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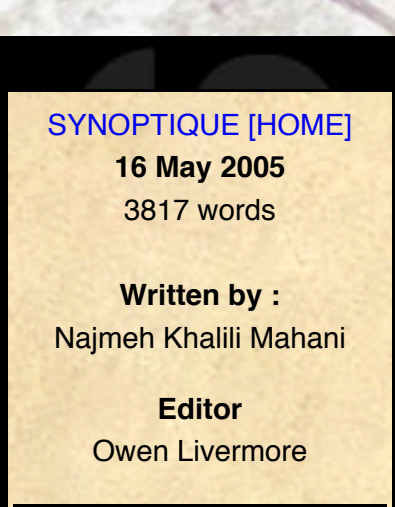


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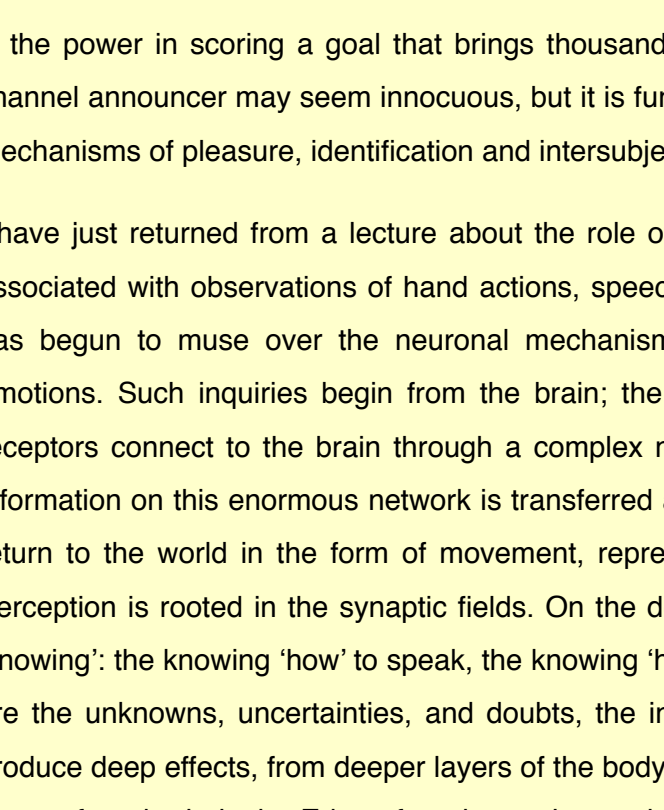
The Plastic Brain

Neurophenomenology as a Discourse for Postmodernism

by Najmeh Khalili Mahani

Cinema is a lot of things to a lot of people, but it is most certainly not contained solely within the physical (celluloid), or even the easily quantifiable (1s and 0s). The same can be said of our body. What are we, if not sensing, feeling, meaning making participants in the world? In her article, Najmeh Khalili Mahani explores the qualities of perception, rooted in the physiology of the brain, that break down the relationship between subject and object. This topic is of much significance for the more recently established discipline of Film Studies, which has not yet come to terms with its relationship with science.

A novel, poem, picture, or musical work are individuals, that is, beings in which the expression is indistinguishable from the thing expressed, their meaning accessible only through direct contact, being radiated with no change of their temporal or spatial situation. It is in this sense that our body is comparable to a work of art. (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p.15.)



I turn the TV on. Somewhere behind the glass, beams of concentrated electrons surge forth from a Cathode Ray Tube, striking rows upon rows of phosphors that coat the back of the screen, triggering emissions of light. Tiny concentrations of red, green, and blue beams fly across the room and find their way into the back of my retina, accompanied by vibrations produced by speakers. After a long day at school, the sounds and images emanating from the television extend my nervous system—a sensor for perceiving a complex, ever-changing world—far from the sensory cells that constitute my body, my physical person. An ad for a sports TV channel announces, "What

is the power in scoring a goal that brings thousands of their feet?" This casual question posed by the sports channel announcer may seem innocuous, but it is fundamental to research that seeks an answer for the intricate mechanisms of pleasure, identification and intersubjectivity.

I have just returned from a lecture about the role of mirror neurons in sensory-motor activations of the cortex associated with observations of hand actions, speech related lip movement and gaze shift. I wonder if science has begun to muse over the neuronal mechanisms of identification—self-self, self-other identification—and emotions. Such inquiries begin from the brain; the body connects to the world via receptors on its surface; receptors connect to the brain through a complex network that links billions of neurons across the body. The information on this enormous network is transferred at the speed of 200 miles per hour, stirring up energies that return to the world in the form of movement, representation, thought, speech, music, reaction, action, affect. Perception is rooted in the synaptic fields. On the dendritic trees grow the forbidden fruits of my humanity; the 'knowing': the knowing 'how' to speak, the knowing 'how' to create, the knowing how to 'will to power'. The thorns are the unknowns, uncertainties, and doubts, the interoceptive reflexes that bypass the cerebral intellect and produce deep effects, from deeper layers of the body; effects such as fear, anger, love, impulse and insanity. The forest of my brain is the Eden of my humanity to which I was destined when the ape in me was extiled from the heaven of 'not-knowing-how'.

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Until we succeed in simulating this magnificent system—the body in which we reside, the brain that senses, represents and communicates the world, the world that this body occupies, that occupies this body—until we dissect it to the last atom and plot all the maps of imminence and planes of consistency of this great organization, it will remain in misty planes of transcendence. Theoretically, simulation is possible. Modelling a physical system with mathematical descriptions is an engineering task; reverse engineering is a (comparatively) trivial chore. We have already reverse-engineered the visual and sensory-motor system of humans into these clumsy compu-robots which we have called Rover and have sent to the outer space. Of course, the feeling, singing, cunning robot HAL has not yet transcended the fictitious world of Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY (1968) and human-like artificially intelligent machines still live in a Hollywoodian world of imaginations (or hallucinations). We have also engineered life: cloned a sheep and named it Dolly. True, our designs were not entirely optimized, Dolly died prematurely, and we did not have a chance to demystify the magic of life and mind of the sheep; but the prototype was complete.

Today, there are scientists who are struggling to bypass the ethical politics or detour the political ethics that prevent engineering humans. Others strive for refined models of the input and the output mechanisms, the feedback loops, the amplification and modulation and filtering at each node of this magnificent molecular system constituting our body. As I am writing, somewhere in the world, a special electronic eye is observing every molecular growth of an axon as it journeys to its genetically predetermined synaptic residence. A magnetic detector is peeping through the brain of someone who feels, someone who remembers, someone who hears. Someday, we will have a grand model that incorporates the emotional states with the molecular composites of cellular organizations, be it matter or ether—the two sides of the same coin, transformable modes of the same existence. "What for?" asks my alter ego, the one who loves the mystery of art, the subtlety of compassion and altruism, the magical world that creates love. As I try to come up with an answer, my email pops with the subject line: Brain Imaging Center Seminar – HOW CAN WE STUDY EMOTION WITH fMRI? Speaker: Dr. Jorge Armony, Douglas Hospital Research Centre, Montreal, Canada. Neuroscience is rubbing shoulders with metaphysics. Whether or not we love our magical, mystical world of spirits, science is attempting to debunk our metaphysical notions of soul. To conserve the beauty which makes art, to not trivialize love, to not reduce humanity to planes of consistency and organization, I want to be aware, I want to be able to follow the trajectory of the lines of flight, even when they are materialized by the laws of physics, by the logic of math.

A few days ago, I presented the introduction of Brian Massumi's "The Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation" (Duke University Press, 2002) in a course entitled *Flesh and Film*. Massumi's plea for bringing the corporeality into the domain of cultural theory and wedding the sciences and humanities astonished me. The surprise did not arise from the novelty of the ideas that Massumi prophesized; rather from learning that the neuro-scientific leaps in understanding the nature of human's incorporeality (perception, memory, cognition, emotion, to name a few) have been either neglected entirely or snubbed by the humanities as empiricist reductionism. Of course, reducing the problematic of human society and human behavior to a physical model is neither an attractive nor a pragmatically sensible endeavor. It was science that claimed authority in the biological categorization of the human race and helped the Nazis to create a myth to justify their catastrophic conquest of the world. How can we trust the narrow view of science to do justice to the formidable structures that form the human body and human society? The answer is that we cannot. However, the role of science in creation of myths that form, inform or deform social structures cannot be overlooked. The scientific hypotheses painstakingly examined within the controlled environment of a laboratory make it to the sphere of public interest and cult aspirations long before concrete results do. Furthermore, shedding scientific light on the nature of human emotion, consciousness, cognition—the building blocks of abstract thought, culture and ideology—illuminates a discursive path in an era when the forces of culture and economy march toward a ubiquitous globalization. Uniting mind—with that envisions ideology—with body—which sustains in its corporeal substance the abstract value system of ideology—brings cultures and communities to a level field of communication where dialogue can happen. This is precisely why the legions of science and humanities need to re-legion.

Perception and representation are the core paradigms of cultural studies that can assess the potential for social or ideological change, hidden in the dynamics of identification with a represented image or concept. With a fair for the same subject, neuroscience has progressed to a point where it can productively theorize about the basic principles of brain function and, hence, it can address questions concerning learning, representing, cognition and behavior. Thus, science can join the communications specialist to speculate (empirically) about "the power of scoring a goal that brings thousands to their feet." If you ask a scientist "How do we perceive?" he is likely to answer that our body is a mega-receptor for external stimuli, a mega-modulator for convolving external pulses and oscillations with internal filters and rhythms, a mega-machine that outlets the product of stimulation and modulation of the inner and the outer signals in the form of vision, sensation, movement, memory, perception, affect. The body, for the scientist, consists of an assemblage of cells, destined to perform a specialized function by a primordial desire for survival—the deriving force of evolution. What constitutes life to a body is the cell-cell interaction via mechanisms of molecular communication, which occurs across complex pathways that have evolved to ensure the proliferation of the organism. The soul of the organism is thus understood as the journey completed by the electrochemical particles that traffic life across the cellular infrastructure of the body. The soul for a scientist is the output of the constant interaction of an internal mega-system that embodies a person with an external mega-system that tirelessly stimulates. The more complex the interconnectivity of the organism, the more complex the output from its interactions with the external world, the more evolved the affect, the more notable the effect will be. The scientist, therefore, shares in the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty that the world has certain ways of invading humans and that humans have certain ways of meeting this invasion; they interplay with a "certain kind of symbiosis." [1] I refer to the neuroscientist's view of this symbiosis as *neurophenomenology*. The body is shared by the world that reflects it, in a "relation of transgression or overlapping." [2] The reflection of the world and of the self occurs in the mirror of the brain, upon where it converges with the surface of the body, and from which the image of the world projects back onto the surface of the body, and thus back to the world. A new discursive paradigm, neurophenomenology aims to explain neuronal mechanisms that guide perception, pleasure and intersubjectivity.

What constitutes identity? How does ideology affect humans? Is desire innate? Is pleasure physiological? What derives empathy? Modern neuroscience is exploring these questions with new tools and on a comfortable bed of over 200 years of empirical evidence that the brain and the mind are interrelated with electrochemical agents and not metaphysical divinities. [3] However, in this electronic age that, as Marshall McLuhan prophesized, "we carry the whole of humanity as our skin"; an age that "we have extended our central nervous system in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned," [4] these questions are of particular—and immediate—importance to communication theorists. They are also important to ethnographers and anthropologists because in the era of *simulacra*—to borrow from Jean Baudrillard—intersubjectivity works within a paradoxical system which, on the one hand, opens infinite windows for encounters with the *other*, but simultaneously conceals the corporeality of the subject and object relationship behind an electronic wall. It is the collapse of a bi-directional experience of flesh that alarms Paul Virilio, who threatens a "loss of orientation" in the speeding "stereoreality" of the electronic age. [5] At the cyberjuncture of hypercommunication, apparatus theory calls for revision. To be in step with the advances of cumulative human knowledge, the revisionist needs to pay attention to the advances in neuroscience and its relation (not always amicable) with established schools of psychoanalysis. Obviously, neurophenomenology embarks on the premise of a unified theory of brain and mind, but I stand on the scientist's side of the divide between philosopher and neuroscientist. If there is a chance of philosophical skepticism, I let the eloquent work of philosopher Patricia S. Churchland speak in neurophilosophy's defense. [6]

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In challenging the dualism of object and subject, in marrying the seer and the seen, the touching and the touched, in bringing the dimension of flesh to the invisible processes that precede symbols and ideas, Merleau-Ponty—like Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida—paves the non-binary course of postmodern philosophy. At the conjuncture of cultural diversity, brought together in the conciliatory mantra of postmodern-isms, flashes in bold the problem of intersubjectivity. However, as a phoenix that has arisen from the ashes of a 'dead god'—that in turn inspired 'the death of the author'—postmodernism flies perilously in an all-image, disorientingly rapid and superficially diverse cultural cyberspace, where the trend of 'deconstruction' threatens to consume it in fire yet again. Martin C. Dillon calls postmodernism "a transcendental system of the signifier" in which the meaning of the world is that projected by signifiers and our knowledge of it is mediated by the vehicle of language, which drives culture and history. Deconstruction helps us understand how the system of signifiers works through and upon us; however, to influence the genesis of these systems, Dillon argues in favor of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology to 'accommodate empirical truths' in postmodern systems of thought:

Truth requires a ground: if one seeks an ultimate ground, ... one must fetch up with an ultimate, an absolute. And there are good reasons (grounds) for rejecting absolutes. But the argument that proceeds from the rejection of all absolutes to the rejection of all grounds (and hence all truths) is specious. There are finite grounds, finite truths. It is on the finite ground on which we stand that we must base the truth ... [7]

In its liberal disavowal of 'subject position', postmodernism assumes a strict regime of relativism where semantics are replaced with symbols; symbols are extracted from intersubjective—but not necessarily objective—cultural agreements; meaning is individuated and thus devoid of global appeal; and thus subject matter is flattened as a deconstructible text, devoid of a 'grand' value. In legitimizing infinite states of subjectivity, postmodernism runs the peril of losing objectivity and an ideologized disconnection from reality: a model closely resembling schizophrenia. Ironically, science has joined philosophy in a discourse of subjectivity and intersubjectivity in search of the origins and mechanism of schizophrenia. Strikingly, the leading evidence has originated from the discovery of mirror neurons. [8]

Fifteen years ago, Giacomo Rizzolatti and colleagues discovered a subset of neurons in a focal area of the brain associated with motor activity. The functional characteristic of these neurons was that they were activated both when the primate performed a task and when it observed or anticipated the same task being performed. [9] The discovery of mirror neurons along with non-invasive *in vivo* techniques of observing the human brain in action gave science a giant leap forward in understanding the mechanisms of language, behavior and intersubjectivity. [10] Recently, Vittorio Gallesse, one of the leading scientists in studying mirror neurons, proposed that, "... our capacity to understand others as intentional agents, far from being exclusively dependent upon mentalistic/linguistic abilities, is "deeply grounded in the relational nature of our interactions with the world." According to his hypothesis, "... an implicit, pre-reflexive form of understanding of other individuals is based on a strong sense of identity binding us to them. We share with our conspecifics [members of the same species] a multiplicity of states that include actions, sensations and emotions." To capture the richness of experience shared with others, Gallesse has conceived the *shared manifold of intersubjectivity*, a multi-dimensional 'we-centric' shared space, characterized at the phenomenological and functional level. He then argues, "... the same neural structures that are involved in processing and controlling executed actions, felt sensations and emotions are also active when the same actions, sensations and emotions are to be detected in others." [11] The complexity of self-other identity and the affective dimension of interindividual relations are common interests of today's neuroscience and yesterday's philosophy. Merleau-Ponty and Gallesse meet at the juncture where the self and the other correlate and represent a reciprocal system governed by—what Gallesse calls as—*reversibility rules*.

The reversible system ruling intersubjectivity is founded upon blocks of perception. "The last frontier of biological science" notes Eric Kandel, "is to understand the biological basis of consciousness and the mental processes by which we perceive, act, learn, and remember." [12] Today's scientist joins the voice of the critics of empiricism that the human mind is *not just a tabula rasa*, a blank slate upon which all knowledge is marked by way of experience. Although more sympathetic to Kant's view that the brain is not just a passive receiver of sense impressions, and that it is rather confined to certain pre-existing conditions and brain properties that organize sensory experience, today's scientist is vigilant about the evidence of brain plasticity—the changes in structure and function in accordance with environmental factors. [13] One might wonder: if the brain is plastic, then how could it help in grounding the plastic culture of postmodernism? Whether or not the plasticity in the brain perpetuates reversibility rules of social and perceptual intersubjectivity, it provides the philosopher, the cultural theorist, and the political activist with an earthly-grounded premise for investigation of the ways in which the nature-culture dichotomy exerts influence on individuals, on society and on the interaction between the two.

Almost seventy years ago, Walter Benjamin drew attention to the process of mechanical reproduction of the work of art and the power of symbolic and representative images in connecting the public and mobilizing the wheels of social change. [14] Forty years later, Jean-Louis Baudry planted the seeds of Apparatus Theory in the terrain of Lacanian psychoanalysis and brought attention to the technical nature of the optical instrument in cinema and the ideological mechanisms that it evoked. [15] The apparatuses of communication—be it print, press, telephone, cinema, television, internet or wireless technology—have undeniably transformed our cultural anatomy and displaced localization of many social functions (across gender and ethnicities). Many a philosopher, feminist, cultural theorist, and politician have vexed about the ways in which this transmigration has taken place; nevertheless, few have addressed the primordial faces of flesh as the mediator in negotiating a relationship between the corporeal site of the individual's reception and the physical reality of the apparatus's stimuli. Furthermore, although the empirical reality is that the biological course of human (de)volution lags behind persistent social (de)volutions; neurophenomenological discourse posits that the flesh that touches is also touched; the brain that enacts a behavioral response is also encroached upon, marked, touched by patterns of electrophysiological response that the environment, the subject, the *other* elicit. Thus, in light of scientific findings about the nature of neuroplasticity, it is possible to begin inquiry into the ways our perceptual activities may affect our fleshly existence.

In 1975, Laura Mulvey used psychoanalysis "to discover where and how the fascination of film is reinforced by pre-existing patterns of fascination already at work within the individual subject and the social formations that have moulded him." [16] Whether modern neuroscience or postmodern critics refute Freud's theories or sneer at Lacan's psychoanalysis, Mulvey's political analysis of the machinery of narrative cinema and visual pleasure remains plausible. Similarly to cultural studies, science—whether at the service of plastic surgeons, esthetic clinics, labor markets and ad agencies, or in search of evolutionary effectors of mate-selection, psychological and social behavior—has been witnessing an upsurge of interest in 'pre-existing' or intrinsic patterns of fascination by visually pleasant stimuli and universal metrics of beauty and attractiveness. Science has comfortably postulated that perception of beauty is innate [17] and although modulated by hormonal status and psychological factors—that determine short-term and long-term preference for attractiveness—it is universal across race and cultures. [18] These findings shed a neurophenomenological light on Mulvey's psychoanalytical speculations about cinema's role in catering to scopophilia, a primordial 'voyeuristic' wish for pleasurable viewing. But if science is correct that the perception of beauty—like fear, hunger and sexual desire—is an innate and universal feature ingrained in the genetic mesh of human existence in such a way that it attracts the gaze and activates a visceral reward system, then how far can the physiological threshold of desire be extended? I find this question particularly pertinent in relation to the indefinite virtual possibilities that our digital and satellite technologies currently provide us. I return to Mulvey, who writes (reinforced now by scientific evidence) that an active/passive heterosexual division of labor controls narrative cinema in such a way that a woman on screen is the bearer of the look and signifies male desire, while the male star controls the film phantasy by representing a perfect, powerful and ideal ego, mirroring the spectator's alienated and internalized imaginary identity. In Mulvey's assessment of Lacan's description of the mirror phase, *image*—before language—is what "constitutes the matrix of imaginary, of recognition/misrecognition and identification, and hence the first articulation of the 'I', of subjectivity." (Mulvey, 1975) If we accept Gallesse's shared manifold of intersubjectivity, which roots empathy in mirror neurons—that mimic the activation pattern of actions observed or anticipated—then we are also in accord with Lacan that the mirror phase—when a child sees and recognizes his image in a mirror—is crucial to the generation of ego and identification with the other. Again, this raises a similar question: is vision provides the primary input to the system of recognition of self and other, and if the neuronal processes of identification occur prior to processing of other experiential cues by the brain, then what is the threshold of recognition of 'real' from the fantastic phantasm?

Imagine a naive scenario: a *scopophilic* generation has accomplished perfection in the creation of virtual realities to such an extent that anyone can create a *narcissistic* version of world, ego and identity, and accelerate and pleasure and desire in ways that are unimaginable or impossible in the real world. This world is also "hermetically sealed": it winds magically, but instead of being in a passive relationship with cinema, the spectator of the virtuality in this world will be totally dissolved along the lines of imagination, indulgence of visual illusions and egotistic unification with a technologically (digitally) enhanced illusion of perfection. The global village of image in which we live electronically is a hologram of cinema perpetuated in many dimensions of culture and technology, postmodern and multiplex. The digital image, whether projected in a movie theater, interacted with on a computer, or communicated on wireless cameras, modulates the fundamental processes of our pleasure and identification in the same way that phantasmagoria of the eighteenth century did. But the intensity of experience is different, as is the nature of the illusion of freedom, albeit at the expense of a greater disconnect from reality. How would this affect the course of our biological (de)volution? Science has yet to fully investigate. But science has already determined that a lack of resonance with the real, and segregation of the self from the tangible 'other' constitutes psychopathological evidences of schizophrenia. Unless it finds a 'ground' to establish a reality, postmodernism runs the risk of psychosis. Can the clinic of neurophenomenology suggest a preventative course that outweighs the side-effects of reductionistic medications?

This is Najmeh's first contribution to SYNOPTIQUE.

Notes

- 1 Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1962. p. 317
- 2 *ibid*, p. 248
- 3 The credit for demystification of concept of soul often goes to Hermann von Helmholtz (1821-1894) who showed evidence of chemical and metabolic reactions involved in electrical stimulation of nerves. Julian Offray de la Mettrie, author of *L'Homme Machine* in 1748, was the first to note that behavior in human, both reflex and intellectual, results from 'irritation' of nerves. For a historical sketch of the science of nervous system, see Churchland, P. S. *Neurophilosophy: Towards a Unified Science of the Mind-Brain*. Cambridge, London: The MIT Press, 1996.
- 4 McLuhan, Marshal. *Understanding Media*. New York, Mentor, 1964.
- 5 Paul Virilio, "Speed and Information: Cyberspace Alarm!" *Le Monde Diplomatique* (Aug 1995).
- 6 In her pioneering work, *Neurophenomenology: Towards a Unified Science of the Mind-Brain* (Cambridge, London: The MIT Press, 1996), Churchland has married contemporary research in the empirical neuroscience with recent research in philosophy of science and philosophy of mind and explores prospects for a unified cognitive and philosophical neurobiology.
- 7 Dillon, M. C. *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*. Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1988.
- 8 For more information on the role of mirror neurons in development of language and social behavior see Stamenov, M. I. and V. Gallesse. *Mirror Neurons and the Evolution of Brain and Language. Advances in Consciousness Research*. Amsterdam, Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2002.
- 9 Rizzolatti, G., R. Camarda, et al. "Functional organization of inferior area 6 in the macaque monkey. II, Area F5 and the control of oral movements." *Exp Brain Res* 71(3) (1988): p. 491-507; Fogassi, L. and V. Gallesse. *The Neural Correlates of Action Understanding in Non-Human Primates. Mirror Neurons and the Evolution of Brain Language*. M. I. Stamenov and V. Gallesse. Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing company, 2002. p. 14-32.
- 10 It has been long discovered that major functional systems of the brain are governed by five principles: 1) each functional system involves several brain regions that carry out different types of information processing, 2) the functional systems are connected by identifiable pathways, 3) functional systems are hierarchically organized, 4) functional systems control action contralaterally, and—most interestingly 5) brain is organized topographically, i. e. the peripheral receptive surface—the retina or the eye, the cochlea of the ear, the surface of skin—is represented throughout successive stages of processing in such a way that neighboring sensory receptors project to neighboring regions of the cerebrum associated with that particular sensory system. (I can't help thinking about flesh, touch, Merleau-Ponty.) In the past decade, non-invasive functional brain imaging techniques (PET, fMRI, EEG) have provided behavior and cognitive neuroscientists with an exciting outlook into the topography of the human brain in action. For details see Kandel, Eric R. and James H. Schwartz eds. *Principles of Neural Science*. New York : Elsevier North Holland, 1981.
- 11 Gallesse, V. "The roots of empathy: the shared manifold hypothesis and the neural basis of intersubjectivity." *Psychopathology* 36 (4) (2003): p. 171-80.
- 12 Kandel, E. *The Brain and Behavior. Principles of Neural Science*. E. R. Kandel, J. H. Schwartzs and T. M. Jessell, McGraw-Hill, 2000. p. 5-18. Eric Kandel is professor in Columbia University whose laboratory has focused on developing reductionist approaches to learning designed to explore the molecular mechanisms of memory storage and to uncover new aspects of neuronal signaling. He shared the 2000 Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine with Arvid Carlsson and Paul Greengard for their discoveries in signal transduction in the nervous system.
- 13 It is long known that cortical plasticity is associated with functional rather than anatomical changes. In a recent article "Neuroplasticity: Changes in Gray Matter Induced by Training" (Bogdan Draganski, Christian Gaser, Volker Busch, Gerhard Schuierer, Ulrich Bogdahn and Arne May. *Nature* 427 (22 January 2004), p. 311–312.) it is shown that the structure of an adult human brain alter in response to environmental demands. The researchers used whole-brain magnetic-resonance imaging to visualize learning-induced plasticity in the brains of volunteers who had learned to juggle. They found that these individuals showed a transient and selective structural change in brain areas that are associated with the processing and storage of complex visual motion. Furthermore, there is new evidence that, neither anatomically nor physiologically, neocortical neurons of a given class are not restricted to specific areas or layers of the cortex, and electrochemical manipulations at the cellular level can affect the electrophysiological properties of single neurons. (Mireoa Steriade, "Neocortical Cell Classes Are Flexible Entities." *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 5, (2004) p. 121-134)
- 14 Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Art and the Interpretation*. E. Dayton. Peterborough: Broadview; 1935. In "The Work of Cinema in the Age of Media" (Rejoinder), *The Occasions*, Oct 31, 2003. http://www.horseshamp.qc.ca/new_offscreen/new_media.htm), I have discussed the cultural implications of new interactive media technologies in formation of new political and social practices.
- 15 Baudry, J. L. "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus." *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*. P. Rosen. New York, Columbia University Press, 1986.
- 16 Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16 (3) (1975): 6-18.
- 17 Several studies have reported visual preferences—in terms of gaze duration—of human infants for faces that varied in their attractiveness. (For details see Geldart, S., D. Maurer, et al. "Effects of eye size on adults' aesthetic ratings of faces and 5-month-olds' looking times." *Perception* 28 (3) (1999): 361-74; Geldart, S., D. Maurer, et al. "Effects of the Height of the Internal Features of Faces on Adults' Aesthetic Ratings and 5-month-olds' Looking Times." *Perception* 28 (7) (1999): 839-50; Rubenstein, A. J., L. Kalakans, Rhodes, G., G. K. Genddes, et al. "Are Average and Symmetric Faces Attractive to Infants? Discrimination and Looking Preferences." *Perception* 31 (3) (2002): 315-21.) Infants, as young as 4 months, have shown similarity with adults in the 'aesthetic' perception of attractiveness. (Sarnecki, C. A., G. Buttenworth, et al. "Facial aesthetics: babies prefer attractiveness to symmetry." *Perception* 23 (1994) (7): 823-31.) A recent study on 'saccade effects' (it was shown that gaze is actively involved in preference formation and that saccade effects are present when participants compare abstract, unfamiliar shapes for attractiveness, suggesting that orienting and preference for objects in general are intrinsically linked in a positive feedback loop leading to the conscious choice. (Shimojo, S., C. Simion, et al. "Gaze Bias Both Reflects and Influences Preference." *Nat Neurosci* 6 (12) (2003): 1317-22.) An inquiry into neurophysiological evidence of preference for attractiveness has revealed that passive viewing of female Faces elicits higher levels of brain activity associated with the reward circuitry. (see Aharon, I., N. Etcoff, et al., "Beautiful Faces Have Variable Reward Value: fMRI and Behavioral Evidence." *Neuron* 32 (3) (2001): 537-51.)
- 18 For more details see Perrett, D. I., K. A. May, et al. "Facial Shape and Judgements of Female Attractiveness." *Nature* 368 (6468) (1994): 239-42; Cellerino, A. "Psychobiology of Facial Attractiveness." *J Endocrinol Invest* 26 (3 Suppl) (2003): 45-8; Johnston, V. S., C. J. Solomon, et al. "Human Facial Beauty: Current Theories and Methodologies." *Arch Facial Plast Surg* 5, (2003): 371-7.

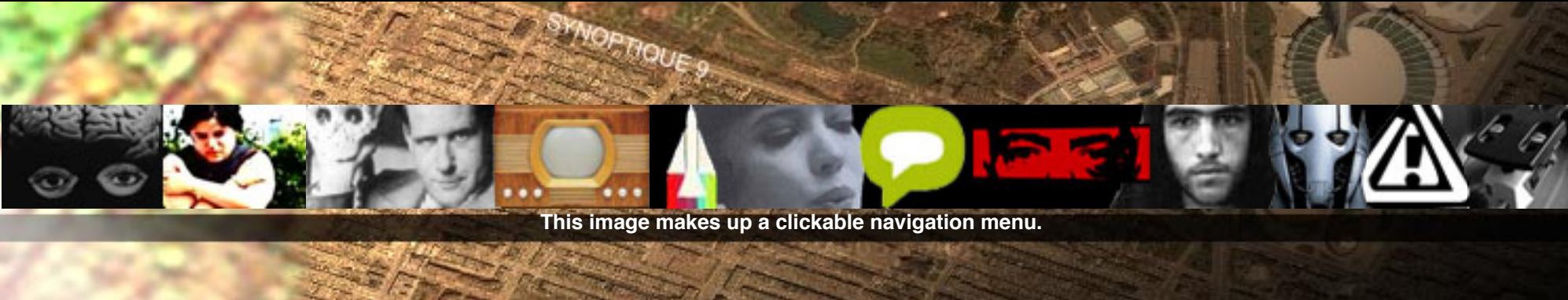
Najmeh Khalili Mahani is a first time contributor to Synoptique. She is currently working towards a PhD in neuroscience at McGill University. Her project, conducted in affiliation with the Brain Imaging Center at the Montreal Neurological Institute and the Douglas Hospital Research Center, is concerned with the effect of stress on the brain and aging in relation to personality variables. She is also a part-time MA Film Studies student with an interest in national cinemas and reception studies.

