sound reproduction, any environment can stand in for any other thus removing the natural context for the sound's original propagation.

Schafer's anguish over loss of context in highly reproduced sonic environments is echoed by Frederic Jameson's description of the negative connotations of schizophrenic symptoms in T*he Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Jameson argues that the fragmentation, isolation, and surface re-assemblage of experience characteristic of postmodernism amounts to a loss of historical context (21). This idea of surface re-assemblage without historical context, or surface without depth, is exactly what Schafer decries. For Schafer, the negative connotations of the prefix "schizo" are used intentionally to describe a world which he feels has been drastically altered by the invention of technologies capable of pushing a sound well beyond the limits of its original source. This is an unstable world in which what one hears is not often a reflection of what one sees, a world in which sounds are not contextualized in terms of their sources.

The thinking of Schafer and Jameson has interesting implications when considering sound/image relationships in film. The audiovisual contract inherent to the cinema is an agreement we make to understand the relationships between sound and image based on the rules to which they abide (Chion 222). When our expectations for these rules are played with, our faith in the contract breaks down, and we experience the world through the schizophonic mind. One of the best ways to reflect such an experience on screen is to make use of "on-the-air" sound, described by Michel Chion

as "sounds in a scene that are supposedly transmitted electronically…by radio, telephone, amplification, and so on—sounds that consequently are not subject to 'natural' mechanical laws of sound propagation" (76). Chion feels that on-the-air sound, especially in the case of music, is interesting because it "can transcend or blur the zones of onscreen, offscreen, and nondiegetic" (77). By presenting the technologies that make this blurring possible within the very narrative of a film, such blurring can then be used to support similar states of confusion exhibited by the characters in the film, or even by the film itself. And this is exactly what Kubrick does in *Eyes Wide Shut*.

The film begins with what seems to be a standard non-diegetic use of a Shostakovich waltz. There is no on-theair quality to the sound that would suggest it is coming from a source in their apartment. Yet a diegetic source is revealed when Tom shuts down their home stereo unit and the music stops. This is a trick such as we'd find on the *Simpsons* or their grand-parents, the *Looney Toons*. It also sets up a basic distrust in the film's audiovisual contract alerting us to the fact that things may not always be what they seem. The film may not always be faithful to our expectations unless we are to expect the unexpected.

Expecting the unexpected is just what Kubrick would have us do, and what we come to expect is for Tom's interactions with other people to be interrupted by the ringing of a phone. The telephone offers one of the most commonly shared experiences of mediated sound. It is a technology based on a schizophonic principal: the separation of the human voice from its grounding in the context of the body and the location of this body in space. Fittingly, Kubrick's use of telephonic interruptions is always in furtherance of Tom becoming increasingly distanced from whoever he happens to be with when the phone call occurs: first during his stoned conversation with Nicole, then as he is about to engage with a hooker, and again during his conversation with old friend Nick Nightingale, the piano player who provides access to the party at the mansion. Each of these calls not only breaks up Tom's interactions with these people, but also serves to remind him, and us, of his increasing emotional distance from his wife.

The telephone thus becomes symbolic of the fidelity issues Tom struggles with throughout the film. This symbolic power is heightened by the presence of Kubrick's manipulation of music between the realms of diegetic and non-diegetic space. This connection is made particularly clear in the scene with the hooker.

As Tom gets up to take the call that interrupts the beginning stages of his sexual encounter, he stops the music on her stereo, another instance in which the potentially non-diegetic music we hear is revealed to be the opposite. After the earlier instance in which Tom revealed an unexpected musical source within the diegesis, and the earlier occurrence of an unexpected phone call, Kubrick here gives us a second instance of each within the same scene. In this way he makes it clear that his play on distinctions between diegetic and nondiegetic music is to be understood in the context of the distanciating potential of sound reproduction technology illustrated by his use telephones.

