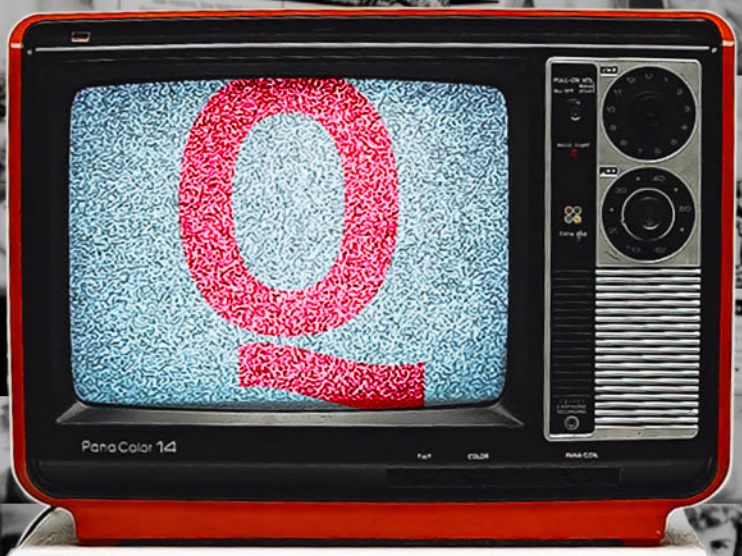
SYNOPTIQUE

An Online Journal of Film and Moving Image Studies



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

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Synoptique Editorial Collective

Synoptique 4
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Edited by
Lys Woods, Colin Burnett, and Owen Livermore

After a long summer hiatus, Synoptique returns with a special edition inspired by the **Women and the Silent Screen Congress** (WSCREEN), held June of 2004, in Montreal.

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

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

OFFSCREEN is the English companion publication to the wildly successful French journal Hors Champs. It is heroically maintained by part-time Concordia Faculty member Donato Totaro. The latest edition has "a decidedly Asian flavour."

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The CGFSSA
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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.

Postmodernism and (Post)Feminist Boredom

Jodi Ramer

An impassioned case for the reclamation of feminism from a "postfeminism" that is unable to offer representational life to the concept and experience of boredom, this essay examines *Charlie's Angels* (2000), *Hedwig And The Angry Inch* (2001), *Moulin Rouge* (2001), and *Les Rendez-Vous D'anna* (1978).

The expression "postfeminism" alerts us to the need, even if we are to embrace this new variant, to reclaim the term at its root: feminism. Compared to the light-hearted ring of the former, feminism smacks of a rigid and humourless stance, a corner from which one hypercritically denounces and disapproves. Feminism is what hysterical women do in an attempt to be righteous.

It should go without saying that all this is nonsense, but it doesn't. Women, in this so-called postfeminist age, may passionately embrace girlpower, rock'n'roll and porn, and do it for gender specific reasons, but they musn't call themselves feminist—at least not without a string of apologetic mitigations. Perhaps it's not surprising that contemporary women would want to disown—or distance themselves—from a 70s brand of feminism that tended, and certainly not without good reason, to characterise issues of lifestyle and representation in bipolar terms. What often gets lost, however, is that feminism has never been a homogenous discourse, and that the peevish, frumpy, closedminded feminist from which most of us are careful to distinguish ourselves is such a stock figure because of mainstream representation—reductive, *unsympathetic* representation. This media version of the tiresome feminist is so unfriendly that one is reminded just how relevant feminist critiques of representation still are.

But now such critiques are, certainly, critiques with a difference, and are coming from a less defensive, less beleaguered-feeling site. Postfeminism may be the best way of naming a discourse of feminist concerns that is informed by the postmodern era—with all the debates over definitions that this implies. This new feminism is perhaps one from which women may speak critically without having to defend themselves as properly positioned in relation to the cause. Though it is a pressure indivisible from the negative buzz 70s feminism has received, nonetheless, many women were left with the uncomfortable sense of being policed, of needing to justify everything from personal appearance to politics.

Indeed, postfeminism as a feminism without apologies would be something to endorse. But the term inevitably carries the sense not of thriving adaptation but of fracture, as though a break has been made with feminism itself—that feminist discourse is now outmoded and effectively over. In her article "Historical Ennui, Feminist Boredom," Patrice Petro addresses this present tendency to view feminist theory (specifically film theory) "as somehow exhausted or completed—merely a stage in the development of the next new thing" (188). And Anne Friedberg, in the post-script to her book *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*, comments on "the theoretical moment periodized as 'post feminist,' when feminist critique (practiced by women) has lost its authority" (198). Concomitant

with this notion that feminism has been a phase—an understandable, necessary one, but one now depleted—is the postmodern fetishization of the new. Within this theoretical framework, feminism is just another trend upon which we might look back with a smile and a shake of the head, with nostalgia and amused embarrassment. Or, if feminism is granted significance as far more than a passing fancy, it then becomes a meta-narrative of the kind that pomo thinkers describe as in crisis: "the Enlightenment, which Lyotard and others have cast as foreclosed in postmodernity, was a major source of many of the values—truth, equality, freedom—which have been central to feminist thought from Mary Wollstonecraft onward" (Friedberg 197). Of course, such values also have been interrogated by feminists as to the assumptions therein (especially the way in which feminism has tended to naturalise a white, middle-class, heterosexual address). In light of this expansion in discourses of marginalisation, postmodern theory may be seen to incorporate a sensibility (the destabilizing and decentering of traditional hierarchies) that is very promising for a feminist cause— that, in fact, feminist theory has been instrumental in delineating.

Too often, though, the (ostensibly) open playing field of our present moment is regarded as a relief from the strictures of feminism rather than an advantage obtained by it. "Postfeminism" can imply a refusal to acknowledge this crucially pertinent legacy, joined with a carefree intention to benefit fully from it. This current version of the-feminism-that-cannot-speak-its-name generally consists of a cheery, fashion-forward rebelliousness. *Charlie's Angels* (2000) is a recent example of a utopiangirlpower film; it acts as though gender matters, but only because it wants to show us how much fun it is to be a girl. Avoiding any hint of female disenfranchisement, the film is not interested in launching a critique, or at least not one recognizable as such. Perhaps, though, by so insistently pretending that for a young woman life is a blast, it highlights the need for—and the dearth of—such edifying fare. In taking feminine fun as its theme, *Charlie's Angels* also provides fun for the women in the audience. We just don't get to see many honest-to-goodness girlfriend movies, and the thrill of one is undeniable.

Charlie's Angels works on the premise that an overload of style and kitschy intertextuality is liberating— these gals are not burdened by a history of sexual oppression. This text is so flattened as to suggest a surface with no underpinning: a surface of limitless play. Here is postmodernism at its most emblematic.

But it does need to be stated that the postmodern stylistic of textual and referential free-for-all is not commensurate with woman-friendly manifestations. The point, here, is not to root out all the "bad examples" of representation, but to suggest that discursive and stylistic reconfigurations often maintain hierarchies, even in the name of breaking them down. Friedberg, in noting the comparable discourses of the feminist and the postmodern, finds that the likeness of the two illustrates the "displacement of feminist critique by the discourse of postmodernism" (196). Much postmodern theory elides the issue of gender, with the implication that such concerns no longer apply since the foundations upon which these old debates were based have now shifted. But renaming and revamping dynamics do not necessarily alter them. Theories (such as Hayden White's in his article "The Modernist Event") that characterise the postmodern moment as "the end of history" and "a time without event" elide the fact that the material reality of women and other minority groups is very pressing and all too real: inequality is not something to be abstracted. Petro puts it this way: "history is also about what *fails to happen* (something about which female artists and feminist women in the twentieth-century have long been painfully aware)" (197). This painful awareness is the frustration at what does not or cannot happen because of ideological circumscription, a frustration at the tiresome and uninspiring array of options, representations and supposed gratifications.

The twentieth-century's proliferation of media—and the constant, disjunctive interplay among them—is often taken as offering increased choice while dismantling conventions of narrative and subject position. But in examining a filmic exemplar of pomo aesthetics like MOULIN ROUGE (2001), one sees how little really changes. Jim Collins, in his essay "Genericity in the 90s: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity," investigates postmodern film for what he sees as a conservative nostalgia. "Eclectic irony" is the obvious marker of a postmodern text, but popular films of the 1980s onwards also tend to incorporate a sensibility of "new sincerity [featuring] a move back in time away from the corrupt sophistication of media culture toward a lost authenticity defined as…the site of narcissistic projection, the hero's magic mirror…the fetishizing of 'belief' rather than irony as the only way to resolve conflict" (259). Certainly this model applies to *Moulin Rouge*, with its specious gestures towards love as the answer. The film energetically appropriates the dazzle of pomo aesthetics while longing for an old-fashioned era of heartfelt narrative and tragic romance.

Now, *Moulin Rouge* boasts a bewildering display of lavish visuals, hyper-kinetic editing and tongue-incheek intertextuality. The result is a giddy spectacle that would seem cutting-edge but manages to be about nothing, really, except nostalgia. The opening of Tom Gunning's essay "'Animated Pictures': Tales of Cinema's Forgotten Future, After 100 Years of Film" offers an anecdote that reverberates curiously when thinking of *Moulin Rouge*:

> In 1896 Maxim Gorky attended a showing of the latest novelty from France at the All Russia Nizhni-Novgorod Fair—motion pictures produced and exhibited by the Lumière brothers, August and Louis. The films were shown at Charles Aumont's Theatreconcert Parisian, a recreation of a *café chantant* touring Russia, offering the delights of Parisian life. A patron could enjoy the films in the company of any lady he chose from the 120 French chorus girls Aumont featured (and who reportedly offered less novel forms of entertainments to customers on the upper floors). Gorky remarked a strong discrepancy between the films shown and their 'debauched' surroundings, displaying family scenes and images of the 'clean toiling life' of workers in a place where 'vice alone is being encouraged and popularized.' However, he predicted that the cinema would soon adapt to such surroundings and offer 'piquant scenes of life of the Parisian demi-monde.' (316)

The setting of *Moulin Rouge* is, of course, the eponymous, infamous nightclub circa 1900, a Parisian café chantant featuring chorus girls/prostitutes, most notably the willowy consumptive Satine. And Gorky has been proven right—the dissolute environs of the Parisian demi-monde have come to be adapted for the cinema. In this case, however, the "strong discrepancy" is still apparent, though between the historical milieu of the film and its content. This adaptation is a remarkably chaste one —a family-viewing bordello, adult nightlife Disneyfied: the *Pretty Woman* version of prostitution.

This film longs for a more innocent time. *Moulin Rouge* opens with an antiquated-looking illustration of a proscenium theatre arch; the red curtains draw back to reveal the opening credits in a script that recalls the intertitles of a silent movie. Though the nightclub landscape is an imaginary one (as anything rendered on film ultimately is, but here triply so through the additional filters of fiction and corny anachronism) the place itself, according to the extensive DVD commentary, is faithfully recreated—hardly a necessary gesture, one would think, for so self-consciously theatrical a film. I suppose it's one of the ironies of the postmodern: accurate period detail is sought, and at great expense, while historical narrative—for better or, more often, for worse—is heedlessly appropriated and reworked (think *Titanic* (1997), or *Schindler's List* (1994)). The careful representation of the club/theatre itself—whereas the city of Paris is an intentionally artificial model, a sparkly framing for the real show—signals a reverie for the *fin-de-siècle* public spectacle which (we like to believe) so thrilled early audiences: the carnivals, exhibitions, and especially films which were, at one time, so novel, so exotic, so transforming. This spectacle, it is feared, is no longer so absorbing, what with jaded audiences being spoon-fed a cinema ever more empty, ham-fisted and commercial, and with the contemporary redistribution of viewing habits, such that one is likely to watch a movie at home, alone, with pauses and interruptions.