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Visual Reality Anthropology

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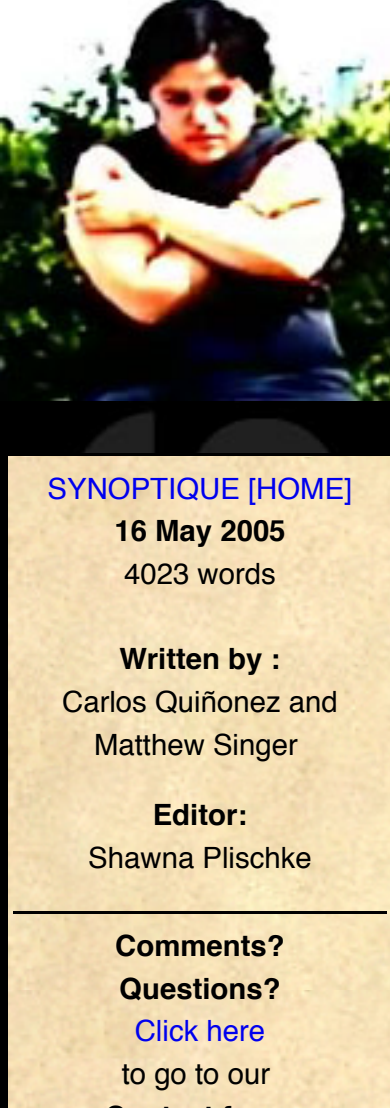
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Visual Reality Anthropology

An Introduction

by Carlos Quiñonez and Matthew Singer



SYNOPTIQUE [HOME]

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Authors Carlos Quiñonez and Matthew Singer revisit the ethnographic form, and makes a plea for artistic creativity as a bulwark against both pernicious misrepresentation and grotesque relativism.

Introduction

"By most of the usual criteria, visual anthropology [VA] has become an established subdiscipline of sociocultural anthropology" [1]. In spanning documentary, visual ethnography, and the fine arts, VA has gained strength through its conceptual plasticity and eclecticism, but like any other social science or humanities discipline, continues with uncomfortably open questions concerning theory and method – What is the nature of visual anthropological media? Exactly what does it mean to "capture some thing on film"? Was Vertov aiming to put boundaries around some *thing* with cinema vérité for example?

This paper attempts to illuminate such questions by developing an argument for a novel addition to VA, namely Visual Reality Anthropology (VRA). With the presentation of VRA, we hope to access certain root questions in the theoretical and methodological problematic of social science and humanities research, or more specifically, how VRA can answer questions of explanation, or of epistemology and ontology. The VRA method is in essence a philosophical one first, and a tool of analyses and cultural production second. In other words, it attempts to define the conditions of possibility for why we can even ask questions of value, much less hope to observe, produce, and transmit them on film.

Our argument first presents a description of VRA, or what it means to undertake the VRA method. It then provides a very brief discussion on the epistemic and ontologic base buttressing such a method, or the philosophical and/or metaphysical under-labouring necessary to build a VRA theory. Finally, three different examples of VRA projects are described and reviewed, displaying the robustness of this method in representing the validity of reality.

VRA

VRA, at its most basic, is an attempt to record, edit, produce, and promote human and social existence in an accurate, meaningful and/or truth-giving manner. To begin to understand what this means, VRA is compared to reality television, as the latter acts as an effective foil by which to show what VRA is not, and thus in turn, what VRA is.

Current reality television studies (however artificially and removed from this task it may be) a mini-society that is continuously experiencing pressures, with contestants always under the threat of dying (represented by being voted off the show and/or not advancing to the next round). Reality television enacts the varieties of tension that exist in life (starvation, pressure to perform, time limits, physical expectations), yet under such staged pressures (however real they must feel), people do not always act as they would normally. This creates tensions above and beyond what would otherwise be experienced and reacted to, and as such, artificial intensity or stress is the characteristic of reality television. Moreover, production uses these situations in combination with editing to further intensify the situation for the contestant and viewer. It is no wonder their success, considering how editorial and productive manipulation become powerful tools by which to convey different types of human emotion and social experience.

What has been gleaned from this type of quasi visual ethnography is that the final product can be entertaining. In containing flashy editing, music, and a whole host of other visually appealing segments, reality television keeps the viewer watching. By the end of the show, the viewer feels that he or she has participated and has opinions on what should happen to the characters next [2]. It is this level of engagement that VRA attempts to achieve.

But what is the VRA method? How is one engaged in it? What must one do? Initially, it is stressed that VRA is a scientific method (in the broadest sense) inasmuch as academic preparation is necessary to make such an endeavour socially and existentially legitimate. This is not a normative statement, for in whatever field one exists, there are always formal ways by which to explore problems; more often than not, yielding more interpretable and useful results. For example, in VRA, conceptual closure is key, as this will define the limits of inquiry, and allow one to establish a clear statement of the problematic being investigated. This in turn defines a research question and a study's aims, necessarily supported by a criteria or theory of explanation. Ethical review may also be necessary depending on the nature of the research. In all of these senses, VRA is inextricably rooted in social scientific and humanities explananda of the world, however varied they might be. The production of VRA media is here much like the production of ethnography, containing creative, measured, and peer-reviewed information about the situation under study.

Very broadly, the VRA method can be broken down into different but inter-related stages. After the conceptual and material preparations already discussed are underway and/or complete, one (re)enters the field, and video is shot. The anthropological filmmaker must not only record video, but also intuitively generalised moods or impressions, so that he or she may be able to more accurately recreate feelings in final edited and produced scenes. Sometimes this means having a cameraperson while one takes notes and watches what is happening. Depending on the situation being filmed, it is also useful to have two cameras available. This allows one camera to focus on the subject and the other to freely record others or related topics. Based on gathered data (which includes video, print, and various other media), the analyst then edits the video to convey a descriptive, yet theorised and produced account of the ethnographic setting. This product can be the final piece of work, or there may be accompanying written material, serving to introduce the piece, or acting in parallel, delving into the complexities represented.

In terms of editing and production, the first decision made is what information to provide the viewer. Choosing what the audience will see and hear allows the editor to (re)create a story, immediately highlighting a crucial point in the VRA method, namely the reflexivity, subjectivity, and creativity imbued in producing such material. This is undeniable and we hope to later demonstrate its crucial nature to any accurate understanding of reality (namely that there is structure that must be in corollary to perception to make any sort of understanding meaningful, however relative such structure and/or our ties to it may be).

Hinged to this point, and as the second decision made in the editing and production process, is how information is put together to create the final product. As mentioned, the use and abuse of artificial stress and editing is the defining characteristic of reality television, and it is here where VRA is different. VRA does not over-dramatise in the sense of adding artificial and unfounded tension, but rather uses editing and production to illuminate feelings and/or moods recorded in empirical observation and systematic recording of the ethnographic setting. For example, music is a powerful tool in the delivery of information, effectively eliciting emotion and highlighting something that is present but not necessarily clear just through visual media.

Presented herein is a linear process, yet the engagement of a VRA research problem and setting is more iterative than anything else, whereby the researcher (re)enters the field, each time with a finer understanding of the situations being explored. Social science and humanities research has used many strategies by which to provide the checks and balances for such a refinement to occur, and while beyond this paper to outline specific techniques, they include obtaining saturation of data, coding to themes, triangulating data sources, comparability with other research, and participant involved analyses.

So very generally but more realistically, the VRA method is the collection of varied data about a complex set of events and states, their gross (re)description, cognitive resolution, and theoretical (re)description. This is a process bounded by empirical observation, by retrodution to plausible explanations for "why things are the way they are" (eliminating competing alternatives), and finally, by the identification of the factors at work in shaping the reality of "why things are the way they are" [3]. During this process, a complex iterative interaction of ethnographic experience, thematic development, the limits imposed by data points, and stakeholder recognition of analytical findings, constitutes analysis. As will be outlined more explicitly in the next section, whatever the case, there is a strong metaphysical base by which to be confident that such an iterative process of refinement around the truth of a situation is possible [3-8].

Ultimately, there are important benefits to the VRA method. VRA can be entertaining. It can be theoretically eclectic without falling away into contradiction, easily crossing and harmonising disciplinary boundaries. It can effectively present information in both an analytical and creative way. And as is the specific case here, through its presentation on the Internet, VRA can be made available to large numbers of people, thereby promoting itself and the understanding of human existence.

VRA, Reality, and Explanation

It is recognised that the core questions of theory and method remain [1], [3] – [8], problematising explanation in all of its form and presence, not just VRA – What can we say is real? How do we know such a thing, and by what criteria? What are the ways one can know reality? Are there better ways than others? These questions are sentinel to VRA, as how is one to establish what feelings or moods are real in the ethnographic setting, and further undertake processes by which to bracket and augment such feelings for the purposes of presentation? We make no attempt to thoroughly answer such questions, as they extend well beyond this paper, yet describing a VRA metaphysic is important in order to more fully explicate previous arguments, and to further develop what it means to do VRA.

Recall that VRA is, in principle, a philosophical method first and a tool of analyses and production second; this must be so, as there is no other way to buttress VRA's central purposive claim, namely that one is able to record, edit, produce, and promote human and social existence in a truth-giving manner. But how can one support this claim in light of the murky theoretical and methodological spectre confronting social science and humanities research today? In his account of our state of affairs, Lawson exclaims:

For we are lost. Lost in a world that has no map, not because it has been mislaid or forgotten, but because we can no longer imagine how such a map could be constructed. In our post-modern relativistic age [...] we find ourselves in a world without certainties, without a fixed framework of belief; without truth; without decidable meaning. [...] It is not simply that our thoughts and beliefs are seen to be relative to experience, culture, history, and language, but that without access to facts that are not vitiated by the perspective of the observer we have had to abandon the very possibility of neutrality or objectivity in their traditional sense. [4, p. ix]

Clearly, the effective decay of empirical realism, reductionism, and positivism as the basis for substantive and complete explanation (in theory as it clearly maintains in practice), and the lessons of perspectival relativism and deconstruction in both quantum and post-structuralist accounts of the world, have led to the undeniable and at times uncomfortable position that we *must* know in many ways [3], [4]. Yet we remain timid in confronting what it is we know. In VRA, we argue that it is now necessary to think creatively and even radically, in order to find a position of truth unnecessary of vitiating the observer and possible of fully grasping the relations to the observed. VRA attempts to do this through its bold claim that it can capture the ethnographic setting through editing and production and then transmit the realities of such a setting later in time. What follows then is a very brief outlining of the conditions of possibility for making such a statement, drawing on different philosophers and theorists so as to establish the case.

In trying to construct a non-traditional and generally non-realist perspective about objectivity and truth, Lawson puts forth his metaphysics of closure [4]. For Lawson, while the "the stories we tell about the world and ourselves" offer limits to the nature of our environment (based on physiology and past social processes), the possibilities of reality are essentially innumerable, and he points to the openness of the world as proof. Openness can be described as the space of potentiality we inhabit as circumstance, the pre-existent conditions of our state of affairs that must go on *a priori* in time (in this sense Lawson subtly slips back into a realism). Juxtaposed here is our ability to close, or congeal around something that is not doubtful. Do we not know that we exist and that we have to function and survive through recognising and understanding (in part) regularity? It is "through closure that openness is divided into things"; the way we make sense of ourselves in the seething flux that appears to be the order that limits our possibilities. The relationship between openness and closure is specific; giving rise to all material (matter and ideas) that becomes textured through more closures of openness, *ad infinitum*. This allows for the inexhaustible combination of closures interacting and giving rise to what we consider reality, with the fundamental beginning representing an immensely dense form of presence that we draw on for action and potential [3] – [5]. Such ideas are brought into more focus by invoking Foucault's notion that "every social space is a container for social power" [6]. Consider the control of knowledge, of symbols, and our resultant agency as examples of such abstractness made real, where openness is made into the things of the world through our closure around potentialities; our ability to develop something, an idea for example, and give it texture through the shaping of that which is palpable, that from which we draw, the "no-thing in particular" that defines our conditions of possibility and ultimately the particularities that come to populate the world as things.

Such ideas link to another metaphysical assumption in VRA, namely that of a realist tenor, or that there exists a world beyond us. This means that VRA is non-anthropocentric, since if VRA is to accept the ultimate context of an open system (and our ability to provide closure such that we can make sense of it), we must therefore be a part of a larger complex, not fully bounded by our perception and existence. In short, we do not exhaust reality, and as recognised by the critical realists, there must in turn be three overlapping layers to our existence; the empirical, the actual, and the real, or in other words, what we observe, what is actually going on in events and states, and finally the mechanisms that actuate such realities [3]. As a result, our observations close around and/or congeal the regularities, powers, natures, or mechanisms that actuate the world and our circumstances, regardless if we are there to experience, measure, and/or theorise about them or not.

Here, VRA also relies on the philosophy of Ortega y Gasset [7], whose primary and fundamental metaphysic is that of the "individual with the things" – "I am myself and my circumstances" [7] – [8]. The interplay or relational character between one and their environment is one's life. Because of this unity in experience, Ortega y Gasset's notion of vital reason hinges on to Lawson's closure, as our bodies are "closure machines" [4], holding back the flux in order to act, or to develop and change within and through the inter-relational nature of one's reasoning about one's lived, changing, and open circumstances. This point is important as it links what is otherwise the moral wound of subjectivity and the loss of a grip on the real, to what becomes the ability of understanding that our "island universes" and "existential angsts" are one and the same among the many differential ways of experiencing them.

The leads to the two next assumptions of VRA, that of a transcendental realism, or that the structure of the world is in corollary to that of our perceptions, and that our perceptions are as real as anything else, otherwise generalised as ontological parity. Since we can perceive and function, and since understanding appears to allow for a deeper and more refined understanding of a world *a posteriori* *a fortiori*, it is a metaphysical slam dunk to say that there is some corollary between our observations of the world and the world itself. Openness thus gives rise not only to matter, but also ideas, which are as material as anything else. One can again think of the processes by which knowledge is turned into power, at some point crossing a perceived divide between that which is amaterial (an idea), to that which becomes material consequence, namely our action and intervention in the world (as per the motivation and/or power of opportunity provided by such an idea). This elision of idealism and realism brings into focus the necessary robust nature of what can constitute a natural complex [3, 5], grounding the ontological parity necessary to link idea to matter, or perception to reality, and most importantly for VRA, allowing a theory of recognition for truth and explanation.

We believe that with such an eclectic and unified base, it is reasonable to assume that something very much is real and observable, and its natures, powers, mechanisms maintain such that they can be felt, (re)produced, and (re)felt in time. So arguably there is truth and explanation, since surely we would not be able to function if this were not the case – the only reason one's basic actions are comprehensible to one's self and others is because there are regularities that we can observe and function with and/or around (however relative they may be). As argued, we can grasp currents of thought, currents of being that act as the delimiting force to our cognitive ratiocination within our circumstances. This is the way it has to be for us to be, and to be sure, what makes it possible for VRA to describe something as true, abstract it, and possibly enhance it through editing and production, and then explain it in presentation through such abstraction and/or enhancement. Again there is relativity here in the way things are and can be known, but this relativism does not translate into dissolving away a hold on reality. Rather, it illuminates the conditions of possibility of what must be true in the world for VRA, and any method for that matter, to work.

In sum, consider the most practical explanation. With the advent of relatively low-cost hand held cameras and computer editing software, many are now actively experimenting with film- or documentary making. Such media is now easily disseminated to the world through the Internet, with people pushing past the traditional boundaries imposed by traditional VA. Essentially, people are willing to record their lives on film because they recognise something that they feel will be maintained over time, a certain feeling or meaning; in other words, a reality that that is relatively stable in space-time, something that can be transmitted to the viewer, whether through sheer individuated sentimentality, or through an attempt to present a statement on the objective nature of things as in a VRA project.

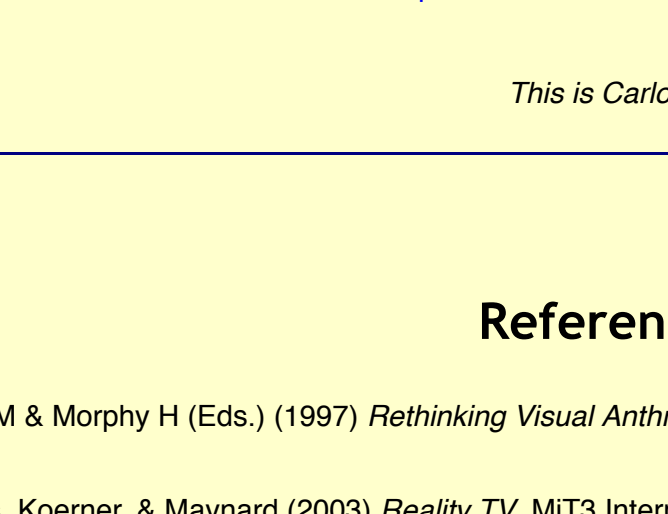
Examples of VRA

We now present three examples of VRA, and highlight some of the bases for each project's attempt to explicate its subject, as well the VRA philosophy, theory and method. The first is THE INTERVIEW (2 minutes 39 seconds), from NEVER MORE: THE MAKING OF THE RAVEN (43 minutes), highlighting the fact that as per time restrictions, only short portions of interviews ever make it to the final cut. Therefore, one needs to draw on the themes presented by the subject and the ethnographic setting, as is the point of analysis and presentation. Editing, music, et cetera, can be used to metaphorically fill in or fortify information, so although emotions can be picked up by camera, use of production techniques can only serve to synthesise and emphasise the information presented (as once again is the point of analysis and presentation). THE INTERVIEW uses music, editing, and other production to highlight the fact that George Falconer has experienced recent serious health issues, and his production of *The Raven* is (in part) a manifest of the realisation of his own mortality.



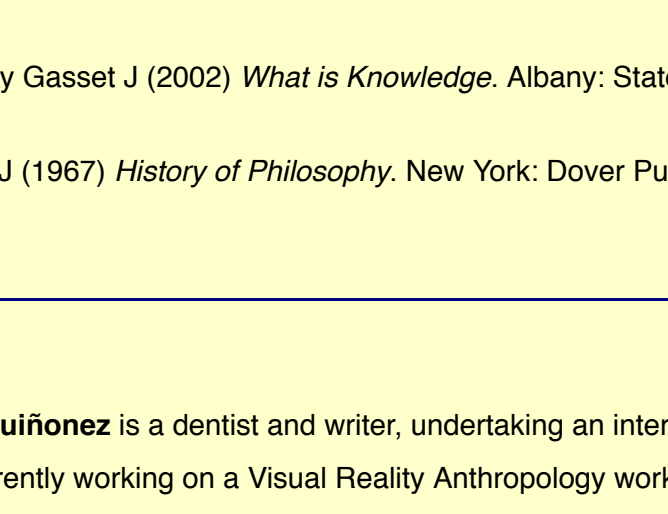
LOW | MEDIUM | HIGH

The second is THE TRAILER (2 minutes 14 seconds) from I SEE THE LIGHT: THE EXPRESSION OF FAITH AND MODERN BORN AGAIN CHRISTIAN CANADIANS (in production), demonstrating the importance of not confusing VRA with otherwise regular films which require certain story constructs, such as a climax or dénouement. VRA does not necessarily have to play out as a story; it can be moments or situations that have anthropological, sociological, historical, and/or political, amongst the many other forms of meaning. Here, THE TRAILER is a conglomeration of popular perceptions, material culture, and music, all of which serve to show the importance and ignorance of current mainstream attitudes within and about an often marginalised, yet organised and strong cultural group in our society.



LOW | MEDIUM | HIGH

The third and final is HEAT STROKE (1 minute 42 seconds), depicting the moments at which someone succumbs to heat stroke. Representing an experience and not a story *per se*, this was a true situation, caught on tape through no planning; in fact the author was acquiring water and clothing for the person during these moments. The notion of authorship here is important, as it nicely highlights two key moments within the VRA method. First, it demonstrates how even when passively filming, something is necessarily "caught on tape" in an independent and open environment; second, it demonstrates that "this" can then be analysed and/or (re)constituted through the VRA method, wherein HEAT STROKE, analysis and presentation are very direct, almost discretely descriptive. So through changes in timing, colour saturation, and soundtrack, an attempt was made to make the physical difficulties and decay of heat stroke more apparent, literally trying to approximate some semblance of these quiet and hard existential moments.



LOW | MEDIUM | HIGH

Conclusion

Presented herein was an introduction to a developing approach in VA termed VRA. In one sense a vindication of ontology, this argument attempted to outline the conditions of possibility for why VRA can make the claim that it does; namely that it can record, edit, produce, and promote human and social existence in an accurate and meaningful way, or in a truth-giving manner. By using editing and production to (in part) represent its analytic, VRA must accept a pre-existent openness, made material and textured by closure through us, contextualised as the myriad reflexive limits of an objectively present environment, where matter and ideas maintain through time such that they can be recognised in the powers, natures, and/or mechanisms that delimit our knowledge and practice, and that can be truthfully represented to promote VRA and the understanding of human existence.

For more information:
<http://www.visualanthropologist.ca/>

This is Carlos' and Matthew's first contribution to SYNOPTIQUE.

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COMMENTS:

Interesting article, I would appreciate further communication with Carlos to discuss your paradigms of ontology. Please contact me at the address above at your earliest convenience!!

By Nicole Littlewood on 2005 07 07

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Que Viva Mexico!

Ethno-Exploitation and *Thunder Over Mexico*
by Chris Meir



[SYNOPTIQUE \[HOME\]](#)

16 May 2005
3335 words

Written by :
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Along with Erich von Stroheim's GREED (1924) and Orson Welles' THE MAGNIFICENT AMBERSONS (1943), Sergei Eisenstein's QUE VIVA MEXICO! [1] is among the oft-repeated tales of directorial artistry betrayed by the commercial interests of producers. The rancor between Eisenstein and Upton Sinclair, who acted as financier for the project, is well documented and needs no further retelling here. What I would like to explore in this essay, instead, is the essence of their competing visions for the project. Though I will not seek to overthrow the widely-held opinion that Sinclair restrained Eisenstein's somewhat quixotic attempts at bringing a grand vision of Mexican culture and history to the screen, I will attempt to contextualize Sinclair's ideas about the project within filmic practices of the early 1930s, a period which saw a vogue for visiting foreign lands and cultures through the cinema. This contextualization will focus in particular on the film that Sinclair assembled from the massive amount of footage that Eisenstein shot in Mexico, this being the film THUNDER OVER MEXICO (1933).

Joanne Herschfield, in her article "Paradise Regained: Sergei Eisenstein's QUE VIVA MEXICO! as Ethnography" takes a crucial step when she announces at the beginning of her essay that

Previous studies of Eisenstein's attempt to compose a film based on Mexican history have focused on the film's production history, on the relation of the unfinished film to the director's larger body of work, and on his theoretical investigations into the nature of cinema... In this essay, I will suggest that Eisenstein's sojourn in Mexico, his collecting of over 170,000 feet of cinematic material, and his writings and drawings about his experiences may be considered as a form of ethnographic fieldwork. (55-56)

It goes without saying that this essay is indebted partially to Herschfield's long overdue call for more substantial analyses of Eisenstein's project than are to be found in the existing critical literature. What Herschfield offers in her essay is a Cliffordian analysis of the ethnographic dimensions of the project, with a requisite eye towards issues of self and other in ethnographic discourses. In this respect the essay is more than competent, but its inconsistency as regards ethnographic reading of the project detracts from her handling of how the project interacts with larger ethnographic trends at the time of its production. Though Herschfield lays out the terms of her study in the manifesto-like language cited above, vowing to eschew an assessment of Eisenstein's theoretical project, Herschfield unfortunately does not stay the course. Instead, her analysis strays far afield, saying that "the film's structure and its compositions are grounded in [Eisenstein's] evolving theories of a political and intellectual cinema" and subsequently falls back into a study of Eisenstein's theories of montage and how they reflect gender-based oppositions (58-59). Not only is this detour self-contradictory, it is also distracting from an otherwise promising critical orientation and veers towards a more commonplace auteurist approach to the project. More disconcerting, however, is the ahistorical scope of Herschfield's argument. Commenting on *indigenismo* in the project, Herschfield points out that though the Mexican intelligentsia was claiming the Indian as the quintessential figure of Mexicanness,

Mexico's Indian population had long since shrunked to a negligible percentage of the nation's population and that the *mestizo* class, Mexico's largest racial group, had subsumed the vast majority of aboriginal descendants leaving only "increasingly isolated pockets of small rural villages" (65). This is a convincing diagnosis of the salvage-impulse of Eisenstein's project, but this conclusion is so perfunctory that Herschfield's reader may assume that Eisenstein's work exists in an artistic vacuum and that Eisenstein was the only film-maker hoping to document vanishing races and cultures. Herschfield's contextualization consists only a cursory (two paragraph) recap of movements in visual and written ethnography wholly without an attempt to place the QVM project within that context.



Ethnography as we know it began in the 1920s in both its written and cinematic incarnations. Though important ethnographic texts had been written before this decade, 1922, with the publication of Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* and the worldwide hit that was Flaherty's NANOOK OF THE NORTH, was a watershed year for ethnography, effectively launching it as a popular and credible form of writing and film-making (Heider 18). To those familiar with the cinema, the story of Robert Flaherty and his ethnographic film-making is so widely known that it hardly needs lengthy description here. While much ink has been spilled criticizing the representational politics of Flaherty's films, what I'd like to stress here is that Flaherty himself was aware of the salvage impulse in his work, and that this impulse is largely characteristic of documentary ethnography in this period (45). This impulse to document and preserve cultures existing outside of modernity found quite a large audience. [2] To say this film was a popular success would be a bit of an understatement, NANOOK was, and still is, one of the most popular theatrically released documentary films ever made (Barnouw 42).

But what made this film so popular? And, more importantly how is this all related to the QVM project? I would suggest that the answer to these questions can be found in part in Erik Barnouw's canonical history of the documentary film. Offering a thematic history of documentary film-making, Barnouw entitles his chapter on the epoch of Flaherty's early work as the era of the documentarian as "Explorer" (32). The suggestion behind such a title is that the documentary film in this era offered audiences an opportunity, via the technology of cinema, to see the world and its peoples, a luxury heretofore largely impossible. The earliest incarnation of the documentary-explorer that Barnouw cites is the early ethnographer. It is to this incarnation that has particular import to the figuration I have proposed of Eisenstein as a sort of cultural *flâneur*. It is important to note that in terms of popular reception, ethnography in this period was essentially a generic mode of touristic voyeurism wherein the screen offered the viewer could accompany the film--flâneur... [3]



The popularity of films which featured the documentarian as explorer, such as NANOOK, gave rise to a cycle of fictional ethnographic exploitation films. As Karl Heider explains, "these early films were commercial ventures, taking advantage of the public interest which had been stimulated by film-makers like Flaherty and ethnographers like Mead" (26). This sort of exploitation film is more or less what Upton Sinclair was looking for when he sent Eisenstein and his crew to Mexico. The now infamously bitter acrimony between the two throughout the production phase of the project can be understood through as a conflict between two different ideas about what kind of film this would be. If THUNDER OVER MEXICO is any indication, we can safely say that Sinclair was interested in making one of the ethnographic exploitation films described above. Eisenstein obviously had other ideas for the project. When Eisenstein set out from Hollywood for Mexico in 1930, his plans for the film that he intended to make, if he had any at all, were vague at best. There was some suggestion, according to Harry Geduld and Ronald Gottesman, that the director intended "to make a picture like NANOOK OF THE NORTH (Robert Flaherty, 1922), MOANA (Robert Flaherty, 1926), and CHANG (Merian Cooper and Ernest Shoedsack, 1927), depicting the spirit of the Mexican people, their culture, and the general appearance of the country in which they lived" (29). Over the course of his stay in Mexico and research into Mexican history and culture, his ambitions for the project grew exponentially. Eisenstein's final script outlines called for four major vignettes concerned with four different epochs in Mexican history, stretching from pre-Columbian times to the modern period. Such a scope was in all likelihood modeled on Diego Rivera's mural *The History of Mexico* and was most likely impossible to realize within the constraints of mainstream theatrical exhibition. But, seeing his financial investment in the project imperiled by such an enormous structure, Sinclair sought other forms for the final cut to take.

The conflict between these two views of the project can be seen in the correspondence between Eisenstein and Sinclair during film. Two suggestions from Sinclair are particularly indicative of the direction he thought the film project should go in. The first comes in a letter addressed to Eisenstein dated a week after the group arrived in Mexico. In this letter, Sinclair advises Eisenstein that he needs "a story on which to string [his] pictures" and that a good idea for this "string" is the story of an Indian boy who comes into contact with modern civilization, "modern science and American ways and ideas" before returning to his village "a wiser and sadder man" (32). Sinclair's suggestion is a very interesting one in that he sees the film's narrative, "the story" to "string pictures together on", as one that should be concerned with the confrontation of modernity, "modern science and American ways and ideas", and the primitive Indian figure who, for Sinclair, exists outside of time and historical progress. Another, decidedly more blatant method of cashing in on the ethno-exoticism of Mexico is suggested by Sinclair in relation to finding a cheap but innovative way to narrate the film:

It has occurred to me to suggest that you might find one or more [narrative] devices from the Mayan legends or present day Indian customs, which might be used in making the titles.

Perhaps you will be using the traditional gods of the, the feathered serpent... You might show this Wind God idol blowing commands or threats and his breath might take the form of Aztec letters and then of the translation. This particular suggestion might not be the thing used by you,

but the main point is to have in mind the finding of some device which will be characteristic of Mexico. (56)

Not only is this particular idea laughably campy, but it also registers the sort of attitude implicit in Sinclair's conception of the project. What Sinclair has in mind is a commodification of Mexican culture and exoticism. The first suggestion shows the typical "noble savage" impulse, with the noble savage encountering modernity and ending up fleeing back to a sort of primitive utopia that is the native settlement. The second suggestion, however, is a much less subtle call for selling the exoticism of native cultures. The attraction in Sinclair's second suggestion is the novelty for modern audiences in seeing the traditional trappings of native cultures, regardless of how tactfully their employed.