So, after the third phone interruption we arrive at the mansion, by now well primed for expecting confrontations with the separation of sounds from their sources. And we are not disappointed. Tom enters and finds the ritual in progress, backed by Nick seen on stage clearly playing a rig of synthesizers and samplers. The voices of the chanting that we hear are played back in reverse, a feat achievable only through sound reproduction technology like that which is visible on screen. The superficiality of the music accompanying this scene is mirrored by the presence of all the masked guests which serve to prevent any voices heard from being grounded in corporeality. The result is a space in which no sound is attributable to a tangible source. We may well understand that the spoken voices come from the bodies and that the chanting voices come from the keyboards, but this is a faith in the audiovisual contract not substantiated by the film itself: we are not offered the sense of material grounding that we would get from seeing people's lips move in conjunction with the sound of their voices.

Sound mediation has reached its peak at this point in the film. So we must ask ourselves: why has Kubrick placed such emphasis on mediation? Instead of keyboards and samplers he could have had, for example, a giant pipe organ and choir. Instead of full face masks he could have had half-masks that keep the mouth visible. There are a couple of possibilities about his decision that are worth considering. First is the obvious one: full face masks ensure protection of identity, a simple function of the idea that this is nothing more than a private party for people whose identities must be kept secret. In a similar way, the keyboards and samplers call attention to the modernity of the ritual, adding a surface sheen obscuring the ancient depths that the ritual suggests. This lends credence to the idea that this is really just a bunch of super rich white men getting their ya-yas on with little interest in the historical context or

implications of their actions.

In its combination of sound technology and dissociation of sounds from their sources, the scene at the mansion is an exemplary schizophonic space. It is also a scene in which surface is celebrated within the narrative, and perhaps by Kubrick himself. I say perhaps because of the ambiguity surrounding whether or not the orgy scene holds a critical or sympathetic stance in relation to that which it represents. Fittingly, this is an ambiguity that is reflected in the blurring of the line between diegetic and non-diegetic music that takes place here.

When Tom begins to wander through the various rooms of the house, the music slips into a mode ordinarily reserved for the non-diegetic: we hear it with equal intensity and no change in spatial signature (Altman 16) no matter where the camera is situated in the space. Yet given the electronic nature of the musical apparatus we have seen, it is reasonable to expect the entire space to be wired for sound reproduction, and that Nick is still playing away downstairs with his music being piped in all over the house. The fact that we can't be sure is the surest sign of all that this space is fundamentally schizophonic, and that this schizophonia is a reflection of the separation that Tom is experiencing from his life with Nicole.

Tom is losing his contextualization in relation to his wife. At the same time, the film suggests a decontextualization of sound from source through the presence of sound technology and a potential slippage between states of diegetic and non-diegetic music. Schafer's concepts of schizophonia and the Lo-Fi soundscape, each of which is premised upon the idea of a loss of context, are made manifest in the context of Tom's potential Lo-Fi situation with regards to his marriage.

The crucial moment comes when Tom is about to be unmasked. As he is brought into the room where he will be questioned, we see Nick being ushered promptly out. The music has stopped and the piano player has left the building, never to be seen again. Yet it is just after Nick leaves that we hear the introduction of the piano theme that will haunt the rest of the film in a decidedly non-diegetic fashion. This is the film's climactic auditory moment. The removal of Nick's presence from the narrative in conjunction with a removal of musical accompaniment from the space of the diegesis has major implications for the issues that I've been suggesting here.

The introduction of the piano theme recalls the only

instance of pure non-diegetic music in the first section of the film: that which accompanies Nicole's confession. The music isn't the same but its relationship to the narrative is. After Nicole's revelation, Tom is plunged into a world plagued by his paranoia surrounding the possibility of her infidelity. When Tom's identity is revealed at the mansion, his paranoia suddenly shifts from the consequences of Nicole's potential infidelity to the consequences of his own. In both cases the paranoia surrounding potential infidelity is marked by the fundamental infidelity that non-diegetic music always presents towards a film's diegesis. The music is a constant reminder that it is separate from the space that the characters occupy yet strangely reflective of that space, just as it calls constant attention to the absence of the piano player who Tom desperately tries to track down to no avail. It might be said that after he leaves the mansion he goes in search of the source of the non-diegetic music and cannot find it. This is a schizophonic breakdown of the highest order.

