Volume 3 | Hollywood & Liberalism

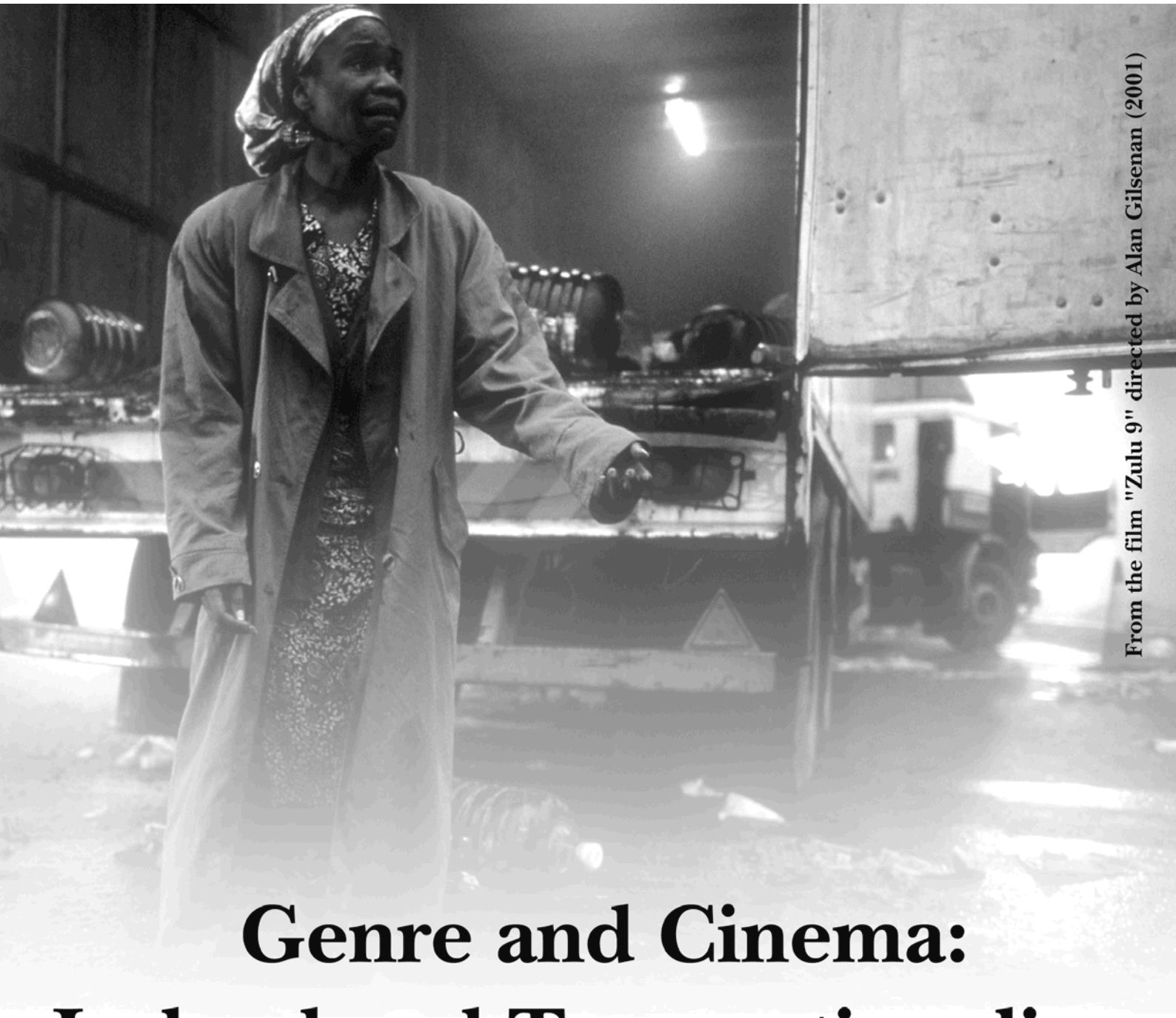
spring/summer 2007

CINEPHILE

university of british columbia's film journal

The Family-Myth in Hollywood
Slavoj Zizek

Interview with Iraq in Fragments'
James Longley



From the film "Zulu 9" directed by Alan Gilsenan (2001)

Genre and Cinema: Ireland and Transnationalism

ed. Brian McIlroy

Contributors: Ruth Barton, Jennie Carlsten, Joan FitzPatrick Dean, Fidelma Farley, Matthew Fee, Michael Patrick Gillespie, Christine Gledhill, Natalie Harrower, Thomas Hemmeter, Cheryl Herr, Dervila Layden, Brian McIlroy, Martin McLoone, Barry Monahan, Joseph Moser, Dana Och, Maria Pramaggiore, Scott Ruston.

Coming from Routledge, May 2007

CINEPHILE vol. 3 no. 1

Spring/Summer, April 2007

Table of Contents

CINEPHILE Vol. 3 No. 1, Spring/Summer Issue, June 2007.

ISSN: 1712-9265 CINEPHILE (formerly UBCinephile): The Film Studies Journal of The University of British Columbia

Publisher: The University of British Columbia Film Program

Editor: R. Colin Tait
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Ernest Mathijs
Program Administrator: Kate Castelo, Gerald Vanderwoude
Original Art by: Alissa Staples

Editorial Board: Jennie Carlsten, Brenda Cromb, Andrew deWaard, Christine Evans, Tara Kolton, Renée Penney, Lindsay Steenberg.
Special Thanks to: Lisa Coulthard, Zanna Downes, Christine Evans, Brian McIlroy, Ian Patton, Richard Payment, Dave Cooper, Bern Staples, Sarah Gay.

UBC Film Program
Suite 235A Brock Hall Annex 1874 East Mall
Vancouver, British Columbia
V6T 1Z1
Canada
tel: (604) 822-6037 **fax:** (604) 822-0508

www.film.ubc.ca/ubcinephile

Editor's Note:

Hollywood and Liberalism

R. Colin Tait

"We know that polls are just a collection of statistics that reflect what people are thinking in 'reality,' and reality has a well-known liberal bias."

– *Steven Colbert at the White House Correspondent's Dinner, 2006*

Welcome to the third issue of *Cinephile*: The University of British Columbia's Film Journal. Our mandate involves considering this cinematic *zeitgeist*, while challenging the basic assumptions which permeate our field. We consider film studies an important emerging discourse, particularly when we consider the absolute dominance of visual culture in our society. Our current theme, "Hollywood and Liberalism," follows our tradition of addressing topics which engage the pressing issues of film, while at the same time proving its ongoing relevance to society at large.

In our shorthand culture, most often communicated through talking points, it seems natural to assume that Hollywood and Liberalism are synonymous concepts. However, even a brief look at the history of Hollywood demonstrates that the opposite is true. The institutional and systemic logic of "Hollywood" exists as a miniature version of U.S. Capital, embedded in the larger logic of the increasing corporatization of society. Historical events – ranging from the institutions self-censorship via the repressive and draconian policies of the Hays Code, McCarthyism, and the increasing spread of Hollywood as the dominant mode of world cinema – all speak to the essential fact of Hollywood's hegemony, not to mention its inherently conservative formal qualities.

It is the residents of Hollywood who perpetuate the myth of liberal Hollywood. The recent fundraising effort in Hollywood, where prominent Democratic presidential hopefuls kowtow to the "cultural elite," does nothing to separate the perception of this link, nor does the annual ritual of the Academy Awards. If anything, the metalinguistic entity known as Hollywood more often represents its precise opposite – a place where starlets get drunk and crash their (electric) cars. We must further consider that the films which stand for Hollywood's "liberal" efforts do not represent a significant fraction of the profits that Hollywood garners. Rather, they accounted for a mere 5% of the total American domestic gross. In short, we should recall that none of 2005's Best Picture Academy Award nominees – which included the most unabashedly "liberal" films in recent history – none of these nominees even came close to cracking the top 20 box-office earners for that year.

Dealing specifically with the semantics of "liberalism," our goal is to disentangle the term's popular meaning by recontextualizing it within industrial, theoretical and historical terms. This endeavor entails repatriating and dislodging the political connotations of the word within the media as most often expressed in the historical conflation of "Commie" and "Pinko" respectively. It is imperative that we clarify that this enterprise aims not at reviving the now-defunct project of "political correctness" but rather for precision about the words we speak (and images that we trade in), in addition to dealing with the meaning-effects of these words and images. We propose that there needs to be space to let ideas breathe, and that this involves a nuanced discussion which exceeds either/or partisanship. As an exemplar of this mentality, the statement that anyone is either "with America or with the terrorists" only impoverishes the public sphere as it leaves room for only the one-dimensional left and right positions, ignoring ahead, behind, up, and down. The questioning of anything outside of the party lines of Left and Right, replete with accusations which begin with the empty signifier "anti" (American/Israeli/nationalist, etc.) only serves to greater undermine the idea of "freedom," by limiting and censoring everything we do and say in a democratic society.

We will illustrate this contemporary deadlock by investigating film's tangible industrial, ideological and metaphorical contributions to perpetuating and dispelling these myths. Until these positions are clarified and redefined, the current perception of both these discourses (conservative and liberal alike) are akin to the recent farcical (and scary) depiction of "The Jew" in Sacha Baron Cohen's film *Borat: Cultural Learnings for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*, 2006. We propose that the rhetoric used to define both the liberal and the conservative is as absurdly propagandistic as *Borat*'s monstrous othering of "the Jew" as a mythical egg-laying beast with claws and horns.

We are incredibly fortunate to have one of the world's prominent thinkers join us in our endeavor and are happy to present a new article by Slavoj Žižek in this issue. I cannot fully express my gratitude for this collegial gesture, and thank Professor Žižek endlessly for his contribution to our journal. It is only fitting that in an effort to clarify our positions within the field of public discourse that we follow Professor Žižek's recent imperatives to think before we speak, read before we write and learn before we do either.

Contributors

Jennie Carlsten received her M.A. in Film Studies from the University of British Columbia, and her B.A. in Communications (Media Studies and Film Concentration) and Political Science from the University of Iowa. Her research concerns include audience reception and spectatorship, ethnic representation, political identity, and memory construction. Jennie is particularly interested in Irish and Northern Irish cinema.

Brenda Cromb completed her Honours B.A. in English and Cinema Studies at the Univeristy of Toronto. Currently, she is an M.A. Candidate at UBC. She recently presented a paper on Maggie Cheung and transnational stardom at the 2007 FSAC Graduate Colloquium. Other recent work has included papers on Takashi Miike's *Audition* and on melodrama in the films of Pedro Almódovar. Brenda plans to complete her degree in 2008.