Throughout the correspondences between Eisenstein and Sinclair during the making of the film there are many telling sideways glances that there are to another film being made roughly around the same time with many of the same elements. This film was F.W. Murnau's TABU (1930). There are several types of references to TABU in the correspondence ranging in content from budgetary considerations, in which TABU is viewed as an industrial model (Sinclair was encouraged by the positive box-office reception of TABU), to using the film as a prototype for questions of content. In fact, the idea of using a Mayan god to breath smoke titles is mentioned by Sinclair in connection with a discussion of narration that stems from his having seen the "innovative" use by Murnau of a French merchant's letters home as a means of providing an indirect narrator for TABU. Finally, there is an account, via Kimborough of the production group screening the film while in Mexico, wherein TABU is described as "a light, pretty picture," one which would have paled in comparison to QVM (172). But we must ask ourselves what this connection between the films consists of if we are to gain some deeper understanding of the QVM project; clearly Sinclair at least saw TABU as a commercial model for QVM, but how can this influence our understanding of the overall project? To answer this question we should look a little more closely at Murnau's film and the Sinclair-commissioned THUNDER OVER MEXICO, the film that is, I will argue, Sinclair's attempt to imitate TABU.

Before describing TABU, we must briefly tell the story of TABU; in this story we will already begin to see the many parallels with QVM. Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, the by then internationally famous director of SUNRISE (1927) arrived in Tahiti in the second week of May 1929 with the idea of making a film about the native population, in part to capitalize on the success of films like Flaherty's MOANA (1928) and a fiction film entitled WHITE SHADOWS IN THE SOUTH SEAS (W.S. Van Dyke 1928) (Eyman 25). About a month later Murnau was joined by a celebrated documentary film-maker who was down on his luck in finding funding for his independent film projects, that film-maker was, of course, Robert Flaherty, who had, coincidentally (or not) worked on WHITE SHADOWS before leaving the project after a falling out with the director W.S. Van Dyke. The tension between Flaherty and Murnau quickly became unbearable, as Murnau was intent on making an artistic fiction film, and "Flaherty realized that Murnau was using him as a glorified advance man, letting him make arrangements with the natives in a way that the aloof German could never hope to" (26). Flaherty soon left the project, and Murnau made his Polynesian film. TABU tells the story of Reri and Matahi, a young couple in the Polynesian Islands who become star-crossed lovers when the tribe's priest Hitu declares that Reri is a sacred maiden who must remain virginal for the rest of her life. The pair flee their home island but, ultimately "a weak French colonial officer, a European trader, a dishonest Chinese saloon keeper, and a relentless Polynesian chief all conspire to thwart the love of the young Polynesian couple" (Heider 26). Despite its scripted plot, there is a strong ethnographic undercurrent in the film, but one that is primarily concerned with exoticism. This is announced in the film's opening title card which assures the authenticity of the film's exotic mise-en-scene: "This film was made in Tahiti... All persons appearing in the film are actual natives of the island, except for a few Chinese." This title-card has no other function than to assure us that this film was not made in a studio, but is instead the *actual* far off land of Tahiti and that these aren't actors in dark make-up but are *actual* natives of the island. In a far that further indicates the degree of ethno-exploitation in the film, Paramount advertised it with the tagline "Uncivilized Love! Rapturous Romance!" and contemporary reviewers praised it as "an entrancing cinema adventure into a beautiful primitive life" (Eyman 79).

Frustrated with Eisenstein's recalcitrance, Sinclair ultimately enlisted Hollywood editor Sol Lesser to cut Eisenstein's footage into a film which would become THUNDER OVER MEXICO. THUNDER is composed mostly out of the materials that belong to the "Maguety" section of Eisenstein's fieldwork, though parts of the film are used to advertise the Mexican Indians to be found in the film. As such it tells the story of Sebastian and Maria and their ill-fated trip to the house of the *haciendado* (land-owner). A cursory glance at the film in light of Murnau's TABU demonstrates the debt that THUNDER owed to the Murnau film. The film's opening title cards, for example, tell the audience that the film is set in Mexico and that we are going to see "The story of Sebastian and Maria, whose suffering represents the suffering of all Mexico" before the revolution of 1910. Another title rhapsodizes on the "pure-blooded creatures" whose "faces are carved in stone" that the film will feature. The film as a whole could be best described as a relatively cliched narrative telling of the abuses of the lower classes at the hands of the gentry, with the added attraction of seeing real Mexican landscapes and people.

At the time of its release, THUNDER OVER MEXICO received scathing reviews and even touched off something of an uproar among leftist artists and intellectuals who felt that Eisenstein's film symphony had been mutilated into a by-the-numbers Hollywood film. Though Sinclair surely distorted Eisenstein's vision for the film, his alteration is best understood as reduction rather than mutilation. Love stories did have prominent positions in Eisenstein's treatment of Mexico. All four parts of the script feature some variation on the motif of the romantic couple: Concepcion and her courtship of Abundio in "Sandunga"; the tragic love story of Sebastian and Maria in the "Maguety"; the forbidden love of the matador Licega and his lover Señora Calderón in "The Fiesta"; and the bleak love story found in "Soldaderas", which features a woman following her husband to war and, after his death, finding a new husband to follow. The concept of "variation" is key to understanding this dimension of the project. The variations on the love story, arguably the most universal kind of story in human art, evokes a scope which encompasses Mexican history from a state of prelapsarian, pre-Columbian innocence, through the corruption and suffering under Spanish colonial rule and later the dictatorship of Diaz, leading up to the bitter hardships on the road to liberation and the return to utopia in the modern Mexico. Without this scope, however, each love story becomes less meaningful without the powerful context Eisenstein wanted to give it. We can then thus understand Eisenstein's frustration when responding to Sinclair's suggestion of making a single feature film out of the "Maguety" material:

The project of making two pictures—one hacienda, and the others [separate] episodes is not possible: if they have not one subject running through, that does not mean that episodes are just a heaping up of disconnected material without forming a synthetic and symphonic whole. You cannot take out of *Hamlet* the scene of the death of Polonius—make another drama out of it and then use "the rest" for another one... Our picture is a strict Mexican "Menu" and cannot be sold "à la carte." (Geduld and Gottesman 132)

THUNDER OVER MEXICO, by attempting to reduce Eisenstein's project, one completely at odds standard theatrical film practices of the time, into a seventy minute feature, leaves only the exotic elements of the project while losing its ambitious historical and cultural scope. To extend Eisenstein's culinary metaphor a bit, THUNDER was to Mexican culture what Taco Bell is to Mexican cuisine, a bland appropriation hoping to capitalize on cultural exoticism.

Chris Meir wrote about BARRY LYNDON in SYNOPTIQUE 6

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Footnotes

- ¹ Hereafter referred to as QVM, or the QVM project.
- ² Of course it is worth remembering that Flaherty so wanted to document the traditional ways of Nanook and his people, that he asked them to use anachronistic, and often very dangerous, techniques for hunting and constructing igloos (Barnouw 40).
- ³ I am indebted here to Catherine Russell who suggests a conflation of the figures of the *flâneur* and that of the ethnographer or documentary observer in ethnographic filmmaking.

Christopher Meir received his MA in Film Studies from Concordia University. He is currently studying for his PhD in Film Studies at the University of Warwick. He plans to write his doctoral dissertation on new Scottish cinema.

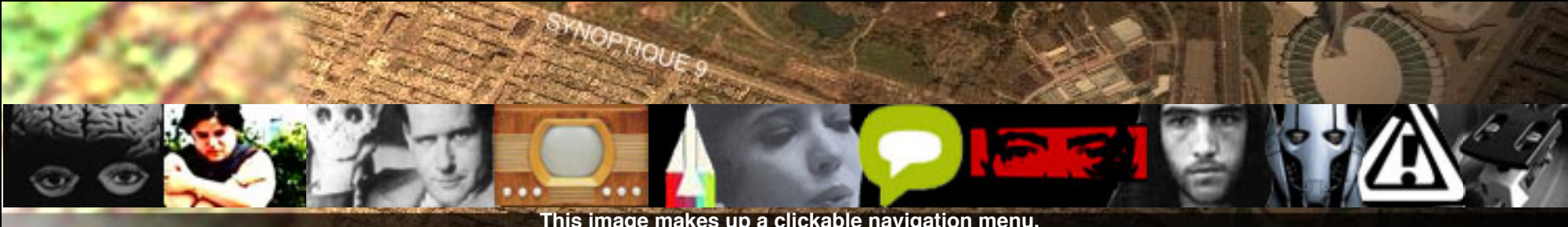
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Moss on Your Transmitter TV in the Faroe Islands

by Jerry White



SYNOPTIQUE [HOME]
16 May 2005
2423 words

Written by :
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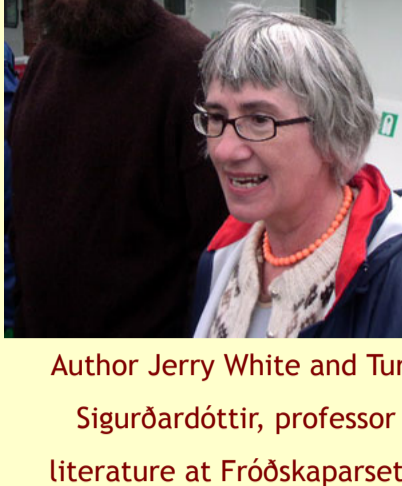
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A brief chronicle of the introduction of television and film – both foreign and domestic – to The Faroes, a cluster of islands midway between Scotland and Iceland. Jerry White explores the Gaelic-Faroese connection throughout the region's short mass media history. He muses on possible cultural implications in years to come of increasingly foreign-dominated television programming.

The Faroe Islands (sometimes spelled Faeroe Islands, properly called Foroyar, pronounced "fur-uh-yer") lie halfway between Scotland and Iceland. They are an archipelago of 18. The population is about 50,000, 15,000 of whom live in the capital city Tórshavn. The language of the islands is Faroese, which is very close to Icelandic (so close that the two languages are basically mutually intelligible); most Faroese also speak Danish, which they are required to learn in school. The Faroe Islands are technically a Danish possession, but have the same semi-autonomous status as Greenland.

I run through all of this because it answers the questions that *everyone* asks me when I tell them that I have been spending time in the Faroe Islands, trying to learn the language, with an eye to making them part of my book on film and broadcast in the North Atlantic. The next question, usually, is "oh, part of a book. Um.... is there much film in the Faroes?" The answer there is more complicated.

The Faroes were the last society in Europe (if you want to think of them as a "society in Europe," and I tend to) to get television. Until the late 1970s, you couldn't get any signals on the islands at all. But in 1979, a small group, led by schoolteacher Jogvan Asbjørn Skalle, decided the time was ripe to change all that. A lot of Faroese young people would go to University in Copenhagen, [1] and buy TVs when they were there. When they graduated and travelled back to the Faroes, they would opt for a shipping container to bring their stuff back by boat. But in 1973, Denmark switched from black and white to colour television. This meant that Faroese students who had bought TVs there suddenly couldn't sell them when they were done with their studies. Since their shipping containers almost always had extra space, returning students tended to just toss these black and white TVs in with their crappy sofas and engineering textbooks. The result for life in the Faroes, as Jogvan Asbjørn Skalle told me when I interviewed him at Tórshavn's Café Natur on 9 July 2004, was that the Faroese were equipped with "for seven years, lots of televisions, but no television!"



Author Jerry White and Turió Sigurðardóttir, professor of literature at Fróðskaparsetur Føroya and head of the Faroese Summer Institute



"At SvF, the best idea they have is to give up, because no politician wants to create another institution."

Dimmalætting, 17 July 2004

So Skalle and his compadres (many of whom were schoolteachers) decided to try to set up a pirate TV station for the entire archipelago. They christened their group Sjórvarp Felagið i Havn, or the Tórshavn Television Association; they came to cooperate with the emergent Esutroy Sjórvarp Felagið, the group that, in 1980, had actually bought a transmitter (Esturoy is the island just North of Tórshavn, which is on the island of Streymoy). A group in Klaksvík (a "second city" for the Faroes, pop. 6000) soon followed, and reasonable signals could now be sent over all 18 islands.

At first, this collective was mostly re-broadcasting week-old Danish news and English soccer matches (tapes would come in on the weekly flight from Copenhagen, semi-surreptitiously passed by a sympathetic staff member at Danish TV). But they also produced their own material. Skalle spoke particularly fondly of a work called KALSOY, a 9-part series devoted to Trolanes, a small village on the island of Kalsoy that is also the northernmost village on the Faroes. They also did a series called CHRISTMAS CALENDAR, a series structured in the pattern of an advent calendar (one episode for each day of advent) that was set on Fugloy, the easternmost Faroe island (which is very hard to get to in the best of times, since it is so exposed to the North Atlantic storms). Skalle thought it was really important for people in the Faroes (especially folks in Tórshavn) to see how other Faroese lived. Toronto, after all, has too long been allowed to hold far too much sway over Canada's media culture; these Faroese TV pirates were determined not to allow that sort of media domination by the metropolis.

This loose collective went on to produce their own programmes for several years. Skalle wanted to make documentary images that reflected the daily life of the Faroes. Speaking of life on one of the Faroes' southernmost island, he told me that he would tell his correspondents, "if you are in Suðroy, and you see a boat coming, make an interview with him. That is news in the Faroes!" He admitted, however, that "if you get out of Tórshavn, you have to construct the news." Maybe a house is being built in a small village somewhere. "There were 4 houses. Now there are 5!" Lest anyone think of this as yellow journalism Faroese-style, it strikes me as quite consistent with a creative approach to making the everyday life of isolated areas cinematic, an approach that is quite common throughout the North Atlantic. Pierre Perrault did this on Île-aux-coudres; Colin Low did it on Fogo Island. And Bob Quinn did it in the Irish-Gaelic-speaking area of Conamara.

Indeed, the Gaelic-Faroese connection is quite distinct, and is, in a way, the key to the whole idea of a North Atlantic cinema. Talking about the pan-Atlantic idealism of his friend Donncha Ó hÉallaithe, an Irish language activist (and lecturer in Math at the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology) Quinn told me in an email that "Donncha Ó hÉallaithe sailed on a Galway Hooker to the Faroes in about 1986. He came back with reports of their TV and it was one of the examples that incited us to put up the transmitter on Onoc Mordaun in 1987." A Galway Hooker, by the way, is a very small boat. Very small. Anyway, this early, semi-legal and closed-circuit television in Irish Gaelic (which was detailed in his son Robert Quinn's film Cinegaeal Paradiso, just shown in Montreal and Edmonton in the last month) was a radical experiment in community media, one that was also influenced by Low's Fogo Island films, which Quinn had seen when he worked at Radio Telefís Éireann in Dublin. [2] And those Fogo Island films, of course, were heavily influenced by Perrault's Île-aux-coudres films. Ah ha! This North Atlantic thing doesn't sound so insane now, does it?

The other important Gaelic-Faroese connection, I'm afraid, is more melancholy. Ireland eventually established a station that broadcast in Irish Gaelic, Teilifís na Gaeilge, in 1996. When I watched it in 1997, I did not hear a single word of English. Even the *commercials* were in Irish. Of course, there were only three of them, repeated over and over (Shell, Nestle and Guinness if memory serves). So perhaps it was not entirely surprising that in 1999, the station was re-christened as TG4, and now shows quite a lot of very cheap English-language material, such as Aussie-rules football and late-night cowboy films.

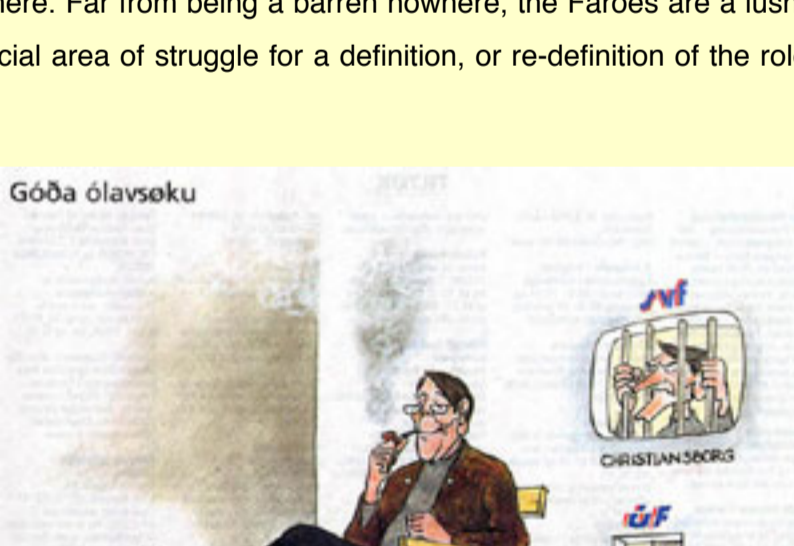
There has been a similar loss of idealism in the Faroes. In 1984, as a result of the threats of lawsuit from various copyright holders who had not given permission for their stuff to be broadcast, Sjórvarp Felagið became Sjórvarp Foroya (SvF). At first, Skalle was happy about this. Speaking of the Danish and Faroese MPs who made this public station a reality, he said that "they knew it was matter of time before public television would come. That was always our intention." But what I found during my trip to Tórshavn in 2004 was a station staffed by highly committed and resourceful folks who are simply starved for resources. They were going through a financial crisis at the time, actually, and during summer of 2004, a takeover from Danish TV seemed imminent. ("Sjórvarp Føroya sendir DR1 1.oktober" screamed the Faroese daily DIMMALÆTTING on 3 August 2004 [3]). That's not an entirely surprising turn of events. Most of the stuff that SvF now broadcasts is either British or American television subtitled in Danish, or Danish TV with no subtitles of any kind. The only regular material in Faroese, other than the commercials, is a 20-minute news broadcast on a few times a week, some goofy programming for kids, and a very sharply photographed gardening show.

Zakaris Hammar is a producer based in Klaksvík. He is a genuine auteur, and I saw a lovely 1992 film of his called MANNA MILLUM, about a day in the life of an old fisherman, at the SvF office in Tórshavn. SvF has also issued a 2-tape set of Hammar's film REYDARGULLID: UM FØROYSKA RÆKJUVEIDU (2003), a tour around the high Atlantic and low Arctic, including Greenland and Svalbard (find it on a map and gape). "His films are a little dull," one staffer at SvF told me, sceptical that my very limited Faroese would be enough to get me through his stuff. "He's like, the filmmaking of talking, you know?" "Cinéma de la parole!" I shouted hopefully. She looked at me like I was some sort of weirdo, but I felt thoroughly validated in my cine-scholarly intuition.

Teitur Árnason's film BURTURHUGUR (2002) (broadcast on SvF), about the previously mentioned island of Fugloy, has a very similarly contemplative, Perrault-ian sensibility. [4] But alas, watching SvF after my language class served largely to introduce me to the wonders of P.D. James adaptations. Don't get me wrong, Roy Marsden is *divine* as Chief Inspector Dalgliesh, but this was not what I had hoped to find.

Like their North Atlantic compatriots in Ireland's Gaeltacht, the Faroese are finding their cooperative-communal-televsual dreams very difficult to maintain. Shortly after I got home, the TV service shut down for a bit, and has now been forcefully merged with the very healthy and well-loved national radio station. There's another Gaelic connection; Ireland's Irish-language radio station Raidió na Gaeltachta enjoys a closeness to the community that the TV station TG4 can only dream of.

Indeed, this is the big reason I have called my projected book on this North Atlantic cinema "The Radio-Eye." What we find in Québec, Newfoundland, the Faroes, and Ireland is an approach to film and TV that is quite close to radio, not only in its attention to language, but also in its civic sensibilities, and its aspiration to community integration. This Radio-Eye is in trouble in the Faroes, and in Ireland too, but it remains a subtext of an awful lot of the film and TV work there. Far from being a barren nowhere, the Faroes are a lush, rocky cultural landscape that is emerging as a crucial area of struggle for a definition, or re-definition of the role we want mass media to have in everyday life.



Goða ólavseku means "Good Ólavseku"; Ólavseku is the Faroese national holiday which is on 29 July; in 2004 the TV station was facing a takeover from Danish TV around that time. Christiansbourg is the seat of the Danish Government (the monarchy). "Útlát " means "payment" or "support." SvF is Sjonvárp Føroya, the TV station; ÚF is Útvarp Føroya, the radio station. The guy with the keys is clearly supposed to be Faroese, as he is wearing the Faroese national costume, which everyone (and I do mean everyone) puts on for Ólavseku. It's from the newspaper Sosialurin, 28 July 2004, which comes out five times a week.

Jerry White contributed a moment from SOLARIS to our style gallery.

Notes

¹ There is a small, scrappy university in the Faroes, called Fróðskaparsetur Føroya. It's a great place, possessed of a truly mediaeval spirit when it comes to University life. Comprised of just a few buildings which house a tightly knit community of scholars, the place radiates commitment to a locally-rooted life of the mind. It has three faculties: Faroese Language and Literature, Science and Technology, and History and Social Sciences. It's right across a lovely little park from the navigation college, an independent but complimentary institution from whom they sometimes borrow classroom space. I cannot speak highly enough of Fróðskaparsetur Føroya's ability to re-charge one's academic batteries (my academic batteries, anyway).

² For the truly oddball readers among us, I offer my comments on this film, delivered at the opening of the Irish Film Festival at Metro Cinema, 4 March 2005. "CINEGAEL PARADISO: seo scannán le Robert Quinn, faoina athair Bob Quinn. Is sé Bob Quinn an príomh-stiúrthóir scannán in Éireann, agus an príomh-stiúrthóir *neamhspleách* in Éireann. Bhí Bob Quinn in Edmonton ceathair bliana ó shin, agus nuair a bhí sé anseo, bhí suim aige faoi na cursaí Ceanadach. Bhí suim aige Bob i chonaic scannán Ceanadanach fosta. Nuair a bhí Bob ina stiúrthóir i Radio Telefís Éireann, i mBaile Átha Cliath, chonaic sé Ceanadach Ceanadanach faoi Fogo Island, oileáin bheag in aice le Talamh an Iasc (Newfoundland), WINDS OF FOGO. Tá an scannán seo le Colin Low, stiúrthóir as Alberta, ina chonai i Montréal, agus ag obair i Talamh an Iasc. Nach tá WINDS OF FOGO scannán le Colin Low agus scannán le muintir Fogo Island. Bhí Colin Low in a shampal tábhachtach do Bob Quinn. Nuair a chuaigh Bob go Conamara, bhí sé a súil go beidh sé in an scannán a déanfaidh le muintir Chonamara. Tá gach scannán diabh seo le Bob Quinn, agus le muintir Chonamara. Is doigh liomsa gur beidh Bob Quinn an stiúrthóir is Ceanadach in Éireann." Corrections to my grammar (which my friend Frank Peters helped me iron out) and spelling (which is my responsibility alone) are most welcome.

³ Funny problem here on the translation front, one that says a lot about what it's like for an Anglo trying to learn Faroese. Looking up the word "sendi" in the only Faroese-English dictionary available, G.V.C. Young and Cynthia Clewer's *Faroysk-Ensk Orðabók / Faroese-English Dictionary* is not terribly helpful. There are lots of options there about sending and spending, neither one of which (to be honest) is about. Most curiously, and not at all atypically for this dictionary, one also finds "sendu/brýni (loc): whetstone for a grindstone (*senda*) which has been smashed or broken." The Young/Clewer dictionary is full of oddball localisms like this, and as a result it often confuses its reader as much as it enlightens. All due respect to those who want to document arcane usages, but we need the standard usages too. This is all the more frustrating because this book is the only Faroese-to-English dictionary ever published and it is *really, really* hard to find (the English-Faroese dictionary, on the other hand, is still in print). I searched for over two years on every website I knew of, without luck; I finally found a copy in the basement of Cathach Books, an antiquarian bookstore in Dublin. Yep, Dublin. There's that Gaelic thing again. Anyway, *far* more useful is Gianfranco Contr'i's *Dizionario Faroese-Italiano / Foroyorsk-Italsk Orðabók*, just published in 2004 by Føroya Fróðskaparfelag (The Faroese University Press). There, we find the very straightforward and sensibly modern: "s"="enda" v ... 4 (tecn.) trasmettere s. **tónleik** trasmettere musica." I do no parlo Italiano, but I'll take Gianfranco's dictionary, no question. It's even pocket-sized, as opposed to the brick-like Young/Clewer tome.

⁴ Both BURTURHUGUR and REYDARGULLID: UM FØROYSKA RÆKJUVEIDU can be purchased at Hjalmar Jacobsen Spðf, the best bookstore in the Faroes. Their phone is 298.31.15.84. I have no idea if they do mail-order. Both tapes are PAL format; BURTURHUGUR is available with English subtitles.

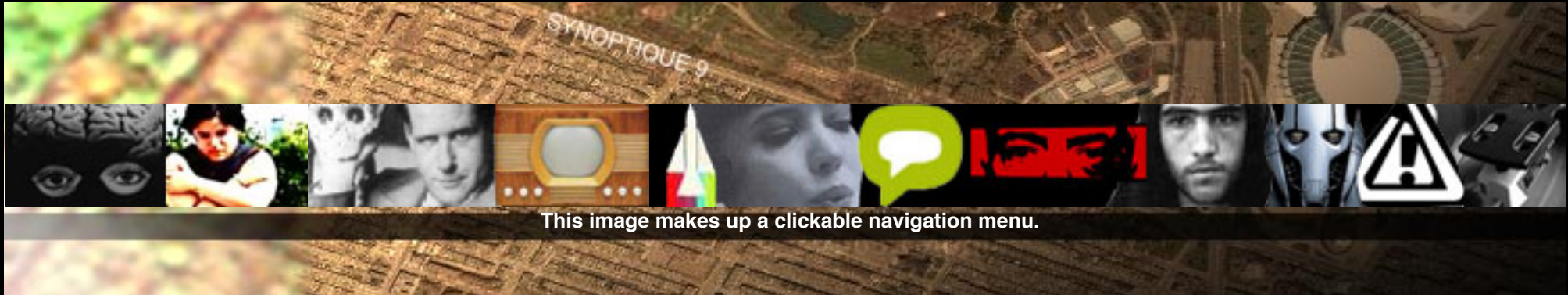
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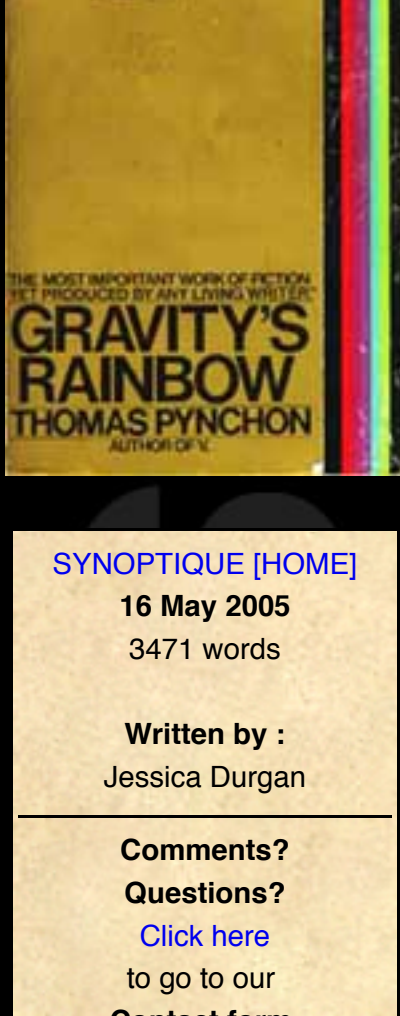
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Physics and Film in Postmodernism

Demystifying the Created Art in *Gravity's Rainbow*

by Jessica Durgan



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16 May 2005

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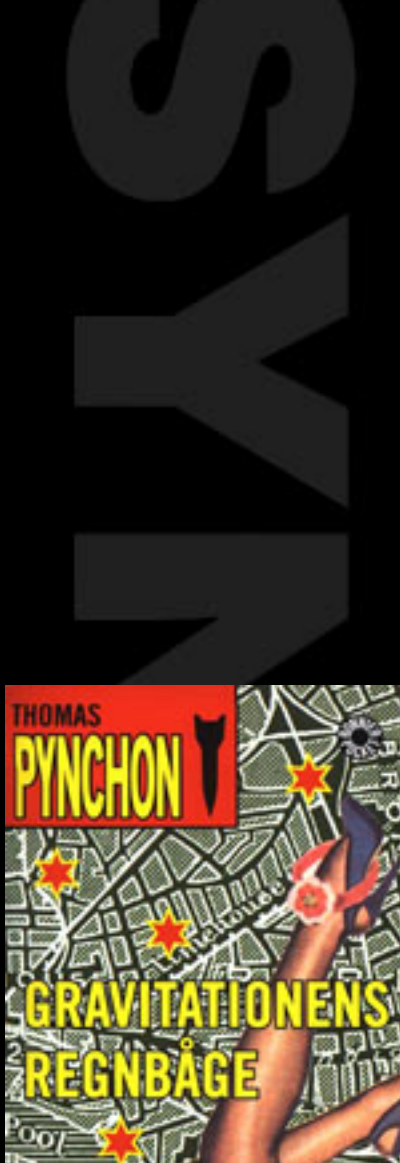
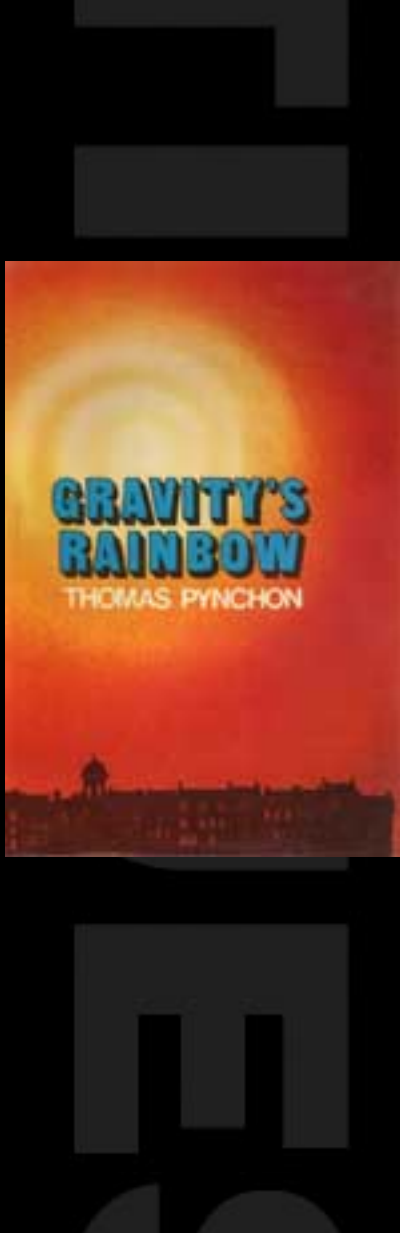
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Film's multiple identities—art, industry, technology, activity—can be difficult to tease out, and even more difficult to separate from the herd. But reminding ourselves that film is, in the end, a play of chemical reactions, lights and shadows is one way out of narrative thrall. Reading film through Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow , Jessica Durgan argues that Pynchon sheds the modernist paranoia surrounding mass art, by reminding us that, at base, film is a science, a math.