Both Gunning and Friedberg make the point that audiences of early cinema probably were not as dumbfounded and overwhelmed as we have been led to believe—just as movies may still be experienced as affective, engaging and exciting. *Moulin Rouge*, however, is symptomatic of a brand of postmodernism that despairs of the truly new while worshipping the kick of the novel. It is weary, and manic in the disavowal of this weariness. It is boredom sped up.

The frantic attempt of *Moulin Rouge* to ward off tedium reminds us that postmodernism's unmoored style may be hiding some longstanding affiliations; the concept of hierarchical destabilization has come up before, and with less utopian implications. Petro cites T.S Eliot as a prominent voice defining the modern condition, due to rapid socio-political and technological changes, as deeply unsettling and lacking in any orienting meaning. Modernist discourse, Petro reports, is rife with the complaint of lack and loss, a refrain also predominant in the more pessimistic postmodernist theory. Cultural critics have spent the last century bemoaning the exhaustion of civilisation as we know it, and equating the signs of decadence with the 'monstrous' spread of popular culture. Whether generating doomed accounts or anarchistic glee, the discourses of modernism and postmodernism would seem to be a direct—and nervous—response to women gaining socio-cultural access. Just as women gain some purchase, the terms conveniently shift: technology will make soulless drones of us all, the masses will devalue anything precious, identity is unstable and open to reconstitution, the historical event no longer holds…

Tania Modleski, in her article "The Terror of Pleasure: The Contemporary Horror Film and Postmodern Theory," interrogates the aspersions cast on pleasure as a dupe of the masses, a suspicion that can be traced through Karl Marx, the Frankfurt school and even pomo critics such as Roland Barthes and Jean-Francois Lyotard. Mass culture is equated, disparagingly, with dominant ideology, and Modleski points up "the tendency of critics and theorists to make mass culture into the 'other' of whatever, at any given moment, they happen to be championing—and moreover, to denigrate that other primarily because it allegedly provides pleasure to the consumer" (693). She goes on to demonstrate that both pleasure and popular culture are discursively linked to the feminine, and comments that women are "denied access to pleasure, while simultaneously… scapegoated for seeming to represent it" (699).

Moulin Rouge seems to take delight in mass culture and the pleasure it offers, but pop aesthetics alone don't make for new representational tactics. In the reformulation, the modern update, of the bohemian hero and his doomed love for the beautifully-suffering courtesan we recognise the same old tropes. The hero goes slumming and becomes fascinated by a love object—and her feminized underworld. The loved one, however, must be destroyed; all the better to hasten the hero's succession to his rightful place in the symbolic realm. *Moulin Rouge* respects the formula, and makes sure the heart-tugging moments are undiluted by irony or stylistic excess.

Of course, in the midst of all the sentiment, the "new sincerity" and call for authentic feeling, nothing is really at stake. Or more accurately, all that is at stake is the maintenance of all-too-familiar representations. The nineteenth-century romantic artist figure so dashingly recreated in *Moulin Rouge's* protagonist recalls a time when one suffered with melancholy rather then boredom. Except that 'one' is always a man, and melancholy a condition that removes him, even if he dabbles with it, from the threatening fray of the masses, of the Other. Melancholy allows the male subject to grapple with the shifting cultural forces that unsettle and alarm him, to express discontent and discomfort, all the while cultivating the stance of a besieged centre, a repository of legitimate values and higher sensibility isolated within a degraded cultural wasteland:

If melancholy and boredom are defined by a certain self-consciousness, in melancholy, self-consciousness is painful precisely because the perception of otherness comes at the cost of exclusivity. In boredom, by contrast, selfconsciousness is…more apt to bring into representation women's experience of everyday life. Whereas melancholia is about loss, and about converting male losses into representational gains, boredom, at least in twentieth century, is about excess, sensory stimulation, and shock (generated as much by the existence of others as by the media and overproduction). (Petro 192)

The gambit of a film such as *Moulin Rouge* is to claim the hip credibility of a new aesthetic—to revel in the "excess" and "sensory stimulation" that signal novelty and cultural cachet—without giving up the model of "representational gains" that Petro describes. The depth metaphors of melancholy have been replaced by the dazzle of surfaces, surfaces slicked with irony (an irony that, in referring to nothing but a *mise-en-abîme* of the ironic, has lost any critical bite). The emotional content, however, still depends on a modernist schema of loss to produce tears—though now neither the text nor the audience really knows what they are supposed to be mourning. *Moulin Rouge's* nostalgia is not actually for a story that means something but for a mythical time before boredom, for the thrill of truly novel entertainment.

It seems that boredom, like mass culture, has spread and become inevitable, but neither has shed the taint of discursive feminization. Thus, "twentieth century boredom becomes both a 'democratic affliction' and a great leveller, bound up with changing definitions of work and leisure, art and mass culture, aesthetics and sexual difference" (Petro 192). If *Moulin Rouge* is an example of a postmodern text interested in toying with these "changing definitions" but ultimately overcome by its own sense of tedium, *Hedwig And The Angry Inch* (2001) presents the promise of postmodernist aesthetics when informed by critical strategies of representation. With campy, glam rock delight, the film tells the story of a pop culture-loving little boy from Communist East Berlin who suffers a botched sex-change operation and ends up singing her (broken) heart out across a tacky and largely indifferent America. This is not the gigs-in-grungy-holes, paying-your-dues version of a hopeful rock star's first crosscountry tour. The romance of this American dream is submerged in the cheesy landscape of outerurban franchise buffets, through which Hedwig storms, snarling and gyrating to a handful of patrons who couldn't be less interested in the show. Not only is Hedwig *not*—despite flashy get-ups and rather unusual gender affiliations—the shocking spectacle any good rock'n'roller *should be* to this middle-aged,

middle-American crowd, she's there not for the love of it but as a gesture of bitter revenge: following ex-lover and song-stealer Tommy Gnosis on his stadium tour. Hedwig's performances are sensational; she should be a star, and the fact that she's not is a frustration, but no tragedy.

The work of rock'n'roll is just that, work, and though Hedwig imagines it as glamorous, and even makes it look glamorous with her hipster icon posturing, we see clearly that it is not; Hedwig, her manager and her bandmates are just slogging along. Here a band gig is not unlike a babysitting gig. This equation, however, does not make for a further deflation of the former vocation so much as an elevation of the latter. Though Hedwig's physical surroundings and cultural milieu are less than inspiring, her insistent performance of the glamorous life makes an *occasion* of all of her activities. By matter-of-factly (while voicing plenty of irony and dissatisfaction) dealing with the quotidian instead of brooding over life's tragic disappointments, Hedwig transforms boredom into creative self-definition.

Hedwig, we are told, embodies a "divide" (the metaphor here is the Berlin Wall) "between east/west, man/woman, top/bottom" and to this list we can add modernism/postmodernism. (Though ultimately *Hedwig And The Angry Inch* posits the concept of polarities and partitions to dismantle such categories. Hedwig is a kind of hybrid creature, a not-man who must contend with all the discontent this entails. Gender identity works best, the film claims, when self-consciously performed and fantastical, and tends to be constructed along the lines of desire, identification and narcissistic projection.) The (highly artificial) East Berlin of Hedwig's boyhood is much like the site of a self-consciously nostalgic and romanticised modernist past—a time and place in which existential angst and grand ideas like freedom really meant something. America turns out to be a postmodern setting extraordinaire: an alienating, featureless, commercial desert of stripmalls and motels. But as indifferent as America is to Hedwig, so, ultimately, is Hedwig to America. This late-twentieth-century cultural landscape is not rendered glamorous with ironic nihilism nor does it stand as a soul-deadening wasteland—it is just boring. If the "original"—male—Hedwig is a parodic melancholy hero, brooding and longing for another life, then the suddenly white-trash, female Hedwig abandoned in a trailer park is the disaffected postmodernist, the unhappy woman. Petro quotes literary critic Reinhard Kuhn on "Flaubert's Emma Bovary, [who] presents symptoms similar to those felt by the bored suburbanite […] The former [Flaubert] suffers from a metaphysical malady, and the latter [Bovary] only feels a superficial and bored disquiet" (191). *Hedwig And The Angry Inch* is about taking on just such genderinflected assessments and pooh-poohing the implicit value system therein. Post-op Hedwig is like Madame Bovary, but without the male *auteur* to make her story tragic. Instead, the "superficial and bored disquiet" Hedwig experiences becomes a critique on the inevitable condition of dissatisfaction stemming from a dissatisfying quotidian existence, a lack of gratification and access to pleasure —"*what fails to happen*."

If we are now bored by the changes that have *not* occurred, the answer is not to give over to exhaustion, nor to fear redundancy. Revisiting the enthusiasms and critiques—even the misfires—of the past is always worthwhile, especially if we reject a teleological view of history, a view that constructs ruptures and failures where there are only cycles and flux. Boredom, according to Petro, is an issue in which feminist theory is inevitably invested. Most broadly, boredom matters because the concept of feminism is infected by it. Feminism comes across as tiresome from the outside; feminist theorists are tired of "the tedium of conventional representation (including what has now become a conventional representation of feminism itself)" (Petro 198). Boredom, however, can be a great motivating force: feminist film theory and practice of the 70s utilized this "tedium of conventional representation" to produce new paradigms, and took on boredom as a confrontation with the quotidian by presenting the mundane details of the so-called feminine sphere of activity—a realm otherwise belittled, or simply unrepresented. Chantal Akerman's landmark film *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai Du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) deals at length (most of its 200 minutes) with the domestic chores of its titular protagonist as she unceremoniously makes dinner and turns tricks in her home— the sex generally occurs offscreen, but not the protracted peeling of potatoes. Akerman's 1978 film *Les Rendez-Vous D'anna*, also dealing with interstitial, banal moments, moves the female lead out of the home and into urban space.

Though the narrative of *Les Rendez-Vous D'anna* is relentlessly linear, a kind of cyclical structure is at work. The film begins with Anna installing herself in a hotel room and aimlessly, vacantly wandering about the less-than-hospitable space; it ends with Anna in her apartment—alone again—a home that might as well be a hotel room for all the specific, cozy domesticity it offers. This combination of anticlimactic linearity

and circularity conveys a sense that nothing adds up to anything, that (as Jayne Loader writes of *Jeanne Dielman*) "in the chain of rituals, of monotony, of the interchangeability of days and events" (336), boredom is the only outcome.

As professional filmmaker and single woman, Anna has mobility, but she is hardly fancy-free. A certain anxiety, an awkward discomfort, could be said to attest to her liminal status as flaneuse within the general condition of modern urban alienation. Her travels certainly appear boring—the tedium of the new when the strange is just more of the same. Anna's position is ambiguous: she seems neither happy nor unhappy. The apparent meaninglessness of events and encounters that she experiences afford her a certain liberation, facilitating her mobility.

The domestic sphere is almost entirely absent in *Les Rendez-Vous D'anna*; interior spaces offer no buffering embrace. Instead, Anna is constantly travelling through urban space, a space marked by anonymity and accidental encounters. The narrative is aleatory. Events do not forward the action or ultimately tie in meaningfully with any overarching plot. The rendez-vous not only lack specificity in terms of the arbitrary nature of their order, they lack specificity in terms of the participants—except, of course, for Anna herself. Within her peripheral, peripatetic status, Anna functions as something of a sounding-board; strangers make use of her presence to unburden themselves. Ultimately, though, despite awkward attempts at connection, Anna ends up with her answering machine (as it pauses and beeps with an irritating/entrancing reiteration), a fitting substitute for the personal meetings that hardly offer her any more engaged or meaningful communication.