Now what if we consider the idea that the very notion of non-diegetic music is a concept designed to add credence to diegetic events? By calling attention to the idea that musical accompaniment comes from outside of the space that the characters occupy, we come to understand that diegetic space as being all the more tangible. In other words, the diegesis is defined by its relationship to its opposite: non-diegetic space. This is a binary construct that draws attention away from the idea of film as a surface without depth, a single plane of expression without an inside and an outside.

The importance of the idea of surface without depth is laid out within the narrative when Ziegler calls Tom to his home to have a frank discussion. He tells Tom that he's making a big deal out of nothing, that there is no depth beneath the surface about which he is inquiring. It was just a bunch of guys having a party, and nothing bad happened to Nick, or to Amanda, the woman who turned up dead from a drug overdose the following day. Ziegler suggests that Nick was reprimanded for allowing Tom to crash a private party, and Amanda's death was a coincidence, not to be read as having anything to do with what Tom suspects took place. The scene at the mansion was a celebration of surface without depth, Schafer and Jameson's nightmare alike. We might take this to be a metaphor for Tom's struggles with Nicole's confession, for that is also something that took place within the space of the mind and found no context in real world action. Her fantasy was separated from grounding in reality, just as Ziegler suggests of Tom's own fantasy about the events of that night at the mansion.

So perhaps the moral of *Eyes Wide Shut* is not the revelation of the fluid boundary between thinking and doing, or the realization that there is more to any relationship than can be summed up by individual thoughts or actions. Perhaps, in the end, it is about the value in celebrating surface without depth. This celebration would include an understanding that perhaps surface and depth are one and the same, just as thought and action could be. To break down the distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic music is to acknowledge film as surface: there can be no escape from the grounding in the materiality of the medium.

The shifts from non-diegetic music to diegetic (and vice-versa) that Kubrick employs are ruses suggesting the ultimate impossibility of such a shift. Similarly, his use of Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman suggests the impossibility that we can forget who they are. While Nicole may have given a better technical performance than Tom, there is no escape from their identity as Hollywood's most celebrated couple (at the time). As such, the film is about stripping surface away from context just as Tom and Nicole constantly divert attention away from the context of the diegesis to their status as surface icons outside of that diegesis. We might understand this as a similar process to non-diegetic music exposing itself as outside the space of the characters, only to point us back to the diegesis by highlighting the fact that they are each a part of the same surface. To differentiate between the two is to imagine a depth that is really just a function of juxtapositions upon a single plane. Tom and Nicole do not exist without their films, and *Eyes Wide Shut* does not exist without Tom and Nicole: they are all part of the same plane.

I suggested in the first edition of this column that perhaps marital infidelity was a desire to have one's cake and eat it too, to have the best of two possible worlds within a single plane of existence. *Eyes Wide Shut* examines this possibility. However, instead of employing a narrative directly concerning multiple partner relationships, Kubrick uses the film's concern for the effects of mental infidelity on a monogamous relationship as its guiding principal. In turn, this principal underlies a formal and aesthetic exploration of surface worship and the problems this worship raises for common distinctions made between diegetic and non-diegetic music. So, what value judgments can be made about this idea of surface worship? History has made many, and they vary in tone across different

eras. Next time we will begin with a discussion of pre-Romantic ideals of vocal abstraction and surface texture in the art of singing, and see how these ideas bear out against Schafer, Jameson, and relevant examples from the wonderful world of cinema. Stay tuned…

Randolph Jordan interviewed Richard Kerr in Synoptique 5.

NOTES

1   http://interact.uoregon.edu/MediaLit/wfae/home/
2   http://www.sfu.ca/~truax/wsp.html

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+ *SPLINTER REVIEWS (VI)*

+ SPLINTER REVIEWS VII

In this issue, we explore:
Alone In The Dark, Assault On Precinct 13, The Aviator, Bad Education (*La Mala Educación*), *Bad Education* (*La Mala Educación*), *Beyond The Sea, Beyond The Sea, The Black Hole* DVD, *Breaking News* (*Dai Si Gein*), *Casshern, Les Choristes, Coffee And Cigarettes* DVD, *The Forgotten, Garden State* DVD, *Ghost In The Shell 2: Innocence* (*Kôkaku Kidôtai 2: Inosensu*), *Hide And Seek, Hide And Seek, Hotel Rwanda, Infernal Affairs* (*Wu Jian Dao*), *John Cassavetes: Five Films* DVD, *The Life Aquatic, Little Black Book* DVD, *Martin* DVD, *National Treasure, Oldboy* DVD, *Ong Bak: The Thai Warrior, Quill, Sideways, Short Cuts* DVD, *Tarnation, Ten* DVD, *Tfn Fanfilms* WEB, *Wonderland* DVD, *The Woodsman, The Woodsman*

OSCAR?