In *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), Thomas Pynchon makes a jarring yet intriguing juxtaposition: he compares film and calculus, calling them “both pornographies of flight” (567). While it may seem strange and almost incoherent for Pynchon to compare a creative art with a mathematical science, Pynchon’s almost encyclopedic knowledge places film and calculus much closer together than the average layman, reader, or academic realizes, as evidenced in several critical works on *Gravity's Rainbow* which discuss Pynchon’s use of science and film under separate chapter headings. Film is commonly considered a creative art: its technical and scientific basis is often overlooked. Pynchon, however, realizing the inaccuracy of this neglect, systemically exposes his reader to film’s technical components in an effort to illustrate the connection between film and science. As an author, he attempts to strip film of its creative aura, that which gives art its ideological power, and instead places film into the scientific world, the world which he, as an engineering major from Cornell, understands, thus demystifying the art form and undermining the hold cinema has had upon popular culture in the 1960s and 1970s.

As previously stated, the connections between film and calculus are stronger than is commonly known and Pynchon illustrates this relationship by comparing the two at several points throughout the novel. By the time Slothrop calls calculus and math the “pornographies of flight” (567), the seeds of the concept have already been planted by the characters of Franz and Leni Pökler earlier in the novel. In one scene, the couple have attended the cinema and seen Fritz Lang’s *DIE FRAU IM MOND* (BY *ROCKET* TO THE MOON; 1929). While Franz, a rocket scientist, is unimpressed, Leni sees in the film “[...] a dream of flight. One of many possible. Real flight and dreams of flight go together. Both are part of the same movement” (*Gravity's Rainbow*, 159). Although Franz is interested only in picking apart the technical elements of the portrayed rocket flight, Leni (and Pynchon) are attempting to show him how flight and dreams of flight, or science and film “go together.” As Franz is incapable of stepping out of his scientific world, Leni tries to enter into it, resulting in the dreamer of flight attempting to speak the language of the master of flight:

She even tried, from what little calculus she'd picked up, to explain [the connection] to Franz as delta-t approaching zero, eternally approaching, the slices of time growing thinner and thinner, a succession of rooms each with walls more silver, transparent, as the pure light of zero comes nearer [...] (159)

Leni refers to the slices of time growing thinner and thinner; she is in fact calling up the image of layers of emulsion in film, each thin and transparent, consisting of three layers altogether. Leni’s phrasing is strategically controlled by Pynchon as she makes several internal references to film stock structures and characteristics. Every layer of film emulsion is near “transparent,” made up of thin celluloid which is similar to blood plasma, in which float, not blood cells, but rather “silver” halloid crystals waiting to be exposed to “light” in order to capture their image.

Likewise, the phrase of “delta-t approaching zero” is a theme throughout the book, a play upon the mathematical asymptote, in which the graph approaches but never reaches zero, though the difference is not visible to the human eye. The asymptote of the pure light of zero references the impact of the rocket in the novel, but it also works as a reference to a film camera. In the novel, despite the aperture of the camera lens being opened completely, a certain amount of light is still caught in the glass of the lens itself (92). Because of this glass barrier, the pure light of zero cannot physically enter and shine upon the film, and even the most expensive camera apertures are limited to quantity of one, labeled upon the lens’ sides, unable to offer the ability to reach zero.

This play between zero and one occurs frequently within the novel, often referring to scientific aspects of rocket building. It also recalls the image of a computer programming language in which bytes of information are recorded by codes of zeros and ones, a technology that is eerily anachronistic in a WWII novel, but developed during the postmodern era in which Pynchon produced *Gravity's Rainbow*. However, the number play also refers to the zero of film latitude which is seen in a film stock’s log exposure graph, a concept explicated through theories of calculus. In log exposure graphs ([click here for fig. 1](#)), the individual layers of the film approach but never reach zero, which in film latitude is the tonal value of pure black (the absence of all light) and pure white (a perfect light in which every wavelength, from infrared to ultraviolet, is equally represented). The difference between one and zero on each end of the spectrum is not visible to the human eye, which sees black and white as extremes, but cannot catch the tiny impurities of camera lens and emulsion. Essentially, when Leni attempts to explain film along calculus terms, she is supporting film and calculus, the two pornographies of flight, as two sciences that are almost indistinguishable.

While Leni and Slothrop refer specifically to film’s relationship with calculus, several sciences are required to create a film. Slothrop would be just as correct to compare film and chemistry, another science which figures prominently in Pynchon’s novel and film production. Film’s visible image is the result of an actual chemical reaction, the reaction of light being exposed to the film plane. All film is simply reflected light being recorded onto silver crystals, be it from the sun, “tungsten light,” [\[1\]](#) or “carbon arc” [\[2\]](#) lighting, cinematic lighting sources that are all mentioned in the novel (92, 381). A chemical reaction between the light and the crystals changes the form of the crystals in degrees, or shades, between white and black, a change which is dependent upon on the amount of light bouncing off the object being recorded. This chemical reaction leads to a gray area between science and art; in photography, one is using scientific methods to create art for the first time.

Historically, this confusion of art and science led to the popular view of cinema as a form of entertainment rather than art, an idea which only began to change in the mid-twentieth century. Film critic Stanley Kauffmann explains how the 1960s gave birth to the “Film Generation,” which he defines as “the first generation that matur[ed] in a culture in which film has been of accepted serious relevance” (Marcus 97). While he maintains that films had been more popular before WWII, cinema then had been seen as a means to escapism, rather than a fully realized art form. This viewpoint changed after the war, but as Pynchon seems to suggest, might have swung too far in the other direction, as film moved from an undefined form of entertainment to a highly regarded artistic genre, to which postmodern society often concedes the right to define its reality. Postmodern poet Laurie Anderson writes:

I went to the movies,
and I saw a dog thirty feet high.
And this dog was made entirely of light. (qtd. in Harper 49)

Anderson’s poem clearly illustrates the cultural perspective during the era of the postmodern novel. At the movies, the narrator of Anderson’s poem is seeing the light which once reflected off a dog in front of a camera, which has been captured and transmuted into the light of the projector, enlarging the image and allowing her own irises to interpret the light. In this specific way, film is often perceived as more realistic than other types of art, such as literature or painting which are recognizably representations, pigment on canvas or ink on paper, often stylistically defined from reality, as in the artistic movements of Impressionism or Surrealism. In contrast, film exposure is the physical reaction of the earth’s elements chemically combining, silver halloid reacting to light; therefore, film can only expose what is in the earth’s environment to expose. Laurie Anderson’s dog made of light and shadow, while disproportionately large, still appears to be more realistic than a painting of a dog which hangs upon a wall with visible brush strokes and paint deposits.

Commonly, confusion results from partial understanding of this conception of the realistic qualities of film. Film can only expose that which is provided by the environment, but the environment must be carefully controlled and manipulated in order to reach exposure at all. For example, many factors must be taken into account during film production: a much more extensive amount of light is required to register an object on film than to the human eye, almost exponentially so; the light must be the right color temperature to reflect correctly, (i.e. a florescent light will make a white shirt appear green on film while the human eye observing the shirt under the same lighting would correct for the florescent and still see a white shirt); and the light must be directional to create shadow and portray three dimensions, while the human eye perceives the most minute of shadows as indicative of depth and dimension. The human eye is quite superior to film; it corrects unconsciously and inherently for these factors. Film, however, does not have such abilities, and must be carefully attended to and manipulated during film exposure.

However, the average viewer does not understand these manipulations in the representations on film, a fact which Pynchon portrays both in *Gravity's Rainbow* and more extensively in his later work *Vineland*. In the latter, Pynchon portrays a revolutionary film collective called 24fps, a group that believes in the “myth of the objective image,” according to Pynchon scholar Volker Hummel. 24fps, which stands for 24 frames per second, believe that the image of film speaks truly and is misled because, as Hummel states, “[film] may strongly affect the beholder because it so perfectly mirrors reality” (Sec. 4.2.1). The use of the word “mirror,” a theme which appears in several of Pynchon’s novels [\[3\]](#), is important as humans recognize that the image in the mirror looks real, but remains only a representation in two dimensions, a notion which remains true when applied to cinema but which is not always recognized—and this misconception of film is exposed by Pynchon within his narrative.

Similarly, the methods of film presentation increase the realism inherent in its structure. Theorist Jean-Francois Lyotard claims, “[...]photography and cinema always have the edge over painting and the novel when it is a matter of stabilizing the referent, of ordering it from a point of view that would give it recognizable meaning” (5). This ordering of shot followed by shot leads the viewer and results in “effects of reality” being “multiplied” in a manner inaccessible to painting and novels printed on paper (Lyotard 5). Of interest here, is that it is the ordering of film, with its projection of film frames at the rate of twenty-four frames per second, which promotes the acceptance of film as realistic. At such a projection rate, film scenes appear as convincing motion, with the “succession of frames” matching the processing rate of the human eye and “creat[ing] the illusion of movement” (Stark 140). However, this illusion blurs and conceals the reality of motion picture film, which actually consists of a number of static, motionless frames. Pynchon recognizes this misleading projection rate: he has named the naive film collective “24fps.” If film was still projected at sixteen frames per second, as it was during the earliest stages of film projection, the resulting unrealistic and stunted motion, not aligned with the capabilities of the human eye, would not allow for the possibility of idealizing film as a realistic or “objective” image.

The proliferation of film art as realism throughout the novel “brings to bear the imprint of cinema upon modern life. It demonstrates the pervasive influence of movies in all facets of our culture” (Clerc 104). A few of Pynchon’s characters, specifically Gerhardt Von Göl, believe film to be more powerful than reality. When Von Göl learns that real African-American troops, called the Schwartzkommando, reside in Germany, after he has shot propaganda footage insinuating that very thing, “he is convinced that his film has somehow brought them into being” (*Gravity's Rainbow* 388). This suggests that for Von Göl, “film has more reality than does ordinary existence” (Grace 668). Through characters such as Von Göl, the novel indicates that “art precedes life, as it were” (Clerc 106). The novel’s reality consists of an “extremely ‘layered’ social reality” (Schwartzman 250), reminiscent of the emulsion layers of film, and is strongly influenced by the objectiveness or truthfulness seemingly inherent in film—the misconception surrounding the idea that film cannot show what is not there as it cannot reflect light that does not exist. Therefore, the characters believe in the reality of film over their own existence, though film is just one of many realities present within Pynchon’s work. However, it is Pynchon’s challenge to the reader to recognize this misconception, which he illustrates to readers through two types of cinematic references: those to existing films and those to the technical aspects of cinema production.

The former of these references, allusions to existing films and genres, are peppered throughout the book and shape the manner in which characters see reality. Clerc calls the protagonist Slothrop “the perfect instrument by which Pynchon can show impressionability and convey the enormous influence of cinema upon the human psyche” because he has been “brainwashed by all the movies he has ever seen” (130). For instance, when Slothrop is asked to play the mythical role of Plechazunga, the Pig-Hero, in a German village ceremony that dates back to the tenth century, he can only describe his costume as “a German Expressionist pig” (*Gravity's Rainbow* 568). Slothrop has no ability to orient new items within his own world without the context of film, which functions as his center, replacing the past social mediators of history and myth. This depiction of film functioning as a seemingly new social center is evidenced in the extensive use of film-related similes, such as “the whole joint is lit up like a Hollywood premiere” (380), which suggest that the characters (and perhaps readers) cannot describe or visualize anything without the common social narrative of film. However, the fact that Pynchon’s book is filled with scientific, literary, and historical references exemplifies that other, perhaps more reliable, means exist with which to make connections and to find universal points of reference.

The second, and most effective, way in which Pynchon attempts to expel the misconception of the objective image is through the references to the technical aspects of film production which are prevalent throughout the novel. These production references are sometimes given in the context of actual filmmaking, such as the description of the White Visitation’s filming of Katje in order to condition an octopus named Grigori, which is told from the cameraman’s point of view. The cameraman is “pleased” with the overall effect of Katje’s appearance (*Gravity's Rainbow* 94), but it is captured only through manipulation, as the cameraman has used “the widest lens opening” with “extra tungsten light laid on” (92). These very technical descriptions of lens openings (camera aperture) and tungsten lighting (yellow indoor light) could easily be described simply as elements ensuring correct exposure. Yet, clearly, Pynchon does not want to simplify the technical elements of filmmaking, rather he wants to expose the manipulation inherent in the art form, and accentuate the connection between film production and science.

Through the emphasis of this relationship, Pynchon is slowly reverting film from creative art to created art, an art which is only the sum of its parts. As he places so much emphasis on the technical elements which influence the reality of film, Pynchon is stripping cinema of its artistic qualities as a method to complete the destruction of art’s “aura.” The concept of aura is defined by 1930s theorist Walter Benjamin “as the unique quality traditionally attributed to an artwork, giving it a special status equivalent to that of a sacred object in religious ritual” (Leitch 1164), an element of art that Benjamin conjectures as to have been declining since the advent of capitalism in the 19th century (Wolin 187). He claims that photography (and film especially) extinguishes art’s aura, which is “the unique and the non-identical” (Roberts 61); therefore, it cannot exist in the art of film, as Benjamin addresses in his seminal essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” For Benjamin, it is the reproduction of film, from negative to distributed prints, which by its large scale, embodies the change of art from spiritually- to politically-based and “opens up enormous, hitherto untapped potentials for the political deployment of art” (Wolin 189). This potential is only pleasing to Benjamin when the political objectives of the created art meet those of his own and triggers within him a fear or paranoia of the power of film’s influence when used against humanity by a “pernicious political program,” which in Benjamin’s case consists of Nazi fascism (Leitch 1165).

And yet, by the time of Pynchon’s novel, film, perhaps, has been tamed of its potentially radical pathways, and domesticated and contained under the constraints of narrative domination. In this shift, film also moves from the suspect neophyte to the respected seventh art: rather than shatter the auratic quality of art, film replicated it. Like Benjamin, but now at a later date, Pynchon wants to smash film’s auratic quality; although ironically he targets the very medium which, for Benjamin, offered an alternative from auratic contemplation. Unlike Benjamin, however, Pynchon masters his paranoia of the misuse of film’s power by furthering the decline of the aura by dissecting the very creation of film. His technical representation of the art of film, interrelated and almost indistinguishable from sciences such as calculus and chemistry, allows the art form to be pinned down, categorized, and essentially understood. By being presented as only the sum of its parts, emulsion and light, cinema is stripped of the aura and brought down to a comprehensible, calculable, and controllable level, reduced in significance and conquered by the human consciousness.

This is Jessica Durgan’s first contribution to Synoptique.

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Notes

¹ A yellow light consisting of a color temperature of 3200 degrees Kelvin, often associated with indoor lighting.

² A type of light invented for film making which burns carbon, and can be manipulated from 5100 degrees Kelvin (roughly the average color temperature of daylight, depending on the weather) to 3200 degrees Kelvin (roughly the color of indoor lighting).

³ Specifically, Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, in which the protagonist, Oedipa Maas encounters several mirrors in hotel rooms during her journey across California.

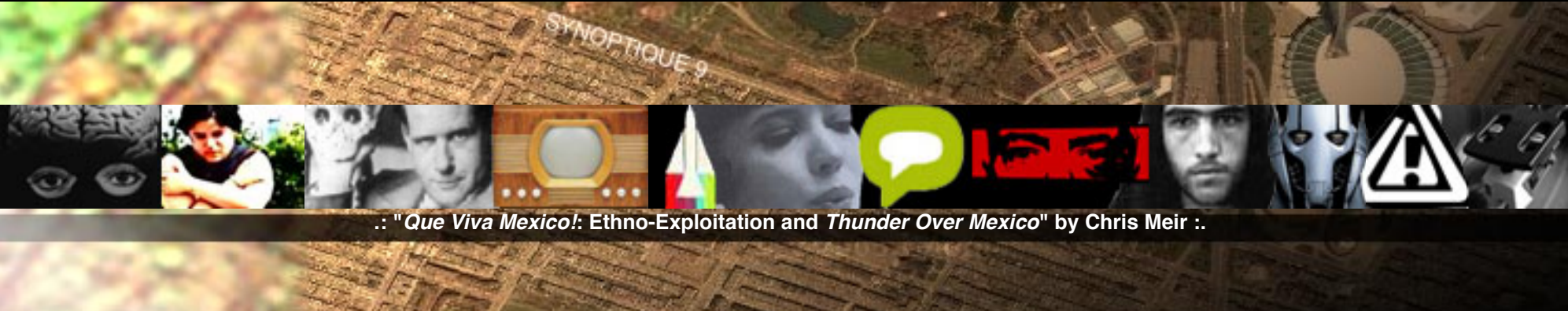
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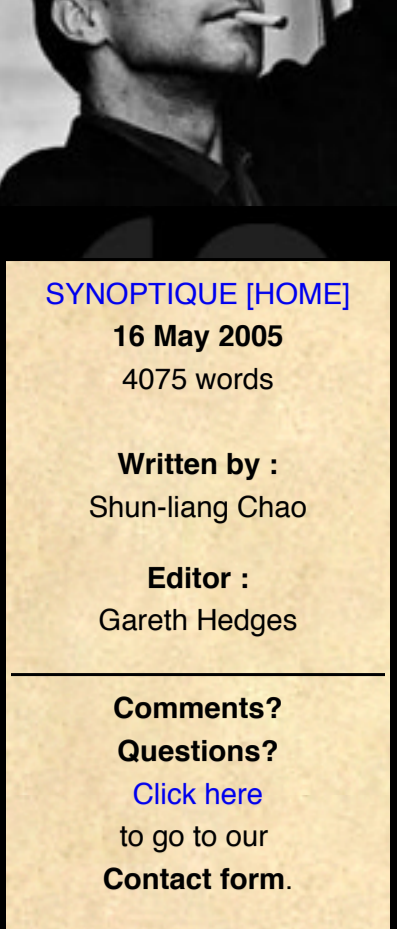


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(Post) Modern Godard: VIVRE SA VIE

by Shun-liang Chao



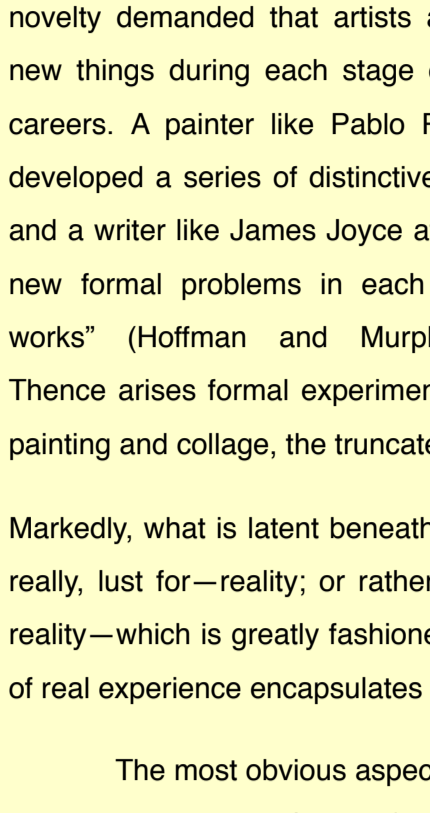
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In this essay the author uses Susan Sontag's benchmark essay on Godard's VIVRE SA VIE as a springboard to investigating the film from a position that the critic could not have considered when her piece was published: that Godard's depiction of twelve episodes in the life of a Parisian prostitute bears traits of the modern and the postmodern.

Jean-Luc Godard, whom Susan Sontag calls "the deliberate 'destroyer' of cinema" (150), is considered exemplary of the French New Wave (La Nouvelle Vague) directors. [2] VIVRE SA VIE (MY LIFE TO LIVE, 1962), now widely hailed as the most complex and successful among Godard's early films, epitomizes his radical "destruction" of orthodox cinema. More importantly, many of the essentials of his (counter) cinematic techniques in this film—such as improvised shots and the narration of a series of disjointed episodes—have become characteristic of what is now called "Godard's style." His endeavour to split with the values of classical cinema and create something new is no doubt the very spirit of modernism; and yet, concurrently, some of the innovations in VIVRE SA VIE open the gate to postmodern aesthetics.



"Moviegoers interested in postmodernism and multiculturalism," David Sterritt maintains, "have recognized his work as a precursor and paradigm of important developments in these films" (2). Although the line between modernism and postmodernism is sometimes not quite clear, and although the concept of postmodern differs according to different critical fields, I will try to explore the modern and postmodern aspects of VIVRE SA VIE in the context of literary and painterly modernism/postmodernism—since, substantially, cinema is an art form of the fusion of word and image. This essay, in other words, aims to elaborate the view that VIVRE SA VIE is a seemingly paradoxical composite of modern and postmodern aesthetics, that it is a practice of the (Lyotardian) theory of postmodernism as both in continuity and discontinuity with modernism.

I

If modernism is a trans-artistic movement, the call for something new is unquestionably the *lingua franca* of modern arts. "This compulsion to novelty demanded that artists attempt new things during each stage of their careers. A painter like Pablo Picasso developed a series of distinctive styles and a writer like James Joyce attacked new formal problems in each of his works" (Hoffman and Murphy 8). Thence arises formal experimentation, one product of which is fragmentation: the fragmented space of Cubist painting and collage, the truncated lines of Imagist poetry, and so on.

Markedly, what is latent beneath modern formal experimentation is actually an epistemological doubt about—or really, lust for—reality; or rather, a fragmented mode of presentation represents the modern artist's notion of reality—which is greatly fashioned by philosophers like Nietzsche, Bergson, and Whitehead. Whitehead's notion of real experience encapsulates the modern notion of reality:

The most obvious aspect of this field of actual experience is its disorderly character. It is for each person a continuum, fragmentary, and with elements not clearly differentiated. . . . This fact is concealed by the influence of language, moulded by science, which foists on us exact concepts as though they represented the immediate deliverances of experience. The result is that we imagine that we have immediate experience of a world of perfectly defined objects implied in perfectly defined events. . . . (142)

In other words, reality is pre-linguistic, pre-conceptual and thus unrepresentable. Hence, we see that much of modern art seeks to concretize the modern knowledge of reality: "Scepticism about the traditional notion that objects are unified and independent . . . becomes perfectly visible in the earliest canvases of the Cubists and Futurists where fragmentation, multiple images, interlocking planes, abstraction and *lignes-forces* imitate, not the appearance of objects but their status in reality as the modern mind was beginning to perceive it" (Korg 34). In other words, deviating from illusionistic realism, which aims to present "a world of perfectly defined objects," the modern artist intends to represent in his/her works the "disorderly," "fragmentary," "heterogeneous" nature of reality. This is why Lyotard says modern art seeks "to present the fact that the unrepresentable exists," to "make visible that there is something which can be conceived and which can neither be seen nor made visible" (78). We have, for example, the idea of pre-linguistic reality, but we do not have the capacity to show an example of it—which is what the modern artist aims to illustrate. It behooves us to say, then, that the same desire to render reality accurately that manifests itself in nineteenth-century realistic art loses none of its force in the twentieth century; what no longer exists in the modern period, however, is the commitment to realism.

"[N]o one has yet made a more modern cinema than Godard" (22), said Kreidl in 1980. Indeed, Godard shares with the modern artist the reaction against traditional realism: on the subject of VIVRE SA VIE Godard says that, "[r]ealism, anyway, is never exactly the same as reality, and in the cinema it is of necessity faked" (Narboni and Milne 185). Godard therefore engages himself in representing 'reality' with recourse to unconventional cinematic techniques. "[O]f all French directors," as Richard Roud points out, "Godard stands out by his insistence on, his belief in, the *real*" (71). Imprisonment is one of his strategies to reject cinematic realism and do justice to the *real*. Godard answers to the question about the production of VIVRE SA VIE:

I didn't want elegant effects, I wasn't looking for any particular effects. . . . The film is a series of blocks. You just take them and set them side by side. The important thing is to choose the correct ones at first go. Ideally, I wanted to get what I need right away, without retakes. If retakes were necessary, it was no good. The impromptu means chance. It is also definitive. What I wanted was to be definitive by chance. [3] (Narboni and Milne 185)

One outcome, or really, the serendipity, of being 'definitive by chance' is found in the church bell heard chiming while Nana gets shot to death in a silent street at the very end of the film. As a matter of fact, sound editing as well as image editing is very much avoided in VIVRE SA VIE. [4] Its inelegant sound quality is another result of chance. Dialogue is inaudible at points throughout the film. For example, in the first scene, in which Nana is conversing with her former husband Paul in a run-down café, a few lines are almost muffled by the *natural* or *real* noises in the café. As Collet comments on Godard's conception of chance: "[Godard applies] to sound the same demands as for the pictures. [He captures] life in what it offers to be seen—and to be heard—*directly*" (161). In fact, it would not be excessive to view Godard's 'being' definitive by chance' as an extension of the automatic techniques of expression fostered by the Surrealists in their efforts to jettison the rationalist view of reality and to lay bare the real by rendering things surreal.

Hence, if, as Roud remarks, "even in the most so-called realist film, sound has always been an exception" (74), then Godard in VIVRE SA VIE makes a bold step forward in *directly* capturing reality. If the *real* has been more or less adorned, or rather, "faked" (in Godard's terms), in classical/orthodox cinema, Godard has the *real* divested of its decorations and restored to its *pre-filmic*/photographic condition. That is to say, he returns *reality* to the filmic image and sound by making them surreal, in the literal sense. Godard's metaphor of having things "brought to light" recalls Heidegger's notion of 'disclosedness' (105). In classical cinema, the "elegant" quality of image and sound has become akin to what Heidegger calls the "ready-to-hand" (103); the viewer has been accustomed to their "elegant effects" and thus takes them as *real*. Hence, to deprive image and sound of those effects is to let them, in Heidegger's terms, lose their character of "readiness-to-handness" (103); to let them "disclose" themselves (105). Heidegger's philosophy of "disclosedness" may very well be the rationale for the modern artistic technique of defamiliarization: modern writers endeavour to defamiliarize linguistic conventions to awaken us to pre-linguistic reality.

One of Godard's stylistic moves to disclose the fakeness and artificiality of the (production of) cinema and provoke defamiliarized effects is to chop up the film into a series of twelve tableaux, each introduced by a heading describing and/or questioning its content. In an interview, Godard explains his motive for the division: "Why twelve, I don't know; but in tableaux to emphasize the theatrical, Brechtian side, I wanted to show the 'Adventures of Nana So-and-so side of it. The end of the film is very theatrical too: the final tableau had to be even more so than the rest" (Narboni and Milne 187). The Brechtian fragmentation of the film into a series of discontinuous subtitled tableaux results in what Silvio Gaggi calls "obtrusive stylization" (16), the impact of which is that the viewer, forced to be aware of the artificiality of the work, "does not psychologically lose himself or herself in the work but remains apart from it, regarding it critically and intellectually" (37).

Indeed, aesthetic distance obtrusively manifests itself in the first half of the final tableaux, wherein the viewer *reads* much of the conversation between Nana and her new boyfriend in subtitles instead of hearing their words. And what is more defamiliarization is that in this moment the *read* conversation alternates with the *heard* one, which very much urges the viewer to doubt whether what is happening between them is real or imaginary. Also, the young man's—or really, Godard's—lengthy recitation of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Oval Portrait" to sound more emotionally distances the viewer from the action because of the abstract nature of word (as opposed to image): "The pictorial element is emotional, immediate; but words (including signs, texts, stories, sayings, recitations, interviews) have a lower temperature. While images invite the spectator to identify with what is seen, the presence of words makes the spectator into a critic" (Sontag 185). The emotional distance is much more evident in Nana's even lengthier conversation with the philosopher on the nature of language in the eleventh scene. Intriguingly, the position of the author vis-a-vis the material presented seems analogous to that of the viewer. In spite of his claim to "convey the feeling of what was going on inside . . . [p]recisely staying prudently outside" (Narboni and Milne 187), Godard seems to be concerned more about "staying prudently outside" than about rendering the inside. For "[t]he film *eschews*," Sontag stresses, "all psychology; there is no probing of states of feeling, of inner anguish" (Godard's VIVRE SA VIE 205). If contrasting his *failure* to convey the inside feeling with his insistence on catching the external *real*, we might be able to infer that Godard wants to bring to the fore cinema's inability to show inner reality: "Godard recognizes that externals are all camera and sound recorder can grasp, and that such outward signs—superficial by definition—may seem sadly inadequate if one is looking for the 'inner selves' of psychologically defined characters" (65), says Sterritt. By applying Brecht's theatrical techniques, then, Godard in VIVRE SA VIE *crosses* the viewer—perhaps himself as well—to reflect on the artificiality of cinematic production and realism, as well as on the nature of cinema and the possibilities of direction.

II

Although employing Brechtian techniques, Godard seems to depart from Brecht's effect at the level of thematic unity. For it in Brecht's plays "the plot is an episodic sequence, a structure analogous to that of a painting that lacks a focus but achieves unity through the repetition of similar formal or conceptual motifs" (Gaggi 39), then unity that can be achieved in Brecht's work seems lost in Godard's VIVRE SA VIE. "[T]he contradiction between the movie's structure and its tone serve[s] not to clarify or emphasize a central thesis but rather to stress discontinuity and to force on our attention the *absence* of a binding idea or programme" (Perkins 35-36). On a preliminary level, this point is most evident in the film's narration.