Andrew deWaard Andrew deWaard is an M.A. Candidate in Film Studies at the University of British Columbia. His broad research area is popular/consumer/celebrity culture and the television/music/film industries that (re)produce it, viewed from a political-economic lens. Intertextuality, Steven Soderbergh, Medium Theory, and Paul Virilio especially tickle his fancy. His latest work is "Joints and Jams: Spike Lee as Sellebrity Auteur," in *The Spike Lee Reader* (forthcoming).

Christine Evans received her Masters degree in Film Studies from the University of British Columbia and her Bachelor's degree in Cinema Studies from the University of Toronto. She is currently undertaking her Ph. D. in Film Studies at the University of Kent, Canterbury, where her research focuses on Slavoj Žižek's unique contributions to film theory. She has published articles on shame and the lamella, psychoanalytic structures of belief, *aphanisis* and narrational strategies in cinema, the work of Slavoj Žižek, and the 'ethics' of representation. Her research interests include psychoanalysis and cinema and the philosophical comprehensions and expressions of love and theology. She thinks that baby ducks are really cute!

Tara Kolton graduated from Rutgers University, 2004, with a B.A. in English (with a concentration in Cinema Studies) and is currently a M.A. candidate in Film Studies at the University of British Columbia. Tara recently attended the 2007 FSAC Graduate Colloquium where she delivered her paper, "Traversing the Internal: Metaphysical Landscapes in Contemporary Cinema." Her research interests include French cinema, film music and sound, and transcendental style in cinema.

Alissa Staples is a painter, translator, and illustrator who received her B.F.A. in Studio Art at UBC. In her illustrations for this issue of "Cinephile," she explored the various styles of sequential art and a merging of both traditional and digital painting media. She lives in North Vancouver.

Lindsay Steenberg is a doctoral candidate at the University of East Anglia under the supervision of Professor Yvonne Tasker. Her dissertation is concerned with the representation of female investigators and forensic science in contemporary crime thrillers on film and television. She received her B.A. from Queen's University at Kingston and her M.A. from the University of British Columbia. Her research interests focus on gender and violence within the contexts of postfeminist and postmodern media culture.

R. Colin Tait earned his Honours. B.A. in Cinema Studies at The University of Toronto and is currently an M.A. Candidate in Film Studies at the University of British Columbia. Colin's research interests include The Crime Film, Nostalgia, Transnational Cinema models and Contemporary American Film. His recent works include analyses of *I ♥Huckabees* (*UBCinephile*, 2006), *The Royal Tennenbaums* (FSAC Graduate Colloquium, 2006), *Schizopolis* (FSAC Conference 2007) in addition to essays on *Ocean's 11* and David Lynch. Currently, Colin is completing his thesis entitled "*Assassin Nation:* Theorizing the Conspiracy Film in the Early 21st Century." His essay "Politics, Class and Allegory in *Inside Man*" will be appearing in *The Spike Lee Reader* (forthcoming).

Slavoj Žižek is a Senior Reseacher in the Department of Philosophy, University of Lubljana, Slovenia, and Codirector of the Center for Humanities, Birkbeck College, University of London. His many books include, *The Parallax View, Enjoy Your Symptom!, The Metastases of Enjoyment, For They Know Not What They Do* and *The Sublime Object of Ideology*.

Containing Their Rage:
Anger and the Liberal Cinema

Jennie Carlsten

"Anger concerns the inadmissible, the intolerable, and a refusal…Without anger, politics is accommodation and influence peddling, and to write of politics without anger is to traffic with the seductions of writing."

– *Jean-Luc Nancy, La Comparution (1991)*

"Disappointed is a lover's word. What about rage?"

– *Tobin Keller (Sean Penn); The Inerpreter (2005)*

A number of films produced and distributed in the U.S. during the years of the Bush administration – films which have been identified as "Liberal" by those critics and pundits inclined to assign such labels – have revolved around the crux of personal anger and public injustice. While films such as *The Constant Gardener* (Meirelles, 2005), *25th Hour* (Lee, 2003), and *The Interpreter* (Pollack, 2005) are clearly inheritors of a tradition that includes earlier Hollywood films like *On the Waterfront* (Kazan, 1954), *Twelve Angry Men* (Lumet, 1957), and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Mulligan, 1962), the formal devices and thematic contradictions of these more recent films illuminate a phenomenon of current Liberal culture: the disavowal of anger and the discomfort with the status of anger as an inevitable, and indeed necessary, component of individual and communal recovery. Often ignored or elided, anger - specifically, the expression and containment of anger - is in fact the organizing principle of these films. The incomplete attempts to deny and defuse anger are symptomatic of a wider tendency in American, and especially Liberal American, culture, which increasingly views anger as a retrograde, undesirable force to be combated by progressively-minded individuals. Anger is a troublesome and uncomfortable concept within the Liberal camp, even as the "angry Liberal" is attacked from without by both the media and conservative spokespeople.

Hollywood has, of course, long been argued to possess a liberal bias. Whether there is any validity to such a claim is a matter that has been dealt with elsewhere and will no doubt continue to be debated. What is certainly true is that "Liberal" has meant different things in different times and

the nature of the "Liberal film" has undergone fundamental changes. For the purposes of this discussion, I am most interested in the shift that has occurred in the Bush-era, post-invasion, hybridised Hollywood-indie-international milieu. At the heart of this shift is a reorientation vis-à-vis anger. Recent Liberal filmmaking reflects an extreme discomfort with anger; *The Interpreter, 25th Hour,* and *The Constant Gardener* provide just a few examples of this discomfort and of the Liberal cinema's tensions and contradictions. How these tensions and contradictions are managed and expressed is largely a question of form, and within the recent Liberal narrative cinema, it becomes possible to identify a subset of films that together might be called a disorderly Liberal cinema.[1]

Within a social context that promotes forgiveness and positivity as fundamentals of personal happiness and spiritual fulfillment, the Liberal code encourages followers to view the wounds of history with an eye to reconciliation. Less happily, in its attempts to promote compromise, tolerance and compassion, the code suggests that there is an enlightened way to remember, grieve, and recover from loss, both as a community and as an individual. In so doing, the code denies the productive role of anger in moving individuals to action and restoring the injured self.

In early 2007, amid recognized opposition to the war in Iraq and following the November 2006 elections that put Democrats in power in the House, there is an undeniable sense of frustration with the Bush administration and the attendant lies and misinformation. Liberal anger has been building in the face of Bush's foreign policy, attacks on civil rights at home and abroad, and the widely perceived arrogance and abusiveness of the administration. While this may come as no surprise to many observers, what *is* surprising is the stunted quality of this anger. The public response seems muted and insufficient. One might ask why individual anger has not translated into greater collective action. The rage seen elsewhere in the world is expressed with far less vehemence within the borders of the United States.

Cynicism or defeatism might explain some of this. More than this, we must consider a cultural climate that disallows liberal anger. Within this climate, a Democratic presidential candidate effectively loses the race the minute he loses his temper, as Howard Dean famously did. Activist mother Cindy Sheehan, her son killed in Iraq, is seen by many as an embarrassment for her refusal to suppress her fury and grieve quietly. And when rape victim Liz Seccuro receives an emailed confession from her unprosecuted attacker, 25 years later, the public debates her right to justice on chat boards and in the media, many demanding that she 'let it go' and forgive her assailant.[2]

"Within a social context that promotes forgiveness and positivity as fundamentals of personal happiness and spiritual fulfillment, the Liberal code encourages followers to view the wounds of history with an eye to reconciliation."

Robert A.F. Thurman, in *Anger* (the fifth book in an Oxford University series on the Seven Deadly Sins), both describes and endorses the predominant Western liberal perspective on anger, a perspective which has shaped the American Liberal ethos. Thurman portrays anger as a socially and personally destructive force, and advocates a Buddhist-influenced spiritual attack on anger in individuals and in society. He argues that anger, once viewed in both Eastern and Western cultures as deadly (e.g., a mortal sin) and associated with hell, unfortunate reincarnations, or other eternal agonies, has lost much of its overtly spiritual power: anger "is not really thought of in the contemporary religious West as that serious a problem" (Thurman, 17). The associations with the soul have been replaced, says Thurman, with an understanding of anger as a negative emotion; concerns are no longer spiritual, but health-oriented. Thurman goes so far as to argue that "…folks are fond of anger…" and he decries the attempts by modern Western women and minorities to harness anger as a tool against oppression (18). Despite Thurman`s concern that his is a minority view in a society that does not take anger seriously enough, his propositions – anger is dangerous to both physical and spiritual health; anger is not a tool but a crutch – are more widely reflected in the contemporary American Liberal rhetoric.

Thurman goes on to compare this holistic view to the view of anger presented in certain streams of Eastern spiritual thought – Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism – which propose "enlightenment" as the evolution out of anger

[1] The word "disorderly" here will, I hope, invoke multiple meanings, as these films are both "lacking regular or logical order or arrangement" (*The American Heritage Dictionary, 2nd College Edition*, 1985) and "turbulent or unruly; fractious or undocile" (*Roget's II: The New Thesaurus, 3rd Edition*, 1995).

[2] "Rape Victim Seeks Long Path to Justice". CBS News, February 24, 2007 http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/02/24/ap/national/mainD8NGCND00.shtml

wherein you can love not only your friends but also and equally your enemies, wanting them all to be as happy as you, at the extreme end of the virtuous circle of mutual surrender beyond not only hells of fire but also temporary heavens of superficial pleasure, in the supreme bliss of freedom beyond all dualities such as self and other (39).

Thurman asserts that modern Western individuals, by adopting this evolutionary practice, can achieve physical, social, and spiritual contentment.

emerging field of "Happiness Studies"), and spiritualism. "The problem," explains Ehrenreich,

> for anyone with a lingering loyalty to secular rationalism, is that the prescriptions don't stop at behavior. Like our country's ambient Protestantism, the Cult of Positivity demands not only acts but faith. It's not enough to manifest positivity through a visibly positive attitude; you must establish it as one of the very structures of your mind, whether or not it is justified by the actual circumstances (Ehrenreich, 10)

"There is an obvious tension between the 'Cult of Positivity' and the anger, fear, and apprehension felt by individual citizens. This tension emerges, unsurprisingly, in the cinema."