Les Rendez-Vous D'anna eschews essence in order to present a destabilizing melange of the particular and the anonymous, the individual and the exemplar. In her book *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrrealist Everyday*, Ivone Margulies' description of *Jeanne Dielman* also applies to *Les Rendez-Vous D'anna*, with the text "oscillating between concreteness and abstraction […] unsettl[ing] notions of type and of representativeness while suggesting a perverse compliance with these very notions…Jeanne [substitute "Anna"] can still be seen as a type, albeit in an unmapped, nonessentialist register. Akerman's main feat is her definition of a positive and political valence for singularity" (148). *Les Rendez-Vous D'anna* works to establish its protagonist as a singular entity who is not merely replaceable or exchangeable: she demonstrates particularity and eccentricity; she occupies a specific place and time, which her story does not transcend; she is responsive, if inadequately so. However, the film's refusal of interiority, and Anna's function as effectively a blank slate (if Anna' encounters are interchangeable with her answering machine, so, in effect, is she) also relegates her character, and all the characters within the film, to anonymity and representative type. Within *Les Rendez-Vous D'anna's* framework of estrangement and alienation nothing is particular, engaging or meaningful: "Nothing happens." Boredom, it seems, more then even necessity, is the key motivator.

Thematics of boredom are applied at the formal level as well, in the "detours" that Margulies describes:

> fixed, symmetrical framing and long shot duration clear the scene, and magnify the focus on single characters as they speak. Along with the fixed perspective, there are no reverse or point-of-view shots; the characters are always seen from the outside […] Akerman's dialogue-as-monologue structure displaces response onto the audience. With no reversal of perspective, she establishes a noncomplicit relation with her audience. (156-7)

Because the viewer is not sutured into the film, she is not afforded the illusion of engagement, of entertainment. Rather than comfortably absorbing the threat of boredom the viewer experiences, the film deflects this anxiety back. The viewer is encouraged to confront, perhaps to become comfortable with, boredom. In performing monotony, *Les Rendez-Vous D'anna* comes to terms with, or possibly refutes, the twentieth century hysteria surrounding ennui.

Not unlike *Les Rendez-Vous D'anna, Hedwig And The Angry Inch* represents a liminal figure without playing up the exoticism or victimization this status often entails. The other is not used as a clear-eyed cultural critic nor as someone who operates outside of the system: the 'system' is too all-encompassing and diffuse to be used to define a periphery and a centre: these entities all coexist. No one has any answers or any claims on meaning. But, for the protagonists, this destabilized condition in itself (counter to the "beyond gender" theories of postmodernism) is not a reason for exuberance nor (counter to a patriarchal discourse of lament) is it an acute misfortune.

Instead, these texts reframe ennui. *Hedwig* uses knowing irony and a splashy pomo sensibility, whereas *Les Rendez-Vous D'anna* utilises modernist aesthetics for an insistent

representation of monotony; both work to deflate the tragic stance of melancholy while simultaneously foregrounding tedium and dissatisfaction as routine symptoms of cultural exclusion. For women and other minority groups there is no appreciable rupture between modernism and postmodernism, just a continuity of boredom. But if feminism does best to reject a discourse that denounces boredom while feminizing it, we hardly want to settle for boredom. Thus in cultivating a representational strategy that "challenges the assumption that *ennui* is a male condition and exposes its status as theatrical gesture or pose" (Petro 195)—in *performing* boredom—we create a critical distance that opens a gap for pleasure. Men, expecting privilege, have wanted to romanticize their suffering, to turn their backs on the commonplace and decry its polluting effects. But women, knowing that life is disappointing, must find creative ways of generating pleasure—which is why *truly* innovative, female-friendly representation can teach men a thing or two about surviving—and perhaps thriving— as postmodern subjects.

Dorothy Davenport: *From Social Conscience to Exploitation Pioneer*

Robert Read

This paper was prepared for and presented at the Women and the Silent Screen Congress, Montreal, June 2 to 6, 2004.

Over the last few years, I have become increasingly interested in the independent, low-budget film industry of the 1930s. As I began to view the available films and read the scant research on this unique period of cinema's forgotten history, I repeatedly came across several references to Dorothy Davenport, a.k.a. Mrs. Wallace Reid, as director, producer, and writer. Who was this woman? Where did she come from? And why is there so little critical work on her career? Well, that was a few years ago, and research on the films of Dorothy Davenport has since proliferated. I should add that although the majority of the work has focused on her career in the silent period, my interest in Davenport focuses on her participation in the B movie and exploitation films of the early 1930s. She was one of a number of silent filmmakers who found themselves unable to meet the demands of the new "All-Talking" Hollywood picture. It was for this reason that Davenport, like so many others, found her way into the emerging B film industry. Overall, my research has focused on the emergence of the independent B movie industry and its relationship to the Hollywood studio system, the Exploitation film industry, and most importantly the connection between the B films of the 1930s and the films of the silent era. Correspondingly, my research has revealed that Dorothy Davenport played a substantial role in the development of these low-budget independent films. In this article, I would therefore like to concentrate on the portion of Davenport's career that sees her move from producer of social conscience films in the 1920s to director and producer of B-grade genre and exploitation films in the 1930s. This will inevitably lead me to say some words about the direction I will be taking my future research on the B movie industry of the 30s.

Davenport began her film career as an actress in the early silent period, a rival to "America's Sweetheart," Mary Pickford. However, after the tragic, drug-related death of her husband, matinee idol Wallace Reid, Davenport embarked on a career as an independent film producer, and later, director. I feel it is important to stress that she worked independently, on the margins of the Hollywood studio system. In the late 1920s and into the 1930s, independent film producers maintained a complicated relationship with financially powerful Hollywood studios. Often this relationship was parasitic, with the independents employing Hollywood's numerous cast-offs and producing films that big studios were not interested in making. For this reason, independent productions of the time typically took the form of cheaply produced genre films: westerns, murder mysteries, horror films, and exploitation pictures.

Davenport's foray into independent film production was not motivated by a need for artistic integrity; rather, it was a socially motivated and calculated personal crusade against the horrors of the drug trade. With the assistance of the Los Angeles Anti-Narcotics League and independent producer Thomas H. Ince, Davenport produced the now lost anti-drug treatise *Human Wreckage* in 1923. The film tells the story of a

number of people who succumb to the evils of drug addiction, and although it did not directly discuss the circumstances of Wallace Reid's addiction, the star's notoriety certainly helped at the box-office. From the images preserved in *Human Wreckage's* production stills, the film appears to have featured an impressive Calagariesque streetscape, here used to represent a drug induced nightmare. It appears that the film was in no way hampered by low production values, unlike many of Davenport's later films. Most importantly however, the production proved to be immensely popular and profitable for both Ince and Davenport, and allowed her to continue the production of her "Sins of the World" film series.

Davenport followed *Human Wreckage* with the 1924 film *Broken Laws*. As Kevin Brownlow documents, during her personal appearances with *Human Wreckage*, Davenport became conscious of the plight of the juvenile delinquent [1]. As a result, she produced and starred in *Broken Laws*, the story of a young man's downward spiral, featuring fast cars, loose women, and plenty of booze. Although emotionally effective, the film was not as financially successful as her earlier work. Moreover, as Brownlow points out:

> [Davenport] was a reformer at heart, but she had a showman's outlook. Brought up in the theatre, and a pioneer in Hollywood she believed that the primary mission of the screen was to entertain. Combining propaganda with entertainment was a difficult exercise in an industry ruled on one side by Hays and on the other by exhibitors, and it was not surprising that her later pictures—such as *The Red Kimono*—veered toward exploitation. [2]

Moreover, the move towards more entertainment-oriented films brought an end to Davenport's working relationship with Thomas Ince and the "Sins of the World" series. After Ince's death, she branched out into her own production company.

In 1925, Davenport produced and co-directed *The Red Kimono,* her earliest surviving film. The film centred on Gabrielle Darley, a young woman forced into white slavery, who during a moment of impassioned rage, murders her husband/pimp. After serving time in jail, she finds herself unable to readjust to normal society and heads back to New Orleans' notorious red-light district, Storyville, only to be eventually saved by the man who loves her. As Brownlow observes, the budget of *The Red Kimono* was much slimmer than Davenport's earlier films and this is most evident in the painted library set used for the producer/director's cautionary introduction to the film. Moreover, the film's strong emphasis on the more lurid details of the white slave racket, the heroine's descent into Storyville and the murder of the husband/pimp, were signs of the shift from the pathos and melodrama of the social conscience films to the sensationalism and titillation of the burgeoning exploitation industry. Her next film was *The Earth Woman* in 1926. While there is little information to be found on this film, we can assume from the fact that it was the last film produced exclusively by her company, Mrs. Wallace Reid Productions, that it was not a financial success.

As an independent producer, Davenport was well acquainted with the difficulties of being outside the Hollywood studio system, and as Brownlow states, she was more of a showman than a social reformer. This bent towards entertainment becomes evident in her later film work. Although Davenport had entered production as an advocate for the less fortunate by making films that exposed the horrors of drug use, juvenile delinquency, and white slavery, her chosen subjects were being co-opted by a new breed of low-budget B movie and exploitation producers. In 1929, Davenport joined forces with low-budget film producer Willis Kent, head of one of the most important independent production companies of the early 30s and an original member of exploitation cinema's "Forty Thieves." Their first collaboration was the convoluted and meandering melodrama LINDA (1929). The story focuses on a young hillbilly girl, forced into a loveless marriage with a lumberjack. Although repellent, the tree cutter turns out to be a lonely and warm-hearted fellow; nevertheless she runs off to the big city. Although the film, full of plot twists so strange as to make viewers dizzy, was made with one of the largest budgets Willis Kent would ever work with, *Linda* was a pretty 'cheap' film compared with Hollywood's output at the time.

Nonetheless, Davenport's association with Willis Kent was a successful one. After *Linda*, Davenport directed or co-directed three more films: *Sucker Money* in 1933, *Road To Ruin* and *The Woman Condemned*, both from 1934. Although none of these films can be considered cinematic masterpieces, they are all representative of the low-budget genre films of the period. Despite the fact that these lurid pulp films have been critically neglected, I find them absolutely fascinating and irresistible. The first, *Sucker Money*, was subtitled "an exposé of the psychic racket" and is an unofficial sequel to the earlier Willis Kent pot-boiler, *Sinister Hands* (1932). In the first film, Mischa Auer played the sinister, but

deceptive, character of the fake swami, Yomurda. In Davenport's sequel, it is revealed that the fake mystic is in fact a diabolical and ruthless criminal mastermind. His fake mysticism and bogus séances are a front for his stock fraud and kidnapping operations. However, justice prevails and after a great car chase, the police gun down the evil swami, who dies squirming in a ditch. Although the narrative is similar to many mystery/horror hybrids of the period, *Sucker Money* is unique as an exposé on the fake spiritualist movement quite popular at the time. The film's daring revelation of this particular social blight raises the question as to who among those responsible for the film can take credit for exploiting these nefarious scams. I have reason to believe that we can assume that this sensationalism was the work of Willis Kent more so than Davenport, who was attempting to profit from her earlier reputation as a social reformer. Manipulation of Davenport's crusader image would again be exploited in their next collaboration.

The Road To Ruin was a remake of Willis Kent's 1928 film of the same name and centres on two young teenage girls who are neglected by their parents and run afoul of moral decency. (Davenport was not involved in the production of the earlier version.) As Eric Shaefer points out, the sound version was a virtual shot-for-shot remake of the silent film [3]. Interestingly, Davenport plays Mrs. Merrill, the jailhouse matron of young girls, who labels the two girls as sexual delinquents and sternly lectures their neglectful mothers (again, following her role as social advocate). Undoubtedly, the prestige and respectability of Davenport's reputation would have assisted in imbuing the proceedings with a certain authenticity, as well as serving to guarantee a substantial box-office boost. Davenport's final directorial effort was *The Woman Condemned*, a convoluted murder mystery surrounding mistaken identity, plastic surgery and twins.

After working with Willis Kent, Davenport gave up the director's chair for the role of producer. She first worked at Monogram Pictures, producing comedies, melodramas, and westerns. After the company declared bankruptcy, she accepted a multi-film contract with the new company Republic Studios, but she produced only one film, THE HOUSE OF A THOUSAND CANDLES (1936). Then she returned to the newly reformed Monogram to produce several more films. In 1938, she gave up production and became a screenwriter working on the scripts of many independent and Hollywood studio B movies until the mid-50s.