In Bordwell's view, "character-centered causality" (157) is the *sine qua non* of classical cinema, inasmuch as it unifies or completes the development of beginning, middle, and end, or briefly, renders a plot well-constructed, continuous. Moreover, it is causality that "commits classical narration to unambiguous presentation" and that holds firm the lines between 'objective diegetic reality, characters' mental states, and inserted narratorial commentary" (162). Simply put, the very task of classical film narration is to ensure that the viewer knows (usually through the manipulation of the camera and character interactions) what happened, what is happening, and what is going to happen; an omniscient narrator, so to speak, is thus indispensable in the classical film. And more importantly, this must be achieved by dint of an "imperceptible and obtrusive" act of narrating. "Editing," Bordwell claims, "must be seamless, camerawork 'subordinated' to the fluid thought of the dramatic action" ("Classical Narration" 24).

Admittedly, in VIVRE SA VIE, Godard shows his impatience with classical narration primarily by drastically tearing down the causal lines or transitions between the twelve scenes. Hence, the presentation of this film turns out to be discontinuous and ambiguous. [5] Throughout the film, the characters' inner feelings, which very much motivate the cause-and-effect sequences in classical narration, are barely presented. The omniscient narration, which is crucial to classical cinema, is thereby jettisoned for an extremely objective depiction—which, incidentally, may shed light on what Godard means by "staying prudently outside." [6] Hence, most of the dramatic knots are untied between scenes, within the scenes, and/or even within a single sequence; the film's communication with the viewer is therefore suffocated.

This situation is exactly what Sontag wrote of the opaque storytelling in VIVRE SA VIE in 1964, two years after it premiered:

An art concerned with social, topical issues can never simply show that something is. It must indicate *how*. It must show *why*. But the whole point of VIVRE SA VIE is that it does not explain anything. It rejects causality. . . . Godard in VIVRE SA VIE [does not] give us any explanation, of an ordinary recognizable sort, as to what led the principal character, Nana, ever to become a prostitute. . . . All Godard shows us is that she did become a prostitute. Again, Godard does not show us why, at the end of the film, Nana's pimp Raoul 'sells' her, or what has happened between them, or what lies behind the final gun battle in the street in which Nana is killed. He only shows us that she is sold, that she does die. He does not analyze. He proves. ("Godard's VIVRE SA VIE" 199)

VIVRE SA VIE, in Sontag's view, is a work of art treated as a mode of "proof," which is distinct from that of "analysis." [7] That is, while "analysis" shows why and how something happened, "proof" shows just that it happened (198-99). Tom Gunling states that, owing to its iconic or mimetic nature, the filmic image, as opposed to language, "can show more immediately than it can tell" (464), so the primary task of cinema is to transform showing into telling, that is, to turn on "the process of narrativization" which "binds narrative discourse to story and rules the narrator's address to the spectator" (465). Apparently, in VIVRE SA VIE Godard very much renounces this process and then deprives the viewer of the right to know. Consequently, the difference between "analysis" and "proof" can be seen as that between telling and showing, between the signified and the signifier, or between modernism and postmodernism.

In order to illustrate the fine line between modern and postmodern aesthetics, Lyotard dissociates Proust's work from Joyce's—while both are generally pigeonholed as modern writers. Proust, according to Lyotard, puts forth the unrepresentable with concern for telling, the signified, wholeness, and thus his work turns out to be unified and closed: "The literary institution that Proust inherits from Balzac and Flaubert "is admittedly subverted" . . . in that the diegetic diachrony, already damaged by Flaubert, is here put into question because of the narrative voice. Nevertheless, the unity of the book, . . . even if it is deferred from chapter to chapter, is not seriously challenged" (80). By contrast, Joyce is concerned only about showing, the signifier, and as such his work remains—both substantively and formally—*incomplete* and open: "Joyce allows the unrepresentable to become perceptible in his writing itself, in the signifier. The whole range of available narrative and even stylistic operators is put into play without concern for the unity of whole, and new operators are tried (80). Also, while in Proust "the form, because of its recognizable consistency, continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure," the form in Joyce "denies itself the solace of good forms" and, more importantly, "searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them, but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable" (81).

While Proust appears to be closer to a modern aesthetics, Joyce might be said to fit in with a more postmodern approach. It is worth noting here that, in Lyotard, postmodernism seems less a rebellion against modernism than both a derivative of and a departure from modernism; that the line between modernism and postmodernism is not necessarily restricted to the supersession of historical periods. In other words, a text is not always *either* modern or postmodern, but can be *both* modern and postmodern. We can still simply conclude, nevertheless, that the borderline—which is likely to be crossed—between the modern and the postmodern is that between the whole and the parts, between the closed and the open, between presenting the unrepresentable and presenting the unrepresentability of the unrepresentable, between the signified and the signifier.

Therefore, if VIVRE SA VIE, as Sontag puts it, is "an exhibit, a demonstration" in that it "shows that something happened, not why it happened" (199), then Godard, like Joyce, very much "allows the unrepresentable to become perceptible in his [film] itself, in the signifier." Godard foregrounds the signifier by including heterogeneous elements which are meant to clash rather than to harmonize, and thus VIVRE SA VIE remains largely incomplete, indeterminate, playful, open, aleatory.

III

Fragmentation, Lyotard would agree, lies at the very heart of both modern and postmodern texts. However, a modern text "fragments reality in order to reconstitute it in highly organized, synthetic emotional and intellectual patterns. [A postmodern text] does not do this; it collects or sticks its fragments together in a way that does not entirely overcome their fragmentation. It seeks to recover its fragments as *fragments*" (Henderson 61). [7]

The notion of fragmentation is actually bound up with that of intertextuality. In a broad sense, each text is more or less intertextual, insofar as it is more or less refers to previous texts. For instance, we have noticed Renaissance and Baroque poetry and painting refer to the Bible and Greco-Roman mythology. There has never been, however, such an artistic period as the postmodern period, in which intertextuality becomes almost tantamount to artistic creation (and culture). According to Lyotard, a postmodern text is characterized by "bricolage: the high frequency of quotations of elements from previous styles or periods (classical or modern), giving up the consideration of environment" ("Defining the Postmodern" 1613). In other words, a postmodern text is constructed as "a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of cultures" (Barthes 146). Modern texts have intertextual references to other texts—typically, high art texts—but only in order to harmonize them as a self-contained whole. Postmodern texts quote other texts from both high culture and popular culture, in order to make them at once "blend and clash" (Barthes 146) with each other to the extent that "the line between high art and commercial forms seems increasingly difficult to draw" (Jameson 1961). Briefly, a postmodern text is a composite of "complexity and contradiction." [8]

VIVRE SA VIE—Nana's conversation with the philosopher in Episode XI most pointedly—embodies these virtues. The fact that the prostitute and a philosopher sit side by side to meditate on metaphysics, on the philosophy of language, blurs the line between high culture and low culture. It is no doubt a postmodern phenomenon. Also, stylistically, VIVRE SA VIE is in and of itself a cinema too complicated and contradictory to fit into any single category:

On one level, it is a documentary about prostitution. Moving on from there, it is 'dramatised documentary' using its central character to present a typical case-history. But the case-history is extended into pure fiction to become the story of a young woman seeking her place in an elusive and alien world. At its most fictional the film again becomes documentary—as sketches of life in Paris in 1962 and as a portrait of Anna Karina. (Perkins 34)

Moreover, VIVRE SA VIE is "a tissue of quotations" *per se*: the quotation from a little girl's essay on the bird told by Paul in Episode I [10]; the clip from Carl Dreyer's JEANNE D'ARC, the overlapping conversation with the philosopher on the nature and purpose of language, in which the philosopher refers to other texts, in Episode XI; the excerpt from Poe's story read aloud by the young man, or really, Godard himself, in Episode XII; and so forth.

Even though some links between these quotations in VIVRE SA VIE can be perceived, they do not serve to establish—formally and substantively—an idea binding other lines of thought. If one makes the point that the quotation referring to the bird may well act as the motif of VIVRE SA VIE, then that point would be tenuous, in that Godard, as aforementioned, very much abstains from probing into Nana's inner self. Also, the image of death that we can find in the excerpts from JEANNE D'ARC and "The Oval Portrait" may foreshadow—but only formally, not substantively—Nana's death. Hence, the absence of a single line of thought which would wrap up the polyphonic quotations and allusions that make up the film. VIVRE SA VIE, then, stands against interpretation; it falls short of denotative function, of hermeneutical totality, and thus serves as an example of "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* xiv). "With the breakdown of the signifying chain," to quote Jameson in a different context, VIVRE SA VIE "is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words, a series of pure and unrelated presents in time" (*Postmodernism* 27).

Indeed, the twelve tableaux of VIVRE SA VIE very much remain "a series of pure and unrelated presents in time," inasmuch as the film itself, and thus the viewer, fails to unify the past, present, and future of Nana's biographical experience and/or psychic life. VIVRE SA VIE, then, is one of the texts that fit into Barthes' notion of the "writerly" text: it "is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can reach; they are indeterminate (meaning here is never subject to a principle of determination, unless by throwing dice)" (S/Z 5-6).

Lyotard's explication of the postmodernism as follows: "Post modernism would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future (*posh* anterior (*modo*)" (*The Postmodern Condition* 81). VIVRE SA VIE, as at once a derivative of and departure from modern and Brechtian formal experimentation, is the very practice of "the paradox of the future (*posh* anterior (*modo*)."

This is Shun-liang Chao's first contribution to SYNOPTIQUE.

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Notes

¹ Quoted from John Kreidl in Jean-Luc Godard (22).

² In *Narration in the Fiction Film*, Bordwell sees the French New Wave—after which loomed New Polish Cinema, New German Cinema, and so forth—as the first fullest flower of the art-cinema narration as "a deviation from classical [Hollywood] narrative." At cinema, which was strongly influenced by modern art during the 1920s and which can be traced back to Robert Weine's DAS KABINETT DES DOKTOR CALIGARI (THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI, 1919), did not burgeon "as a fully achieved narrational alternative" until after World War II (228-31).

³ The process of Godard's chance shooting recalls André Breton's Surrealist automatic writing: "Write quickly, without any preconceived subject, fast enough so that you will not remember what you're writing and be tempted to reread what you have written. The first sentence will come spontaneously, so compelling is the truth that with every passing second there is a sentence ours to our consciousness which is only crying out to be heard" (29-30).

⁴ Jean Collet has pointed out that VIVRE SA VIE was "the first sound film shot outside a studio and involving no sound editing" (160).

⁵ Sontag's account of Godard's attitude toward narration acts as an apt gloss on his break with classical narration: "At the Cannes Film Festival several years ago, Godard entered into debate with George Franju, one of France's most talented and idiosyncratic senior film-makers. 'But surely, Monsieur Godard,' the exasperated Franju is reported to have said, 'you do at least acknowledge the necessity of having a beginning, middle, and end in your films.' 'Certainly,' Godard replied. 'But not necessarily in that order' ("Godard" 157).

⁶ Even though an omniscient narrator is an objective narrator, s/he is able to lead the viewer to the inner states of a character. By contrast, Godard stops himself from probing his characters' inner feelings.

⁷ Likewise, Bordwell says: "Godard's films invite interpretation but discourage, even defy, analysis" (*Narration in the Fiction Film* 311).

⁸ This passage is quoted from Henderson's comments on the line between montage and collage in film: Eisenstein practices montage and Godard collage.

⁹ I refer to Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966).

¹⁰ The quotation goes: "A bird is an animal with an inside and outside. Remove the outside, there's the inside. Remove the inside, and you see the soul."

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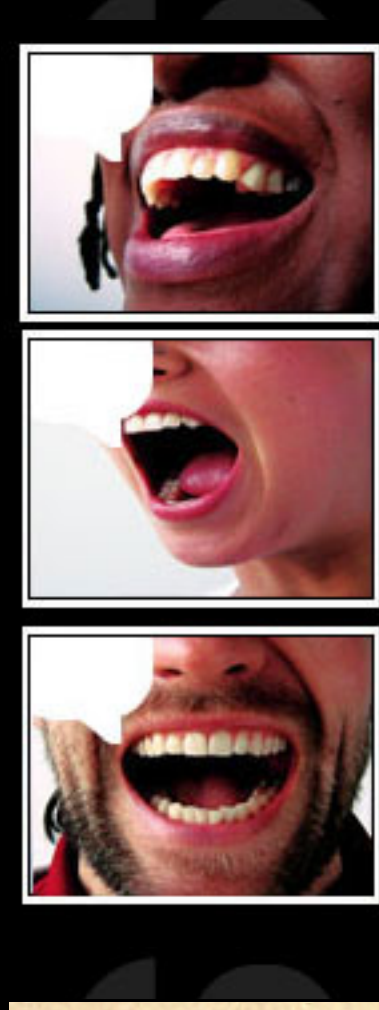
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You're Going to Toronto to Eat Hot Dogs?
A visit to HOT DOCS, Toronto's feisty Documentary Fest
by Lisa Fotheringham



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SYNOPTIQUES

The most natural way for me to articulate the self-reflexive tone of this year's Hot Docs film festival is to present my review of the festival as a story about my trip to Toronto. I am sorry if it bores you; feel free to scroll along to the splinter reviews of some of the film festival highlights at the end of the article, if you prefer.

Taking the train from Montreal to Toronto on the evening of Sunday, April 24th, I took a few moments to consider my relationship to documentary filmmaking. After all, I figured if I was going to be spending my only "week off" between academic semesters watching and learning about contemporary documentary films in Toronto, I should probably understand why.

My relationship with the world of documentary films is a long and winding road. In a pattern similar to many other students of cinema, I've been easily seduced by the stunning images of other locales and eras delivered to me on screen in films such as Alain Resnais' NUIT ET BROUILLARD (1955), Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas' HORA DE LOS HORNOS (1968), and Newsreel shorts such as BLACK PANTHER (1968). I became fascinated with the idea of a Griersonian documentary tradition and I discovered that I, myself, am a proponent of the argument that cinema, as a visual medium, can supplement social activism.

Admittedly, my acknowledgement of the merger of digital technologies with documentary filmmaking marked the first significant departure from my romantic notion of the documentary film. And, for a short while, in a bout of true snobbiism and film purist idealism, I moved away from contemporary documentaries, choosing to focus my energy in other cinematic realms that I unjustly determined more worthy.

I'm not sure exactly when I made peace with the realist/formalist documentary debate that had erupted in my mind (not to worry: the debate never deprived me of any sleep). I believe that it was a silly and naïve debate, in any case. The skull and cross bones of the documentary world is that filmmakers portray information about an environment, an issue, or a being that exists within their own time-space reality for an audience who may or may not have the same relationship to the subject. The aesthetic choices that an artist or filmmaker makes when constructing their documentation should be their own. I have read many studies related to the democratization of art made possible by advancements in digital technologies and I have no strong rebuttal. So, although I do still have a personal preference for the intrinsic beauty that a film like Barbara Kopple's HARLAN COUNTY, USA extends, I have grown to appreciate the aesthetic that video art brings to the documentary oeuvre. Moreover, I have developed an admiration for the medium's ability to displace didacticism in a way few classic documentaries ever could.

Temporarily finished with my philosophical meditation, I looked out the train window toward Lake Ontario. I was looking forward to my week in Toronto. I'd never spent much time in the city, and what better time to come, then during one of their strongest and most internationally recognized film festivals?

Monday morning was technically Day Three of the Hot Docs Film Festival, but for me it marked day one. I made my way through the University of Toronto campus to the Isabel Bader Theatre to retrieve my press pass. It was raining outside and a number of delegates seemed to be gathering in the "delegate lounge" behind the theatre in a charming three storey building (part of Victoria College). I decided to check the space out. A buzz of activity filled the air. This apparently was the industry hot spot. There were seminars in the upstairs rooms, a lounge lobby area where people were gathered around on sofas snacking and sipping on coffees, an information room with internet-access, as well as the Doc Shop and a screening room. The screening room was already full and the employees of the Doc Shop were busy taking reservations from film buyers who were interested in screening films from the enormous catalogue of documentaries available for screening (including nearly every documentary submitted to the Hot Docs 2005 festival).

The industry space was "hot", and a nice hideaway from the wet weather, but I had come to the festival first and foremost to see some films. So, after making a note of the operating hours of the delegate lounge, I mapped out my screening schedule for the next few days and made my way to the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) theatre where I saw my first few films of the festival.

The film screenings were dispersed between four Toronto theatres. The Isabel Bader Theatre and the ROM Theatre I have mentioned. There were also the Bloor Cinema and the Innis Town Hall Theatre (part of the University of Toronto's campus). Each of the theatres embodied their own character.

The Innis Town Hall Theatre reminded me of the theatres from my own university experiences and was located just behind the University of Toronto Library – which architecturally looks like either a peacock or a turkey (there is apparently a debate amongst the locals).

The ROM Theatre was typical of a museum cinema. The floors, seats, and lobby were kept in neat order, with deep red velvet curtains, gold toned walls, and interesting hieroglyphic patterns framing the stage. A quirk about the ROM Theatre was its proximity to the subway line. The first time I was in the theatre I thought that maybe we had experienced a small earthquake (probably more of my paranoid California roots than anything else). When I looked around the theatre however, everyone seemed complacent, and after about two screenings, I hardly noticed the rumbling effect that the passing subway created.

The Isabel Bader Theatre was the most technologically advanced and modern of the cinemas. I was quite impressed with the theatre. It had that special sleekness as well as a titanium shaded modernism radiating a sense of the contemporary. This is also the theatre where the main events of the festival occurred: the awards ceremonies and the interview with Errol Morris.

Finally, there was the Bloor Cinema, the repertory film house with a huge upstairs balcony. I liked this cinema because they served popcorn and soda. Also, it was next door to this incredible, inexpensive Lebanese food place called Ghazale. Thanks to them, I never once ate a hot dog while I was at Hot Docs.

My week was predominantly spent either in one of these four spaces or traveling between them. In total I believe I saw fifteen films, attended three panel discussions, as well as the interview with Errol Morris.

The 2005 Hot Docs Film Festival marked the twelfth anniversary of the festival. Their advertising campaign used slogans such as "Outspoken", "Outstanding", and "Get Real". The festival was outstanding. I don't know if I would necessarily call the program outspoken (after all, the Donnigan Cumming exhibition was going on simultaneously at the MOCCA gallery on Queen Street West), but I certainly learned a great deal about all types of things: taxidermy, Sri Lanka, the Endesa coporation, Jerry Lewis' family, female television correspondents, Arabic media outlets, and lonely and middle aged karaoke-singing men from Germany.

Audiences at Hot Docs film screenings make for an eclectic mix, the most "real" of any festival I had previously attended. Social activists and political analysts mix with film critics and industry producers. Colourful local characters take advantage of the co-sponsorship agreement of the film festival with local newspaper, *The Toronto Star*, which allows for students and seniors to attend any daytime screening before 6:00pm and any late night screening at the Bloor Cinema free of charge. There is little of the red carpet distraction that typically infests star-studded film festivals (although there are Q and A periods after nearly every screening in which the audiences are introduced and invited to interact with the filmmakers). Overall, the festival is successfully delivering "hot" topics to the people, and the people (especially the fortunate Toronto audiences) are eager to take it in.

I thoroughly enjoyed my trip to Toronto for the film festival. I also got to sneak away from the festival hubs a few times throughout the week to catch some live music performances at various local haunts. In addition, I had the good fortune to catch two great exhibitions at the AGO (Art Gallery of Ontario): Bruce Mau's "Massive Change: The Future of Global Design" and "Christo and Jean-Claude: Works from the Weston Collection", both of which I recommend.

Festival Highlights

There was a definite motif at this year's festival, and this is it: it is rare to find a documentary in which the director does not address, at least to some extent, their documentary process and method. And many times, the journey that the filmmaker makes as they attempt to piece together a story out of the information they have compiled, actually becomes the plot line structuring their film. Perhaps to the over-prescribed masses trying to map their way through the post-modern world, documentary filmmaking has come to be a sort of a holistic form of self-medicating.

I am certainly not proposing that all documentary filmmakers are using their practice therapeutically. This trend is not true of all of the films that I screened during my time at the festival, nor is it true of each of the following films I have highlighted below, nor am I defending it as a well-defined social criticism; it is simply an idea that I believe is worth consideration, especially in view of the growing popularity of the documentary film within our society.

Yes, the Festival Highlights

VENETTA SONG Dir: Eylem Kaftan (Canada, 2005) ROM Theatre April 25, 2005

In this film, Kaftan, a Montreal native of Kurdish descent, embarks on a journey in search of answers in the murder of her aunt, half a world away, in unfamiliar Turkey. This is as much a journey for us, the audience, as it is for the filmmaker, into the mysterious Kurdish customs responsible for this "honour killing"—one of many practices that remain incomprehensible and/or reprehensible in our North American outlook. But, unlike many films that have variously tackled the sensitive and controversial topic of ritualistic violence (religiously- or secularly-inspired), Kaftan's film is noteworthy for its non-didactic tone; she is truly out for answers, even as she struggles to ignore her own prejudices. This is a film about the search for identity: one's own identity and the identity of a stranger. It is also a film about the way that stories are told: through photographs, moving pictures, village tales, and folk songs.

ABEL RAISES CAIN Dir: Jenny Abel, Jeff Hockett (USA, 2005) ROM Theatre April 27, 2005

I've included this daughter's affectionate tribute to her quirky dad in my list of favourites, simply because it's so delightfully entertaining. The film chronicles the eccentric and clever experiments carried out by the director's father, Alan Abel, throughout the course of his life-long research into the hilarious particularities of human behaviour. There are elements of Andy Kaufman, Woody Allen and even Tom Green recognizable in Abel's impressive oeuvre, all beginning with his infamous McCarthy-era fundraising campaign to restore domestic 'decency' by clothing household pets. Ultimately, this is an insatiably compelling ethnographic film studying the bizarre behaviour of a most exotic group: the 20th century North Americans!

SOLIDARITY SONG: THE HANNES EISLER STORY Dir: Larry Weinstein (Canada, 1996) Isabel Bader Theatre April 27, 2005

This year Hot Docs honoured the work of legendary filmmaker Larry Weinstein, whose creative approach to the difficult task of documenting music has enlightened and delighted audiences for decades. Of all the excellent films that took part in the retrospective, I want to mention in particular SOLIDARITY SONG: THE HANNES EISLER STORY, because of the film's unusual and extraordinarily deserving subject. The obscure Eisler, once a film composer during Hollywood's Golden Era, has somehow been overlooked in cinema's history books. Weinstein revives this character for us on-screen, pasting together documentary images with impressive theatrical recreations of Brechtian performances similar to the ones that so heavily influenced and inspired Eisler as a young composer in Weimar Germany. This innovative film resists the heavy-handed dogmatism underlying many documentaries about the persecuted and misunderstood heroes of history. Instead, Weinstein offers us an uncompromising, yet poignant, film uncluttered by histrionics or cliché.

GRIZZLY MAN Dir: Werner Herzog (USA, Canada) Bloor Cinema April 29, 2005

Granted, a Herzog film seems an obvious choice for my "Top Festival Picks," but this film is undeniably remarkable. The true beauty of the film is the way it impeccably maintains a balance between the idealism and paternal wisdom provided by the film's protagonist and narrator. A surprising majority of the film footage was shot by Timothy Treadwell himself, an unabashed bear enthusiast, who spent twelve summers living and documenting his unique experiences of bear communities in Alaska. Herzog pays tribute to Treadwell's legacy by treating the former enthusiast's project with delicacy and subtle reverence. The fact that Herzog himself traveled to Alaska's lush and expansive forests is a testament to the poetic and immediate, if blindly naïve, beauty of Treadwell's lifework. This is no National Geographic, IMAX exposé. We get an unprecedented look into the eyes of a Grizzly bear, quite literally, which leaves us to decide: are these creatures misunderstood or are we finally getting a glimpse into the unrepentant primordial, and therefore, innocent, face of evil?

Interview with Errol Morris

I quite enjoyed hearing Errol Morris talk about his perceptions on cinema and his film work. He is a colourful character and vividly opinionated. During the first ten minutes of the interview, he made two statements; first, his belief that a notion of true cinema is "remarkably stupid" and second, that he condones capital punishment for those with annoying cell phone rings. These two statements, while not pertaining directly to any particular work of cinema, shed light on the filmmaker's demeanour. The interview was conducted by film critic Gerald Peary who seemed a nice enough guy, however difficult a time he was having keeping Morris' responses within the allotted time constraints.

Morris described the way that he has chosen subjects for his documentary films, noting at least a couple of times that they were prompted by articles he happened upon while reading the Sunday *New York Times*. He also articulated his beliefs about filmmaker and film-subject relationships explaining how he believes that many documentary filmmakers have disturbing ideals about trying to make films depicting how wonderful people are. To these idealistic filmmakers, he raises the question, "What if people really suck?" Then he defined himself as a "secular anti-humanist".

Besides being entranced by the entertaining social perspectives of Errol Morris, I found it interesting to see the kind of work that the filmmaker is currently engaged in. Clips were shown of moveon.org-sponsored ads that Morris worked on for the John Kerry campaign in 2004 as well as his less political ad work for Miller Hi-Life and Quaker Oats. The evening was entertaining, informative, and refreshing. I only wish that there had been more time allotted by the festival for the event. By the time the clips from his corporate commercials were screened, the festival coordinators announced that the interview had already gone over time and that we needed to leave the theatre so that the film scheduled to screen afterward would not run late. It was too bad because I would have liked to hear more about how Errol Morris negotiated such contracts. Instead, the interview ended with a humorous sequence of commercials featuring monkeys eating oatmeal, which, according to Morris' preface, is his strongest work yet!

Lisa edited the multimedia presentation of a panel of the Women and the Silent Network Conference in
SYNOPTIQUE 4.

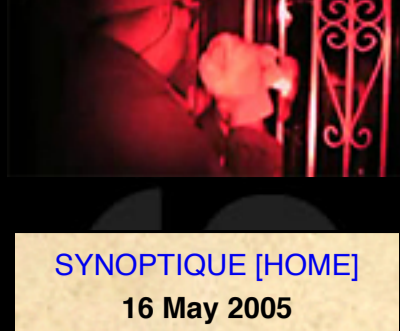
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SYNOPTIQUE [HOME]
16 May 2005
2761 words

Written by :
P-A Despatis D

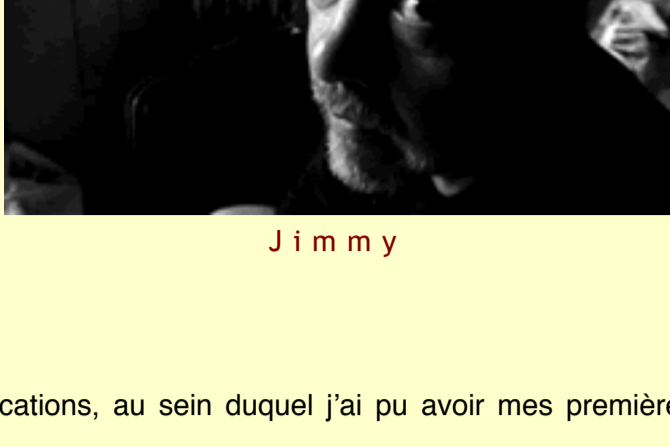
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Simon Sauvé a quitté l'école pour devenir assistant monteur. Il a travaillé plusieurs années sur de nombreux longs métrages et documentaires. Promu monteur en 1996, il a ensuite monté plusieurs documentaires et séries télévisées. Après avoir rencontré Jimmy Weber pour la première fois en 1999, le tournage de JIMMYWORK a débuté en janvier 2000 ; il s'agit de son premier long métrage. JIMMYWORK peut être décrit comme étant le portrait éclectique d'un véritable crasseux. Mêlant film noir, biographie et cinéma-vérité, ce road movie frénétique débute dans le quartier du Mile-End à Montréal, avant de nous transporter éventuellement au cœur du Far-Est québécois.



J i m m y

Quel est ton background ?

J'ai fait un DEC en communications, au sein duquel j'ai pu avoir mes premières expériences de production. Même si le programme était plus orienté sur la télévision, j'ai eu la chance de rencontrer plusieurs personnes, dont des directeurs photos, avec lesquels j'ai travaillé par la suite sur plusieurs projets en 35mm.

Peu après, j'ai commencé un bac en études cinématographiques à l'Université de Montréal, dans lequel je m'ennuyais énormément. J'avais besoin de faire des films, de jouer avec la matière. Malheureusement, il s'agissait d'un programme très théorique. Cet aspect des études cinématographiques, qui m'intéresse beaucoup désormais, ne me disait vraiment rien à l'époque. J'ai donc quitté l'école et on m'a presque aussitôt offert un emploi comme assistant monteur.

Depuis 1996, je travaille comme monteur à la télévision. J'ai fait plusieurs séries documentaires, dont *Dans les années 80*, ainsi que plusieurs émissions musicales. Encore récemment, en pleine production de JIMMY, je travaillais parallèlement au montage de *musicographies*.

Certains de ces projets me demandent de condenser plus de 800 heures de matériels afin d'aboutir à une émission d'une heure. Ce sont justement toutes ces expériences, parfois pénibles, qui m'ont aidé lors de la réalisation de Jimmy.

À ce propos, quel est votre point de vue par rapport à Jimmy ? Contrairement à ces *musicographies* d'artistes assez objectives que vous mentionnez, on ressent une certaine condescendance de votre part envers Jimmy. Par exemple, dès le début du film, ce plan dans lequel Jimmy plonge dans une piscine n'est pas très flatteur... De même, vous avez inclu un segment dans lequel le grand frère de Jimmy le dénigre. Enfin, vers la fin du film, lorsque Jimmy prétend être blessé, afin de se désister d'un projet ambitieux, vous l'encouragez à réaliser le méfait.