Film and cultural criticism, where they address the presence or absence of anger at all, tend to treat anger as though it were interchangeable with violence. Predictably, Thurman likewise confuses anger with violence in his discussion, and sets up a false opposition which places anger against love and compassion. Finally, Thurman discusses anger in terms of addictive behaviour. This conception of anger – as something natural and understandable, yet at the same time, a weakness to be conquered because of its dangers to physical, psychic, and social health and harmony – has come to dominate progressive thinking about this complex emotion.

Far from being 'fond of anger,' Liberals (and the Liberal cinema) are fearful and distrustful of the concept. Anger, along with a gamut of other 'negative emotions,' is seen as hazardous not only to individual health, but to the liberal vision. Increasingly, the refusal of anger is treated as a natural component of the progressive Liberal worldview.[3] The conception of anger as a wholly negative force is rarely questioned, although Barbara Ehrenreich has recently, and refreshingly, touched on it with a critical look at the main stream view of personal happiness. Ehrenreich describes the current of over-reliance on forgiveness and optimism as a "Cult of Positivity"; a tide that encompasses the self-improvement industry, corners of academia (such as the

This positivity means not only hoping for the best, forgiving one's enemies, or putting one's faith in the inherent goodness of others; but more insidiously, in demanding such hope, faith, and forgiveness from others. Ehrenreich quotes Martin Seligman, a major proponent of positive psychology, as conceding that such positivity is only possible in nations that "are wealthy and not in civil turmoil and not at war." (*ibid*.) Confusingly, Seligman seems to intend that the U.S. be included in this grouping.

There is an obvious tension between the "Cult of Positivity" and the anger, fear, and apprehension felt by individual citizens.[4] This tension emerges, unsurprisingly, in the cinema. Within this climate, the so-called "Liberal" films of Hollywood and independent cinema are notable for their engagement with the notions of anger and reconciliation. Films like *Traffic* (Soderbergh, 2000), *Babel (*Iñárritu, 2006), *The Constant Gardener*, *The 25th Hour*, *The Interpreter, 21 Grams (*Iñárritu, 2003)*, The Life of David Gale* (Parker, 2003), and *Syriana* (Gaghan, 2005), to name a few, have been identified (or more pejoratively, accused) as Liberal filmmaking.

In each, a wounded protagonist navigates disillusionment, loss, and the defeat of ideals, in service of the film's ostensible Liberal agenda. To varying degrees these films are critical of the U.S. Administration, as well as being anti-

---

[3] In considering whether a Liberal worldview *necessarily* demands such a conception of anger (I argue that it does not), one might turn to the work George Lakoff has done in defining the core principles of the Liberal American ethos. In electoral terms, argues Lakoff, the most important points of identification are values and cultural stereotypes. Together, these compose a Liberal model of the word, what Lakoff calls a "nurturant parent" model centered around values of empathy and responsibility. For a fuller discussion of the Liberal model, see, e.g., Lakoff's *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*.

[4] Of course, the rejection of an enforced positivity can also be found in the model of survivor therapy put forward by therapists such as Judith Herman. Herman identifies three stages to recovery: the establishment of safety; remembrance and mourning; and reconnection with 'ordinary' life. In the stage of remembrance and mourning, the individual tells the story of his or her trauma. The goal is not catharsis or exorcism, but integration. The action of organizing and narrating one's story – through the (highly cinematic) techniques of flooding or testimony – permits that integration. The link between narrative, anger, and recovery is explicit; in this second stage, the individual expresses rage and chooses how to remember and grieve on his or her own terms. Resistance to mourning, explains Herman, can appear as "…a fantasy of magical resolution through revenge, forgiveness, or compensation" (Herman, 189). If the revenge fantasy arises from helplessness and imagines a restoration of power, the forgiveness fantasy is just another attempt at empowerment. The survivor "imagines that she can transcend her rage and erase the impact of the trauma through a willed, defiant act of love" (*ibid*).

corporate, anti-death penalty, pro-environment, anti-U.S. aggression, and/or anti-war in general or specific terms. They take a social problem perspective on crime and a sympathetic view of immigration rights and minority concerns. Where they suggest solutions, they tend to favour Democratic policies. While some L/liberals might in fact wish to distance themselves from the particulars of these films, the consensus – in the form of critical reviews, media promotion, and audience discourse – ensures their Liberal designation.

The immediate post-9/11 tendency towards escapism has given way slowly to what Mark Cousins calls a "new engagement with reality" (Cousins, 2006). This reality, it should be noted, remains somewhat removed; while films like *Crash* (Haggis, 2004) and *World Trade Center* (Stone, 2006) deal directly with recent America, more frequently, the Liberal films consider events at a remove, geographically or temporally, using 'other' realities to comment on the present. While Cousins praises the increased political involvement of both Hollywood and independent cinema, post-9/11, Slavoj Žižek decries the "abstention from the political" that marks the same films; by obscuring the cause behind events, the films retreat into abstraction (Žižek, 2006). Both points are instructive. In fact, there is a dichotomy within this Liberal cinema, which approaches the political even as it shies away. At the heart of this dichotomy lies our discomfort with anger, our insistence on the silver lining which is the triumph of the human spirit, on the containment of rage, and our desire to view even the most horrific events as opportunities for forgiveness and personal redemption. The Liberal films manage to do what is not permitted elsewhere: they are pissed off, and they say so. Ultimately, though, Hollywood demands not merely or necessarily closure or the happy ending, but containment. Anger is expressed, but it is also harnessed, controlled, and finally dissipated. To a great extent, how successfully the films are able to engage in this pursuit is matched by their use of disordered narrative structures

Among the Liberal films named above, *The Interpreter* is perhaps the one most aptly labelled a 'Hollywood' film, in terms of its production, cast, and crew as well as in its adherence to classical Hollywood's stylistic conventions. *The Interpreter*, moreover, embodies Hollywood's unhappy relationship with Liberal anger. It is the clearest example of the accepted Liberal stance on anger, particularly in its inability to recognize or reconcile the contradictions in its own position. Ultimately, the film's ideological posturing disturbs, not because it is insincere, but because it is hollow and self-defeating.

The Interpreter deals with similar subject matter to the rest of the Bush-era Liberal dramas. Silvia (Nicole Kidman) is a U.N. interpreter, an idealistic woman raised in the fictional African nation of Motobo. It is gradually revealed that Silvia has a history of revolutionary political activity before her arrival in the U.S. and her apparent conversion to mainstream Liberal politics. In her capacity as a U.N. employee, Silvia overhears a threat to Matoban President Edward Zuwani, the genocidal dictator responsible for the deaths of her family. Zuwani, it is explained, is visiting the U.N. in an attempt to gain sympathy and avoid international trial for his crimes against humanity. Silvia's dark personal history – including the loss of her family and her romantic and political involvement with Zuwani's revolutionary opponent – makes her not only an ambivalent witness, but a likely suspect in a plot against the dictator. Tobin Keller (Sean Penn) is the Secret Service agent who begins by investigating the plot and subsequently becomes Silvia's confidant and protector. Tobin has suffered a traumatic loss of his own: his unfaithful wife was recently killed in an auto accident caused by her lover. Their anger provides a shared motivation and connection for Silvia and Tobin, both of whom, it is suggested, have withdrawn into isolation and passivity.

Some of the film's ideological murkiness arises from its indecision about Silvia's character. On the one hand, she is set up as the moral centre of the film. "She *is* the U.N.," says another character, and certainly Silvia is presented as a model for a pro-United Nations, internationalist, liberal citizen of the world. Sure, she has engaged in violent acts and been associated with unsavoury characters in the past, but Silvia is now older, wiser, and craves what she calls "quiet diplomacy". In the film's heavy-handed climax, she forces Zuwani, at gunpoint, to read from his own autobiography's dedication: "the gunfire around us makes it hard to hear." And yet – the point is precisely this: Silvia achieves at gunpoint what she could not as a quiet diplomat, not only coming to terms with her past by confronting Zuwani and averting his assassination, but even, the film absurdly suggests, forcing the dictator to confront his own troubled conscience.

"At the heart of this dichotomy lies our discomfort with anger, our insistence on the silver lining which is the triumph of the human spirit, on the containment of rage, and our desire to view even the most horrific events as opportunities for forgiveness and personal redemption"

The Interpreter disguises its ambivalence about Silvia's motivations and value system within a conventional thriller plot, positioning her as a familiar femme fatale whose "real" identity is part of the mystery – is she the vulnerable heroine or the dangerous villianess of the piece? This, in turn, reduces Tobin to a conventional hero/patsy figure, and the film to an action-thriller-whodunnit, rather than following through on the emotional and political complexities at which it gestures.

"In their use of flashback and disordered narrative, the disorderly cinema questions our memory of events, showing the distance between reality and the figuring of events."

The film's ambivalence about anger and its place in recovery is apparent too, in its regard for the invented Matoban tradition of the "forgiveness ritual". With considerable condescension, the Matoban Ku are suggested to be closer to enlightenment, their traditional ways holding valuable lessons for the cynical Westerners. Silvia explains to Tobin that through the forgiveness ritual, the Ku are able to mourn their dead, release their anger, and move on. The ritual involves binding an accused killer, and dropping him into the water; the family of the killer's victim may then choose to either save the killer or let him drown. If the family lets the offender die, says Silvia, "they'll have justice but spend the rest of their lives in mourning. But if they save him, if they admit that life isn't always just, that very act can take away their sorrow. Vengeance is a lazy form of grief." Her speech could come straight from a self-help bestseller, in its insistence on forgiveness and its condemnation of any (lazy/unenlightened/morally suspect) mourner who makes the wrong choice. "Justice" and "recovery" are presented as incompatible events. Tobin's acknowledgment that he cannot forgive either his wife or the rival who caused her death – "not a very Ku thing to do" – is a simultaneous admission that he is in need of some serious Liberal intervention.

Interestingly, the film reveals an internal disquiet when it rejects another piece of the Ku tradition: the refusal to name the dead. When Tobin rightly identifies Silvia's anger over the deaths of her family, she silences him with a finger to his lips: "we don't name the dead." Naming the dead, she later explains, is seen as an obstacle to moving forwards. This, of course, is in direct opposition to Silvia's brother Simon and his compulsive list-making and naming; ultimately, Silvia obtains the notebooks in which Simon has methodically listed the names, ages, and cause of death of Zuwani's victims. Silvia adds Simon's name and, in anticipation of her meeting with Zuwani, her own. As the camera tracks down the empty halls of the U.N. and over the rooftops and skyline of New York, Silvia's disembodied voice reads out the names. Whether this act of naming brings about any sort of actual justice for the Matobans goes unaddressed; clearly, what counts here is that it has brought some closure to Silvia, allowing her to exorcise her personal anger and finally heal. This closing sequence is followed by an epilogue in which Tobin names his own dead wife, and the two mourners part ways. The disagreement within the film itself reflects the very real struggle played out all over the world in the wake of genocidal and repressive regimes: what does it mean to forgive and forget; what is the difference between mourning and wallowing; how should people commemorate their losses? The constant play in the film between the words "dead" and "gone" underscores the film's own uncertainty.