The Aviator (2004)
11 nominations including Best Picture

Yes, *The Aviator* bursts onto the silver screen, a brazen biopic on that debonair millionaire king-of-the-air, Howard Hughes. What's that, Mr. Hughes? You think there are germs everywhere? Not to worry, because your silly strangeness has been exploited for big box office! This boffo blockbuster, starring Leo DiCaprio and just about every other star in tinseltown, is sure to catch the attention of a little gold fellow named Oscar… This is truly the Hollywood that Hollywood wants, with bold strokes of colour, scintillating styles, steamy sex, sentimental Scorsese, and most importantly, a hopeless obsession with the memory of itself. Bravo!
-Owen Livermore

Les Choristes (2004)
2 nominations

You will feel a strong sense of déjà vu watching *Les Choristes*. There is little original here. While this film is not unpleasant and is, in all honesty, quite charming, it really doesn't offer us much of anything. They could have called it Dead Chorus Society.
-Collin Smith

Hotel Rwanda (2004)
3 nominations

A powerful film for what it is: a heavy handed history lesson that drives its message home with a hammer and a "History for Dummies" approach. Still, it's an important film for mainstream audiences to see. However, if you go into this film not knowing much about the situation you deserve to feel shame. Get off your ass and search out multiple sources of news. Then do something about what you see!
-Collin Smith

Sideways (2004)
5 nominations including Best Picture

The film seems to be full of emblematic images: Miles (Paul Giamatti) lives his life as one summation after another. The blunt camera work helps out: the images

are so dead center that you want to switch off your peripheral vision. Which is appropriate: everything coming in from the sides is almost too—in the language of a stoner—unbearably relevant. Unlike *About Schmidt* (Alexander Payne's last road-and-a-wedding-flick), *Sideways* is much less generous with simple pleasures. It starts hung-over, in the late morning, under heavy summer weather, and is accompanied by a faux-ironic jazz score that seems composed to remind us of the way Miles bangs the wine around in his glass before he gargles it. His anxious glass swirling is much too passiveaggressive for Epicureanism, and Miles' car is much too rattly for a road trip. This movie can be very funny, but I found myself wincing at the bright lights. It is working away to wear down your expectations, and at that it succeeds remarkably.
-Adam Rosadiuk

HOLLYWOOD

Alone In The Dark (2005)

The genre of this film is somewhat hard to define. Is it a tech-noir film, a sci-fi flick, a horror flick, a monsters-thatinvade- the-earth-and-kill-us-all film? It's all over the place! In the first few minutes, already the movie tries to include too many things at once and the story (a razor-thin plot) simply doesn't hold up. Surprisingly (or maybe not), this film is currently ranked #8 on the IMDB bottom 100 films. Not that I worship IMDB's rating system in any way, but such a rating has to mean something. It doesn't mean there won't be a remake. Geez, I can't wait to see that!
-P-A Despatis D.

Assault On Precinct 13 (2005)

Basically the film fails due to a script that just never takes off. The dialogue is always a bit clunky and the characters speak like their lines were written to explain their motivations. The actors do their best with this material but no one ever seems quite real enough. No character ever feels three-dimensional enough. Plus there are too many clues that the story feels a little too obvious and convenient.
-Collin Smith

Beyond The Sea (2004)

Karaoke dynamo Kevin Spacey plays an aging postmodern waxworks caricature who lays siege on the bio-pic, the musical and the life of Bobby Darin. Also,

features the most obnoxiously self-satisfied child actor outside of cereal commercials. That's only the first 15 minutes.
-Gareth Hedges

Beyond The Sea (2004)

Spacey throws away any semblance of authenticity. This is a construction and Spacey throws it in our face time and again. He sets up the film as if it is being made by Darin himself, like an autobiography from beyond the grave. This gets around the film trying to be anything more than it is; a loving tribute from a fan to his idol. Darin's flaws are never insurmountable (except perhaps his premature death) and neither are those of his wife, Sandra Dee. This is a charmed life of a man who never got to express how deep and creative he could really be. At least, that's what his ghost wants us to think.
-Collin Smith

The Forgotten (2004)

Warning, this review contains spoilers. Though it is hard to imagine spoiling such a terrifically terrible movie.