Je crois avoir filmé Jimmy avec beaucoup de respect. Lui-même me l'a dit. Lorsque le frère de Jimmy décrit son frère comme un lâche, il ne le dénigre pas. Jimmy est comme ça. Jimmy est un gars qui parle beaucoup, qui rêve, complot, même agit peu. Lors de cette campagne de publicité pour le rodéo, pour une fois qu'il faisait ce qu'il disait, j'ai trouvé qu'il serait intéressant de le filmer. Il est très surprenant qu'il ait réussi à se rendre jusque-là, devant la directrice du festival.

Tu ne peux pas faire un film sur quelqu'un en ne décrivant que ses qualités ; il faut toujours un contre-poids. Je ne pense pas pour autant que cette démarche représente un manque de respect envers lui. En fin de compte, il n'a peut-être pas fait la campagne pour le rodéo mais il tient tout de même la vedette d'un film de 80 minutes. Il a de quoi être fier!

Néanmoins, vous admettez que Jimmy a l'air d'un perdant dans le film ...

Il est comme ça. Sa vie est malheureusement une série d'échecs. C'est un gars qui aurait voulu être écrivain, comédien... Bref, il aurait voulu devenir plein de choses. Je ne sais pas pourquoi il ne l'est pas devenu. Il faudrait lui demander. En fait, c'est quelqu'un qui a beaucoup d'idées, mais qui n'a pas de motivation. Cela n'en fait pas un perdant pour autant. Je trouve que Jimmy est une belle personne qui possède beaucoup d'imagination. L'encourager à se prendre en main à la fin du film n'est pas une attitude dénigrante de ma part. Je lui disais « est-ce que tu veux que ce que ton frère pense de toi soit vrai ? Es-tu vraiment comme ça ? ». Je pense qu'il l'a prouvé le contraire.

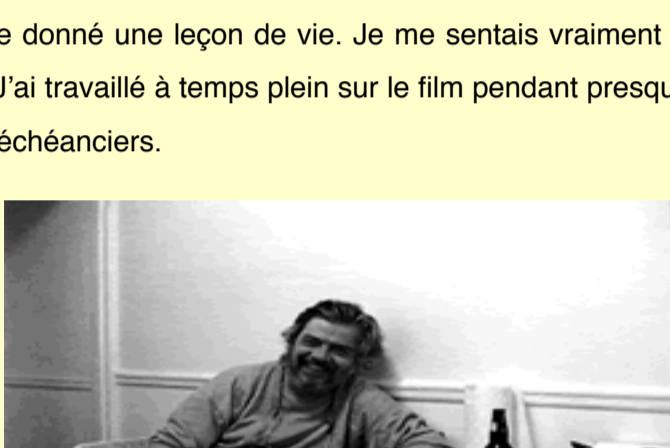
Le style de vie de Jimmy est très particulier. Il ressemble pratiquement à un antihéros de la société moderne. Est-ce l'élément qui vous a attiré à faire un film sur lui, sur cet être « crasseux », pour reprendre le terme utilisé sur le site du film ?

Jimmy est quelqu'un qui vivait près de chez moi. Je ne le connaissais pas beaucoup mais il m'a rendu quelques services au fil du temps. Un jour je lui ai offert une bouteille de rhum. Tout en buvant, il a commencé à me parler du festival western de Ste-Tite et de son projet de faire une publicité pour le festival. À cette époque je voulais faire un film sur Jimmy, mais je ne pouvais pas car je travaillais trop. Quelques mois plus tard, j'ai finalement décidé de faire le film.

Au début, je suis allé le filmer une fois par semaine chez lui, lorsqu'il faisait cuire le poulet pour la compagnie de nourriture pour chat. Je voulais aussi le suivre dans sa démarche de projet publicitaire. Avec un gars comme Jimmy, tu te demandes toujours s'il va mener le projet jusqu'au bout. Je suis sûr qu'il en aurait été capable si son projet avait été accepté.

Comme le projet de publicité a échoué, il a un peu l'image d'un antihéros dans le film. Je sais qu'il est répugnant pour certains, mais il y avait néanmoins quelque chose chez lui qui m'attirait. Je m'étais toujours demandé comment il en était arrivé là. Finalement, je ne l'ai jamais su ; il n'a jamais voulu me le dire.

J'admire beaucoup Jimmy. Il faut une certaine dose de courage pour vivre ainsi dans la société telle qu'elle est aujourd'hui. Tout le monde dit « allez vite, vite ; travaillez, travaillez, travaillez ». Il se situe à l'opposé de tout cela. En quelque sorte, il m'a même donné une leçon de vie. Je me sentais vraiment bien pendant que je faisais ce film-là ; c'était là liberté totale. J'ai travaillé à temps plein sur le film pendant presque neuf mois, il n'y avait pas de contraintes de production ni d'échéanciers.



Est-ce que Jimmy a vu le film ? Quels ont été ses commentaires ?

Oui, il a vu le film. Il m'a remercié pour le respect dont j'ai fait preuve non seulement envers lui, mais aussi envers sa famille. Enfin, il était très touché par la dédicace à son ami Michael, qui est mort du cancer quelques mois après la fin du tournage.

Comme je le disais plus tôt, en dépit de l'échec final de ses projets, Jimmy tient quand même la vedette d'un film de 80 minutes.

Qu'en est-il des spectateurs? JIMMYWORK reste un film relativement difficile pour les gens qui ne sont pas habitués à ce type de construction narrative. Non seulement le sujet du film n'est pas très joyeux, mais il provoque même un certain malaise car il est impossible de distinguer le vrai du faux. On se sent inconfortable devant tout ce que Jimmy fait.

Je pense que les gens ont aimé le film, du moins d'après ce qu'ils m'ont dit. Cela me fait plaisir car JIMMYWORK est un film très personnel. Mis à part quelques mauvaises critiques à Toronto, je pense que les gens ont été avant tout intrigués. Il est vrai que c'est un film un peu dur à prendre. Je ne sais pas si c'est à cause de la forme ou à cause du personnage ... ou des deux! D'ailleurs, JIMMYWORK n'a pas attiré que des cinéphiles avertis. C'est un public très diversifié qui est venu voir le film et qui a payé le 17\$ pour le voir au festival de Toronto.

La réaction des gens est très positive. Plusieurs personnes m'ont posé des questions sur le film. À l'issue d'une projection à Montréal, une dame est venue me voir et m'a demandé pourquoi nous n'avions pas appelé la police après que 'Chacha' s'est fait blesser! Les gens qui ressortent du film sont souvent un peu déboussolés. Ils ne savent pas nécessairement comment le prendre, s'ils doivent rire ou être fâchés contre moi. [rires].

D'ailleurs, un des films présentés au festival en même temps que Jimmywork était The Art of Killing a Cat. Plusieurs activistes ont manifesté contre ce film. C'était amusant parce qu'un site web a écrit qu'au lieu de manifester contre ce film, « les gens auraient dû se rabattre sur Jimmywork, un film immonde fait par un réalisateur irresponsable qui a poussé son sujet dans le crime ». Je n'ai pas de problème avec ça [rires], ça veut dire que j'ai bien fait mon travail et que Jimmy a bien fait le sien. Mais il est vrai que la confusion qui existe dans le film entre ce qui est vrai et ce qui ne l'est pas peut en effet causer une frustration chez certaines personnes.

ndlr : Sur le forum de discussion du site officiel du film, une personne a fait un commentaire similaire à la critique citée ci-dessus. « Selon moi, Jimmy se cherchait une raison pour ne pas continuer toute l'aventure lorsqu'il se blesse la veille du vol. S'il n'avait pas été encouragé par Simon, peut-être aurait-il renoncé et Chacha aurait-il encoeur un bras fonctionnel...C'est incroyable ce que quelqu'un peut faire lorsqu'il veut vendre un film. Aucune répercussion légale pour un complice comme M. Sauvé? ».

J'avais observé le même genre d'attitude à propos de Blair Witch Project. C'est un film que j'ai particulièrement aimé. En dépit des nombreuses critiques à son égard, je considère que ce film minimaliste est un chef d'œuvre du cinéma. Tu y crois, ou tu n'y crois pas ; tu embarques ou tu n'embarques pas. J'ai embarqué, et ce fut un des films les plus effrayants que j'ai vus. D'ailleurs, il fait partie des facteurs qui m'ont poussé à faire JIMMYWORK.

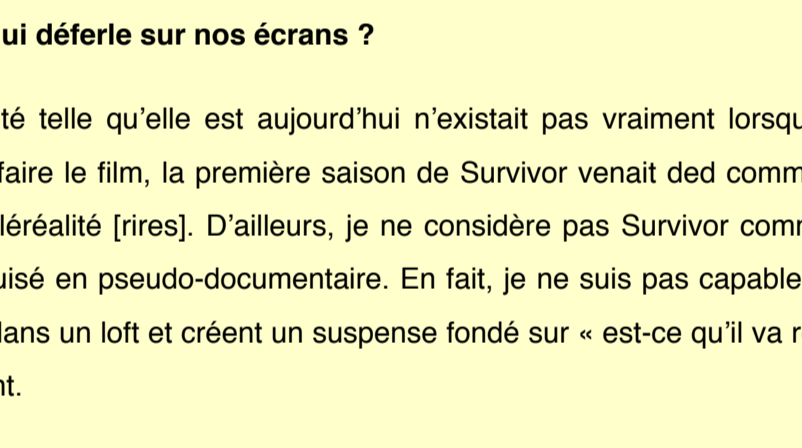
Pour revenir à mon film, je suis certain que, malgré son aspect non conventionnel, il pourrait plaire à plus de gens qu'on ne croit. Je ne vois pas pourquoi des spectateurs habitués à regarder des films de Chuck Norris n'aimeraient pas ce film!

En ce qui concerne la distribution, le principal problème reste l'argent. Dans le cas de JIMMYWORK, les coûts d'une bonne distribution seraient bien plus élevés que les coûts de production du film. Au festival de Toronto, le film a eu droit à plusieurs visionnements réservés à l'industrie. Plusieurs personnes sont venues, mais ces gens, en particulier les membres de grosses compagnies, sont souvent intimidés par de tels films.

Revenons un instant sur la confusion que votre film engendre. Avec ce mélange tordu de réalité et de fiction, JIMMYWORK ne serait-il pas, un peu comme le film SERIES 7 : THE CONTENDER, une critique de la vague de la télé réalité qui déferle sur nos écrans ?

Non, puisque la télé réalité telle qu'elle est aujourd'hui n'existait pas vraiment lorsqu'on a commencé le film. Quand j'ai commencé à faire le film, la première saison de Survivor venait ded commencer. J'éprouve certains problèmes vis à vis la télé réalité [rires]. D'ailleurs, je ne considère pas Survivor comme étant de la télé réalité, c'est un Gameshow déguisé en pseudo-documentaire. En fait, je ne suis pas capable d'écouter ces émissions! Ils mettent dix inconnus dans un loft et créent un suspense fondé sur « est-ce qu'il va réussir à la conquérir ... » ; on s'en fout complètement.

Il y a également un problème de terminologie autour de mon film. Plusieurs personnes veulent apposer à JIMMYWORK le terme de docu-fiction. Or, d'après moi, un docu-fiction est un documentaire ennuyant de l'ONF dans lequel ils reconstituent des scènes réelles. Personnellement je n'aime pas ce type de documentaire, d'autant plus que ces films laissent souvent à désirer stylistiquement. Lorsque j'ai fait JIMMYWORK, je me suis éloigné le plus possible de ce style.



SERIES 7 : THE CONTENDER. Dans une émission de télé réalité hebdomadaire, six participants se voient donner des fusils et sont suivit jour et nuit par des caméras alors qu'ils essaient de se tuer.

Mais, lors du tournage, considérez-vous Jimmywork comme étant un film de fiction ou un documentaire ?

Quand je filmais, je filmais la plupart du temps un documentaire. Jimmy n'est pas un acteur, et le film n'avait pas de scénario. J'ai tourné beaucoup de matériel en espérant pouvoir créer une certaine forme narrative au montage, comme la plupart des documentaires conventionnels. Comme Jimmy est quelqu'un de très spontané, c'est lui qui a en quelque sorte écrit le film. Tout ce qu'il dit vient de lui.

Sur le plan légal, nous avons été obligés d'appeler JIMMYWORK une fiction à cause des assurances, mais rien n'a été scénarisé ; tout ce qu'il y a dans JIMMY a été spontané.

Cela soulève justement une question importante par rapport aux documentaires contemporains. Ils sont presque autant mis en scène qu'un film de fiction. Les réalisateurs demandent aux participants de refaire leurs répliques, de refaire leurs actions en suivant certaines indications afin que cela passe mieux à la caméra, etc.

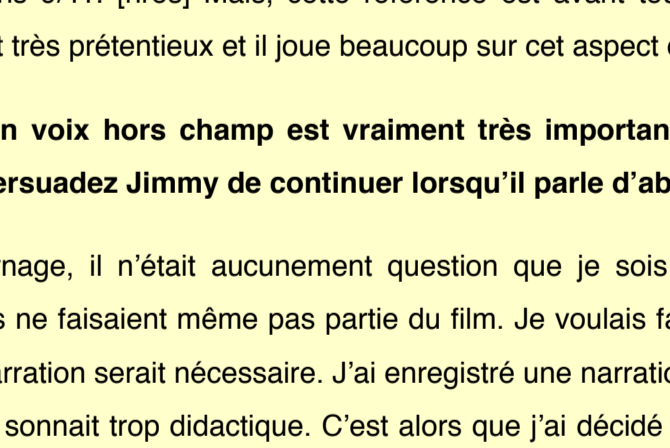
Au festival de Toronto, il y avait une rétrospective sur un réalisateur pionnier du cinéma direct. J'ai eu la chance d'aller voir deux des films. J'ai été surpris de voir à quel point ces films-là, malgré leur appartenance au cinéma dit direct, étaient eux aussi très mis en scène. Je ne dis pas cela de façon négative ; ce n'est pas nécessairement un problème. Il reste quand même une grosse dose de spontanéité dans ces films. C'est un peu la même chose dans JIMMYWORK.

Dans la bande-annonce de JIMMYWORK, il y a d'ailleurs une référence à Michael Moore, qui est justement accusé par plusieurs de manipuler les faits...

Effectivement. En fait, j'aimerais savoir à quel point ses documentaires sont truqués. Je suis sûr qu'il y a plus de vrai dans Jimmywork que dans 9/11. [rires] Mais, cette référence est avant tout une farce servant à refléter l'humour propre à Jimmy. Il est très prétentieux et il joue beaucoup sur cet aspect de sa personnalité.

Votre présence constante en voix hors champ est vraiment très importante dans le film. C'est même grâce à cet outil que vous persuadez Jimmy de continuer lorsqu'il parle d'abandonner son projet.

Oui. Cependant, lors du tournage, il n'était aucunement question que je sois dans le film. Au début, mes questions et mes interventions ne faisaient même pas partie du film. Je voulais faire un film sur Jimmy. Lors du montage, j'ai réalisé qu'une narration serait nécessaire. J'ai enregistré une narration conventionnelle avec Jimmy pour faire des tests, mais elle sonnait trop didactique. C'est alors que j'ai décidé d'incorporer mes questions au lieu de laisser Jimmy narrer le film.



Étant donné que le projet était relativement abstrait, je présume qu'à ce moment il n'y avait pas de financement externe ?

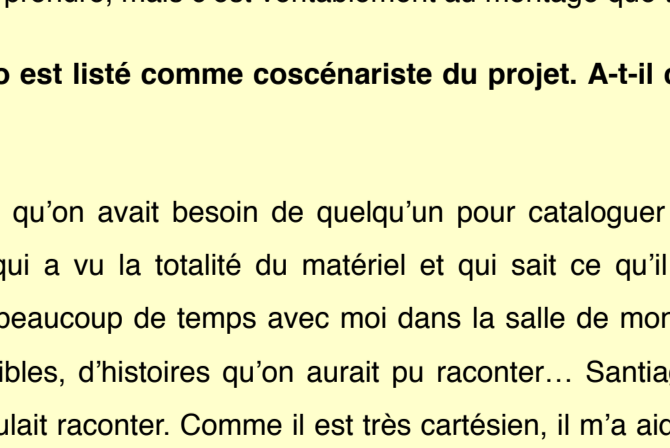
Au début du projet j'étais effectivement seul, sans financement et sans maison de production. C'est plus tard que Atopia a commencé à collaborer au film. Encore aujourd'hui, j'ai de la difficulté à décrire ce qu'est JIMMYWORK. Comme vous le mentionnez, quand j'ai commencé le film, je ne savais pas du tout dans quoi je m'embarquais. C'était vraiment un projet très dur à décrire. À cette époque, je n'aurais pas pu avoir de financement. Même quand le projet a commencé à prendre forme concrètement, il m'a fallu attendre un an avant de recevoir moi-même source de financement. L'arrivée d'Atopia a vraiment facilité le financement.

Parler de mon film m'est encore très difficile. Je ne suis pas une personne qui intellectualise ce qu'il fait. Je préfère entendre d'autres personnes parler de mon travail, il me semble qu'ils ont plus de facilité à décrire ce que je fais. C'est d'autant plus vrai pour JIMMYWORK, qui est un film très dur à décrire.

JIMMYWORK a été écrit au montage, avec l'aide de Santiago Hidalgo. Avant cette étape, j'avais une certaine idée des directions que le film allait prendre, mais c'est véritablement au montage que tout a pris forme.

Justement, Santiago Hidalgo est listé comme coscénariste du projet. A-t-il collaboré à toutes les étapes du projet ?

J'ai rencontré Santiago parce qu'on avait besoin de quelqu'un pour cataloguer les 200 heures de film. C'est d'ailleurs la seule personne qui a vu la totalité du matériel et qui sait ce qu'il y a sur toutes les cassettes. Santiago a également passé beaucoup de temps avec moi dans la salle de montage. Le projet avait contenait tellement de trajectoires possibles, d'histoires qu'on aurait pu raconter... Santiago m'a aidé à trouver l'accent principal de l'histoire qu'on voulait raconter. Comme il est très cartésien, il m'a aidé à faire du ménage dans tout le matériel qu'on avait. Même s'il n'a en fait participé qu'au montage, son rôle dans la construction du produit final a été très important.



P-A Despatis D. a écrit sur le Festival du nouveau cinéma pour SYNOPTIQUE 6.

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JIMMYWORK est à l'affiche à Montréal depuis la mi-mai. Il sera bientôt à l'affiche sur d'autres écrans à travers le Québec. JIMMYWORK a gagné le grand prix au *Victoria Independent Film & Video Festival* et le prix du jeune public (compétition internationale) au festival *Visions du Réel* (Nyon, Suisse).

<http://articles.synoptique.ca/jimmywork/>

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Vol.1:The Bloody Faithful by Brian Crane



[SYNOPTIQUE \[HOME\]](#)

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1293 words

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A few years ago, I went to see the Patriotes' memorial in the cemetery at St.-Denis-sur-Richelieu. Before leaving I poked my head into the church, where I was told by a friend that the crucifix had been repainted. As a boy, he had spent Sunday mornings sitting with his family under the very bloody Christ that still hung from the crucifix. Now seeing it years later, most of the blood he remembered was gone. (*Ergo* it must have been repainted.) To me there still seemed to be plenty of blood, but then I was raised in rural Baptist churches and was more accustomed to bare crosses and folding chairs than to statuettes and pews. The possibility that this was a cleaned up image startled me.

The next bloody Christ to leave its mark on me appeared in THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST. As we all remember, he was served up with a healthy does of outrage at the film's graphic violence and purported anti-semitism. *Synoptique 1* added to the noise with a PASSION bibliography and Michael Baker's article on THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST. For a few months at least, everyone I knew in Montréal and around Concordia seemed to talk about nothing but Jesus.

Now it's a year later. THE PASSION has been released on DVD, a less violent cut of the film (the "repainted" edition) has gone nowhere at the box office, and things seem to be getting back to normal.



THE PASSION OF THE
CHRIST

I first saw THE PASSION at the Paramount in downtown Montréal after being pressured by friends. It was three or four weeks into the initial release and I went to a weekday matinee, so I was surprised to find the theatre full. I was even more surprised when the jaded urbanite audience I had assumed filled the theatre sobbed its way through the last half of the film.

I'll admit several reaction shots of a distraught Mary choked me up pretty bad. Still, in the end, I was too caught up in the way the film kept situating itself as a literal presentation of the gospel narratives to have anything but a detached, analytical response. I felt like ticking events and verses off in my head as the movie went along. Pulled out his beard? Check. Spat and laughed? Check. No bone of his body broken? Check. The very literalness of the adaptation made me want to stand back and judge this film in terms of its interpretation of the source text.

This literacy—dare I call it faithfulness?—of the adaptation should have come as no surprise: Gibson and his supporters had repeatedly insisted this was a key aspect of the film. The literal, in other words, was taken for granted in the production and distribution of this film. What are we to make of this?

The beginnings of an answer can be found by taking a brief detour to consider Pier Paolo Pasolini's THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST. MATTHEW, which became available on DVD in Canada during the lag between THE PASSION's theatrical and DVD releases through a coincidence of production schedules.

Like Gibson's film, Pasolini's is based largely on Matthew's gospel. Also like Gibson's film, it is an explicitly literal adaptation of this text. In Pasolini's case this is taken to extremes. With only one or two exceptions, if you can't read a statement on the page of your Bible, it is not spoken in the film. This pattern of dialogue-as-citation is further emphasized by a voice-over that recites important verses. Pasolini selects events and makes minor alterations in their sequences, but otherwise, his interpretive intervention is limited to casting, staging, montage, and choice of soundtrack. The result is an austere, strangely silent film that is full of words.



THE GOSPEL
ACCORDING TO ST.
MATTHEW

Of course, the films are also wildly different. THE PASSION is about a bloody suffering body. It is a horror film and a melodrama. THE GOSPEL gives us a neo-realist portrait of a distant, troubled preacher's powerful charisma and social message. More generally, THE PASSION was understood by critics (and probably its supporters) to express a retrograde conservative message, while THE GOSPEL was taken as a left revision of the Christ (though it took the Church a bit of time to decide this was the case and withdraw their initial praise). In other words, these two equally literal adaptations could not be more different.



THE PASSION OF THE
CHRIST

So does the comparison make sense as anything other than a stunt? Is it legit to set a gay-bashing outside-the-fold Catholic's image of the gospels beside a gay and bashed outside-the-fold Catholic's image of the gospels? Or does this simply add more fuel to the everything's-relative-and-basically-a-matter-of-your-point-of-view fire by showing yet again that even the literal boils down to personal opinion? In the coming issues of *Synoptique*, this column will try to think through the relationship between film and literature by exploring questions like these.

But for the record, I think the comparison between THE PASSION's and the THE GOSPEL's faithfulness is rock-solid. And my reasons why are related to the bloody Christ hanging in the church in St.-Denis.

Like that statue, these films are involved in an on-going effort to understand and interpret texts that founded vast swaths of world art and culture. Like that statue, these films embrace the priority of these texts, interpret what these texts mean, and, thus, raise questions that transcend the cinematic.

What are the gospels? Who do they tell us we are? What do they tell us we might be? These—and others I won't list—are "Big Questions" that men and women have chewed over for two millennia. That's a long time, but these films' attention to their source reveals that these questions are alive today. These films do interpretation. More importantly, both figure their interpretations as self-consciously faithful adaptation. Faithful adaptation in these films thus indicates *not* the clarity of a fixed text, but instead the contradictory and meaningful life of these ancient texts in the modern world.

Faithfulness, thus, pulls the cinematic and the literary together in order to address fundamental cultural questions. These questions transcend the disciplinary boundaries of cinema, just as they transcend the bounds of literature. Addressing them is, ultimately, what makes cinema and literature worthwhile. But doing so extends the reach of cinema beyond the limits of the modern era by linking its work to the concerns and texts that ground humanistic study.



THE GOSPEL
ACCORDING TO ST.
MATTHEW

What I'm suggesting is that THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST, like THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST. MATTHEW, is an important film. Not sociologically, not anthropologically, not culturally. Or at least not only in these ways. It is important because it is a film of ideas. What's more, its ideas—whether we love them or hate them—are not simply "significant"; they are foundational and compelling. We must address them. But to address them means meeting their challenge, engaging them rather than discussing them, even as Gibson fails to match our portrait of an artist nor his film our ideals and beliefs. In other words, this film asks filmgoers to think beyond ourselves.

That's exciting.

So stay tuned. Future installments of this column will try to sort out how films use the literary to broaden the scope of the cinema and bring its resources to bear on large-scale questions of Art and Culture—and even how they (and we) figure out what the hell "large-scale questions of Art and Culture" are.

Brian Crane wrote about Stan Brakhage and cellphones in *SYNOPTIQUE 8*.

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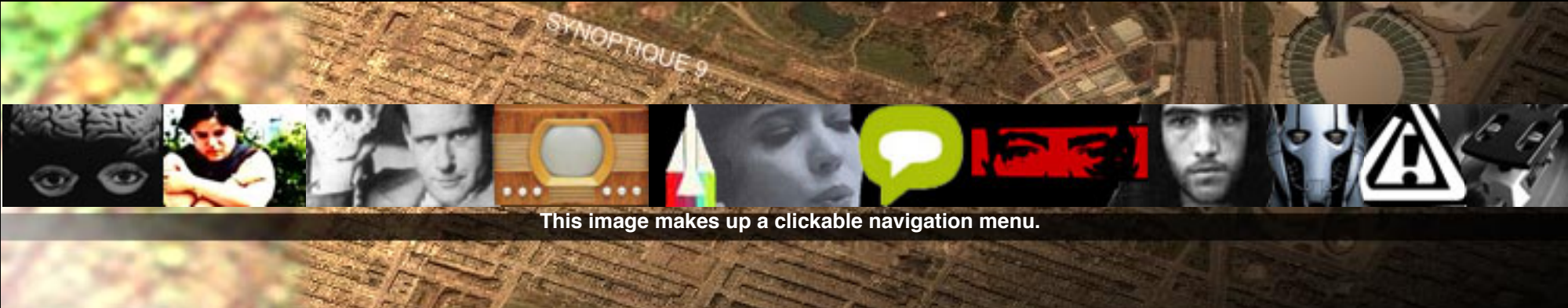
Brian Crane is currently a PhD student at Université de Montréal.

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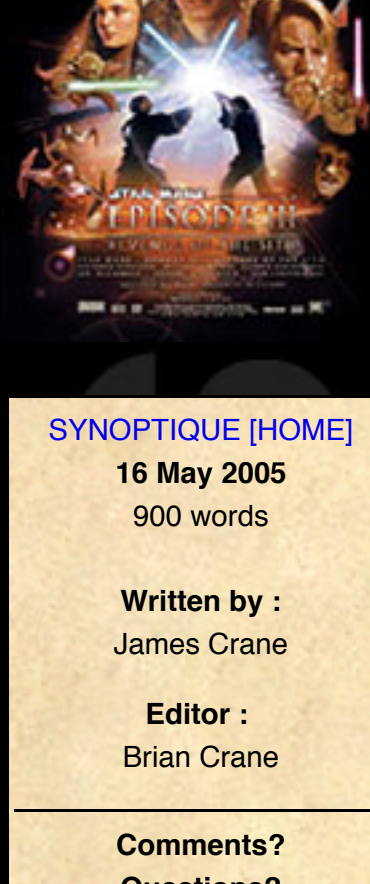
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Trailer Review: STAR WARS EPISODE III: REVENGE OF THE SITH by James Crane



SYNOPTIQUE [HOME]
16 May 2005
900 words

Written by :
James Crane

Editor :
Brian Crane

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First off, this goes out to the people that are saying "Eh, I don't get STAR WARS" or "I've never seen it" or etc., etc. You are not alone. Do not be scared. This was my girlfriend three years ago. It DID scare me to death. I wasn't sure I was willing to commit myself to a human being who hadn't lost themselves in a galaxy far, far away. Somehow acquire the 5 movies available at the moment (I recommend buying, stealing is bad) and do yourself a favor and watch them.

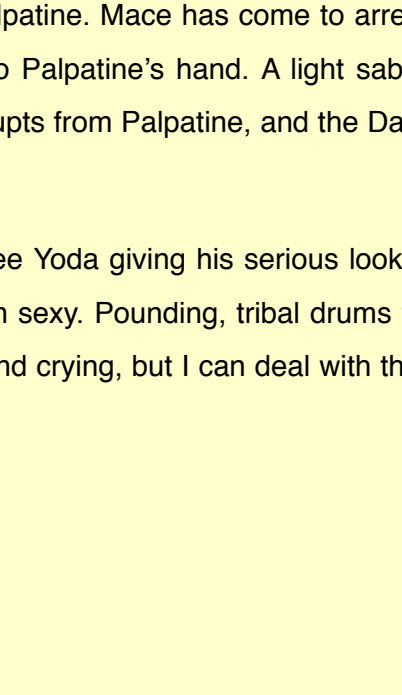
For those who do get it, but only kinda, relax. We all dislike Jar Jar. Midichlorians suck too. It's time to move on, cause there is something so cool to talk about. The trailer for

STAR WARS Episode III: Revenge Of The Sith

Can we get nerdy now? You know that tingly feeling that creeps up your spine when your body basically gets an overload of pleasure? My body succumbed to that feeling as soon as I heard the opening notes of the musical score kick in and the rumbling of some other worldly ship screeching across space.

The trailer kicks on, and the 20th Century Fox logo blazes up on the screen and then boom, I'm seeing my first new glimpse of Star Wars in three years. An Imperial Shuttle look-alike is flying through the darkness of space with the planet Coruscant lurking in the background. Remember that tingly feeling I was explaining. It's already gone up the spine, and, nowhere else to go, it's heading back down. The trailer cuts and I'm looking into the eyes of Palpatine. The first words uttered are the words DARK SIDE. I'm completely sold. I HAVE TO SEE THIS MOVIE. I've been waiting through two prequel movies just to hear the master of the dark side even mention his own allegiance out loud.

It doesn't stop there, and I surely didn't stop watching. Anakin is already looking more sinister than I had ever hoped for. The grown out hair, for some reason, screams evil. Not able to catch my breath, the trailer cuts to the next scene. Two giant ships duel it out in some cosmic space battle that makes the assault on the Death Star II seem like a piece of cake. There hasn't been a really big, intense, space battle in the prequel trilogy yet. We had kid Anakin accidentally hitting that auto pilot button and destroying the Trade Federation Ship (good for him?). We also had Obi-Wan and Jango fett having a small dog fight. But now it appears we're going to get a huge space battle. Finally.