The Interpreter uses not only conventional characterization but conventional editing, in a mode of linear storytelling that distances the events of the filmic present from those of the past. The overall effect is one of reflection on, rather than interrogation of, the past. Looking at a photograph of her younger, revolutionary self, Silvia is able to say "that's not me." The form of the film reinforces its thematic disavowal of anger. Conversely, other Liberal films seem to insist "that IS me/you/us," using form to draw explicit connections between past and present, anger and recovery, loss and the responsibility to take action. In these films, the use of flashback and disordered chronology dominates.

Flashback and framing devices have been particularly associated in Hollywood cinema with film noir and melodrama, where they lend themselves handily to psychoanalytic readings. By returning the viewer to the past along with the mourner/victim, flashback becomes a means to demonstrate the process of recovery. In this way, flashback replicates the second stage of recovery described by Herman *et al*, shaping past events in a meaningful narrative, and may function as flooding or testimony, parallel the 'talking cure,' and invoke Freudian models of associative memory. In the recent Liberal films, flashback may be used quite simply, as in *The Interpreter*, where it serves (in one isolated usage) hermeneutically to unlock an enigma and simultaneously aid and demonstrate Tobin`s interpretation of events. Increasingly, though, the Liberal cinema uses flashback, bifurcated storylines, and anachrony to create interrogative and critical relationships to history, marking a distinct shift from the expository use of such techniques in classical Hollywood as well as from the poetics of modernism.

Maureen Turim, writing on the use of flashback in cinema prior to the 1990s, points to certain ideological implications

of the flashback. Both heightening viewer awareness of structure and producing extreme identification by shortening the emotional distance between viewer and protagonist, a narrative relayed through flashback most frequently links discrete events in a causal pattern, endows events with an aspect of fatalism, and promotes moral didacticism. History, presented in this way, is further subjectified and "urges us to assume that the subjective reaction of a fictional individual somehow constitutes a collective subjectivity, a shared experience" (Turim, 103). Modernist filmmaking, though, has frequently used flashback to interrogate those same effects. The new class of Liberal films owes as much to the Modernist inversion as to the models of film noir and melodrama. Clearly, flashback in the Liberal films is investigational and confessional, but it is also used ironically and self-consciously to call into question the viewer's own relationship with and understanding of history and memory.

In the Liberal films, flashback often conveys a "certain tone of critique and retrospective guilt" such as that Turim identifies in the Hollywood traditions of noir and melodrama (122). More essentially, the disorderly Liberal cinema employs the technique to invoke the audience's sense of irony and to place emphasis on the absences in the narrative, those pieces of memory and history which are not known or explained, or for which our explanations must be called into question. Most significantly, perhaps, the use of flashback and, more generally, disordered narration, effectively counters in these films the suppression of history perpetuated by the Conservative discourse. Nowhere is this desire to suppress history more evident than in the rhetoric surrounding the terrorist attacks on the U.S. and the subsequent U.S. response. It has been observed that the isolation of "9/11" as a singular date, alongside the use of the term "Ground Zero," suggests that the story of the present political reality begins with the attack on the Twin Towers. Our rhetorical framework conveniently "posits this day as one that is simultaneously without history and the beginning of history." (Beckman, 2004) In the disordered films of the Liberal cinema, we are carried beyond finite points and singular events, unfixing the narrative and suggesting that there are multiple places at which to begin to tell the stories of our national and personal disasters. The careful and 'rational' ordering of events gives way to an enraged spilling forth, much as, in an intimate argument, speakers might jump between the immediate offense and that varied slights and insults accumulated throughout the course of a relationship.

Addressing the trend of "movies…that move forward dramatically by going backward in time", David Denby points to *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino, 1994) as the archetype, and claims that Tarantino explicitly created an impression of the "eternal present" that nevertheless links moments through their causal impact on one another (Denby, 2007). Denby goes on to contrast the use of the disordered narrative in films like *Pulp Fiction* with the use in later films, including those mentioned here. He rightly points out that the effect is quite different, although his analysis of that difference is, I believe, mistaken. In *Babel*, for instance, Denby finds the disjointed nature of events to be "hostile" to the viewer; "the editing withholds information, not so much to create suspense as to uncouple the intent of an act from its result" (*ibid.*). In fact, this hostility might be seen as a deliberate effect, not the unintended and unfortunate consequence Denby identifies. More accurately, this hostility is a manifestation of anger, not (only) with the viewer, but on behalf of the viewer and expressing in form that which the narrative struggles to contain.

"Most significantly, perhaps, the use of flashback and, more generally, disordered narration, effectively counters in these films the suppression of history perpetuated by the Conservative discourse."

The Constant Gardener and *25th Hour* are but two examples of the disorderly Liberal cinema, and provide some alternative to the Hollywood model of *The Interpreter*. Each uses the device of the flashback to present the hero's personal loss as an enigma to be solved through the gradual accumulation of clues; on one level, the declared mystery (who betrayed one protagonist; what is the conspiracy hidden from the other) and on another level, the recovery of the two men as they move from passivity to anger and action.

The Constant Gardener, directed by Fernando Meirelles and based on a John LeCarre novel, tells the story of Justin Quayle, a British diplomat stationed in Africa. His wife Tessa has been murdered and in his grief, he begins to look into the circumstances of her death. Tessa is an idealist and an activist, who may or may not have been an unfaithful wife; she died while investigating the actions of Western pharmaceutical companies in Africa. Justin is the "constant gardener" of the film's title: loyal and placid, more inclined to parroted speech than action, unwilling to take risks on behalf of others. While Justin is shown to be essentially a kind and moral person, he is not a whistleblower or activist. His political inaction is paralleled by a lack of demonstrative emotion; Justin admires but is also embarrassed by his wife's outspoken and passionate ways.

Viewing Tessa's mutilated corpse, Justin shows no outward emotion; he merely identifies the body as his companion turns away, vomiting.

Critics have rightly objected to the film's self-righteousness, air of 'white guilt,' and its condescension towards its African subjects in particular. For the most part, critics of the film have made the tacit assumption that the purpose of the film is to educate, enlighten, or ennoble the viewer; in short, they have read the film as being "about" Tessa. Tessa is, in fact, a paragon of the Liberal code: forgiving and able to set aside her anger for the greater good. Having just lost her own baby, Tessa nurses the child of an AIDS victim in her hospital bed; her fight against the pharmaceutical companies is motivated not by anger, but by love, and she is positioned as a willing martyr to the Liberal cause.

On the other hand, it is possible, and more productive, to read the film as being "about" Justin and one individual's movement through the first shock of loss into anger, reshaping incomprehensible events into a reasoned narrative and taking action. Tessa is not, after all, the sympathetic centre of the film; it is Justin. Tessa's character is revealed in fragments, through flashbacks, which the viewer must piece together. Ambiguous and contradictory pieces of information are presented, rendering Tessa an unreliable site of identification or moral attachment. Once allowed expression, it is Justin's anger which propels the narrative and with which the viewer can relate. The film reflects the dangers of indifference and inaction. Redemption, insofar as it is permitted, comes through anger, not forgiveness (Justin's sacrificial death is the only possible ending, of course, as this anger must finally be contained). *The Constant Gardener* has been described as "the angriest story LeCarre has ever told" (Ebert, 2005) and it seems that, for many, this open anger is the most difficult aspect of a problematic film.

Like *The Constant Gardener*, Spike Lee's *25th Hour* operates in two registries of grief and anger; Montgomery "Monty" Brogan's personal story of loss is set amid the larger context of 9/11 and the impact on the city of New York. The film centres around Monty's last day before entering prison to serve a long sentence for drug-dealing. Monty spends his last day on the outside saying goodbye to family and friends while also learning which of his loved ones betrayed him to the Drug Enforcement Administration. The film makes extensive use of both motivated flashbacks and montage to account for the events of Monty's downfall and to detail the complex and tense relationships between the various characters. Anger is the unifying element of the film; every character and every scene is marked by the emotion and it is this anger, rather than an unfolding narrative, that provides the momentum and relationships between scenes.

The central moment of the film occurs when Monty confronts his reflection in a bathroom mirror. Seeing the words "fuck you" written on the mirror, Monty launches into a furious rant: "Fuck me? Fuck you! Fuck you and this whole city and everyone in it." He goes on to curse, in turn, everyone from Enron executives to Arab terrorists to George Bush and Dick Cheney, Jesus Christ, every identifiable ethnic group, his best friend, girlfriend, father, and even the city of New York itself: "Let the fires rage. Let it burn to fuckin' ash then let the waters rise and submerge this whole, rat-infested place." Finally, a defeated Monty looks himself in the face and concludes "No, fuck you, Montgomery Brogan. You had it all and then you threw it away, you dumb fuck." Monty then tries to scratch the words off the mirror, but can't.

"Anger is the unifying element of the film; every character and every scene is marked by the emotion and it is this anger, rather than an unfolding narrative, that provides the momentum and relationships between scenes."

It is a highly performative scene: stage lighting and Monty's exaggerated gestures (gestures not replicated by his 'reflection', which in fact stands still and provides a surrogate audience) create the effect of a rehearsed soliloquy. As Monty speaks, his performance is intercut with individual tracking shots of the groups he attacks. In this scene, Monty not only acknowledges the depths of his rage, and his own responsibility, but invites the audience to participate with him in his performance and to identify with both his anger and his guilt. Anger is presented as something that is not 'right' or 'wrong,' but unavoidable. Though it may be shocking and distasteful, it cannot be ignored but must be encountered.

The disjointed nature of the film's narration adds to the effect. The film moves from one angry moment to the next, without reconciliation. The eventual attempt at closure and containment – Monty's choice to accept his fate and go to prison – is framed as artificial and incomplete. By including a lengthy montage of an imagined future in which Monty escapes and lives 'happily ever after,' Lee creates a future which is more 'true' than the unrepresented, but more plausible, alternative eventually chosen. This imaginary future contains the film's only images of peaceful stability and the sequence is notable for its static camera, muted colours, and lack of tension. The viewer knows, though, that this is an *imagined* condition: nothing is really this simple

and like the words on the mirror, the reality of Monty's loss – and of our own loss and anger – cannot be erased.