The premise of this film is that experimenting aliens hovering above the earth discover that, "The bond between a mother and child is like a tissue. It has an energy that can be measured." The bond is breakable unless you are Julianne Moore's character. Her maternal instinct is so strong that she cannot forget that she had life inside of her. The alien does not realize that motherhood begins in utero, so he is never able to adequately erase her child from her memory. This film is a pro-lifers dream come true!

Now, can we all join in a round of gagging to express our disgust?
-Shawna Plischke

Hide And Seek (2005)

Fox has been making a big deal about the film's twist ending. All this would lead one to believe that this thriller's finale would be shocking, surprising and terrifying. That's why it was a big disappointment when I figured out the twist in the opening credits. Good idea, but it's been done before. In the hands of a good director this tale could have been disturbing and real. Alfred Hitchcock and David Lynch have both told this story to much more terrifyingly wonderful effect. However, in the hands of the director of *Swimfan*, the story becomes predictable and obvious.

-Collin Smith

Hide And Seek (2005)

Well, not that I want to spoil the film, but the killer is him!! It's him! HIM!! I mean, come on! This concept has been used ad-nauseam in the past few years; we don't need anymore of those schizophrenic killer film. The film isn't all bad; there's plenty of suspense and spooky ambiance, but the ending spoils it all.
-P-A Despatis D.

The Life Aquatic (2004)

A natural extension of Wes Anderson's aesthetic/ thematic preoccupations. Another gentle tale of flawed people reluctantly living down these flaws, concocted with the expected off-kilter humour, self-conscious beauty, surprising poignancy that sneaks up on you, and general mild good-naturedness. As for the fantastical, blatantly artificial aquatic adventure theme, the bluntly stagy (but somehow convincing) character interactions, and the goofy-naïve, clumsy action sequences: just think of the film as a collaboration between Wes and his RUSHMORE creation, the precocious, over-achieving oddball Max Fischer, and it'll all make perfect sense.
-Jodi Ramer

National Treasure (2004)

Like a videogame daydreamed by a teenage boy drifting in and out of sleep in an American history class, except not as good.
-Gareth Hedges

White Noise (2005)

I am ashamed to admit that I jumped out of my skin during one loud oomph attempt to scare viewers in this lame excuse for a horror film. I am equally ashamed to admit that I flocked to the cinema to see Michael Keaton back in action because I have not appreciated his presence on screen since Batman (1989)… 1989, has it been so long? The most worthwhile scene is a montage sequence that foregrounds Keaton's acting skills: shot after shot, Jonathan Rivers (Keaton) stares at a blank television screen with the great intensity of Bruce Wayne; he is obsessed to find his dead wife within the white noise. And so on, and so forth, until the out-of-nowhere 'twist' ending emerges. Now if I say, 'Beetlejuice, Beetlejuice, Beetlejuice' perhaps Tim Burton will make a sequel emerge. (We can only hope so, for Keaton's sake).
-Andrea Ariano

ART HOUSE (INDIE & FOREIGN)

Bad Education (*La Mala Educación*, Spain, 2004)

A film for film-lovers to love. It's all representations (of representations (of representations (…)))

But how disappointing. When François Ozon plays at Hitchcock, I feel like he's achieved something. When Almodòvar does, I feel cheated. There's beauty here to be sure; but by the end, the cinema-game hollows out all the substance. That might be the point; but coming from Almodòvar at this point in his career, it's a lazy one.
Perhaps, Pedro, this (and not any funny business with the Spanish Academy's voting system) is why you didn't win any Goyas.
-Brian Crane

Bad Education (*La Mala Educación*, Spain, 2004)

Dear Mr. Almodovar,
Your epilogues are ruining your movies. Please stop.
-Janos Sitar

PS—There is a point at which you just have to let go. Tacking on details is just pointless. The attention has been paid. The information has been received. A graceful exit rather than a shove out the door. We're making the connections.