Generally speaking, the independent low-budget films of the 1930s are a curious lot, but they have often offended critics and scholars due to their continued devotion to silent film aesthetics. Performances tended to be histrionic and still evoked pantomime, and direction was often stagey, slow, and encumbered by the injection of sound and dialogue. Many critics from the period labelled these films as old-fashioned in comparison to the more advanced Hollywood films—an attitude that has received little opposition over the years and that has, in fact, been perpetuated by the limited scholarship on figures like Davenport and on the early B film industry in general. *Forgotten Horrors*, written by George Turner and Michael Price and published in 1999, offers little in the way of new insights into films of this ilk, electing to criticise them for the fact that they often fail to challenge silent cinema's aesthetic principles. In their discussion of *Sucker Money*, for instance, they note that the evil swami Yomurda's exaggerated wickedness owes largely to the influence of co-director Dorothy Reid and that the film suffers from clumsily forced writing (by producer Kent) and inept direction [4]. With regards to Reid's later film, *The Woman Condemned*, they state that a certain 20s aura clings to it [5]. However, these criticisms are for naught. As Brian Taves explains, the B filmmakers of the 30s were not prized for their artistic and stylistic innovation; value was placed in their experience and ability to simply get the job done [6]. Furthermore, the preservation of this "antiquated" style worked in a positive sense that many have overlooked: the creation of something of a hybrid set of aesthetic values. The mixing of the old-fashioned look of the silent film and the new technologies of sound recording created a contradictory and unstable cinematic image, one that borders on the aesthetic interests of surrealism. Hence, when examining Davenport's film work, I think that rather than focusing on her antiquated reliance upon silent film aesthetics, we should see these lagging old fashioned techniques as evidence that these films were open to a new aesthetic discourse, one that leads to the fringes of the surreal.

In addition, my research has revealed that the urban representation of the B and exploitation cinema of the early 30s parallels French novelist and essayist Pierre Mac Orlan's literary concept of the "Social Fantastic:"

> For Mac Orlan, the notion of the social fantastic is the presence of the undefined, the mysterious and the threatening beneath the surface of modern society. It is the sinister, inexplicable nature of this phenomenon, the insidious threat

> as opposed to total, explicit horror that renders it more disturbing. [7]

For Davenport, beginning with her early social conscience films, the modern city was a place of sexual threats and impending danger. We could consider the Caligariesque dream-city in *Human Wreckage*, or the following, from *The Red Kimono* (I cite Kevin Brownlow):

> The picture suffers from a lack of realism, mainly in its art direction. It would have been a relatively simple matter to re-create the red-light district on location in a run down part of town; instead, it is reproduced on an unconvincing set. Perhaps Mrs. Reid remembered the lawsuits that followed the first spate of white slave pictures, when owners of restaurants used as locations took companies to court and won. The trouble with the film is that all the other exteriors were shot on location, and the blatant artificiality destroys conviction. [8]

Certainly, the decision to have the Storyville location as a studio set may have been motivated by the possibilities of impending lawsuits, but I disagree with Brownlow when he states that the artificiality of Storyville destroys the film's believability. Instead, I offer this interpretation: when the film moves from its actual location settings of Los Angeles to the back lot staging of the red-light district, the result is the evocation of the social fantastic, which, as we have seen, has little regard for standards associated with 'realism.' In the film, Storyville is not only a locus of ill repute, but the location of the mysterious, sinister and threatening, which manifests itself in the attempted rape of the heroine. Therefore, we can see *The Red Kimono* as an early cinematic manifestation of the social fantastic; the representation of the modern city as a place where danger and uncertainty lurks in the shadows. I should also add that the social fantastic finds its way into the genre films of the emerging B industry, and Davenport's later films are populated with characters looming from the urban spaces of the social fantastic: the evil swami in *Sucker Money*, the drug-peddling cad in *Road To Ruin*, and the sexually frustrated and murderous gangster in *The Woman Condemned*– they all evoke the hidden dangers of the modern city.

To conclude, my initial examination of the low-budget film industry of the 1930s has revealed that Dorothy Davenport played an important role in developing this emerging cinema. Her films are exemplary of certain narratives, aesthetic forms, and themes that were developed in the silent era, all of which, as abandoned by the new technology-seeking Hollywood studios, were maintained by the filmmakers of the low-budget independent cinema of the 1930s. In addition, the maintenance of this old-fashioned style and the subsequent evocation of the surreal and the "Social Fantastic" make these wonderful and lurid pulp films worthy of further critical investigation.

FOOTNOTES

1 Brownlow, Kevin. *Behind the Mask of Innocence: Sex, Violence, Prejudice, Crime: Films of Social Conscience in the Silent Era*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990. 173.

2 Brownlow 175.

3 Schaefer, Eric. _Bold! Daring! Shocking! *True!: A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999. 58.

4 Turner, George E. and Michael H. Price. *Forgotten Horrors: The Definitive Edition*. Baltimore: Midnight Marquee Press, 1999. 100.

5 Turner, and Price 136.

6 Taves, Brian. "The B Film: Hollywood's Other Half." *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise*, 1930-1939. Ed. Tino Balio. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993. 329-330.

7 Baines, Roger W. *Inquiétude in the Work of Pierre Mac Orlan*. Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000. 36.

8 Brownlow 92

The Stepford Wives Reality is Stepford

Dave Douglas

Reality is Stepford: So Why Not Try Comedy?

In Hollywood's current mood of viewing the world via the rear-view mirror, the return of Ira Levin's *Stepford Wives* provides a curious commentary on social change during the last 29 years. Bryan Forbes original film, with William Goldman as scriptwriter, served as a paranoid riposte to the wave of feminism that emerged during the early 70s. The sci-fi/thriller proved controversial during its initial release, before being comfortably accredited cult status, in large part due to the patronage of gay audiences. Flash forward 29 years and Frank Oz's timing for the remake seems oddly out of place. How does one scare a modern audience with the spectre of feminism in a world already engrossed in the reality of "Stepford"—extreme makeovers, Martha Stewartism, and Oprah's soft-love. It simply can't be done and Oz doesn't even try. Sadly, Paul Rudnick's script for the updated film elicits little in the way of comedy, but it does restore to "Stepford" a renewed rationale for fearing aspiring women. More on this later…

The new improved *Stepford* is, not surprisingly, filmed in the same Connecticut town of Norwalk, which, true to its "back to the future" calling, has resisted any pressure to change in response to feminism, post-modernism, transcendentalism or any other "ism" for that matter. The perfect homes and perfect lawns of the very real Norwalk embody the ideals of fictional Stepford. Of course, not all remains the same in Oz's version of the film: a notable inflation informs the character of Joanna Eberhart. In the original film, Joanna was an aspiring semi-professional photographer. In retrospect, her feminist threat to patriarchal order was barely in its infancy, posited on an attempt to secure a quiet afternoon for herself to develop some photos in the family's hall closet. In the update, Nicole Kidman's Joanna could never be such a slacker; modern Joanna is a network president providing images for the entire world!

Oz attempts a modicum of surprise, by offering Kidman not in the image of her ubiquitous fashion magazine cover star persona, but as a bland and repressed figure who takes delight in offering America dismal television content. Under the skin, this Joanna aspires to be the successor to Diana Christensen from Sidney Lumet's *Network* (1976), but never displays the ruthlessness and conviction that Faye Dunaway's character offered a generation earlier. Thwarted in her design to swamp America with crass "reality" television, Joanna is obliged to move to Stepford, ostensibly to convalesce, but we know better: this sleepy "perfect" community is little more than a purgatory for the decidedly urbanite Eberhart.

Once ensconced in her model home in Stepford, Joanna is immediately suspicious of her neighbours and community, but the source of this suspicion is telling. For her part, Katherine Ross' Joanna found her suspicions grounded in the explicit chauvinism of the Stepford community. Kidman's Joanna reacts less to this than to Stepford's penchant to celebrate the uncomplicated image of Norman Rockwell's America. Stepford's problem isn't a matter of the inequality of the sexes: the problem is it's the suburbs—and that ain't hip. Aided by her urban posse, Joanna proceeds to mock Stepford by attempting to dress like the natives

and match their obsession for home maintenance; her and her girls find the exercise demeaning and foolish, all the while remaining oblivious to their peril at the hands of the avenging suburban nightmare around them.

In the end, Oz eschews any pretence at engaging the thriller genre, but in a nod to the current trend in (what passes for) script writing, he does offer audiences the proverbial "surprise" ending, one which exposes the doyenne of the community, Claire Wellington (Glenn Close), to be the real villain. The choice of Close and her rationale for wreaking such havoc on the community speaks volumes about the new Stepford—post-feminism, indeed.

Close, who notably played Alex Forrest in Adrian Lyne's *Fatal Attraction* (1987), was the Reagan era poster-girl threat to the wandering and lustful male. The choice of Close for the role of the puppeteer of Stepford is deeply ironic. As Alex Forrest, Close embodied the threat that the unrestrained, sexually aggressive female posed to patriarchal authority. As Claire, Close damns her former identity as an abomination in her call to restore the image of patriarchal authority. In Claire's world, it is liberated women who lead men astray, and this can't be allowed to happen, hence the necessity of a robotic makeover on a community-wide scale.

With the election of Bill Clinton, America got both a philandering President and the recognition of the power of the "soccer moms." Oz's re-telling of *The Stepford Wives* seeks to bring these two cultural moments together in a story that once again assigns blame for society's ills on the danger of the libidinous female. *Stepford* articulates that happiness is to be found in order and simplicity: a boxstore bought salve for the complications of the modern world.

The final irony of the film is found in the timing of its release, in the same summer that saw Martha Stewart convicted and sentenced both to jail and house arrest in the affluent suburbs of Connecticut. Like her onscreen alter-ego, Stewart has been held up for public condemnation: a sacrificial lamb whose public shaming serves to protect her corporate male counterparts who committed crimes of a far greater scale. At the end of the day, society still feels more comfortable blaming the woman.

Women and the Silent Screen: *Panel 16 New Histories / New Methods | Histoire nouvelle, méthodes Nouvelles*

Lisa Fotheringham

The third international **Women and the Silent Screen Congress** was held in 2004 from the second through the sixth of June at Concordia University in Montreal. We present here Panel 16, held Saturday June 5th, 10:45 am in the Garbo Salon. The panel, entitled New Histories/New Methods, featured presentations by Christine Gledhill of Staffordshire University, Rosanna Maule of Concordia University, and Tom Gunning of the University of Chicago. The panel chair was Martin Lefebvre.

Tom Gunning: "Light, Motion, Cinema: The Heritage of Loie Fuller and Germaine Dulac"

Synopsis: Tom Gunning charts the profound aesthetic influence of dancer Loie Fuller on the experimental filmmaker Germaine Dulac, suggesting a deep kinship between the birth of cinema, the extravagance of art nouveau, and a burgeoning modernity.

This article will be published, in a much expanded form, in an upcoming edition of *Framework*.

Part 2 of Tom Gunning's presentation is commentary he delivered while showing Dulac's film *Arabesque*.

Christine Gledhill: "Reframing Women in 1920s British Cinema"

Synopsis: Christine Gledhill examines the importance of the experiences of two women film pioneers in understanding the history of early British Cinema: Violet Hopson, and Dinah Shurey (Britain's first woman director).

Christine Gledhill has not informed us about what future plans she has for this article.

Rosanna Maule: "Une histoire sans noms : pour une révision du concept d'auteur dans le cinéma des premiers temps"

Synopsis: Providing a comprehensive overview of the main theories of authorship in film studies, Rosanna Maule's article argues that the notion of authorship needs to be redefined, and that the study of women filmmakers from the silent era offer important strategies in that redefinition. Includes examination of the work of Francois Jost, Jane Gaines, Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, and others.
This article will be published in an upcoming edition of *CiNéMAS*.