In their use of flashback and disordered narrative, the disorderly cinema questions our memory of events, showing the distance between reality and the figuring of events. The truth and the retelling, the imagined and the visible, are juxtaposed, as in *The Constant Gardener*, where the events of Justin's murder are intercut with the two very different (and equally incomplete) eulogies given at his memorial service. In this way, the disorderly cinema appeals to the viewer not just to remember, but to provide context, seek out the truth, and hold our speakers responsible. Closure is achieved through the actions of protagonists who are forced to accept responsibility not only for their own misdeeds, but those of their communities. Resolution may not be violent, but it is always angry. In their attempts to contain that anger, the films call upon the model of classical Hollywood and privilege personal redemption over any sort of collective action. Like dockworker Terry Malloy, Justin and Monty are compelled to turn their grief to anger and act; whereupon their anger is quickly contained - and the credits roll. Monty cannot be allowed to take his anger out into the world, except in a fantasy. Ultimately, too, both men must turn their anger inward. Monty's rage against himself is made manifest when he first begs and then provokes his best friend to beat him to the point of disfigurement. Justin resolves the narrative conflict of *The Constant Gardener* through his own death. Justin's anger dies with him; his is not the triumphant walk down the pier, as in *On the Waterfront*, but a walk into the white light by which the film represents both death and memory.

The Liberal code insists on this containment. In doing so, it may produce more than simply films with confused ideologies and unsatisfying resolutions. In language that seems very much in tune with the Liberal disavowal of anger, Robert Thurman uses the analogy of fire to explain his view.

> When things catch fire, you give maximum attention to putting it out, using all reasonable methods at your disposal to do so as quickly as possible. You do not first feel bitterly angry at the fire, shout and scream at it, curse its name and so on. You think of that as a waste of time and energy. So you need not bother to get angry with the unenlightened when they harm you, just make every effort to minimize or avoid the harm (Thurman, 85).

Yet once the fire is out, we may be right, and we are certainly human, if we feel anger with the flames for the damage they have caused. The emotion guides us to protect against the recurrence of fire, it teaches us the power of fire, and it forces us to acknowledge our own responsibility for the conditions that led to the fire in the first place. To pretend otherwise seems dishonest and dangerous. Ehrenreich writes, "what is truly sinister about the positivity cult is that it seems to reduce our tolerance of other people's suffering…creating an empathy deficit that pushes ever more people into a harsh insistence on positivity in others" (11). At its unrealized best, a Liberal cinema may address this empathy deficit, force us to recognize our individual and collective responsibilities, and allow the necessary and healthy expression of anger.

"In their use of flashback and disordered narrative, the disorderly cinema questions our memory of events, showing the distance between reality and the figuring of events."

Works Cited

Beckman, Karen. "Feminism in the Time of Violence." *The Scholar and Feminist Online* Winter 2004. http://www.barnard.edu/sfonline/reverb/beckman1.htm

Cousins, Mark. "Cinema Gets Real." Prospect June 2006. http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/article_details.php?id=7458

Denby, David. "The New Disorder." New Yorker March 5, 2007. 80-85.

"Disorderly." Def 1. *The American Heritage Dictionary, Second College Edition*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985.

"Disorderly." Def 2. *Roget's II: The New Thesaurus, Third Edition*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995.

Ebert, Roger. "The Constant Gardener." September 1, 2005.

http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20050901/REVIEWS/50826001/1023

Ehrenreich, Barbara. "Pathologies of Hope." *Harper's Magazine* February 2007: 9-11.

Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: Basic Books, 1997.

Lakoff, George. *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

Nancy, Jean-Luc. "La Comparution / The Compearance: From the Existence of 'Communism' to the Community of 'Existence.'" *Political Theory* 1992, Vol. 20, No. 3: 371-398.

"Rape Victim Seeks Long Path to Justice". CBS News, February 24, 2007 http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/02/24/ap/national/mainD8NGCND00.shtml

Thurman, Robert A.F. *Anger*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Turim, Maureen. *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History*. New York: Routledge, 1989.

Žižek, Slavoj. "On 9/11, New Yorkers faced the fire in the minds of men." The Guardian September 11, 2006. http://www.guardian.co.uk/print/0,,329573427-103677,00.html

The Global Social Problem Film

Andrew deWaard

As Justin Rosenberg famously stated: "'Globalization' was the *Zeitgeist* of the 1990s" (2). While debates continue to rage surrounding the concept of globalization and globalization theory, it is undeniable that we now live in a much more "globalized" world than we did fifty, twenty, even ten years ago. In typical Hollywood style, it took some time for mainstream cinema to embody characteristics of this sweeping socio-politico-economic change, but its effects have now most certainly arrived. Hollywood has, of course, always been a global institution. But like globalization itself, the transformation is not so much a matter of innovation, but degree. The changes taking place – both globally and cinematically – are not necessarily new, but what is new is the rapid rate at which they are occurring. From worldwide release patterns and digital technology[1] to piracy and the New International Division of Cultural Labour,[2] the changes are happening exceptionally quick. One such development – simultaneously an embodiment as well as an artistic response to transnational flows – is the emerging cycle of global social problem films.

My case studies in elucidating the global social problem film (the GSP)[3] will be Steven Soderbergh's *Traffic* (2000), with its three intersecting plot lines exploring the illegal Mexican-American drug trade from the perspective of user, enforcer, politician and trafficker, and Stephen Gaghan's *Syriana* (2005), a geopolitical thriller that explores the political, military, economic, legal and social aspects of the global oil industry. Another recent example of the GSP is *Fast Food Nation* (Linklater, 2006), the fictional interpretation of Eric Schlosser's expose of the same name detailing the economic, environmental and social consequences of the fast food industry, weaving stories from across the United States and Mexico. *Babel* (Iñárritu, 2006) is another: this multi-language, globe-spanning mediation on communication follows a chain of events linking an American tourist couple, a Japanese father and daughter, two Morrocan boys, and a Mexican nanny's cross-border trip with two American children. *Blood Diamond* (Zwick, 2006) tackles conflict diamonds in war zones, *The Constant Gardener* (Meirelles, 2005) takes on the global pharmaceutical industry, *Munich* (Spielberg, 2005) explicates international terrorism, and *Lord of War* (Niccol, 2005) satirizes global arms distribution. The GSP is a result of postmodern genre hybridity, an integral characteristic of New Hollywood. As seminal genre theorist Steve Neale notes, "New Hollywood can be distinguished from the old by the hybridity of its genres and films… this hybridity is governed by the multi-media synergies characteristic of the New Hollywood, by the mixing and recycling of new and old and low art and high art media products in the modern (or post-modern) world" (248). The GSP's hybridity is comprised of three main ingredients: the original social problem film of early Hollywood cinema, the distinct influence of documentary/docudrama, and the multilinear, web-of-life (or as will later be theorized by way of Deleuze: rhizomatic) plotline. There is usually a dash of thriller, a pinch of sardonic wit, and the whole bastardized recipe occurs in a global melting pot.

Socially Well-Adjusted

In what might well be considered the textbook for the social problem film, *The Hollywood Social Problem Film: Madness, Despair, and Politics from the Depression to the Fifties* provides an extremely thorough and systematic analysis of the social problem film. Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy explicitly define the genre according to its didacticism:

[1] Robert E. Davis, "The Instantaneous Worldwide Release: Coming Soon to Everyone, Everywhere," in *Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader*, ed. Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 73-80.

[2] Toby Miller, Nitin Govil, John McMurria, and Richard Maxwell, *Global Hollywood 2* (London: British Film Institute, 2005).

[3] In a nod to Miller et al.'s convenient dropping of a letter in their acronym, NICL, I've taken the liberty of dropping a letter in mine, GSP, to parallel such other globe-impacting acronyms as GNP and GDP.

"the central dramatic conflict revolves around the interaction of the individual with social institutions (such as government, business, political movements, etc.)… it deals with social themes very much on the surface of the dramatic action" (viii). Similarly, another look at the social problem film finds it "distinguished by the way its subject was usually given as much weight as its stars or story: the films used individual human dramas to present a morality tale with wider social repercussions" (Brooke). Notable examples of the original social problem film include *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (LeRoy, 1932), Frank Capra's *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936) and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), and *Best Years of Our Lives* (Wyler, 1946).

Roffman and Purdy place the social problem film's rise and peak during the 30s and 40s, though Kay Sloan locates its origins during the silent era with what he terms *The Loud Silents*. The social problem film can be located periodically during the tumultuous times of the 60s and 70s, with Watergate, the civil rights movement, and the Vietnam War providing ample social strife. The 80s are typically remembered for the blockbuster's rise to preeminence, but independent auteurs kept the spirit of the social problem film alive with films such as John Sayles' *Matewan* (1987) and Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989). But the recent wave of social problem-focused Hollywood films suggests that the GSP constitutes a new and emboldened cycle in the social problem genre. If its forefather was concerned with an individual in conflict with a social institution, the GSP exponentially multiplies both dimensions. Rather than focusing on a single individual, we get a multitude of interconnected individuals; instead of a solitary institution, we get the network of social institutions. Both *Traffic* and *Syriana* follow a series of individuals in their interactions with the intertwined systems of law, military, economics, and government. Specifically how this is accomplished will be considered below, but first we can trace the GSP's origins in the original social problem film.

Roffman and Purdy locate two key reasons for the emergence of the social problem film, reasons we will witness in the emergence of the GSP as well. The first was the strong sense of social consciousness that grew out of the Depression and the subsequent rise of fascism. Along with the novels of John Steinbeck and the songs of Woody Guthrie, audiences were hungry for social and political commentary. Seventy years later, the GSP is in a similar situation, albeit a vastly different social and political climate. Though *Traffic* predates it, the attacks on the World Trade Center of 9/11 mark a certain entrance – whether desired or not – onto the global stage for America.

As Slavoj Žižek remarked, "On September 11, the USA was given the opportunity to realize what kind of a world it was part of" (47). While Žižek astutely identifies America's largely ideologically-reaffirming response, we might also witness a certain global social consciousness arising out of the ashes of Ground Zero. Though certainly not limited to the events of 9/11, this emerging global consciousness – a concern for the global ramifications of our actions and decisions – parallels the one that gave birth to the original social problem film.

"There is usually a dash of thriller, a pinch of sardonic wit, and the whole bastardized recipe occurs in a global melting pot."