Breaking News (*Dai Si Gein*, Hong Kong, 2004)

Comme John Woo et Ang Lee, Johnnie To s'impose de plus en plus comme une des figures importantes du cinéma asiatique d'action en Amérique du nord et en occident. Fidèle à ses habitudes, Johnnie To nous présente ici un thriller très bien ficelé digne des grands festivals de cinéma (le film a été présenté à Cannes, rien de moins). En plus des séquences d'actions impressionnantes, To réussit à incorporer un très fort message social dans le film. Bien que ce message tourne surtout autour des média de Hong Kong qui sont reconnu pour être très vorace, le film est des plus intéressant pour un public Nord-américain où le rôle de divers média dans plusieurs dossiers est de plus en plus critiqué!
-P-A Despatis D.

Casshern (Japan, 2004)

The future of cinema, today!

This film is one of the films in this new trend of CGI films that use real actors in computer generated sets — *Immortel, Sky Captain And The World Of Tomorrow* and the upcoming *Sin-City*. So far so good. *Casshern* is one of the best sci-fi flicks I've ever seen and it's a pure visual feast. Borrowing on aspects from Oshi's *Avalon* (2001), *Casshern*'s cyberpunk dark-noir retro future will certainly redefine the aesthetics of the genre.

Kiriya's use of religious and philosophical discourses throughout the film is not as effective as it could be but the narrative successfully holds up in this complete mayhem of complex montage sequences and ultra-stylish cinematography. Like *Immortel* and *Sky Captain* and many other excessive movies for that matter, *Casshern*'s reviews were a mixed-bag. Maybe the world isn't ready for this new trend of filmmaking. The movie geek that I am is ready: bring it on!
-P-A Despatis D.

Ghost In The Shell 2: Innocence (Kôkaku Kidôtai 2: Inosensu, Japan, 2004)

Quotiest anime ever!
-Janos Sitar

Infernal Affairs (Wu Jian Dao, Hong Kong, 2002)

Hong Kong's new wave of action cinema isn't as new as it may seem to a Montréal audience. Many great Asian action films never make it to Montréal unfortunately. Almost four years after it's making, *Internal Affairs* has finally been released in Montréal. The limited release is not likely to pick up much at the box office, as most Hong Kong cinema enthusiasts have already found a way to see the film on video. I'm glad the film finally made it to theatres, perhaps it will increase the quality of American action films, which look rather weak compared to *Internal Affairs*.

Needless to say it's a very strong film worth watching. It's not a fun film to watch though; the suspense of this film makes it very stressful to watch. By the end of the film you feel somewhat relieved that it's all over, although the excellent nerve-racking climactic ending might be quite frustrating. That relief will be short-lived though; two sequels have been made since the release the film in Asia. It's only the beginning…
-P-A Despatis D.

Ong Bak: The Thai Warrior (Thailand, 2004)

This film is not a great film by any means. The action sequences are 'cool' and 'hip' but the story is rather bleak. I worry that after fans see this negative comment about the film they will send me tons of hate mail claiming that *Ong-Bak* is a great film and that it's a revolution of the genre. The same thing happened with *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Those films lack an innovative visual style; it's just that the better, earlier films were simply never released in America. *Heaven's Seven* (*7 Pra-Jan-Bar*, 2002) and *The Bodyguard* (2004) are just two similar films with a much more interesting story and visual aesthetic than *Ong-Bak*. While, the Thai movie connoisseurs (i.e.: geeks) might not appreciate this film as much as a neophyte audience it's still worth watching … although sadly, there are no songs, a la *The Adventures Of The Iron Pussy* or *Monrak Transistor*.
-P-A Despatis D.

Quill (Japan, 2004)

This melodramatic tearjerker revolves around the highs and lows in the life of a dog. Don't be mistaken though; the film is not as silly as it sounds, and it turns out to be quite touching. Visually rather bland, still, the film as a whole is quite enjoyable. A movie about a cute dog … what else can we ask for? (A movie about a cute talking dog, but that's a different story).
-P-A Despatis D.