Tribeca? –Or not

Daniel Stefik

Dan Stefik wrote about Bruno Dumont's *Twenty-Nine Palms* in Synoptique 2. This is Part Two of Synoptique's coverage of the *TriBeCa Film Festival*. [see Synoptique 3 – "**Festival de TriBeCa : Compte Rendu**" par P-A Despatis D.]

For those of you unfamiliar with the grid of streets and avenues that is Manhattan Island, Tribeca (**Tri**angle **Be**low **Ca**nal) is an upscale area just above the former heart of New York—Ground Zero. Yet the vestiges of the former WTCs and that one fateful day are not only found at Ground Zero environs; beyond the construction crews and souvenir stands, the traces of the past are present in motions, actions and words, though rarely spoken at ease. All of these aspects make for some great cinema and cinema-going experiences.

Tribeca is a fairly young festival that understandably hasn't found its niche or target audience. Which is troublesome, only because of the abundance of Film Festivals, the majority of which have carved out an audience or central thematic. Take for example the *San Francisco Black Festival, the Human Rights Watch Int'l Festival in New York*, touring festivals such as *HDFEST*, or the *Int'l Wildlife Film Festival*. There's no shortage of festivals in North America, and even if a great deal of overlapping occurs, each festival offers its own personality or lack thereof. Although I've experienced many festivals at home in Montreal, I've never had the opportunity to attend festivals elsewhere.

My itinerary was not as all encompassing as that of my fellow *Synoptique* festival reporter, Pierre- Alexandre Despatis; his dedication to cinema going and picture taking was remarkable. However, this having been my first lengthy stay in NYC, and fully aware of the concentration of a portion of the Festival's content on NYC films, I wanted to get a feel for the general area, venues, crowds and climate which make this Festival attractive beyond the dark rooms, the white screens and embattled dreams. My only goal, if possible, was to screen films from all of the program categories: competition and non-competition, feature and short, fiction and documentary. Here's what I found.

RESTORED AND REDISCOVERED

In light of the Cinémathèque Québecoise's recent tragic announcement concerning the cancellation of summer programming, it was a pleasure to witness the restorations of two 50s classics, Elia Kazan's *East Of Eden* and Mikhail Kalatozov's *The Cranes Are Flying*. The former screened at Stuyvesant High School to a rather impressive crowd made up of filmgoers from all walks of life. Unbeknownst to most, a guest speaker was swiftly introduced, none other than Martin Scorcese, dear friend of cofounder Robert DeNiro and co-curator for this section of the Festival. Hearing Scorcese articulate so eloquently his love and passion for cinema, and illustrating his fondness for Kazan, James Dean and the craft that united them and helped define a new generation of anti-heros, was a rare treat. Here was one of America's most influential filmmakers, presenting his very own print of the 1955 classic adaptation of Steinbeck's novel, shedding light on Kazan's film and the reasons why it left such an

indelible impression on his then sprouting film-student experience. Having never seen the film myself, I was thoroughly convinced, if not during his enthusiastic presentation then certainly thereafter, at the importance and stature of this film in its historcal context. Even if its content is at times emotionally overwhelming, the experience was nevertheless unexpectedly affecting.

Also, I managed to screen (again, for the first time) a new print of Mikhail Kalatozov's classic B & W masterpiece *The Cranes Are Flying* (1957), courtesy of Mosfilm. Cinematographer Sergei Urusevsky's camerawork is dazzling in its relentless pursuit of its protagonist, Veronica, played by the beautiful Russian actress Tatiana Samoilova. The amenities and innovations which revitalized the moving camera throughout the latter half of the decade are in full view here. It's not difficult to imagine why Scorcese, as co-curator, would have chosen to present this film. Besides the utmost in quality screenings within this category, each presentation served to remind the public of the importance of screening films in their original format. And Scorcese's mandate is the result of two principles: overly decrepit prints circulating in repertory cinemas and the myth of DVD superiority.

FICTION

None of the fiction which I digested ranked highly in my opinion, though I was less interested in feature fiction competition than other offerings which are less likely to resurface in the future for varying reasons. I would prefer not dwelling on films which will probably receive their fair share of forthcoming publicity, but there are some films worth discussing. Namely, *Blind Flight* (2003), John Furse's compelling drama based on actual events in which an Irish nationalist and an English journalist fend off their oppressors while captured in Beirut for four-and-a-half years. Ian Hart and Linus Roache deliver some pretty convincing performances, at least until the film degrades into a sentimental and sappy genre film, which is rather unfortunate given the film's timing and parallels to events unfolding in the Middle East/U.S. conflict in recent months. Given the somewhat shallow performances by the men's captors (no fault of their own, it seems), I could see this film making a better theatrical play than screenplay, in that it would afford the kinds of changes which come with time, maturity, and a better understanding of the kinds of relations between the West and their significant "others." These relations are often trivialized for the sake of fiction and mainstream audiences that putatively prefer one-sided introspection.

Zaman, The Man From The Reeds (Iraq/France, 2003) is a lushly photographed film which charts the plight of Zaman as he travels up the Tigris river to Baghdad in search of a cure for his wife's sickness. This is supposedly the first feature shot in Iraq in over a decade, five reels of which were confiscated by Saddam's regime and never recovered. While the film is remarkable for the way in which it represents the traditions, lifestyles and settings of a people whose history is rarely documented, its narrative is weak and predictable at best. One can't help but assume that endless compromises were made, possibly a result of the lost footage. Still, an interesting film in terms of its historical context.

Yukihiko Tsutsumi's *Love Collage* (2003) is a Japanese film that will probably fare well on the international circuit. An odd love story which combines several formats (Super 8mm, video, polaroids, B&W), it will appeal to those looking for hip, stylish antics, and can be interpreted as a treatise of sorts on the art and excess of photography in the modern age (in much of the same manner as *City Of God*). Although Tsutsami's treatment of New York is inescapably fresh (the film's settings alternate between Tokyo and the Big Apple), the film eventually devolves into a mediocre action flick before ever coming to terms with the characters' lives and development. The overwrought plot twists essentially destabilize a potentially interesting character study of a Japanese teen who's life takes a turn when he moves to NYC in search of his ex and the love of photography which had united them initially, in Tokyo. A good chunk of the film consists of still frames, more than any feature film I've ever seen, which supports the claim that New York is the most photographed location in the world, Tokyo a potential runner-up.

On a much bleaker note, there's Brett C. Leonard's minimalist character study *Jailbait* (2004), which examines the relationship between two convicts, Randy and Jake, played by Michael Pitt and Stephen Adler Guirgis, respectively. The press notes misleadingly describe the film as a "stark, disturbing, and often comical study of one man's subjugation of another." The film was rarely comical or disturbing, and if I had previously imagined Pitt to be young actor with potential, this film asserts that while his pretty face may garner him some attention, realistically, his charming, boyish looks will work against him in the long-run. Imagine an interminable, rather feeble monologue by Guirgis interspersed with reaction shots from Pitt and you have the film. Another entry that would have been more convincing on stage.

Happily Ever After (2004) is Unsu Lee's light comedy, fairy-tale about an ambitious sister who hires a waitress (fairy-godmother?) to save her underachieving brother. Sound familiar? Yes, you've seen it countless times before, especially if you lived through the 80s. That said, the Q & A following the screening was worse: Lee stood at the mic, but the audience interest was focused on the film's leading star Jason Behr (this guy looks way too much like Jesus' Son). I had the sudden urge to leave, but admit that my curiousity at the whole star phenomena, primarily at the independent level, got the worst of me. You will undoubtedly hear about Behr in the future, but Lee, less likely. The whole thing was Sundance material, insofar as the moniker conjures up images of spoiled, narrowminded filmmakers and actors trying to sign a deal, make it big, and move on to better things before ever tapping into their potential.

THE BOTTOM LINE

It's no wonder that with documentary film production and appreciation on the rise (*The Corporation*, *Super-Size Me*, and *Fahrenheit 911*) programmers at Tribeca were capitalizing on the same. There were three doc categories at Tribeca, including First & Second Feature filmmakers, more experienced filmmakers, and a special section reserved for docs examining New York at large. I've singled out four docs, three of which deal with important issues or current affairs and one of which deserves particular scrutiny.

The documentary competition presented films from all corners of the world including an impressive entry from Bulgaria. Adela Peeva's *Whose Is This Song?* (2003) follows the director as she maps out an itinerary through the Balkans, chasing the origins of a childhood song which each country clams as its own. She sits down to converse with the locals in each area and discovers that each has a story to justify the historical anthem as their national property. As her pilgrimage draws to an end, very little is resolved save for the fact that Nationalism can have dangerous consequences in which a given people stubbornly pit their own culture against another and claim supremacy. Peeva expertly weaves several issues together (nationalism, religious dogma, class difference) and follows a path of musical interpretation that transforms the original song into numerous forms: from ballad to religious hymn to street march, no form any more convincing than the next. Seeing the lower-to-middle-class locals meditate on their claims to history is both fascinating and disturbing. An acute examination of how 'word-of-mouth' media can create historical myths and legends.

Another quiet masterpiece in the same category is Sergei Dvortsevoy's *In The Dark* (2004), a fortyminute film which observes a day in the life of an 80 year-old man who recently lost his sight and is looking to remain a part of his society. He lives with his cat in a tiny apartment and spends his time netting shopping bags with hopes of replacing the more common plastic bags. When he hits the street to offer them up free of charge, the locals ignore him and reject his plea. Without an ounce of sentimentality, this film manages to capture the essence of the old vs. the new, and in doing so highlights a basic problem in developed societies, regardless of location: the drive for convenience over union is dissolving any notion of community.

For something more controversial, Carey Schonegeval's sixty-minute information session the *Original Child Bomb* (2004) is yet another film which resonates particularly with our post-modern age, as Schonegeval examines the awe and fear inspired nuclear history of America, the proliferation of global nuclear armament, and the aftermath, including lingering physical and mental effects. This was one of the few films I screened in private on DVD, which didn't seem to detract from the film's powerful imagery and its ability to simultaneously affect, inform, and disturb. This should be essential viewing for early childhood education.

Another documentary which skillfully weaves the personal and the public is Bruce Weber's *A Letter To True* (2003). I haven't had the opportunity to screen his critically acclaimed documentary on Chet Baker from a few years back, but his latest is sure to connect with the masses and dog-lovers alike. Weber's photographic sensibility captures his five purebred dogs beautifully and the resulting footage is delicately intercut with meditations on a wide diversity of issues including war, the Black Civil Rights movement, and Classic Hollywood iconography to name but a few. Remarkably, nothing here seems out of place, a testament to Weber's holistic approach to America's historical legacy and the mark of a talented experimental documentarist.

EXPERIMENTAL CINEMA : ALIVE & WELL-HONOURED

Thanks in part to curator Jon Gartenberg Tribeca had a committed, though informal, experimental section. Before each presentation, he spoke of the importance of using Festival culture to expose the public to fare that might not otherwise attract wide, divergent audiences. His point was well taken.

A personal highlight of mine was the discovery, several days into the Festival, that select works of and about Stan Brakhage were being screened as a Tribute to the late experimental filmmaker. The event took place on a beautiful, sunny Wednesday afternoon at the Museum of Jewish Heritage, a venue used for several screenings and events throughout the Festival. After passing through a metal detector and dealing with some pretty insensitive security measures, I was handed program notes which detailed the screenings and events to unfold. With the aid of Tribeca-based New York Filmmakers' Co-op (a non-profit organization devoted to distribution of experimental films) Gartenberg had curated four great silent, color films: *Wonder Ring* (1955), *Mothlight* (1963), *The Riddle Of Lumen* (1972), *Black Ice* (1994).