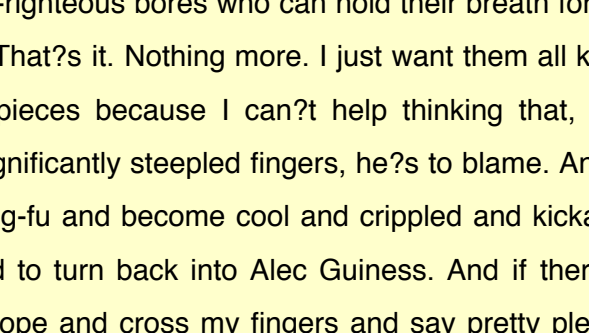
The speed at which this trailer is progressing is making my stomach twist into a knot. There are way too many stimulating visuals to suck in, and they are going by too quickly for my brain to process. More Palpatine is shown. This movie really is going down the path of the dark side.

Then the scene that steals the whole trailer happens:

Two doors slide open, and Mace Windu enters the chambers of Chancellor Palpatine. Mace has come to arrest Palpatine, and Palpatine obviously has a problem with this. The image cuts to Palpatine's hand. A light saber drops from his cloak to the open palm. The screech of a blood thirsty animal erupts from Palpatine, and the Dark master leaps at the startled and on the defensive Jedi.

Cut to the next sequence, and I've forgotten to breathe. I see Chewbacca, I see Yoda giving his serious look, I see C-3PO gold plated for the first time in the prequel trilogy and looking damn sexy. Pounding, tribal drums fill the soundtrack. The rhythmic beat reminds me to breathe. Padme's pregnant and crying, but I can deal with that as long as she's not rolling around in the grass giggling.

Dear sweet luscious looking LAVA PLANET!



I remember reading in the late 80's an interview with Lucas discussing how Anakin had a light saber battle with Obi-Wan. Obi drastically wounds Anakin and leaves him for dead. I was mesmerized even further than I already was by STAR WARS, and dreamt of seeing the birth of Darth Vader in the cinema. This trailer tells me this is going to be happening. Scenes of Anakin and Obi-Wan dueling litter the end of the trailer, and at this point I'm no longer sitting in my chair, but rather standing up, and finding myself closer to the TV then I realized.

The music climaxes and I see the roman numerals flash up to tell me basically "hey, that's all you get for now. See ya May 19th." But then Darth Vader appears on the screen, staring off to the left of the frame. It is totally unexpected, and totally needed. The trailer is over, and it has proven to me, a STAR WARS fan, that I haven't seen anything yet.

This trailer shows me the possibility that my favorite STAR WARS movie, THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK, could possibly be moving to seat number two.

James Crane is a first-time contributor to Synoptique.

COMMENTS:

Sitting through the two prequels, I've watched the mysterious followers of ?an ancient religion? that were so cool in the original movie turn into self-righteous bores who can hold their breath for a long time and jump really high. And now I want a jedi slaughter. That's it. Nothing more. I just want them all killed while I watch. I want Samuel L. Jackson to be cut into little pieces because I can't help thinking that, somehow, perhaps with his silly significant glares cast out over significantly steepled fingers, he's to blame. And I want Yoda to be chased off to Degobah so he'll stop doing kung-fu and become cool and crippled and kickass again. And I want Obi-won to get shipped off to the desert and to turn back into Alec Guinness. And if there's a pause in the jedicide?and please let there be no pause?! hope and cross my fingers and say pretty please while knocking on wood and even pray that, please god please, no narrative line will depend upon a contract negotiation or a vote in the Senate. Did I mention killing the jedi? Oh. And the Dark Side. I want it to threaten the very extinction of all that is good or dresses in natural fibres. Because without Darth Vader (no Annie doesn't count) or the Death Star or the Emperor (no Palpatine doesn't count), these movies suck.

By Brian Crane on 2005 05 12

I have to concur: the trailer for the third and last Stars Wars excites me to no end. But then so did the trailers for Episodes One and Two. Let's face it: for the past several years we've all been giddy suckers to our nostalgic yearnings. So notice where I place the blame here. It isn't in the lap of one George Lucas, for he's making film with the gifts (or lack thereof) he was given. How silly of us to expect any filmmaker to return after such a lengthy hiatus only to make the exact same thing he made before he left (and this ignores the fact that he did not direct the last two pictures of the first series). Has there been decline in his talents, or in those of his personnel? Perhaps, but perhaps history will show that he and his crew (actors included, poor souls) simply ventured to take on too large a task, not really knowing what to expect from the new technology and the challenges it posed. Liam Neeson and Christopher Lee are both able-bodied performers (I refuse to praise them as highly as others), but crickey, they didn't have a clue where they were out there and obviously don't have the imagination necessary to fill in the gaps left by the blue screens that surrounded them on set. Someone does know what he's/she's doing, however, as evidenced by the progress from Episode One to Two. Though I am one of few who believes "Phantom Menace" to be superior to "Attack of the Clones" (or should I say, more bearable), simply because the former has that gripping pod race and the latter has that drippy video-game/ treadmill segment (near the climax, no less!), the second rendered visual effects far more mature than the first. Look no further than how dynamic "the camera" is in the second. In the first, we have static shots (like the one of Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon leaping from the ventilation shaft-- why in the world would they chose to use a shot like this when they are, according to Lucas, "creatively liberated"?) and, at best, some twirling moves in the final space "battle." In the second, during the climactic battle sequence in which Yoda gets a lift from a clone ship, the camera executes some astonishing zooms that search for their targets through the foreground layers of destruction and mayhem. It also racks focus, adjusting itself so that the action remains clear, just as a focus puller would have to do in a real staged battle sequence. These tend to be dismissed as minor "technical" accomplishments, but they are sure signs of artistic progress, from where I sit. In the end-- setting aside the aesthetics for a moment-- I am a Star Wars fan, but right now I am not proud of it, partly because I feel as if the audience, the fans, are ahead of the game, with Lucas straggling far behind. Star Wars: Revelations (though the title is far too "Matrix") might be a sign of this. I personally would have preferred seeing a prequel trilogy that began with Anakin's teen years, giving the audience his dark turn in Episode Two, and then leaving Three for Vader, Vader, Vader. Or how about this scenario? What if Anakin post-turn was to have set out to destroy Count Dooku (a HORRIBLE moniker for a baddie) to take his place at the Emperor's side? After all, evil just craves more and more power. Now that would have been a way to investigate evil, not this romp through the tantrums of a teenage heart thro.

By Colin Burnett on 2005 05 13

I'll limit my comments to the lava planet. The lava planet is something an eight year-old dreams up and gets plenty excited about when s/he decides that the living room floor is made of lava and only jumping from sofa to easy chair can save them. Aside from being the first sign of the practical and figurative application of elementary science fair curricula into increasingly sophisticated child's play, having a lava planet and planets of its kind in one's childhood is a rite of passage. Even nostalgia for it--the kitcheness and kookiness of a person of 27 jumping on the furniture with or without liquid or pharmaceutical aid--can be fun (although nostalgia for that rite depends equally on its passage and one's presumably moving past it, as on having done the thing in the first place). As such, getting excited about a trailer for a Star Wars prequel is fine, just like getting excited about your lava planet. I couldn't be happier for you. Just when I am not as quick to jump up on the furniture to avoid shag carpet lava, please don't poke me with your plastic light sabre. I don't care. [Although, is Christopher Lee in this one? He and I share a birthday]

By Gareth Hedges on 2005 05 13

Electricity. That's what I call the nervous charge that moves up my spine and dissipates somewhere in the back of my head. Granted, my tastes have shifted dramatically over time, but some things have cemented themselves. Case in point: electricity is the feeling I still get when watching the STAR WARS movies, even while suffering through the bad taste on the palate left by the very sub-par PHANTOM MENACE and ATTACK OF THE CLONES. The lingering ghosts of these two films threaten to derail something so pure and innocent in my mind (or the mind of grade school Owen circa 1983) that cannot be mended by the mantra, "It's a movie for kids. It's a movie for kids..." Let's reflect: Midichlorians? Pop goes the myth. Did the filmmaker feel it right to reduce this intangible, magical idea of 'the force' to something as banal as an SAT score? Can a Jedi cheat by injecting themselves with those things? Is the Jedi Council going to have to resort to conducting mandatory testing? So many questions... Character. Dialogue. These are important things. Couldn't the rather paltry love connection in ATTACK OF THE CLONES have been outsourced? In terms of dialogue, talk is cheap, and less is so much more. Memo to Darth Maul: why utter a few throwaway lines when you have a *freakin' two-sided lightsaber!* For those choice bits of verbal exchange, I wish that Lucas remembered those Kurosawa movies that allegedly influenced him. I was shocked beyond comprehension when Liam Neeson's character did not disappear when he was killed. I still await an explanation. CGI Yoda? Does consistency mean nothing? Besides, characters are much cooler in Muppet form...and so on (by this I mostly mean Jar Jar-esque lapses). Make no mistake, there is a lot at stake here with the debut of REVENGE OF THE SITH namely the collective dreams of all those STAR WARS fans who crave an experience as intangible as The Force itself. Those dreams will have to remain, chrysalis-form, in my head. Upon reflection, this is not such a bad thing. Of course, what is *not* at stake is any sort of benchmark in CGI, which Lucas seems determined to achieve. Does anyone even care about this any more? Through it all, I am often shocked at how I am willing to deny my own critical devices and give the benefit of the doubt to Mr. Lucas and the early raves for REVENGE. The fans are correct--we can get nerdy now. The time is right. The time is also right for a good ol' fashioned Jedi ass whuppin'. They really have it coming: at the very least, the events of REVENGE will have them venturing outside of their stuffy, pretensions council rooms. I would come down harder on the prequels (and I would be justified in doing so), but I suspect that another extended dearth of STAR WARS related material would cause me to reconsider my harsh stance. For now, we are stuck with what we have on our plate, and we have to finish our meal, but we may reflect upon this experience in time as character building. In REVENGE OF THE SITH The bad guys will win. Jedes will be slaughtered, Darth Vader will be born, and it *will* be electric: of this I have little doubt. I am resigned, with a little sadness, to say "Bring it on!!!"

By Owen Livermore on 2005 05 15

In one scene midway through the trailer for REVENGE OF THE SITH, Mace Windu, flanked by three fellow Jedi, flatly comments to Chancellor Palpatine whilst igniting his purple light-sabre, "You're under arrest Chancellor." The Chancellor, wrapped in a black cloak, sneers, "Are you threatening me, Master Jedi?" and launches himself with an electrifying howl from his chair, brandishing his own light-sabre before his unlucky accusers. This one scene is proof-positive that George Lucas has finally got it right. Because of this one bit, I finally understand, as a STAR WARS fan since 1977's first film, why I've remained a STAR WARS fan in spite of the prequels' numerous flaws: Jake Lloyd's abysmal acting (even for a child actor), Lucas's cringingly racist portrayals--exemplified by Jar Jar Binks--all that and more that ruined THE PHANTOM MEANCE, and that continue to taint the otherwise relatively superior ATTACK OF THE CLONES. The trailer for EPIISODE III pledges no more "Roger, Roger!" droids and midichlorians, no more giant ticks grazing like cattle in fields of astro-wheat while Hayden Christensen and Natalie Portman re-enact The Sound of Music on Naboo. STAR WARS: EPIISODE III is THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK of the new prequel trilogy and it will not suck. It can't: all the gravitas, pathos and horror that has been lacking from the prequels permeate every sound and image of that brief scene between Windu and Palpatine, and it's still there in the montage of shots that follow. Lucas has finally cut the crap and moved away from the kiddie audience. Following Mace Windu and Darth Sidious's confrontation, the screen cuts to black, and the throeb of kettle-drums reverberate, presaging a dire turn of events: vivid images of ships streaking away at emergency speed from planets we've never seen before; armies of hostile droids closing in on Ewan McGregor's Obi-Wan, sans lightsabre; thick smoke pouring from a leviathan space-cruiser in the upper-stratosphere of Coruscant as it nose-dives towards the city-scape, leagues below. The trailer signals a luscious tragedy that every STAR WARS fan has hoped for since THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK. This will be the STAR WARS narrative that finally chronicles the closing of an epic age of Old World Galactic Republicanism and space-chivalry gone twisted. Throughout the trailer, Hayden Christensen's paliscent scowl, his hollow eyes and unkempt hair, hint at how much The Dark Side of the Force has finally infected both him and the galaxy far, far away that Star Wars fans, through thick and thin (and Man, has it been thin!) have come to call home away from home. And the film's depiction of the end of the Jedi Order will make REVENGE OF THE SITH the acid test of just how well Lucas can purposely and effectively wrap up a series that started so well back in 1977 and appeared destined to end so spectacularly badly. I ready myself to witness, in all their CGI verisimilitude, the poignant events that leave Ben Kenobi and Yoda the only Jedi left in the galaxy, Anakin a disfigured and willing Sith Lord of the newly christened Emperor of the Galactic Empire, and Luke and Leia newborns in ominous times indeed. If just a trailer has the power to make one want to forgive the errors of THE PHANTOM MENACE and ATTACK OF THE CLOWNS (oops!), I can't wait to see the final product.

By Friedrich Mayr on 2005 05 17

The Morning After? (Don't worry, there are no spoilers here). I arise this morning (well, afternoon really), a bit hazy from the events of last night. Was it all a dream? Did I want it all to have been (but, a dream? The doorbell rings and I slip on some clothes and head downstairs. A package from mom. My birthday isn't until next week, and we're usually late with such things in my family. So I decide to open it in the case it's something that demands immediate attention. I pull out my new kitchen shears to cut the edge off in the bulging envelope, and I can just make out the top of what looks distinctly like the packaging for a Star Wars action figure. So it is a birthday present after all, but my heart sinks as I prepare myself for a badly reproduced Senator Amidala or, perhaps worse, a Mace Windu. I pull it out and discover that, as far as these things go, she actually managed to hit the nail on the head. It's Yoda. One of my favourite figures as a youngster was a Yoda with a real fabric robe and little brown cane. And so my mind casts back not only to last night's midnight screening of Revenge of the Sith, but 28 years prior to my earliest movie memory: I could see 3PO (ha!) on the screen and hear some British guy's voice on the soundtrack, but I couldn't understand who was talking. Nobody's mouth was moving in conjunction with the words being spoken. I stuck my five year old elbow into my brother's side. ?Who's talking??? I just couldn't understand. Where did I learn to depend so heavily on the illusion of synthesis upon which so much of the cinema is founded? I'm not sure, but regardless of my confusion I embarked upon a love affair of many years, seeing the films over and over and over while buying up as much merchandise as possible. I remember once seeing my mom's purse on the dining room table, and nervous as one could ever be I stuck my adolescent hand inside and pulled out a few bills. I had heard that the little store on the corner would soon be stocking Star Wars figures, and I just had to get some more. MORE! I got there and they hadn't yet been received. I was so disappointed, but the good little consumer in me couldn't stand in that store without spending the money I had just liberated. So I bought some toy soldiers instead. They sucked. Man did I ever want some Star Wars figures, and these stupid little green things really didn't measure up, like a CGI Yoda to Frank Oz's clothed hand. Some years later, our family plagued by money problems (and not because I stole all of it ? I hadn't? gone that far over to the Dark Side), we prepared to move from the house of my childhood to a small condo. We had a garage sale and sold off every single one of my many figures and accessories. We had big-ass Millennium Falcon for crying out loud! Probably got a buck for it. But I was 14 by then and told myself that it didn't really matter. I was moving beyond, trying to follow the example of the Buddha ? sorry, Yoda - letting go of my attachment to material things. But now I wish I had them back, partly because I'm a collector at heart (or perhaps just a pack-rat as more than one significant other has suggested) and partly because I have such joyous memories of playing in my room as a child: epic landscapes sculpted out of blankets and cardboard boxes, pitting these figures one against the other in horrid displays of violence the likes of which have never been represented in any of the Star Wars films, golden sunshine gleaming in through the orange curtains onto my yellow walls all the while. For better or for worse, Star Wars defined my childhood in many ways. And so my mom's package carries a weight that is not accounted for on the postage stamps. It is the weight of an era that has come and gone, an era which so many of us had hoped to re-discover in these new prequels. Not only is this Yoda figure a symbol of many happy childhood days, it is a chance for me to grow up and do the adult thing: leave it in its original packaging and never EVER sell it no matter how high its market value rises. But wait, what's this? Damn! In the haste of my package shearing I snipped the top off of the box. Just a centimeter or so, but certainly enough to make Comic Book Guy complain about having had to rise off of his stool to come and examine it. And so, like poor Annie, I'm caught between two worlds. Surely it would still be of value despite the clipped box, but wouldn't I get more enjoyment out of it if it were open? Do I grow up? Or do I try to recapture days gone by? It seems to me that this has been the fundamental dilemma of the prequels since frame one. Lucas is trapped in an impossible world, a world that can never deliver on either the glory of days gone by or the passion of a fully realized present. He's lost somewhere between childhood and the adult world, and doesn't quite know what to do about it. This state of limbo is exemplified in the ?From Pixels? documentary on the ?Attack of the Clones? DVD: the computer guys come to show George their new CGI Yoda, and he insists they use Empire Strikes Back as the reference point and try not to create too much of a distinction between the original puppet and its new digital incarnation. But then he says something strange, explaining to them that the original Yoda is stiff because he's a puppet, and that perhaps this could be freed up a bit in the digital domain. So which is it George? Do you want fidelity to the puppetry of Frank Oz, or do you want to ?improve? on this by turning Yoda into something that he never was? He'd probably answer that he wants the best of both worlds, and this is the very substance of Anakin's own downfall. It really doesn't matter what I thought of Episode III: the raging fire of expectation was put out in my soul long before seeing any of the latest trailers. I've simply been dead inside, my dreams of a bright Star Wars future squashed by the detestable Jabba the Hut himself as he slithered unconvincingly across a hanger floor in a scene that was retrieved from a floor of a different kind in time for the original film's 1997 ? special edition? re-release. And yet, like some automated clone droid, I got my ticket for the ?Revenge of the Sith? midnight show a week in advance and showed up three hours before the film to ensure a decent seat. I felt like an obligation, a loose end in my life that needed to be tied up. However good or bad the movie was, I am happy that it's over, for now I can get on with my life and turn towards the true promise offered in the very first text crawl of the original film: a new hope. And I have much new hope, not for whatever Lucas might do next but for the power of cinema itself to deliver all the magic that so many of us associated with the Star Wars legacy. In many ways Star Wars taught me how to experience film. My early lesson from C-3PO was that what I see on screen need not necessarily match what I hear, and that some of the greatest joys in the cinema come from a deliberate confounding of expectation. Like the Star Wars prequels, cinema is always composed of things that seem familiar but are strange at the same time, and we can rarely ever be really sure what to expect when the lights go down. And in this respect Lucas has succeeded mightily, for whether or not anybody really loves the new films, I guarantee that expectations have had to be adjusted to accommodate whatever feelings they have inspired.

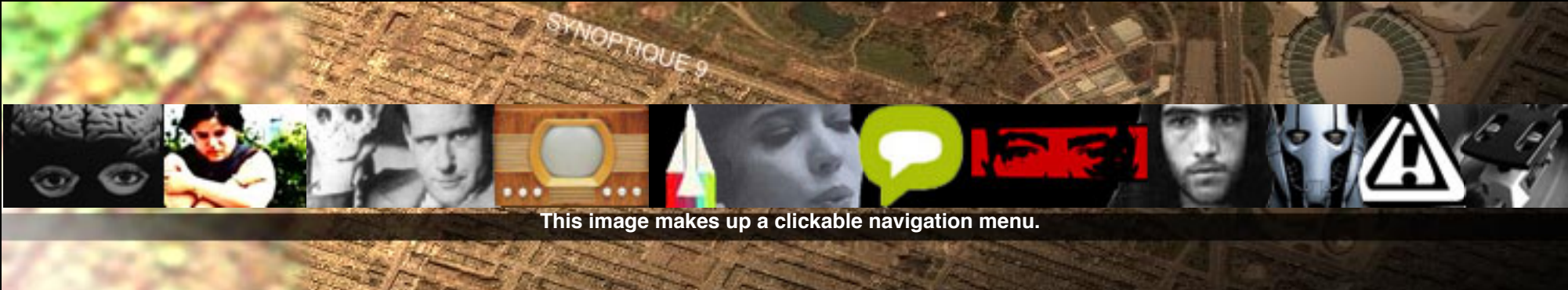
By Randolph Jordan on 2005 05 19

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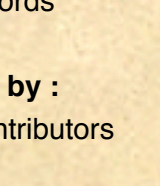
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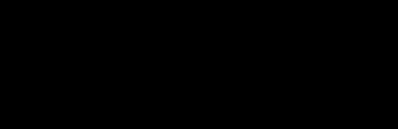
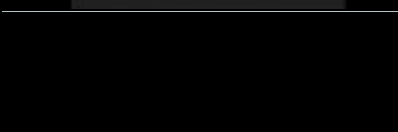
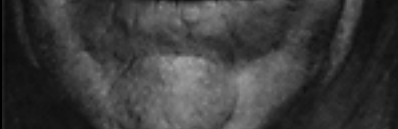
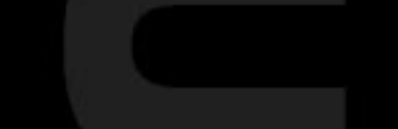
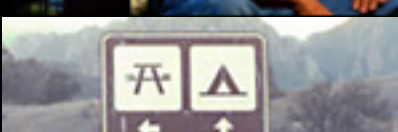
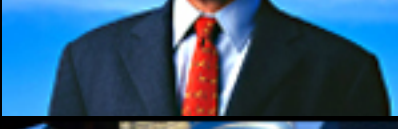
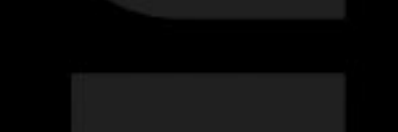
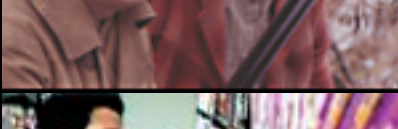
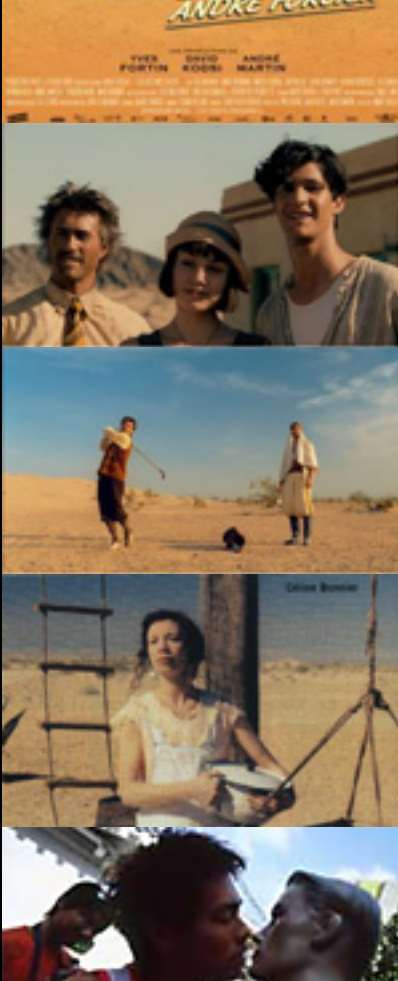
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THE FLICKERS

STRONG-LES ÉTATS-UNIS D'ALBERT (André Forcier, 2005)

What a surprise? A well-written, well-acted comedy directed with a light touch and visual flair. I left this movie wanting to rewatch THE SON OF THE SHIEK (1926), did, and then wanted to go back to see this film. Hands down my most satisfying movie experience in a long time. I'm going to track down more of Forcier's films.

-Brian Crane

STRONG-FORMULA 17 (Yin-jung Chen, Taiwan, 2004)

[Sex in the Taiwanese] City: part 1] ... Everybody was taken aback when this movie made its way to the top of the Taiwanese box office charts last summer. Although not as sexy and funny as South Korea's hilarious SEX IS ZERO, FORMULA 17 is a very interesting teen romantic comedy. Amusingly, even though there are no girls whatsoever in the film, FORMULA 17 was directed by first-time Chen Yin-jung, a 24yo woman! It's an important film in the Taiwanese cinema not only because it tackles several taboos in Asia (the film was hence banned in Singapore) but also because FORMULA 17 is one of the rare films to break away from the 'social realism' most Taiwanese directors use.

-P-A Despatis D.

STRONG-HITCH (Andy Tennant 2005)

Charming Will Smith is a ladykiller with a big broken heart. My goodness! (Yawn.)

-Amy Fung

STRONG-THE HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY (Garth Jennings, 2005)

As it was the case with most of the intertextual references in *The Simpsons*, I saw the parody before the actual movie. It was rather shocking to finally see CITIZEN KANE after having seen its numerous parodies in *The Simpsons* several times. Although I was very familiar with the name and although I had seen Douglas Adams' couple of times on TV, this release of HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE was my very first experience of Douglas Adams' oeuvre (no comments please!). While watching the film I couldn't help noticing how the character of Zaphod Beeblebrox seemed to be inspired by Zapp Brannigan on *Futurama*! Isn't there a certain cinephilic pleasure of entertaining this thought? That being said, the movie is entertainment at its finest and it's a great companion to the book (which I have now started to read).

Oh, and by the way, I'm soooooooooo getting one of those sighing doors when I buy a loft!

-P-A Despatis D.

STRONG-THE INTERPRETER (Sydney Pollack, 2005)

THE INTERPRETER harkens back to a time when middlebrow cinema was a force. It takes but a moment to recall that this story of a white African revolutionary is directed by Sydney Pollack, whose OUT OF AFRICA is the seminal piece of 80s middlebrow. It takes but a moment to link the convoluted plot to Pollack's gloriously middling 70s paranoia-thriller THREE DAYS OF THE CONDOR, another seminal film of its age. Then, Pollack himself comes on screen, and Robert Altman, Woody Allen, and the essence of the middlebrow is burned onto your retina. Not to worry; it's a good pain.

-Jerry White

STRONG-JIMINY GLICK IN LA LA WOOD (Vadim Jean, 2004)

Amidst the numerous celebrity cameos this movie offers, one of my co-workers makes a cameo of her own. She stands stone-faced and indifferent in the background of many of the red carpet scenes at the Toronto International Film Festival (where she works in the press office,) while Jiminy Glick (Martin Short) hams it up a few metres away interviewing the likes of Sharon Stone and Kevin Kline. Equally unfazed by the ghastly antics of Glick as she is by the sparkle of celebrity, she unwittingly gauges just how humourless and unglamorous this movie is.

-Zoë Constantinides

STRONG-MELINDA AND MELINDA (Woody Allen, 2005)

The later work of any great screen comic (Buster Keaton, the Marx Brothers, Steve Martin) is always open to ravaging by two equally naughty factions: A) the naysayers, who take anything the comic does from inside the shadow cast by *his great films* ; and, B) the contrarians bent on reclaiming later *misunderstood* works. As someone who has made a private hobby of defending Woody Allen, I have to concede with prejudice that MELINDA & MELINDA sits nicely on the shelf with SWEET & LOWDOWN and CELEBRITY, but I wonder if that's a concession? The trailer sells MELINDA AND MELINDA on the film's doubling up on the word "obsequious." There's peculiar and disquieting irony in that—made stranger still coming from actors whose performances in the film could be summed up with that very word.

-Gareth Hedges

STRONG-MINDHUNTERS (Renny Harlin, 2005)

I was rather scared when I saw Renny Harlin's name associated to the project; I wasn't sure we could expect a decent film after his recent film DRIVEN. MINDHUNTERS turns out to be a very good action flick! It has its flaws like most action films but it's entertaining throughout.

-P-A Despatis D.

STRONG-RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK: THE ADAPTATION (1989/2004)

Three pubescent boys from Mississippi spend eight years making a Beta Cam shot-by-shot remake (not homage, not parody) of their Hollywood holy grail. The audiences may be howling with grown-up laughter at the heartfelt dream of three little boys, but one can feel mostly good about it. Maybe thirty-somethings Eric, Chris and Jayson cringe a little when they watch themselves, but those boys have been vindicated. This film is priceless: simple, pure, miraculous.

-Zoë Constantinides

STRONG-SPONGE BOB SQUARE PANTS (Stephen Hillenburg 2004)

Riding the waves on the hairy sun-blotched flabby back of David Hasselhoff, SPONGE BOB SQUARE PANTS is exactly this: a good time in an improbable situation, with deep-sea fun, song and dance—anyone who still doesn't 'get' SPONGE BOB SQUARE PANTS is just thinking too damn hard.

-Amy Fung

STRONG-LE SURVENANT (Eric Canuel, 2005)

If I had a pet hog and trained him to laugh, he would sound like le survenant. Unpleasant.