Tarnation (2004)

Jonathan Caouette's self-portrait is fun to watch with all its kaleidoscope effects but by the time the credits role one wonders why one sat through this self-indulgent piece. It's like looking at family photos; actually it is looking at family photos. While it may be meaningful for him and his loved ones, for the rest of us it falls flat.
-Collin Smith

The Woodsman (US, 2004)

Traitant d'un sujet très difficile et tabou, le film réussit très bien à représenter la difficulté que le personnage a à se retrouver une place dans la société après sa longue peine de prison pour pédophilie. La cinéaste, sans nous imposer son choix personnel laisse très habilement les spectateurs faire leur propre opinion du personnage principal. Tout au long du film, malgré que l'on veuille tant le prendre en pitié et être de son côté, l'on se demande sans cesse s'il va récidiver et nous décevoir— surtout au nombre de fois qu'il semble copiner le diable.

Cette sensation est très particulière et rend le film très intéressant au niveau psychologique. Contrairement à plusieurs films indépendants qui reposent sur une psychologie des personnages plutôt boiteuse, le tout est très bien assembler dans *The Woodsman* et le film nous montre d'une façon très intéressante comment une personne dans une telle situation tente de reprendre sa place dans la société avec toutes les difficultés que cela encours.
-P-A Despatis D.

The Woodsman (US, 2004)

So, all that a pedophile needs to keep him from re-offending is sex with Kyra Sedgwick. Good to know.
-Gareth Hedges

DVD

The Black Hole (1979; DVD 2004)

My example of the film whose parts add up to more than the whole that constitutes them. This film, Disney's sci-fi rendering of *20,000 Leagues Under The Sea*, is "the last studio sci-fi film," to paraphrase the featurette, and therefore a relic from an earlier age. Every aspect of the production was done 'in-house,' with visual effects departments working alongside set designers and the cinematographer to solve all the problems in ways that only a "department" system could. From the spooky aircraft carrier-like ship sitting on the lip of a black hole to a washed-up Anthony Perkin's hammy-horror line delivery to John Barry's all-too-Bond-like score (a word of advice: don't hum it to yourself or your mind will be spinning to the tune for days!) to the mock-profound 2001 climax (a perfect metaphor for the film itself— what does this jumbled montage add up to, anyway?), this is Camp at its very, very best. Highly Recommended.
-Colin Burnett

Coffee And Cigarettes (2003)

At the video store:
I say: Dad, how 'bout *Anchorman* (2004)? I heard it was funny.
Dad says: Hey look, this movie has Bill Murray, Iggy Pop, Steve Buscemi, Tom Waits, and did I mention Bill Murray? It'll be way funnier.
I say: yeah, but dad, it's a Jim Jarmusch movie…
Dad says: Bill Murray. It's got to be funny.

Later that Night:
Dad says: What the hell? I thought you said this director

was famous? How did he make such an unfunny movie with Bill Murray. What a waste of talent… who'd have thought Bill Murray could be in such a boring movie. I say: yeah, but dad, it's a Jim Jarmusch movie…
-Shawna Plischke

Garden State (2004)

"Sometimes I want to go to sleep and merge with the foggy world of dreams and not return to this, our real world. Sometimes I look back on my life and am surprised at the lack of kind things I have done. Sometimes I just feel that there must be another road that can be walked—away from this person I became— either against my will or by default" (313).

"I slept soundly and all through the night, the concentration of yellow pills in my blood diminished, milligram by milligram, like decaying uranium" (322). ~ from Douglas Coupland's Life After God.
-Janos Sitar

John Cassavetes: Five Films (2004)

[8-disc box set, includes *Shadows, Faces, A Woman Under The Influence, The Killing Of A Chinese Bookie,* and *Opening Night*] Criterion releases a DVD and we jump like dogs in a circus: What transfers! What sound re-mixing! What thoughtful and thought-provoking extras! How discriminating we are to notice! Yapyapyapyap!

Well, I have nothing to say about Criterion.