The films span forty years of Brakhage's career and capture a diversity of approaches and interests which made him one of cinema's most celebrated filmmakers. After having used the NYC subway system as my mode of transportation, the Wonder Ring screening was a rather eerie experience. The film, which I hadn't previously seen, documents the Third Avenue elevated train which has since been removed. Composed of beautifully fleeting imagery, and using rhythm and light in rich, innovative ways, Brakhage's unique perspective on public transportation was an indication of how early Brakhage had assumed a distinctive vision of his experiences of the quotidian world. Screening *The Riddle Of Lumen* for the first time, and knowing very well that it hadn't been included in the DVD collection of works entitled *By Brakhage*, I was ecstatic to say the least. The film presents fragments of reality juxtaposed one after the other. Our desire to make sense of the imagery is soon abandoned with reflection upon the film's title and acknowledging the work as a riddle. The film is a challenge and ploy to remove us from our basically centered thought processes and rationalist tendencies, and it works tremendously. In sharp contrast, and having forsaken reality entirely, both *Mothlight* and *Black Ice* are exemplary of Brakhage's tendencies toward abstraction. Seeing these pristine, colorful prints with a roomful of Brakhage enthusiasts (and a few who had never seen a single film of his) was a rare and exciting event.

Immediately following the screenings, Gartenberg presented three filmmakers and their respective documentaries on Brakhage. Benjamin Meade's fascinating interview (supposedly the last) entitled *Brakhage: The Final Word* is a most revealing portrait of Brakhage's views on everything from Americana to his early childhood orphanage in Kansas City.

Ken Jacobs was on hand to speak of Brakhage and their close relationship to one another, and audiences were privy to two sequences from *Keeping An Eye On Stan* (2003), a collaborative effort between Ken and his daughter, Nisi Jacobs. *The New York Irish Bar 1997* segment had a trio (Stan, his wife, and Ken) swapping a video camera in an Irish Bar and catching some candid moments, as we see Brakhage manhandling a digital camera with apparent ignorance as to how it functions—a true film purist, no doubt. During the course of the evening Jacobs films Brakhage as he scratches the emulsion off the surface of an old strip of film and offers it as a gift to his wife. The beard and generally scruffy appearance…that unique voice…the idealist/minimalist at work…fragments of a lifetime which have thankfully been captured for all those who love this unique man. Criterion, listen up! Couldn't this be worthy bonus material on an upcoming *By Brakhage Vol. 2* DVD?

The second segment was particularly eerie, placing the trio at New York's most famous tourist attraction, ground zero. I had just accidentally drifted into its path that day, and must admit a strange feeling came over me seeing Brakhage in the same area on video, almost seven years ago. Then again, strange New York related 'coincidences' had been occurring all week, and so regularly that I discounted the fate factor almost entirely.

The third film on Brakhage was the most intimate of the three, probably a result of seeing Stan bedridden, during his final months in Victoria, British Columbia. The work is only fifteen minutes long but has Stan reading from his own manifesto, Metaphors on Vision and looking rather calm and content all things considered. The scene is curiously reminiscent of Tarkovsky's late bedridden state and illustrates what I imagine to be a man who's somewhat more accepting and tolerant of death than the average person. His accomplishments and level of involvement within the avant-garde are truly unprecedented.

Later on that evening, after the spirit of Brakhage and all of its accompanying enthusiasm had left the building, the same venue was presenting a special screening of Jennifer Todd's *The Time We Killed* (2004), an experimental feature which had garnered an award at the Berlin Film Festival earlier this year. I wasn't convinced that this film deserved all of its attention, though it did have some rather evocative black and white imagery and offered insights of political vs. personal nature in a timely manner. The film follows

the perils of Robyn, an agoraphobic New Yorker who can't seem to withdraw from the events, memories and state of affairs which haunt her and make her a slave to her flat. A mix of both DV and 16mm film, *The Time We Killed* demonstrates an impressive low-budget stylistic alternative; however, its downside is the result of lacklustre acting and an overly fragmented, abstracted narrative which became increasingly difficult to follow.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

Tribeca organizers and programmers have their work cut out for themselves and will need a couple of extra years to get on the right track. I must say that I was not impressed with the main venue (the Regal Entertainment Centre) which consisted of 11 theatres distributed over several floors. Every screening promised a long trek up three or four flights of narrow escalators and an ambience which was really no different than your average multiplex. Convenient location? Yes and no. The surrounding area has some nice touches (albeit a little upscale for my tastes) with the New Jersey skyline only seconds away and a great bagel joint which had me-repeat customer- coming back for every flavour of cream cheese they could muster up. But in the end, the time spent at the major venue is key, and in my opinion, the Regal centre has got to go. It offers nothing to the festival climate in general.

On the other hand, most of the secondary venues, including the schools and museums, were worthy additions to the Festival. And even if they were situated a little further, what better way than to capture some of the scenes the city has to offer. After all, it's New York for Christ's sake.

The Tribeca Festival Staff weren't exactly jovial, save for the ones handing out free popcorn on the city's many street corners, "compliments of American Express." But then again, having worked my fair share of film festivals, I understand the difficulties which arise when a couple of hundred people get thrown together for one major occasion and have to pretend that everything's going to work out as planned. Planned? There are often less plans than there are reactions and festival-going can be as much a pain for staff as for patrons. All in all, Tribeca was reasonably organized and there were no major problems in my experience. Though I was not a paying customer, in which case I tend to reserve my complaints for Festival revues and the like.

Interview with Erin Brown

Janos Sitar

Janos Sitar is a graphic designer and general crafty boy at Synoptique who wrote about *Troy* in Synoptique 3.

I first met Erin Brown in the fall of 2000 at the University of Victoria when we were both schlepping coffee and movie tickets at Victoria's Cinecenta and heading in parallel directions: she into the world of film production and I into the world of film studies. A friendship emerged quickly and now I have a chance to poke and prod Erin for the sake of intellectual curiosity. In an ideal world, this conversation would have taken place at the Tribeca film festival where her short animated film *The Home* (2004) screened, but instead we sat down in Victoria, BC to discuss her experience of Tribeca, New York and the world of independent film co-ops.

Janos Sitar: How did you get into Tribeca? Did you start by shopping it around to different festivals?

Erin Brown: I had been shopping it all over. Basically, I started really high. I started with Cannes and worked my way down to see where my film fit in. I got accepted into Vancouver [International Film Festival] which was pretty decent; it was a nice premiere to have. From there, I tried to find similar festivals in terms of the quality of their product and the quality of films they select, and the variety of people who come there. Somehow I found Tribeca, and I don't even remember how, I think I was told that it was THE New York film festival because there isn't really a Toronto International Film Festival for New York, and Toronto has sort of become that way for people. So, I thought "Ok, this is supposed to be THE New York festival, and I want to go to New York because there are so many incredibly artistic minds there." But unfortunately I didn't have the money to pay the entry fee, so I took a gamble. It was Christmas time and I guess they were in the Christmas spirit because I told them that it screened on television, and at Vancouver, and that I don't have $50 American because I'm Canadian and my money is worthless, so would you be willing to consider my film? And they said sure; they had 1900 submissions for shorts and somehow it got in. When they emailed me, I thought they made a mistake, seriously, but they wanted me and that was good. It was totally surreal because I thought there was no way I was going to get into New York City, you've got to be kidding me. . .

JS: But it's still a fairly new festival.

EB: It's a really new festival, but I had no idea until I was there how big a festival it was. It's got money, which is a lot different from the other festivals that you deal with. The advertisements were everywhere, all sorts of people and all sorts of celebrities were there, but it was funny because there's these two worlds: the independent, cheap, filmmaker world and the celebrity world. People were like, 'did you hear the Olsen twins are here?' Ugh, God, no, really? Ugh.

JS: (Laughing) With *New York Minute*?

EB: With this shitty feature film that they made. And it just seemed so separate whereas somebody else was like, "Yeah, I just ran into Steve Buscemi at the coffee

shop." So you do have these separate worlds going on. And that was one of the most intriguing facets. Everyone says, "who did you see? Which celebrities did you see?" I didn't see any celebrities.

JS: So you weren't stalking Benicio Del Toro?

EB: No, no Benicio. He wasn't there.

JS: How did you get involved in animation, because you're really not an animator.

EB: Not at all, I can't even draw a storyboard. I had a story that I really wanted to tell and I had no capacity or desire to do it in live action because I wanted it to be a sort of surreal landscape that could be anywhere, but is just off in a way. And to do that type of thing would take a huge, huge production budget and I would never have that amount of money. It's a short film – you have to be realistic: what can you accomplish for a five minute film? What kind of money can you pull together? So, I thought about animation and some of the imagery that I was putting into the film was pretty intense and intricate and to do it in live action would have come off looking really hokey. I managed to meet some fantastic animators and talk to them about the idea and it just clicked. It was good for me as a challenge, because I come from a writer's perspective. I'm a writer first and a director second, so having to sit down and think about all the visual aspects, I had to write character descriptions for everybody. What gender are they, what race, how tall, what colour are their eyes, what are they wearing? What type of location is in the background? Do you want buildings? Do you want an open park scene? Every element was excruciatingly thought out, and at that point in my artistic development, it was exactly what I needed. It was the best choice I think I could have made.

JS: And for that, did you find that people were more receptive when you were shopping it around?

EB: I think acknowledging my own limitations was really valuable because people see that you are a new emerging filmmaker and you've got all of these grand ideas. If I were to go around and say, "Hey look, I'm making live action and this is my story idea," they would have laughed in my face. In showing that I recognize the limitations but also push them as far as I could, that was a really good choice. And then from there, I could use my inexperience as a sort of selling point to the people I wanted to collaborate with, like my animators who are very strong visually, but their weakness was storytelling. I could turn to the musicians for instance and say, "I'm just learning, do whatever you want, these are the parameters I'd like you to work with," and I'd let them take their area of expertise and run with it. But at the same time, I was surrounding myself with so many talented people that no one really noticed how inexperienced I actually was. So we ended up getting money from Bravo! to make it, and when I found out, I literally started bawling because it was such a shock. I thought, "wow, I've done very little with film and I've never done animation and they're going to give me money to do it, they're going to put it on television, oh my God, are they crazy?" I took the money and ran before they changed their minds.

JS: How is the funding issue? That's the never ending struggle, but…

EB: I'm going into my second film now, and I always thought that if you do one, the next one will be easier. These festivals say, "great, so you did an animated short, but what can you do in live action?" You have to go around again and prove yourself in another area. I was really shocked at how difficult it is to find funding the second time. And again, you're finding different pockets of money. With the animated short, it was a Bravo!FACT production, so the animation and music was considered as an art form and that's what sold it to Bravo!FACT. This new film is a totally different project, so you have to try and tailor it. It can't be too commercial for one funder, it can't be too artistic for another funder. All these different choices you have to make, and eventually you have to come up with your artistic vision and say "this is what it's going to be and I'll try to get whatever I can to support that vision." It's tough. We might have money, we might not have money. We are still going to shoot the film either way. And I think that's a nice way to do it, because then you know the people are there because they believe in the project and not simply because they're getting a paycheque. And it helps you make a lot of choices too because I don't have anybody looming over me telling me what to do or what choices to make.

*Writers' note: At this point in the interview the façade of professionalism that Erin and I had established broke down for a short while as we began to make jokes about film content and the appearance of scantily dressed women (AKA booty girls). Eventually we regained our composure and began to discuss the process of writing and the learning curve in filmmaking

EB: After doing my piece of crap feature *To Be Decided*

that I did in university…

JS: But it was a learning experience. I guess I should backtrack and fill in some of the information regarding the feature. I still love telling the story of how when we'd be working together one of our other co-workers would slide you a piece of paper with the word "video" written on it and you would look at him and scream.

EB: (Laughing) Yeah, because at that point I knew I should have done video. I'm still in debt because of this godforsaken 82 minute piece that I made. This film that was a huge learning experience and I wouldn't change that for anything because it's what's gotten me to the point that I'm at now. But at the same time, I look at the money I spent and I know that it would have been smarter to do it on video. Fortunately, it gave me that kind of old-school street cred like, "She did film. She did 16mm and cut it on a Steenbeck. That's pretty hardcore."