The second major factor in the development of the original social problem was the "golden era" of the Hollywood studio system. Guided by the Production Code, a basic set of conventions and a consistent ideological framework was established which propelled Hollywood to central prominence in the popular culture landscape. The social problem film was able to capitalize on Hollywood's studio formula and present social problems that complied with the Code's ideological viewpoint. From the standpoint of production, the GSP is in a similar situation through which it can exploit the Hollywood system. Rather than a studio formula, the GSP is a product of the middle-tier that developed in the 1990s between the "independents" and the "majors": the "major independent." Following in the footsteps of Disney's success with Miramax, every major studio acquired a stable of subsidiaries (sometimes referred to as "stindies" or "mini-majors") in order to profit from notoriety gained at the Academy Awards and prestigious film festivals.[4] Negotiating the fine line between art and commerce, the major independents provide the opportunity for big-budget, celebrity-starring, heavily-marketed films that can still retain their artistic merit and message to thrive within a landscape dominated by blockbuster filmmaking. Examples of this new mode of production, *Traffic* was developed with Universal's USA Films (now Focus Features) and *Syriana* was developed by Soderbergh's own production company Section Eight Ltd. (a partnership with George Clooney) and Participant Productions (Jeff Skoll's production company that focuses on films which inspire social change), with financing from Warner Brothers. The product of an emerging global consciousness as well as fortuitous industry developments, the GSP is in a unique position with which to raise awareness of pertinent global problems.

Keeping it Real

Documentary filmmaking – and its offshoot, docudrama – is the second key influence for the global social problem film. As the primary focus of

the GSP is shedding light on a real-world problem, the effort to achieve a sense of realism is vital. Stylistically, the use of ostentatious cinematography is rare, but if used, serves a utilitarian function. *Traffic*, for example, uses distinctive colour palettes to clearly distinguish its three plotlines: the East Coast scenes are shot in bright daylight to produce icy blue, monochromatic tones; the Mexican scenes are overexposed and use 'tobacco' filters for grainy, bleached-out sepia tones; and the San Diego scenes use the risky technique of 'flashing' the negative for a halo effect to complement the vibrant hues. Documentary-invoking handheld camerawork often compliments this realist, utilitarian cinematography.

The use of graphic matches with sound bridges is another stylistic convention of the GSP, its editing embodying its objective to find and explore global connections. In the conclusion of *Syriana*, for instance, a shot of the videotaped burial requests of a young Pakistani terrorist, Wasim (Mazhar Munir), slowly fades into a graphically-matched shot of the energy analyst's (Matt Damon) sole surviving son, while Wasim's chilling dialogue bridges the edit: "From the dust a new person will be created." The toll this oil addiction will have on future generations across the globe is rendered explicit by this stylistic convention.

Primarily, realism in the GSP is produced through a reliance on non-fiction resources in the scriptwriting process. Although based on the 1989 British television miniseries *Traffik* (Reid, 1989), Stephen Gaghan made significant changes to his adaptation after a year's worth of obsessive research, interviews with key political figures in Washington, and investigative trips to San Diego and Tijuana. Most notably, the drug cartels were shifted from Columbia to Mexico to correspond with the real-life relocation of drug production that occurred in the preceding decade. Another element of realism is Gaghan's own drug addiction, which, according to Sharon Waxman's account, started

in high school (the basis for Caroline, the prepschool drug abuser) and continued throughout pre-production of the film.

Syriana has a similar non-fiction background, including its confusing title. The term 'Syriana' is a metaphor for foreign intervention in the Middle East, used by Washington think-tanks to describe a hypothetical reshaping of the region to ensure continued access to oil. The screenplay is loosely adapted[5] from former CIA case officer Robert Baer's memoirs, *See No Evil: The True Story of a Ground Soldier in the CIA's War Against Terrorism*. Robert Baer became the basis for George Clooney's character, Bob Barnes, who similarly undertakes various clandestine Middle Eastern operations, including a failed assassination plot.[6] Because of this fictionalizing of non-fictional memoirs, the film carries this unique statement in the credits: "While inspired by a non-fiction work, this motion picture

[4] For more information, see Allen J. Scott, "Hollywood and the world: the geography of motion-picture distribution and marketing," in *Review of International Political Economy* 11:1 (February 2004), pp. 33-61. Alisa Perren, "sex, lies and marketing: Miramax and the Development of the Quality Indie Blockbuster," in *Film Quarterly* 55:2 (2001), pp. 30-39. Justin Wyatt, "The Formation of the 'major independent': Miramax, New Line, and the New Hollywood," in *Contemporary American Cinema*. ed. Steve Neale and Murray Smith (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 74-90.

and all of the characters and events portrayed in it (except for incidental archival footage), are fictional." The fine line between 'real' and 'reel' is certainly blurred, and a rare breed of docudrama is formed.

Docudrama, which quite obviously combines elements of documentary and drama, typically involves recreations or dramatizations of documented events, and may involve real footage of the events themselves. Its aim is to concentrate on the facts and avoid editorializing or opinionated bias; in practice, of course, this rarely occurs. The inherent problem of bias in docudrama became a newsworthy event this past year with ABC's "controversial"[7] airing of *The Path to 9/11* (Cunningham, 2006). *Syriana*, also a dramatization of real events, was subject to criticism for its political bias as well. As is the case with any cultural text that ventures even the slightest criticism towards American governmental policy, there were accusations of those "typical Hollywood liberals" and their "anti-American" values. An op-ed in the *Washington Post* claimed that "Osama bin Laden could not have scripted this film with more conviction" (Krauthammer). I will leave the validity of that statement to the reader's discretion.

Seth Feldman's analysis of the genre, "Footnote to Fact: The Docudrama," focuses on the function of such films. His analysis of the three most popular incarnations of the docudrama – *Roots* (Chomsky *et al*, 1977), *Holocaust* (Chomsky, 1978), and *The Day After* (Meyer, 1984) – finds them "firmly grounded in events that had already achieved a central place in the public imagination. What all three programs then spoke to were the personal, psychological reasons for that centrality" (349). The same could be said for *Traffic*'s engagement with the War on Drugs and *Syriana*'s interconnection of the War on Terror with Big Oil: prevalent issues in the forefront of the social imaginary seen through the eyes of a range of (mostly) sympathetic characters. However, it must be noted that unlike Feldman's examples, *Traffic* and *Syriana* are dealing with contemporary, ongoing issues that demand attention and action; they are not simply ruminating on past events.

Furthermore, Feldman's reading of the conservative, comforting nature of the docudrama is not applicable to the GSP. *Roots*, *Holocaust*, and *The Day After* attempted, according to Feldman, to provide "explanations of an incomprehensible world to the disenfranchised," but failed to offer "a deeper understanding of historical forces; rather it is the durability of [the] familial order" (349) that is celebrated. Conversely, the GSP's greatest strength is its illumination of socio-politco-economic forces through narrative means. And while the GSP is also concerned with the familial order (*Syriana* in particular focuses on

[5] To the dismay of Gaghan, it was deemed an Original Screenplay by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

[6] Critics accused the film for changing the assassination plot's target from Saddam Hussein in the book to a benevolent, liberal prince in the film. My response would be: Mohammed Mossadegh.

[7] "Controversial" in this case being newspeak for "blatant right-wing propaganda," see Max Blumenthal, "ABC 9/11 Docudrama's Right-Wing Roots," in *The Nation*. 11 September 2006. <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20060925/path_to_911>.

fathers and sons), here the solidarity of the family is seen to be in decay in the face of such dire global problems. The GSP is thus a unique variant of the docudrama, but without its conservative trappings.

Finally, I would be remiss not to mention the recent resurgence in documentary filmmaking that is largely concerned with global connections and consequences as well. This strain of global social problem documentaries might be seen as a parallel cycle to the GSP, sharing similar tactics and worldviews. The all-time highest grossing documentary film is *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Moore, 2004), which lampoons the Bush administration and its corporate cronyism for exploiting the 9/11 attacks towards an aggressive foreign policy with dire global consequences. *An Inconvenient Truth* (Guggenheim, 2006), third highest grossing, is a passionate and informative plea for clarity and action against worldwide climate change. Other popular examples include *The Fog of War,* (Morris 2003), outlining the global threat of the American military as seen through the eyes of Robert S. McNamara, architect of the Vietnam War; *The Corporation* (Achbar, 2003), a psychological examination of the corporate organizational model that has dominated economic, political and social forces around the world; *Darwin's Nightmare* (Sauper, 2004), which explores the global network created around the Lake Victoria perch, from European supermarkets to Russian arms dealers to exploited Tanzanians; and *Why We Fight* (Jarecki, 2005), an exploration of the American military-industrial complex's quest for global domination. These bold documentaries share a similar sensibility and global consciousness with the GSP: they are informative indictments for change.

"The same could be said for *Traffic*'s engagement with the War on Drugs and *Syriana*'s interconnection of the War on Terror with Big Oil: prevalent issues in the forefront of the social imaginary seen through the eyes of a range of (mostly) sympathetic characters."

Rhizomataz!

The final – and most revolutionary – aspect of the GSP is its innovation on the web-of-life plotline. Instead of the traditional two primary lines of action, the 1990s saw a surge of films weaving together a variety of plotlines involving a multitude of characters. Again, this is not a matter of precedence, but degree. The last fifteen years produced a tremendous increase in multilinear filmmaking; some prominent examples include *Slacker* (Linklater, 1991), *Reservoir Dogs* (Tarantino, 1992), *Short Cuts* (Altman, 1993), *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino, 1996), *Magnolia* (Anderson, 1999), *Snatch* (Ritchie, 2000), *Amores Perros* (Iñárritu, 2002), and *Crash* (Haggis, 2004). As we will see, the GSP utilizes this multilinear form for political ends.

David Dresser dates the multilinear narrative back as far as *Intolerance* (1916), D.W. Griffith's silent-era epic spanning 2,500 years, paralleling four different ages in world history. For our purposes, we might consider *Intolerance* as the birth of the GSP nearly a century before its popularization, though it concentrates on the enduring problem of intolerance throughout the ages, rather than its global connectivity. Multiple storylines focused on a single locale are also not uncommon in the history of Hollywood, *Grand Hotel* (Goulding 1932) and *Dinner at Eight* (Cukor 1933) being the earliest incarnations. The disaster film also relies on multiple characters united in adversity; horror films, to a lesser degree, rely on a similar structure.