…but these movies …these movies get under your skin and make you think Prozac is cheating …and now I can watch them over and over again.

Can I get a Ba-Ba?
-Brian Crane

Little Black Book (2004)
Am I a romantic comedy? Am I a serious commentary on exploitative talk shows?

Sigh, I am failed genre transgression.

PS—For proper use of Carly Simon in a romantic comedy soundtrack see *Working Girl* (1988) or *How To Lose A Guy In 10 Days* (2003).
-Shawna Plischke

Martin (1977; DVD 2004)

George A. Romero's non-zombie masterpiece is finally on DVD. Every trope of vampire lore is reworked into a contemporary context: the lumbering ruins of a Pennsylvania industrial town replace the castles and decaying aristocratic order of yore; a razor blade and syringe take the place of fangs; and the vampire himself is reborn as a kind an older—much, much older—teenage misfit (the troubled young man of the title). The DVD adds a short featurette, commentary and more, with emphasis on the film's production (a marvel in and of itself).
-Gareth Hedges

Oldboy (2003)

1:05:18 : Here you will find the first and last sign that this movie wasn't made by a talented robot auteur.
-Zoë Constantinides

Short Cuts (1993, DVD 2004)

It's past the deadline, and my editor is bugging me to do another Splinter:

"Anything for *Short Cuts* ? I could use a Criterion *Short Cuts* review. Write it like Carver, blunt and brief. Carver had a healthy relationship with his editor, why don't you?"

Okay, fine. I thought it would be a good idea to talk about the Criterion release of Altman's *Short Cuts*, because it includes Raymond Carver's short stories. I haven't seen that before. Maybe that's why I bought the DVD in the first place, though I can't really afford it. Or maybe I just liked the packaging.
-Owen Livermore

Ten (2002; DVD 2005)

Cramped, clipped, patchy, unsettled, slightly naïve—this is Kiarostami at his most beautiful. But wait, "Kiarostami"? By what deficient conventions of movie understanding can we possibly allow ourselves to believe that it is he whom we see through this film and not the people in it? I suppose that they are the very conventions that make *10 On Ten* virtually unbearable to watch (save perhaps for number 10).
-Colin Burnett

Wonderland (2003)

Finally, a movie about the enormity of John Holmes' loathing for humanity instead of the enormity of his member. Despite being very much a product 21st Century Hollywood—with its sitcom stars (Lisa Kudrow) and pedestrian cameos (Carrie Fisher, Paris Hilton)—there is something hateful and inescapably bleak lurking beneath the tinted frame. This effect is bettered by the limited two-disc edition DVD which includes the cheaply-made but absorbing documentary *Wadd: The Life And Times Of John C Holmes*, which despite its overall veneration of the pornstar makes an effort towards addressing his addiction and the depths of his pathological coldness. Other extras include actual crime scene footage, deleted scenes (at least one of them funny), commentary, etc.
-Gareth Hedges

WEB

Tfn Fanfilms

À une époque où le CGI est maintenant à la portée de tous, il est possible de voir apparaître une nouvelle forme de participation vis-à-vis un film. Un court métrage tourné en 1997 par deux fans, *Pink Five*, illustra la possibilité au grand public de créer des films de *Star Wars* en utilisant leur ordinateur personnel. L'évolution rapide de la technologie de l'audio-visuel ainsi que d'Internet a permis en 2000 la création de TFN FanFilms, une fusion de FanFilms.com et de TheForce.net. 5ans plus tard, on retrouve près de 50 courts métrages reprenant le mythe de Lucas et l'adaptant par moment avec une qualité impressionnante. On y trouve également des informations et tutoriaux démontrant comment arriver à un tel résultat ainsi que d'autres films de fiction «non-Star Wars». Pour les intéressés, sachez qu'il y a un concours annuel en collaboration avec StarWars.com récompensant le meilleur film où *Pink Five* récolta plusieurs honneurs.
"Fan Films at The Force.net": http://www.theforce.net/fanfilms

"Pink Five": http://atomfilms.shockwave.com/af/content/pink5

et pour la suite des aventures de Pink Five:

"Pink Five Strikes Back": http://atomfilms.shockwave.com/af/content/pink5_strikes
-Steve Murray