-Brian Crane

STRONG-TIAN BIAN YI DUO YUN (Ming-liang Tsai, Taiwan, 2005, Quebec title: WAYWARD CLOUD / UN NUAGE AU BORD DU CIEL)

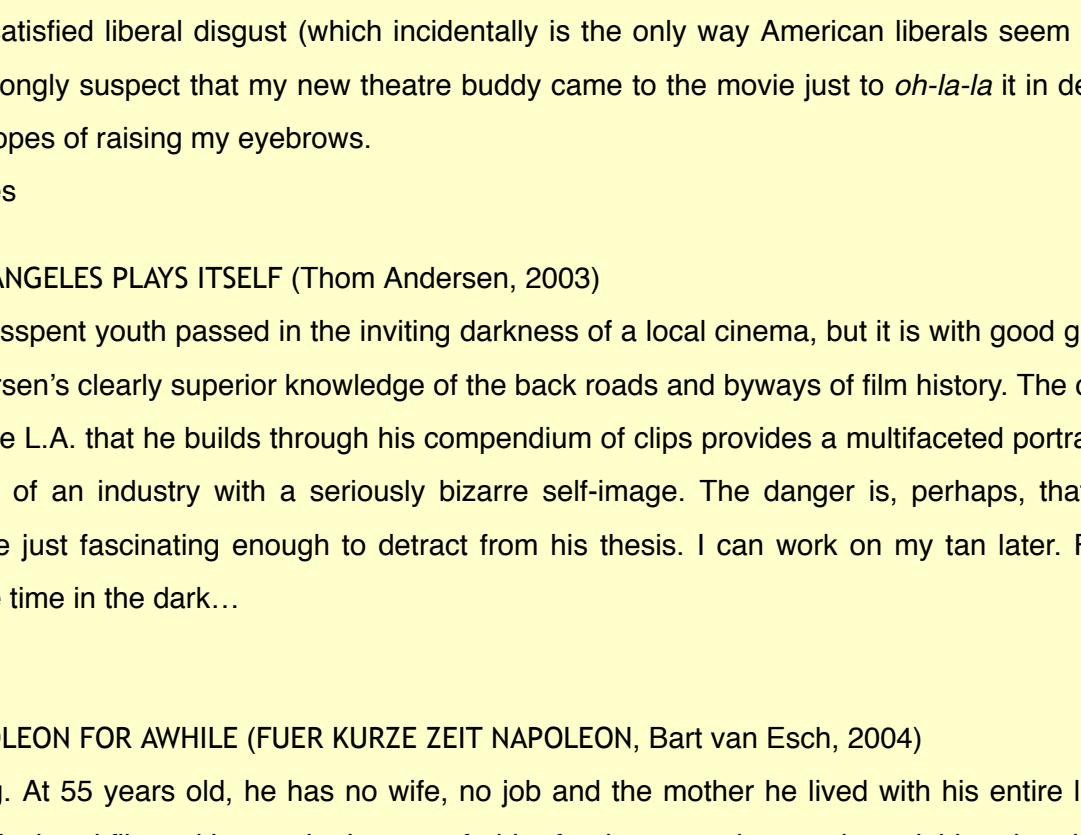
[Sex in the Taiwanese] City: part 2] ... I like Asian films, I like musicals; boy was I in Heaven !

-P-A Despatis D.

STRONG-UNLEASHED (Louis Leterrier, 2005)

A man trained as a dog slowly learns to take back his place in society after he finds refuge in an antique shop where he meets a caring blind man. This learning process is well depicted on the screen and it is very strong emotionally. Up to that point, the film is well done and well written. Then, the dog's former owner finds him and decides to make him fight again. It quickly turns ugly; both for the dog and for the film. The last section of the film is a pure mess with major script problems. The weird blend of drama and action is questionable in UNLEASHED. People expecting to see an action-packed film will find the first half of the film utterly boring and people who like the first part of the film will greatly be disappointed by the second half of the film.

-P-A Despatis D.



DOCUMENTARY

STRONG-ENRON: THE SMARTEST GUYS IN THE ROOM (Alex Gibney, 2005)

The best that can be said about this New American Liberal Outrage doc was said by an elderly man sitting behind me in the theatre—the only other patron to stay through the credits. As I got up, he looked at me and grimaced. I raised my eyebrows in acknowledgement, and he muttered "Oh! la-la" shaking his head in disgust. That is to say that like any good exploitation film, ENRON: THE SMARTEST GUYS IN THE ROOM served its purpose: arousing self-satisfied liberal disgust (which incidentally is the only way American liberals seem to get aroused anymore). I strongly suspect that my new theatre buddy came to the movie just to *oh-la-la* it in despair, just as I had come in hopes of raising my eyebrows.

-Gareth Hedges

STRONG-LOS ANGELES PLAYS ITSELF (Thom Andersen, 2003)

Much of my mispent youth passed in the inviting darkness of a local cinema, but it is with good grace that I bow to Thom Andersen's clearly superior knowledge of the back roads and byways of film history. The comprehensive picture of movie L.A. that he builds through his compendium of clips provides a multifaceted portrait not only of a place but also of an industry with a seriously bizarre self-image. The danger is, perhaps, that the film clips themselves are just fascinating enough to detract from his thesis. I can work on my tan later. For now, I'll be spending more time in the dark...

-Celia Nicholls

STRONG-NAPOLEON FOR AWHILE (FUER KURZE ZEIT NAPOLEON, Bart van Esch, 2004)

Poor Wolfgang. At 55 years old, he has no wife, no job and the mother he lived with his entire life has passed away. His musical and filmmaking aspirations are fodder for the gong show at the neighbourhood bar. Now, Bart van Esch went and made a documentary about him. Everybody look at Wolfgang, isn't he funny? Isn't he sad? Isn't he oblivious? Wasn't he destined to end up like this? This documentary makes you feel uncomfortable and ashamed. I can't decide if that's a good or bad thing.

-Zoë Constantinides

STRONG-SEARCHING FOR THE WRONG-EYED JESUS (Andrew Douglas 2003)

A documentary with the appearance of a meticulously orchestrated storyboard? A tale of the Deep South with a great rambling mouth of a man in boots and a pearl white cowboy hat? Yes and double yes. Yarns are spun; tales are told. The morbid simplicity of the Handsome Family is captured on a floating barge, slowly passing by with the unrelenting stare capable by only those playing their souls out in a swamp. This is God's county; and the reverence is beautiful and lucidly saturated in every single note and frame.

-Amy Fung

STRONG-TOUCH THE SOUND (Thomas Riedelsheimer 2004)

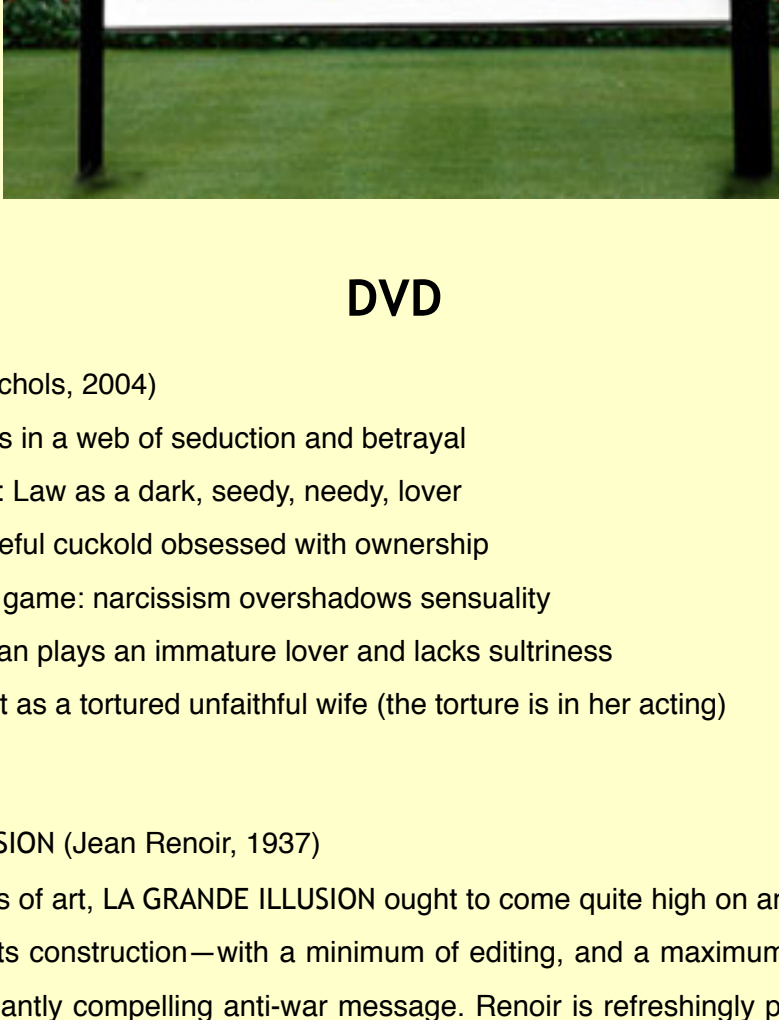
Low gliding cameras and long steady shots of something seemingly awesome, Riedelsheimer's subject matters always fall short of the reverence he frames them in. Evelyn Glennie is an amazingly astute percussionist, feeling the rhythm of the world through her body. She just so happens to be deaf, and although her accomplishments are worthy of documenting, the expression of the human body as a perceptive feeling instrument is disappointingly captured in slow tracking jam sessions or static interviews. For crying out loud, let the rhythm move you!

-Amy Fung

STRONG-WHAT THE #5? DO WE KNOW!? (William Amtz, Betsy Chasse, Mark Vicente, 2004)

After watching this documentary we're left wondering 'what the #5?' did I learn while watching this documentary? Although it presents some very interesting facts, like a mysterious way to reduce crime in big cities, the movie sticks to the surface of many theories and ultimately fails to put all the pieces of the puzzle together. Or, was I (or the 'hidden observer' in my body) too naive to think a 108-minute long documentary could explain quantum physics to me? Oh well, the truth is (and will remain) out there ... Scary!

-P-A Despatis D.



DVD

STRONG-CLOSER (Mike Nichols, 2004)

Cold calculating characters in a web of seduction and betrayal

Love is lost, lust is gained: Law as a dark, seedy, needy, lover

Owen as a deliciously spiteful cuckold obsessed with ownership

Sex is a "guilty fuck" mind game: narcissism overshadows sensuality

Erotic professional: Portman plays an immature lover and lacks sultriness

Regret that Roberts is cast as a tortured unfaithful wife (the torture is in her acting)

-Andrea Ariano

STRONG-LA GRANDE ILLUSION (Jean Renoir, 1937)

Considering films as works of art, LA GRANDE ILLUSION ought to come quite high on anyone's top-ten list. It looks beautiful on screen, and its construction—with a minimum of editing, and a maximum of camera movement—is essential to the film's brilliantly compelling anti-war message. Renoir is refreshingly principled and the viewer is never faced with the problem of determining whether the visual aesthetic actually glorifies the violence that the film itself pretends to condemn. Yet, perhaps his greatest feat of all is in making what is essentially a film about several men in a small room carry universal significance.

-Celia Nicholls

STRONG-JAWS (Steven Spielberg, 1975)

Admittedly, there are many reasons to hate JAWS. It is, after all, the movie that inaugurated the current Hollywood obsession with the bottom dollar, and paved the way for any number of aesthetically and morally bankrupt money spinning summer blockbusters. Yet JAWS is more than the B-grade, monster schlock. It is, in its way, a minor artistic masterpiece. Recall, for example, the formal perfection of that shot of Captain Quint's butcher knife, its tip embedded in the boards of the ship's deck, or the rippling pages of the shark book as reflected in Chief Brody's glasses. Such indelible images give JAWS its bite.

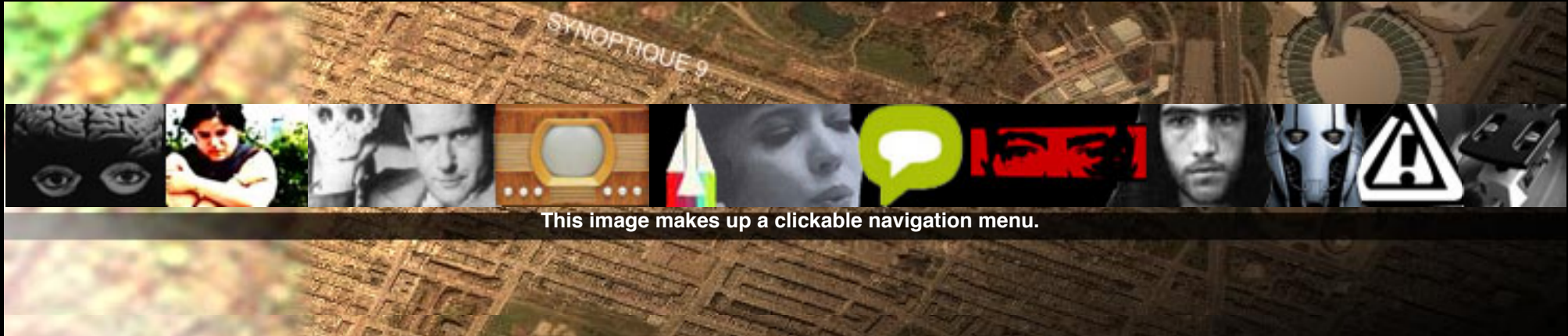
-Celia Nicholls

STRONG-THE LIFE AQUATIC WITH STEVE ZISSOU (Wes Anderson, 2004)

The thing is, is, that I knew all along that this film would be a grower. I knew it. And sure enough, only days after its home video release, the promise and the vision of Anderson's final instalment of his... errr... "hyper realist" father-and-sons trilogy is now clear to me. The characters are as real as they ever were, and as they days go by because of the complexity of the story and the depth of it all flows over me. Working upon the score of THE ROYAL TENENBAUMS, composer Mark Mothersbaugh has built the whole of the THE LIFE AQUATIC upon the back of the central theme of Anderson's previous film. The same as it ever was. And in the middle of it all is an inspired Bowie cum Bazzal soundtrack and the sort of set pieces that are nothing less than a Max Fischer wetdream. Makes me happy.

-Mike Baker

STRONG-NOW, VOYAGER (Irving Rapper, 1942)

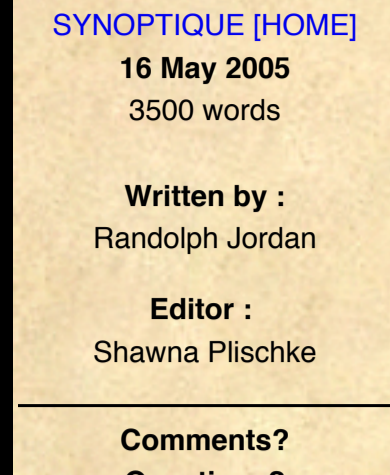


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Squalid Infidelities 3 Big Fun in My Living Room

by Randolph Jordan



SYNOPTIQUE [HOME]
16 May 2005
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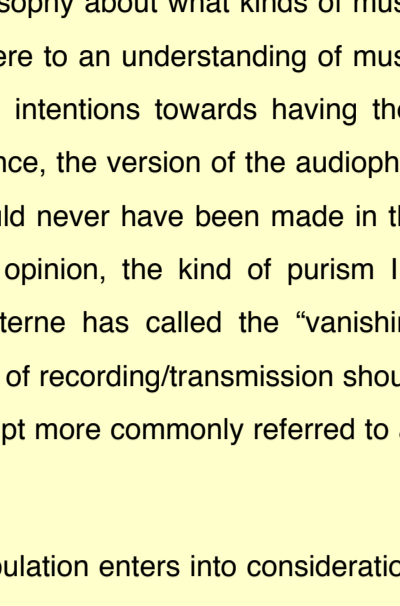
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At a recent audio/video tradeshow I found myself digging around the bins of a record dealer specializing in audiophile quality vinyl pressings. Not being an expert on the vinyl scene, I had very little idea as to whether or not some of my favourite music had ever been given the audiophile treatment. I figured one easy bet would be to check out the Miles Davis section. It seemed as though my bet was paying off; my excitement increasing as I flipped through the titles chronologically...until the section stopped just short of where my interest starts: the late 60s.

People who follow jazz will know the utter contempt with which Davis's *Bitches Brew* was treated at the time of its 1969 release. Surely 36 years later the genius of that particular album has become commonly appreciated. Or perhaps not, at least from a particular audiophile perspective. I was informed that, in fact, record companies who make audiophile pressings don't produce any Miles beyond the late 60s. The dealer told me there just isn't the market for it in the audiophile community. I have since learned that the complete *Bitches Brew* sessions, released on CD as part of the extensive Miles Davis "complete sessions" series, are also available in a 180 gram vinyl pressing. But it seems to stop there, and what I really wanted was some of the stuff released in the 70s, particularly *Big Fun*. Thus I began my investigation.



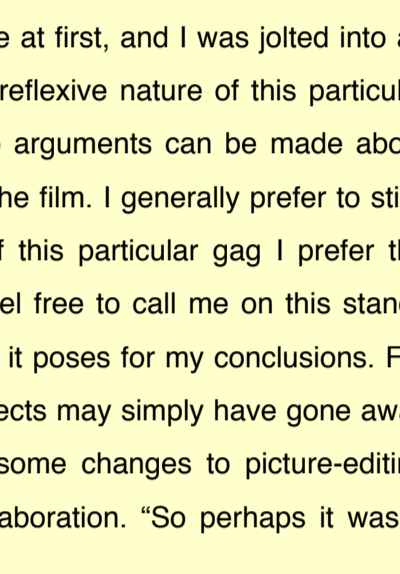
It seems that along with the "analog is best" mentality comes a particular philosophy about what kinds of music are best as well. It turns out that the best kinds of music are those which adhere to an understanding of music being something produced by musicians on unamplified instruments with no intentions towards having their sounds captured and represented in any recording format whatsoever. In essence, the version of the audiophile ideal that I'm exploring here is that the best recordings are the ones that should never have been made in the first place. This seems like a contradiction, and of course it is. But in my opinion, the kind of purism I'm describing is founded upon a very particular contradiction that Jonathan Sterne has called the "vanishing mediator" in his book *The Audible Past*. The basic idea is that any technologies of recording/transmission should vanish from perception when listening to the final product. You'll hear the concept more commonly referred to as "transparency."

This idea is complicated to impossible extremes when any kind of studio manipulation enters into consideration. However, regardless of the material being represented on a recording, we are left with a peculiarity to the logic of transparency aside from the problems of theorizing the concept of the "original" (as explored in the first edition of this column): equipment of mediation is a necessary link in the chain between recorded performance and listener, but it is this equipment that the listener hopes will disappear. As is the case with vinyl fetishists, it is precisely the indexical link made possible by the material processes of phonography that are said to allow these material processes to render themselves invisible [1]. Transcendence of the equipment is, in other words, dependent upon its material embodiment.

At the heart of the idea of transparency is the concept of the "soundstage." In audiophile parlance, there are two main things to which the term "soundstage" refers. One is the ability to understand the position of each musician and their instrument in a recording. This is dependent upon designing the recording according to the ideal of music performed live by musicians within a single space and maintaining the integrity of this ideal by placing any given sound in a specific spot -- and keeping it there. The other main feature of a good soundstage is a system's ability to draw attention away from its sources, especially with regard to the position of a pair of speakers. Being able to tell where the speaker is positioned in the room is bad. Being able to tell where an imaginary musician is positioned in the room is good. So it is interesting to note that audiophile interest in Miles Davis seems to have stopped at around the time that he attached a portable microphone to his trumpet and began moving around the stage while performing.

This mentality has spilled over into the realm of film sound production and exhibition, particularly where surround sound is concerned. One of the main principles behind surround sound speaker placement is that of the soundstage. No speakers, particularly not any of the rear speakers, should call attention to themselves. The soundfield should remain stable and not disrupt the spectator's feeling of immersion within the soundscape of the film. Like two channel stereo purists, this philosophy of exhibition implies that program content will adhere to the philosophy. And indeed, in the vast majority of films we find a tendency towards using sound to create a feeling of stable environment even where the picture might suggest otherwise. This is most evident in the use of continuous soundscapes during scenes in which the picture editing is intended to be as "invisible" as possible. This is one reason why the standard shot/countershot scenario for conversation between two characters is not as disorienting as it should be. If a cut in the soundscape was heard every time a cut in the image was seen the experience would be far more jarring, if only for the reason that we have not been trained to internalize the convention of abrupt sound edits in the way that we have come to terms with continuously changing shots on the image track.

Disruption of immersion is a problem explored by Michel Chion in *Audio-Vision* when he discusses the idea of "in-the-wings" effects in surround sound. He notes that much more use was made of side and rear channels in the early days of the formats, but sound designers found that too much emphasis on the rear speakers drew attention to these speakers and away from the frame of the image. This situation was not conducive to the ideals of a cinema that seeks to keep the processes of its production hidden. I experienced just such a situation last week when I threw on my DVD of MONTY PYTHON AND THE HOLY GRAIL. I had forgotten about the film's false start in which the credit sequence from a completely unrelated film is the first thing we see and hear. All of a sudden it stops, and from the right rear channel in the Dolby Digital 5.1 mix we hear the sound of the projectionist's voice grumbling about having put on the wrong film by mistake. The isolated position of this voice startled me at first, and I was jolted into an awareness of the system of reproduction which was very appropriate for the reflexive nature of this particular comic routine. Of course the 1975 film was originally mixed in mono, and so arguments can be made about whether or not this use of surround sound is faithful to the original concept of the film. I generally prefer to stick with whatever format the film was originally designed for, but in the case of this particular gag I prefer the updated multi-channel mix as it suits their purposes splendidly. You should feel free to call me on this stance once you get to the end of this column and discover the potential contradiction it poses for my conclusions. For the moment, Chion suggests that this feeling of distraction by "in-the-wings" effects may simply have gone away as people became used to the new sound formats, and that perhaps with some changes to picture-editing practices it could have spawned a new realm of productive audio-visual collaboration. "So perhaps it was a mistake to have given it up so quickly" (Chion:84).



However, I suspect that the ideals of the vanishing mediator are so deeply ingrained that no amount of pushing sound through the rear speakers would have undone the deeply held ideals of the audiophile community whose Holy Grail it is to lose all awareness of the equipment responsible for the sounds it hears. My position, and it is by no means a new one, is that this equipment is as much an instrument of sound production as any of the "real" instruments held in such high regard. This is the basic principle behind the idea of the "scratch" in contemporary DJ culture, and long before that in the practice of scratching the surface of film found in many avant-garde/experimental films. I believe that to ignore the instrument of sound reproduction is to lose a major part of what makes the experience of a great sounding system so profound.

I'll finish with two brief case studies illustrating aspects of the ideas I've been discussing to this point. With *STAR WARS: REVENGE OF THE SITH* just around the corner (and yes, my ticket for the midnight show on opening night is tucked safely in my wallet), it seems appropriate to briefly consider the role of THX within the discourse of fidelity and its attendant problems.

The THX ideal has been at the forefront of efforts to try and reduce the differences between the controlled standards of mixing and the process of exhibition. In essence, it seeks to deliver upon the threat implied by Schafer's concept of "schizophonia" (see the second edition of my column for further discussion). The idea is to get all theatres standardized to THX specifications. In theory, if a THX certified film is played back on THX certified equipment, there will be no difference between master and duplicate, original and copy (Johnson:104). This has extended into the realm of home theatre in recent years, with THX certifying home electronics and companies like DTS claiming that their process for encoding DVD soundtracks essentially clones the master tracks, offering the original without any process of reproduction getting in the way.

Chion expresses dismay at the degree to which these kinds of projects have been extended. He laments the quest for sonic purification and banishment of coloration while expressing nostalgia for the sounds of the large acoustical spaces of older theatres (Chion:101). Chion suggests that standardization models for film sound (like THX) eschew notions of sonic fidelity in favour of homogenization (Chion:100-101). What is crucial here is that Chion's use of the term "fidelity" refers to privileging the sound of the space of exhibition over that contained on the film's soundtrack, being faithful to the space in which sound is reproduced, not to an idea of the original sound from whence the reproduction has come. This is a reversal of the way that fidelity has been used in the discourses responsible for the ideal of the vanishing mediator to which THX subscribes (see related column by Brian Crane).

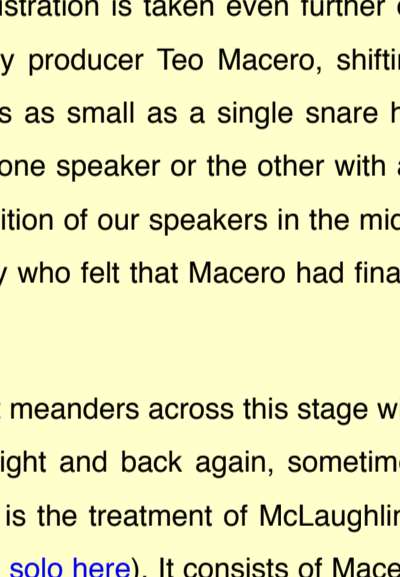
Chion's desire for the sound of the acoustical exhibition spaces of old is, in the end, a desire for what I call real-world schizophonia, that in which a soundscape is doubled in the presence of reproduction technology, rather than the total soundscape replacement that Schafer fears and for which THX standards reach. Chion enjoys the interaction between reproduced sound and the space in which it is reproduced, a grounding in the here and now which allows schizophonia to exist without being fueled by the desire to "transcend the present tense" that Schafer suggests is characteristic of 20th Century life (Schafer:91).

I think Chion is well grounded in his stance. However, I do think the THX ideal has it dead right on one count: absolute fidelity between an original and copy can be achieved, but only in the relationship of the master recording to its duplicates. This essentially takes what is usually considered to be the copy and puts it in the position of the original. The original recording is the ideal to which all subsequent reproductions should adhere, not the idea of an original performance outside the context of recording. The mediation of recorded sound must be taken into account as part and parcel of that sound.

But now I have a problem. I like THX for the way it aligns master and duplicate, but not the way it adheres to the ideal of the vanishing mediator in so doing. If we're constantly aware of the space of exhibition, then how can we ever achieve fidelity to the sound of an original recording mastered for exhibition in a space very different from my living room? We're back to the problem of the non-identity theorists who suggest that, because of the realities of perception, an original sound really can't be found and thus shouldn't be sought.

Perhaps the answer lies somewhere in a version of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism: individuals are said to be non-existent outside of their relationships to others, yet in no way does this negate the fact that individuals are also whole and complete beings unto themselves. A master recording is like an individual sent out into the world. There is some way in which it can retain all its dignity as a distinct entity while having that identity necessarily bound up within the space that it must operate. Our local Quebec government might do well to read some Bakhtin as they prepare to launch into an escalating separatist campaign in the coming years. And I'm sure there's an argument for multiple-partner relationships to be found in there somewhere, but we'll leave that for another day.

And so, finally, let's go back to why it is that I was hoping to find a nice 180 gram vinyl copy Miles Davis's *Big Fun* in the first place. Side three consists entirely of the track entitled "Go Ahead John." Like a work of Magic Realism the piece hovers between the grounded and the fantastical. Five instruments are present: trumpet, sax, electric bass, electric guitar, and drums. For the first part of the track (listen to the first part of the track here), Steve Grossman's sax and Davis's trumpet (which solo at different times) are each fixed securely in a single central spot, thus keeping with the ideals of the stable soundstage. Dave Holland strikes a single bass note repeatedly for much of the piece, creating a solid floor spread across the entire stage. Here we have the beginnings of a frustration of the soundstage, for while Davis and Grossman are localizable, Holland is somewhat ubiquitous. This frustration is taken even further on the drum and guitar tracks. Jack DeJohnette's drumming is hacked to bits by producer Teo Macero, shifting quickly and abruptly between the left and right speakers, sometimes with units as small as a single snare hit. These aren't pans; they are isolated pieces of the drum track forced hard into one speaker or the other with an electronic switching device. This technique calls constant awareness to the position of our speakers in the midst of the stability of the bass and horns. As such, it was heavily criticized by many who felt that Macero had finally overstepped the bounds of his production privileges [2].



But wait, there's more. To top it all off, John McLaughlin's guitar accompaniment meanders across this stage with gestures reminiscent of the movement of the aurora borealis, drifting left to right and back again, sometimes hovering in the middle for a while like a ghost. This is also Macero's work, as is the treatment of McLaughlin's solo wherein all notion of stability is torn to shreds (listen to an excerpt from the solo here). It consists of Macero hitting some kind of button which shifts the track radically from a loud centralized position to a much quieter ambient version located far to the back right of the soundstage. It sounds as though someone was actually pulling the chord in and out of McLaughlin's amp at moments that precisely emphasize the accents in his playing. Finally, this treatment is interspersed with an overdudded low volume track of McLaughlin providing his own accompaniment. These techniques call attention not only to the necessity of multi-track recording technology to make this possible, but also to the materiality of the electric instrument itself. In my opinion, Macero's treatments of both the drum and guitar tracks demonstrate a sensitivity to the essence of these performances that complement them wonderfully. To me, the production here is as inseparable from the performances as is lighting to set-design in film.

It is interesting to note that on the CD release of *The Complete Jack Johnson Sessions*, they provide the various takes used to create "Go Ahead John" with the intention of letting us hear the music "as played" rather than through Macero's production (listen to an excerpt from this here). Surprisingly, the drums and guitar are not mixed with a traditional stereo image as I had imagined they would be. Instead they are placed hard right and hard left respectively, a result of the fact that they were originally recorded in mono. The result feels very bland, like a DVD special feature that lets you listen to raw sound recorded on a film set before hearing how it is combined with post-production sound in the final mix. This is interesting for completists who love to follow all stages of production, but it's a far cry from the glory of the final product. Hearing these versions has re-affirmed that the studio is as valuable an instrument on that piece as any played by the five musicians.

What is most interesting about the *Big Fun* version of "Go Ahead John" is that it loses some of its meaning if heard in mono or from an off-axis position. Without the drum and guitar tracks shifting from left to right, the interplay between the stereo image and the confounding of this image is gone. You could also make this argument about music recorded with a traditional soundstage model in mind, saying that outside of the stereo image one cannot place the musicians in relationship to each other and thus the dynamics of their interaction is lost (a loss that is an inherent part of the highly separated positions of the instruments on the versions found on the Jack Johnson sessions). But the difference is this: "Go Ahead John" calls attention to the position of your speakers within the room as well as the position of the musicians in relation to one another. So to lose this is to lose the contextualization of the piece within the space of your listening area as well as the interaction between the musicians on the recording. With the traditional soundstage ideal, the loss is only about the context of the original recording trying to be represented *despite* the conditions of playback.

With "Go Ahead John" as it was released on *Big Fun*, Davis and Macero have fashioned a piece that offers a wide range of possible approaches to the concept of the soundstage. They deliberately call attention both to the position of musicians within the space of the performance, and to the position of the speakers within the space of the reproduction. This is honesty at its finest, and I would like nothing more than to be able to get my hands on a copy that respects the original material as closely as possible (post-production and all) so that the intended interaction between this production and my listening space might be fully realized. Then I would like hear films which operate according to similar ideals, and I would like these to be made available for home reproduction with uncompensated multi-channel soundtracks so that I can pit the original master recording against the particular acoustics of my listening space and reap the benefits of two distinct ideals operating as one. This is the fidelity I crave.

Randolph Jordan's last column was on *EYES WIDE SHUT* in SYNOPTIQUE 7.

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Notes:

- Readers interested in the nuances of this argument should read "Defining Phonography" by Eric Rothenbuhler and John Durham Peters, published in the summer 1997 edition of *Musical Quarterly*.
- See Rob Sibley's review [here](#).

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