The pioneer of the web-of-life plotline is Robert Altman, and as such, he had a tremendous influence on the GSP. *Nashville* (1975) is a landmark film, not just for the GSP, but for cinema as a whole. With *Nashville*, Altman weaves a cinematic web the likes of which had never been seen before in mainstream film: densely interconnected storylines, a massive ensemble cast, and a satirical mixing of presidential politics with the business of country/gospel music. *Short Cuts*, "an L.A. jazz rhapsody" (Wilmington) is inspired by nine short stories by Raymond Carver and follows 22 principal characters.[8] Altman's signature style – overlapping dialogue and a wandering, zooming camera to capture his web of improvising characters – complements this formal experimentation, as it did in *Nashville*.

Utilizing the web-of-life plotline creates an expectation within the viewer for unforeseen relations and causal connections among the film's disparate characters. With the GSP, the web-of-life is woven on a much larger scale: the global web-of-life. Thus, the connections made are

[8] The postmodern mark of pop culture significance, *Short Cuts* was parodied, along with *Pulp Fiction*, in an episode of *The Simpsons* entitled "[3F18] 22 Short Films About Springfield."

far more startling and unexpected. In *Traffic*, a teenaged drug abuser (Erika Christensen) in a Cincinnati prepschool affects her father's ability as the newly appointed drug czar (Michael Douglas) to combat a corrupt Mexican General (Tomas Milian) who has just enlisted the help of a double-crossing cop (Benicio Del Toro) in his effort to continue supplying cocaine to a jailed San-Diego based drug kingpin (Alec Roberts) whose wife (Catherine Zeta-Jones) continues the family business while under the surveillance of a rogue African-American DEA agent (Don Cheadle) who has just lost his Puerto-Rican partner (Luis Guzmán) to a Mexican hitman (Clifton Collins Jr.). This is, of course, just one line of connection between the central characters, many more could be made. It is here, in the limitless possibility of interconnection, that the GSP presents its revolutionary act. In his essay "Global Noir: Genre Film in the Age of Transnationalism," David Dresser concludes with this provocation:

> Multiple storylines, the simultaneity of events forever skewing chronology and linearity, and chance encounters are, after all, not only the very core of global noir, but the very stuff of the hypertext that is digital and cyber technologies. Is global noir, then, the future of cinema, and is the future here? (534)

Short answer: Yes with a but; long answer: Deleuze with an if. But first, some background.

With their two volumes of Capitalism and Schizophrenia, 1972's Anti-Oedipus and 1980's A Thousand Plateaus, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari set out to enact, among other things, a transformation of "the image of thought." Rather than the grand pursuit of truth or reason, Deleuze defines philosophy as the creation of concepts that define a particular range of thinking with which to grapple with reality. One such valuable conception is Deleuze and Guatarri's own rhizome, formulated in A Thousand Plateaus, which is a concept based on multiplicity, aiming to move away from the traditional binary structure of Western thought. A figure borrowed from biology, the rhizome is a model in strict opposition to the conventional figure of the tree which operates on the principles of foundation and origin. The rhizome, on the contrary, is proliferating and serial; it operates on the principles of connection and heterogeneity. There can be no points or positions within a rhizome: "any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be" (7). Neither mimetic nor organic, a rhizome is a mobile and bifurcating series of lines; it only ever attempts to map, never resolve.

How appropriate, then, that Syriana deals with an actual hypothetical "remapping" of the Middle East. As "the rhizome pertains to a map that must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight" (21), Syriana works to outline the map of law, military, politics, economics, and terrorism that is the global oil industry. The terrorist act in the film's conclusion shows its detachability; the globe-spanning locales in which the story take place show its connectability; the double and double-double crossings by CIA agents show its reversibility; and the anti-trust regulators in the film's legal plotline show its modifiability. The young Pakistani character, victimized by a post-Fordist disposable workforce and led astray by radical Islam, simultaneously provides an entry and an exit from this rhizome.

A rhizome "has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it overspills" (21). Perhaps this explains the common reception of Syriana's plot as too complex to follow. As Roger Ebert states with precision: "we're not really supposed to follow [the plot], we're supposed to be surrounded by it. Since none of the characters understand the whole picture, why should we?" (emphasis added). The film has thus utilized the structure of the rhizome in its plot structure to illuminate the rhizomatic quality of its subject matter. The viewer is supposed to get lost in the film's complex story and be even more bewildered by its fruition. Like every useful answer to a difficult question, the GSP reveals even more complex questions instead of offering a tidy resolution.

"The film has thus utilized the structure of the rhizome in its plot structure to illuminate the rhizomatic quality of its subject matter. The viewer is supposed to get lost in the film's complex story and be even more bewildered by its fruition."

In order to present this rhizomatic subject matter, the GSP's form must be rhizomatic, which in turn requires a rhizomatic production process: "To attain the multiple, one must have a method that effectively constructs it" (Deleuze 22). The complex, erratic productions of Traffic and Syriana are examples of such a process that constructs the multiple. Referring to it as his "$49 million Dogme film" (as qtd. in Waxman 315), Soderbergh directed and shot Traffic with the spontaneity and freedom he enjoyed with his self-financed efforts. Three months, ten cities, 110 locations, and 163 speaking parts: the shoot was a frantic affair. The cast and crew travelled light and quick, "like the Grateful Dead" (as qtd. in 317)

according to Benecio Del Toro. Unable to secure permission to shoot in the White House, Soderbergh and Douglas went on a tour and stole footage guerilla-style. This is true rhizomatic technique: "Speed turns the point into a line!" (Deleuze 24). Syriana was a similarly complex endeavour; shooting took place in over a dozen locations around the globe, including Geneva, Dubai (the first Hollywood production in the U.A.E.), Egypt, Tehran, London, Morocco, New York, Texas, Maryland, Baltimore, and Washington D.C. Thus, both films can be seen to exhibit a rhizomatic theme (the globally interconnected problems with which each film engages), a rhizomatic structure (an overwhelming global web-of-life plotline), and a rhizomatic construction (a complex, unpredictable production process). The GSP – in construction, structure, and theme – is a true personification of the rhizome.

To return to Dresser's earlier question: yes, hypertext is at the core of the future of cinema, but its truest contemporary incarnation is not the global noir and its flaccid intertextual referencing, but the GSP and its truly rhizomatic embodiment. And yes, the future of cinema is here if filmmakers use the logic of Deleuze's rhizome. Only by utilizing a concept capable of rendering the multiple and heterogeneous nature of our interconnected globalized world can cinema hope to confront our most pressing global problems. To rewrite Manuel Castells' famous proclamation about the network society: the logic of the rhizome is more powerful than the power in the rhizome.[9]

Conclusion

The War on Drugs is a plague. Its extreme inefficiency actually increases drug use, its estimated 19 billion dollar budget is a tremendous drain on the American economy, it abandons junkies threatened by unclean needles and contaminated product, it contributes to high-crime zones, it replaces honesty with lies in education, it facilitates organized crime, it ignores the fact that cigarettes and alcohol cause many more fatalities than heroine or cocaine ever will, it hinders legitimate scientific research, and its racially biased enforcement is the central reason for an exploding prison population. As Robert Wakefield so poignantly states in Traffic's conclusion, "If there is a war on drugs, then many of our family members are the enemy. And I don't know how you wage war on your own family."

Oil addiction is one of the gravest problems humanity faces; its environmental and political-economic effects are widespread and devastating. The burning of fossil fuels is the primary cause of climate change, making droughts, extreme weather, and rising sea levels a reality in our not-too-distant future. North Americans are the world's biggest perpetrators of releasing greenhouse gas emissions, and our reluctance to curb our pollution or embrace technology for cleaner, renewable energy is inexcusable. A much tougher to comprehend consequence of oil addiction is its effect on human rights and poverty. Oil-related environmental disasters in developing countries are rampant, as transnational oil companies take advantage of weak governments desperate for foreign investment. Syriana works hard to dramatize the difficulty – and the urgency – in combating this addiction to oil. According to Roffman and Purdy, "the Hollywood social problem film represents a significant social and artistic achievement, marshalling the resources of film to provide a vivid commentary on the times" (vii). Through its propagation of a global social consciousness, its commitment to realism, and a utilization of the Deleuzian rhizome, the GSP has reinvigorated the potential for far-reaching social and political commentary in mainstream Hollywood cinema.

Works Cited

Brooke, Michael. "Social Problem Films: British cinema and postwar social change." ScreenOnline. <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/1074067/index.html>

Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

Dresser, David. "Global Noir: Genre Film in the Age of Transnationalism." Film Genre Reader III. Ed. Barry Keith Grant. Austin: University of Texas Print, 2003.

Ebert, Roger. "Review: Syriana." rogerebert.com. 9 Dec. 2005. <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20051208/EWS/51130002/1023>.

Feldman, Seth. "Footnote to Fact: The Docudrama." Film Genre Reader. Ed. Barry Keith Grant. Austin: University of Texas Print, 1986.

Krauthammer, Charles. "Oscars for Osama." The Washington Post. 3 March 2006. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/03/02/AR2006030201209.html>.

Neale, Steve. Genre and Hollywood. New York and London: Routledge, 2000.

Roffman, Peter and Jim Purdy. The Hollywood Social Problem Film: Madness, Despair, and Politics from the Depression to the Fifties. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981.

Rosenberg, Justin. "Globalization Theory: A Post Mortem." International Politics. No. 42, 2005.

Sloan, Kay. The Loud Silents: Origins of the Social Problem Film. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988.

Waxman, Sharon. Rebels on the Backlot: Six Maverick Directors and How They Conquered the Hollywood Studio System. New York: W. Morrow, 2005.

Wilmington, Michael. "City Symphony." The Criterion Collection: Short Cuts. <http://www.criterionco.com/asp/release.asp?id=265&eid=389&section=essay>.

Žižek, Slavoj. Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11. London: Verso, 2002.

[9] The original statement is "The logic of the network is more powerful than the power in the network," Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society. The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 500.