JS: Do you think that it became your mini-version of film school?

EB: Absolutely.

JS: Especially coming from a writing background and meeting mostly film production students / graduates.

EB: Yeah, one choice I had was to transfer to UBC [University of British Columbia] and take their film program and possibly work on someone else's film. Or, I could stay in Victoria, use the resources that I had and make my own feature project. So I decided to do that instead. I think it was the best choice to make at the time because I was a writer in film studies, I didn't really know how to use a camera and no one really figured that out. They said to me, "Oh, you're making a feature, that's so cool." No one asked me if I had made a good short. I did do it ass-backwards. Now I know that the secret to making a good feature is first making a really good short, but at that time it was just a learning experience.

JS: One of the things that we aim for in *Synoptique* is to discuss things in terms of communities. We present ourselves as being Montreal based and coming from a specific program rather than hiding that. Keeping in line with that perspective, you are firmly located in Victoria and very involved in everything that goes on in film in this city and in particular CineVic. How does CineVic fit in with the general context of film in Canada?

EB: CineVic is a co-operative that helps create a community in a field that can be driven by isolation in the writing process, as opposed to sleazy networking and really scrambling to get to meet the people you want to meet. If you establish a community, a place where people can come together and meet like-minded people, it's like walking into a room where you're instantly friends with everybody because you have so much in common. I think that's the answer because we're all becoming so segregated. We're busy and scattered in so many directions, so to come to one place and be centered, focused and meet people that want to help you, that's really empowering. You're going outside the system. You're creating your own structure of meaning in your life.

JS: Do you find that the same thing is happening in different sites?

EB: Absolutely. We are part of the Independent Media Arts Alliance which is a national organization of almost all the film co-ops across Canada as well as exhibitors, distributors and whatnot. Last year was my first time going to the national conference and I realized how this is happening all across the country; CineVic has been around for 13 years, but some of these co-ops have been around 30 years. You look at something like LIFT in Toronto, Main Film in Montreal, The Winnipeg Film Group: these large organizations with this extended history. And yet, they've still got the same raw passion that you have in this little dinky town of Victoria. You really see that it's not just us [in Victoria], and if I go to these other communities you've already got a network of friends ready for you to be part of it all. Now they're talking about the Executive Director of LIFT coming out to Victoria to visit. We want to send some people out the other way and really start sharing different ideas from a different regional context. It's just amazing.

Decasia (2002) A Review

Mike Rollo

Bill Morrison's *Decasia* (2002) is a stunning sonic and visual experience. The film, consisting of about 70 minutes of water-damaged, moulded, and celluloid-corroded nitrate archive footage harmoniously swept along by Michael Gordon's soundtrack, was originally commissioned by the Europaischer Musikomat as a new symphony by co-founder Michael Gordon for a live event performed by the Basil Sinfonietta. Bill Morrison presented his film at the Cinémathèque Québecoise this past April as part of a retrospective.

Decasia has four movements: Creation, Civilization Man, Conundrum, and Disintegration and Rebirth. Morrison pieces together naturally damaged and decayed film creating a hypnotic rumination on life, death, cinema and history. The film opens with a Sufi dervish dancer, who continuously reappears throughout the film acting as our guide in a journey of fragmented memories and untold stories, captivatingly circling to the sound of brake drums scraped slowly with a metal beater. We then cut to a laboratory where racks of reels are spooling and uncoiling thousands of feet of film. Technicians inspect the newly developed stock as the camera slowly zooms into a frame bringing us into the abstracted cinematic world full of pockmarks, weaving mold, and dancing emulsion.

The footage used in *Decasia* was gathered from flood-damaged basements and crumbling archives and used stock with a film base made of cellulose nitrate commonly used for commercial 35 mm film before 1951. As we all know, this stock yields images of great clarity and intensity, but, because it is highly flammable and prone to deterioration, it is completely unstable. For this reason, filmmakers shifted to a more reliable and safe tri-acetate. The deterioration of most of the films pre-dating 1951 is so devastating that 50% of Hollywood's films are literally rotting away and have beckoned the call of filmmakers like Martin Scorsese and Woody Allen to preserve them. In the case of *Decasia*, while its corrosion functions as a distressing reminder, a call for historical awareness of the ephemerality of the damaged filmic documents of the early 20th Century, it is also a marvel of stylistic innovation and an inspiration for poetic interpretation.

Morrison did not handle the nitrate himself. It also proved difficult for the filmmaker to find any film laboratory that would handle the toxic material. John Allen of Cinema Arts in Angels, PA., optically printed each frame because the shrunken sprocket holes of the old stock do not match those of contemporary stock. After stabilizing the material, Morrison stretch-printed the footage. Optically printing each frame two, three or sometimes four frames to slow the film down and investigate the beauty of the decay, he offers the viewer nothing less than 24 paintings each second.

The powerful visceral effect of the slow motion allows everything to appear fluid, creating landscapes of fantastic pulsing shapes. The moving palette of found images bubble, crack, twist, drip and swirl to violently screeching violins and roaring thunder of cellos and electric bass guitars. In a way, Michael Gordon's accompanying symphony both emphasizes and celebrates the deteriorated celluloid. The marching noise of intensely de-tuned violins in a continual sliding of pitches, the feedback from electric guitars

and the plunking of out-of-tune pianos give the film a ghostly aural accompaniment. Gordon's symphony is a beautiful parallel to the imagery of Morrison's visual score, suggesting that junk is beautiful and elucidating the powerful movement of the corrosion.

Decasia does not rely on explicit meaning or try to present us with the vague outline of a story but rather works on a more subconscious level of understanding. It is cyclical in form, complete with narrative craters both from the decay and the original content, as though it were influenced by the motion of the Sufi dancer and were being marched along by the searing score of the symphony. The decay on the one hand and the images of people and landscape on the other suggest an interesting clash of forces between the decay of life and life affirming itself. In one segment, the lengthy birth of a child is enveloped by a frenetic white cloud of mold. The crumbling celluloid obscures the assembled stories; the figures become faded apparitions– their purposes forgotten. However, their dreams, in the form of these degraded images, continue in a new form.

Morrison has carefully chosen footage that addresses our relationship with death and presents an analogy between human mortality and the fear that follows closely behind it. A lengthy shot of parachutes slowly descending to the earth in a murky sky of celluloid corrosion is an example of this, allowing the decayed source and its original content to interact in such a way as to create a powerful symbol. In another shot, a boxer situated at the left hand side of the frame fights off a soupy white mould blob invading from the right. He punches at the damaged area to stave off disintegration.

Though creating a link between the mortality of humans and the mortality of films, the film becomes a store-house of memories lost and reborn through the discovery of the damaged films and their newly re-contextualized form. *Decasia* initiates a model for our own relationship to our histories and speaks to the impossibility of possessing the present.

Bubba Ho-Tep (2003) A Review

Neil Karassik

"Ask not what your rest-home can do for you, but what you, can do for your rest-home."

THE FILM

Good news everyone: Elvis Presley, the King of Rock 'n' Roll, lives! He may not be alive and well, but he's alive nevertheless. You see, the King (Bruce Campbell) now resides in an old, decrepit East Texas nursing home where he lays bed-ridden, tending to a cancerous growth on the tip of his penis. One of the home's nurses assigned to take care of Elvis's "puss-filled crankshaft" claims that his name is really Sebastian Haff, an ex-Elvis impersonator who broke his hip falling off a stage and went into a deep coma only to come back with "a few… problemmms." Of course, this was all part of a clever ploy by Elvis to switch places with the best impersonator in the country and live the life he truly desired, away from the hassles of fame and fortune and the pettiness of his so-called friends and associates. All was well until the catastrophic spill, and now we join Elvis here, in a run-down home chock-full of old loons.

Things are looking pretty grim for Mr. Presley/Haff, that is, until we are introduced to his only believer and best friend John F. Kennedy (Ossie Davis). Of course, if we've made it this far we already know that this isn't going to be your typical Kennedy; in fact this Kennedy is an old, Ding-Dong loving black man who says he's black because "they dyed me this color! Can you think of a better way to hide the truth than that?" When the two senile American icons discover an ancient mummy dressed in cowboy duds who is sucking the souls of the home's residents through their assholes and writing hieroglyphics ("stick pictures") in the toilet stalls ("shit-house walls"), they decide that they must put an end to this ancient evil and save the souls of these poor old folks.

It is fascinating to wonder how *Bubba Ho-Tep* (2002) may have turned out had it had a slightly bigger budget. Of course, many fans of the film would dismiss such a thought as unappreciative of the film's camp value. Perhaps Bubba Ho-Tep's scarabs are meant to look like some sort of Cronenbergian hybrid from the likes of *Naked Lunch* (1991). CGI would have killed the aesthetic of those pesky cockroaches and probably would have taken the enjoyable artificiality out of the proceedings. Director Don Coscarelli, well aware of budgetary constraints, makes smart, economical choices in setting up shots and delivering suspense. One debatable directorial choice of note is the use of a sped-up/slowed-down time continuum and a distorted space, where we see Elvis watch the janitor clean his room, leave, re-enter, the nurse enters, leaves… They all jump around the frame with disorienting, stop-motion movements and a loud (whooshing) sound. Scenes composed in this fashion feel arbitrary and clichéd, having been done repeatedly in a number of low-budget films like *Cabin Fever* (2002) briefly, *Donnie Darko* (2001) excessively, *May* (2002) briefly and *Requiem For A Dream* (2000) on overkill, just to name a few.

Video: The picture is uniformly grainy. This intentional effect, accomplished by shooting on highspeed film (800 ASA), is used by the director to set a specific tone and feel. Once sped up, the picture is noticeably softer and the artificiality of the make-up less noticeable. While many films employ this look sporatically, it is used all throughout *Bubba Ho-Tep*.

DVD EXTRA HIGHLIGHTS

Audio Commentary by Don Coscarelli and Bruce Campbell: Rather than sounding like the traditional commentary in which the director gives the usual speech and promotes the film, this is a conversation between two friends as they watch the picture live. Campbell, as always, is very amusing and spontaneous, asking a lot of valid questions with Coscarelli gladly giving his input.

Audio Commentary by the King: Here is where a typical feature like an audio commentary really spruces up a release. Those who appreciate Bruce Campbell or this picture should not hesitate to listen to this commentary; it is frighteningly well played and laugh out loud funny.

Joe R. Lansdale Reads from *Bubba Ho-Tep*: Cult author Joe R. Lansdale, who wrote the short story that inspired the film, reads an excerpt from his original story. While similar to the screenplay in many ways, the excerpt has many more four letter words than the film and displays a crudeness and morbidity of descriptive that the filmmakers did not elect for. This extra feature is quite useful, especially for the purpose of comparing the literary and cinematic versions of specific scenes.

Packaging: The DVD (contained in a stylish limited edition slipcase cover) also comes with a tenpage booklet with a letter by Bruce Campbell, production stills, conceptual designs, and comments on these by Coscarelli and Campbell. The sharp menu designs thankfully don't give away crucial information or contain annoying quotations (until you arrive at the special features, but by then you've probably seen the film).

PARTING WORDS – T.C.B. BABY

Bubba Ho-Tep is certainly not your run-of-the-mill B-horror movie; in fact it confounds the very notion of genre itself. Is this comedy, horror, drama? These questions are brought up by the film's director and even he admits to having had serious trouble classifying the film for the festival circuit. But for anyone who can appreciate originality, *Bubba Ho-Tep* stretches its genre boundaries to nearly absurd lengths. This film and DVD are both highly recommended and should be coveted by any lover of Bmovie slash horror slash comedy slash drama slash coming-of-age cinema.

Fahrenheit 9/11

Colin Burnett, Jason Woloski, Janos Sitar, Owen Livermore, Mattieu Bégin, and Brian Crane

***Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004)**

Michael Moore's America, in which financially strapped and marginally educated voters take a genuine interest in overseas foreign policy while becoming appalled that the ramifications of September 11th have not yet been fully understood, and then cast their votes based on these interests, is a truly romantic one and for that I salute Michael Moore. Moore is a patriot to the core (despite what the forthcoming *Michael Moore Hates America* will have to say about it), which has left him with the unfortunate blindspot of many a sincere patriot before him: the inability to correctly gauge the state and capacity of the average American that surrounds him.

Ultimately, the Achilles' Heel in Moore's project of dethroning George W. Bush may be found in the sobering reality that too many individuals in America live lives that don't have anything to do with the propaganda (in the best sense of the word) Moore is selling them on in the first place. The difficulties to be understood in *Fahrenheit 9/11* (perhaps one of the most well-researched, eruditely constructed pieces of propaganda ever put on film) has both everything and nothing to do with contemporary American life. The sad fact is, if George W. Bush can do anything remotely positive to the American economy in the months leading up to the election, or convert a miracle, Hail Mary-like pass in the dying seconds of the Presidential race in the form of capturing Osama Bin Laden, then all the Michael Moores in the world won't be able to prevent Dubya from living out another four years as CEO of the U.S.A.

-Jason Woloski

***Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004)**

Replacing the now infamous images of commercial planes spearing through the sides of the WTC with a pitch black screen, sounds of terror and disbelief coming from bodiless figures, Michael Moore in fact manages to conjure the unthinkable himself: the sickening abuse of images to which his film only obliquely alludes. This aesthetic mystification of the attack not only stinks of cheap and cruel emotional manipulation, but by making of it a thing into which we cannot stare directly, he encourages silent reverence and resignation rather than critical sharpness, self-awareness, and a sense of responsibility. Archie Bunker had a word for dross of this nature, one that transcends political affiliations and ideological orientations, that runs to the core of the complex and befuddling rituals of self-deception and selective memory that cater to the late modern attention span: "crapola."

-Colin Burnett

***Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004)**

The expected attack on President Bush became an unexpected elegy to the soldiers who have died (and will die) in Iraq. If I had one word that I would like to interrogate the meaning of as a result of this documentary I would choose: freedom. The claim to give someone freedom and to fight for freedom

means that someone has a definite idea of what this word means. Umm, Mr Bush?
-Janos Sitar

***Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004)**

Florida + hanging chads + conspiracy = election – credibility

W + golf = U.S.A. – leadership

(terrorists + airplanes) + U.S.A = 9.11

U.S.A – WTC = rationality / (fear + anger)

Osama Bin Laden = terrorist

terrorist = bad

Bin Laden family = Saudi

Saudi Arabia = bad

Bin Laden family + Bush family = $

9.11 ≠ Saddam Hussein

Iraq = Oil

Oil = $

W + corporations = greed

Saddam Hussein + Iraq ≠ WMD

W > Saddam Hussein

life < oil

war = death

dead soldiers = grieving parents

———————

life = 0

2004 = election

Michael Moore + camera = *Fahrenheit 9/11*
-Owen Livermore

***Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004)**

In Mooreland, like Disneyland before it, you can buy a clearcut, specific ideology simply by paying $10.50, or whatever your local Cineplex charges, then sit back and watch as Moore and his crew do all the dirty work while you get credit just for liking him. In Mooreland, simply going to see a movie is the new form of political activism (passive, low-impact activism), as is exercising your most basic right as an American: voting. Apparently, since you've taken voting for granted for so long and haven't cared to make an effort to come out to the polls in years, we'll actually count it as activism if you bother this time around. In Mooreland, films that are supposed to be ultra-politically charged and generate loud screaming matches after screenings are in reality so clearly laid out that when it comes time to argue, the debate can accurately be reduced to, "I loved it. I love Michael Moore," or "I hated it. I hate Michael Moore." In any other year, Michael Moore could be a very dangerous man. In 2004, Michael Moore could end up a hero for stopping that other, even more dangerous man.
-Jason Woloski

***Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004)**

Je n'ai pas l'intention d'écouter FAHRENHEIT 9/11 simplement parce que j'ai l'impression que le film n'a pour but que de me convaincre de quelquechose dont je suis déjà convaincu.
-Mattieu Bégin

***Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004)**

Nathaniel Hawthorne once wrote that "the United States are fit for many excellent purposes but they are not fit to live in." The present administration seems set on proving him only half right.

Michael Moore, in turn, is set on proving the present administration is full of idiots and crooks (underplaying the ways they may be in fact sinister). He's not interested in analysis or even investigation; this is Fox News for blue states, and on this level it works. But the film is his best precisely because it succeeds in being bigger than this.

Moore gets crowded off-screen by the genuine emotion boiling at the surface of his images and the result is a long string of great moments and a film

that asks you to look beyond the spin (even Moore's) to the consequences of our insane contemporary political climate. This is a real achievement, and I don't mind saying that I don't know how Moore managed to do it, especially since he discredits his most moving interview subject's grief in the eyes of those who see her simply by going with her to the White House.
-Brian Crane

+ Splinter Reviews (III)

Jason Woloski, Steve Hyland, Janos Sitar, Colin Burnett, Owen Livermore, Collin Smith and Mike Baker

***Supersize Me* (2004)**

The Michael Moore-style documentary that Michael Moore's lifestyle wouldn't allow him to make.
-Jason Woloski

***Open Water* (2004)**

Well, at least they stopped arguing.
-Steve Hyland

Before Sunset (2004)

Urban space and memory collide when Jesse (Ethan Hawke) and Celine (Julie Delpy) meet again. Replace Vienna with Paris and begin the exploration. What do you remember? What do they remember? Interrogate yourself and your memories to see how your perception has altered the socalled facts. Challenge yourself to wind down those alleyways and coffee shops to find the most important conversations that make up your life.
-Janos Sitar

***The Bourne Supremacy* (2004)**

There are car chases and then there are car chases.

The Expendable: *The Rock*, *Gone In 60 Seconds*, *The Fast And The Furious* (and its offspring), and the innumerable ones that litter the Bond series—except for the one in *Tomorrow Never Dies* that sees Brosnan and Michelle Yeoh zip through the streets of Saigon on a Mercedes motorcycle. (Sticklers will point out that that's not really a car chase, that it should instead be compared to the cracking motorcycle 'duet' at the climax of John Woo's *Mission: Impossible 2*. Agreed.) Bond also gave us another memorable variation on the car chase: the tank-car pursuit in *Goldeneye*.

The Most Worthless of All: *Dead Pool*, the dreary final entry in the Dirty Harry series, in which Callahan has to outrun an 'explosive' remote-controlled toy car.

Underrated, though perhaps Justifiably Forgotten: *The Corruptor*, *Maximum Risk*, and *The Italian Job* remake.

The Car Chase Elite of Movie History: *Bullit*, *Ronin*, and *The French Connection*. Now add *The Bourne Supremacy* to this list, overshadowing the respectable romp in the previous Bourne film.
-Colin Burnett

***Zatoichi* (2003)**

Close your eyes. Within all sounds around you lies patterns, and within those patterns, a symphony. All you have to do is stop and listen. As the mysterious master swordsman Zatoichi explains, "The blind are sensitive to such things". A film based on both a timeless story, and (apparently) the ancient Japanese art of tap dancing, ZATOICHI floats, thumps, swipes, strikes, spurts. Like all good samurai flicks before it, action is rhythm, from a sword slowly leaving its sheath to a lightning-quick deathblow. However, the

overriding lesson to be learned in Kitano's bleached-blond *Zatoichi*, and all other Zatoichi's before it, is this: don't fuck with elderly, blind Japanese masseurs. But stay on their good side and they'll slice-and-dice their way into your heart.
-Owen Livermore

***The Stepford Wives* (2004)**

For five *Star Wars* movies and counting, Yoda has had the same voice. That voice is Frank Oz. As it turns out, Yoda's voice has no vision. Oz's latest effort as a director, a remake of the cult original of the same name, is the kind of mess that has to be seen to be believed. That said, I wouldn't wish this film experience on anyone. Showcasing one of the most inept, incoherent third acts to a film in recent memory (are these wives robots or not?!?), Oz the filmmaker had better be careful, otherwise he's going to have to hire someone to reshoot the ending to his own career as a now flailing, once career-healthy creator of some of Hollywood's lightest, oddest fare (*Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*, *What About Bob?*).
-Jason Woloski

***The Village* (2004)**

Believers of the noble lie are at least a quarter naive; while non-believers are prone to scoff at the believers and the lie alike.
-Colin Burnett

***Spider-Man 2* (2004)**

If Michel de Certeau were alive I'm certain that he would be all a-tingle over the webslinger's latest adventure. Civic space is turned on its ear by Spidey and Doc Oc as their fisticuffs turn horizontal into the new down. Cool costumes and superpowers aside, *Spider-Man 2* stresses that walls are not barriers but surfaces that desperately need to be negotiated, traversed and redefined.
-Janos Sitar

***Discordia* (2004)**

The result isn't the goal; the film is about the process. By not limiting its analysis to the political issues surrounding the events (the fallout of Benjamin Netanyahu's aborted speech at Concordia University in 2002), but instead focusing on the personalities that became involved, *Discordia* offers an interesting perspective to viewers unfamiliar with the school, the city and the particularities of the clashes involving Netanyahu supporters, protesters and police. The filmmakers have chosen to focus on 3 distinct individuals, each one playing a dramatic role that summer. Each one envelops the audience into his cause, simultaneously converting and repelling as his personal appeal ebbs and flows. The film makes stars out of these three, acting as a testimony to their ambitions. This gambit doesn't detract from the film or the importance of the issues and in fact enhances both, allowing differing viewpoints to have human faces, and to witness the personal implications of the stances these students were taking. The audience is more invested in their plights as their collective humanity, with all its faults and blemishes, comes shining through.
-Collin Smith

***Harold And Kumar Go To White Castle* (2004)**

Q: Can dumedy about two mid-twenties stoners take on identity politics and cultural stereotypes?

A: This odd couple for the 00's will be the subject of many undergrad essays in the years to come.

The antithesis of Cheech and Chong, Harold (John Cho) and Kumar (Kal Penn) represent the world of functional stoners whose quest for hamburgers leads them on an odyssey which confronts their fear of conforming to some stereotype of cultural identity. Toss in a sexually ravenous Neil Patrick Harris and a group of extreme (white) guys and you get an astute commentary on conflicting ethnicities and masculinity. But then again, they do get high with a cheetah and attempt to ride it to safety.
-Janos Sitar

***Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story* (2004)**

Direct from *The Waterboy* school of, "Seeing people get hit really hard is really funny, so why bother paying for a re-write?" comes *Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story*. The only silver lining to be found in this otherwise dull, dreary cloud is that with the release of *Dodgeball*, Ben Stiller has managed to maintain his breakneck,

Samuel L. Jackson of the mid-1990s pace of starring in nearly a movie a month over the first half of 2004. (For those keeping score, Stiller released *Along Came Polly* in January, *Starsky And Hutch* in March, *Envy* in April, *Dodgeball* in June, and also has a cameo in *Anchorman: The Ron Burgundy Story*, which opened in July. Evidently, Stiller laid low during the months of February and May in order to shoot the five or six movies he'll be starring in this fall.)
-Jason Woloski

***Napoleon Dynamite* (2004)**

Some would have you believe that the debut feature from Jared Hess, *Napoleon Dynamite*, is on the leading edge of New American film comedy, equal parts Wes Anderson and Todd Solondz. The reality is quite different. The film is a perfect example of what a terrible mess a first-year film school screenwriting assignment would become when given life on the big screen. All over-simplified story and pomo irony, Hess' film is a derivative bore. This film is not a cult hit. It was quite literally given away for free in a series of Monday night screenings across North America in advance of its proper theatrical release. And anyone who paid a cent and expected something more than the free chapstick and buttons used to shill this fluff deserves an apology.
-Mike Baker