Representations of Western Tourism in Cinema:
Fantasies, Expectations and Inequalities

Tara Kolton

"We're not here to capture an image, we're here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura. Can you feel it, Jack? An accumulation of nameless energies."
There was an extended silence. The man in the booth sold postcards and slides.
"Being here is a kind of spiritual surrender. We see only what the others see. The thousands who were here in the past, those who will come in the future. We've agreed to be a part of a collective perception. This literally colors our vision. A religious experience in a way, like all tourism."
Another silence ensued.
"They are taking pictures of taking pictures," he said.
– Don DeLillo, *White Noise.*

The idea of tourism has always been central to cinema; from the earliest days of the "around the world" silent film, the medium has offered a completely new way for people to see and experience other parts of the world, places we would likely otherwise never experience ourselves. It is the unique mobility of film – its ability to circulate around the world, as well as the mobility of the image itself – which ensures a virtual sense of travel and tourism in a thrilling way. At once, the cinema allows us to access actual locations in the world which may remain physically inaccessible to us, as it also by necessity of the idea of 'capturing' a moving image (a deliberate process of framing, selection and presentation) presents an essentially virtual image of actual locations. In the political economy of cultural display, "virtualities, even in the presence of actualities, show what otherwise cannot be seen. Tourists travel to actual destinations to experience virtual places" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett qtd. in Dicks, 4). Essentially, the virtual nature of cinematic images enhances our expectations and fantasies of actual places. Cinematic representations of travel not only increase our desire to visit exotic and far away locations, but reinforce a certain image of these places in our minds. It is this very exact representation of a place which we desire and

expect to encounter, experience, and consume for ourselves.

The dominating images of the world that Hollywood, and Western cinema more generally, set forward reflect most cohesively an exoticized fantasy projection of the non-Western world that is at once enticing as it is filled with danger and trauma for the traveler who deviates from a conventional path of exploration. In a world that is markedly growing increasingly uncomfortable with American dominance, and where the Western traveler is seized by paranoia and expectations of danger and hostility, cinematic representations of journeys to lush, foreign lands offer a safe way to experience the world. To borrow Anne Friedberg's concept of the "mobilized virtual gaze," we can now sit safely back in our seats and engage in cultural "window shopping" without going anywhere or subjecting ourselves to the potential perils of travel. Many contemporary films which deal with the Westerner traveling to the less developed world project a fantasy of self-discovery and "authentic" experience for the traveler, as well as an inevitable confrontation with extreme danger upon seeking this unconventional encounter.

"In a world that is markedly growing increasingly uncomfortable with American dominance, and where the Western traveler is seized by paranoia and expectations of danger and hostility, cinematic representations of journeys to lush, foreign lands offer a safe way to experience the world."

The exoticized gaze of the Western traveler thus implies a subsequent fear of the non-Western world.[1] Released in the decade preceding the post-9/11 climate of Western paranoia, Danny Boyle's *The Beach* (2000) and Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Sheltering Sky* (1991) are, on the surface, strikingly different kinds of films in their production processes and aims: *The Beach*, a US-UK Hollywood co-production filmed on location in Thailand, and *The Sheltering Sky*, directed by one of art cinema's contemporary auteurs, an abstracted narrative filmed on location in the Sahara Desert of Niger. Despite the obvious narrative similarities that the films share – countercultural Americans who venture into foreign terrain and whom there are forced to encounter themselves – they also share uncannily similar core thematic issues where a dichotomy is broken down between the 'traveler' and the 'tourist.' Essentially, these films engage with the countercultural notion of an 'authentic' lifestyle of travel as being superior to the commercially exploitative, and the intellectually shallow industry of tourism. It this ideology that almost any film dealing with American tourists in the non-Western world (running the scale from Hollywood to art cinema), sets forward, and which reflects the overarching romanticized gaze through which the West views the rest of the world. It is an endlessly contradictory lens through which the traveler's desires and experiences are ideologically reflected in such films: Americans venture to the less developed world to experience these worlds 'authentically,' yet fail to really engage with local culture, instead meeting extreme danger and trauma; cinematographic fetishisation of beautiful foreign landscapes further enhance viewers' desires to travel to these locations, while their narratives' "message" ultimately delivers a strange warning about deviating from the well-trodden road of conventional tourism.

In addition to the highly conflicted attitudes towards Western tourism that these films project, the problematic production processes of the films themselves directly correlate to the increasingly Western-centric, virtualized image of the world as an all-encompassing travelogue. Hollywood productions which (in the case of *The Beach*, quite infamously) engage in actual physical impact upon the world, altering landscapes and cityscapes to suit the productions' needs, further confuse our ability to distinguish an 'actual' location from a 'virtual' place. In a world where tourism and cinema work hand in hand, many film productions continue to increase the amount of locations that are rendered accessible, desirable and visitable. We can view the way that Hollywood (and perhaps Western cinema in a general sense) deals with travel as directly reflective of the way that American and the Western world tend to view the rest of the world as the site of its conflicted fantasy projections. Cinematic representations of travel beyond the safety zone of the West project an image of a world which is at once alluring and hostile, which manages to 'enlighten' Western travelers before it ultimately reinforces the relevance of Western values, and ultimately portray the 'rest of the world' as a place that is open to exploitation for the pleasure and benefit of the West.

Tourism: A Historically Inequitable Industry

The World Tourist Organization defines tourism as: "the activities of a person traveling to a place outside his or her usual

[1] This contradictory perspective on travel to the less-developed world as at once enticing and terrifying is most recently exemplified in Alejandro Iñàrritu's *Babel* (2006) which certainly reflects the post-9/11 cultural climate of terror paranoia, as even wealthy Americans going the "safe route" on a Western tour bus in Morocco are subject to an unfortunate, accidental shooting incident.

environment for less than a specified period of time and whose main purpose of travel is other than the exercise of an activity remunerated from within the place visited…" (World Tourism Organization 1991 qtd. in Dicks 48). By definition, tourism necessarily includes some kind of distance or removal from the ordinary activity of the location being visited: tourism includes the promise and expectations of an *experience*.

Key to this exploration is tourism as a historically conflicted and unequal industry. We can see tourism as at once extremely exploitative to regions of the world, resulting in drug trafficking and prostitution in certain areas. At the same time, we cannot deny the essential role that tourism plays in many economies (especially in many tropical, less-developed nations), which actually thrive on their tourism industry. The greatest inequity of tourism is that it is a necessarily unequal industry that exists essentially *for* the residents of those developed nations of the world, who can actually afford the luxury of travel. International travel is an expensive venture, and Western tourists who are able to fund the plane ticket reap the benefits of visiting less developed nations of the world, where the Western dollar goes a long way. Travel and tourism is essentially a *privilege* of, with little exception, the Western world:

> If tourism is about 'getting away from it all', it is clear that not everyone is able to get away, and that not everyone is getting away from the same 'it.' Evidently, the 45 most highly developed countries in the world account for three-quarters of international tourism departures […] This fact gives the spectacular growth in tourism a marked asymmetry, since by and large it is Europeans, North Americans, Australasians and the Japanese – the minority world who are taking trips into the cultural mosaic of the less developed nations – the majority world (48).

Particularly relevant to a juxtaposition of tourism to the Global Hollywood industry is the fact that it is a minority population that is dominating the world's majority population. The "Third World" and less developed nations for very clear and practical economic reasons do not have the same privilege to travel First World nations: where the Westerner's dollar will go far abroad, the currency of a less-developed nation would barely register in the West. The Western world is afforded a great mobility that the rest of the world simply cannot obtain. As well, economic and class divisions have been routed in tourism since its rise in popularity in America: at the turn of the 20th century it was a further exclusive industry open only to society's upper crust (37). Today, it is fair to say that international travel is at the least, a middle class privilege.

"Key to this exploration is tourism as a historically conflicted and unequal industry."

Thus, the films which I have chosen to explore here, in regards to their representations of tourism, by necessity centre around white, (at least) middle class American tourists who travel to less developed regions of the world. While it is easy to view Hollywood's representations of American tourists who journey to the East as a quite limited perspective, in this sense, these narratives must necessarily be Western-centric and the touristic experience channeled through this particular Western gaze.[2] It is foremost and nearly exclusively the Westerner who journeys into the developing world. The split that the *The Beach* and *The Sheltering Sky* are instead concerned with is the dichotomy between 'kinds' of travelers: specifically, the *traveler* versus the *tourist*. I will return to this idea later, but what is relevant for now are the films' fascination with and countercultural regard for the 'authentic' travel experience. In both of these films the romanticized ideal of travel outside the Western world as an experience of self-discovery and adventure is explicitly opposed to the cheaply exploitative and 'safe' route of conventional tourism. It is in this light that the Western world (particularly America here) views the less developed world as a place that can teach the traveler something about himself. In some ways these films attempt to critique the West's exploitation of other nations through tourism, yet ultimately they remain grounded in the historical implications of travel and inequality. While on the surface, both of these film's travelers are searching for something outside their comfort zone, eventually the journey as far away from the Western world as possible becomes a retreat into the self.

First, I would like to briefly consider the global impact of cinema on tourism, and what it is capable of as an industry. Photography has often been linked to a promise of 'artistic authenticity,' as the invention of photography and cinema resulted in a certain freeing and mobilisation of the world. Walter Benjamin argued:

> Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of a tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling (Benjamin 1973, qtd. in Dicks, 19).

Central to my focus here is the idea that cinema opened up to us the possibility to travel without going anywhere, as well as the promise of *adventure*. Not only can we see the world through film, but we also experience a kind of thrill through watching travel images – an adventure and thrill that relies on the moving image. The visceral experience of the world through cinema cannot quite be met by reading about or looking at still images of a location. It is particularly the thrill-seeking desire that cinema both creates and satiates that I want to focus on.

---

[2] A film about a non-Westerner touring the West would be highly improbable, yet an intriguing premise; perhaps this rupture most recently exemplified in Larry Charles and Sacha Baron Cohen's *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (2006).

We can see the very beginnings of cinema, even one to two minute shorts, as being highly focused around this new opportunity to see and project the world. Tom Gunning has explored the travel genre as "one of the most popular and developed" forms of early cinema (Clarke, 214), the unique ability of motion pictures to essentially represent movement, combined with the rapid mobile camera, presenting travel on screen as a thrilling attraction for the earliest film-going audiences. An early film such as *The Georgetown Loop* (Colorado 1903) is a notable case of a film that not only managed in a few minutes to capture the treacherous, rugged mountain-scape of Colorado, but to do so in an exhilarating, action-packed way that carried the audience along on a fast-paced, jaunty, elevated train ride, while also capitalizing on possibilities for tourism promotion. The film is simply three minutes of footage from a camera anchored to the top of one of the train-carts, resulting in an exhilarating ride. The Georgetown Loop was, significantly, a railroad created as Colorado's first tourist attraction; not the most practical route, running double the length of the distance between the adjoined towns, but certainly the most exciting route. Much akin to a roller-coaster ride, the Loop provided visitors with an adventurous and scenic route (Colorado Historical Society**).** Perhaps we can then consider this one of the earliest "tourist films", as it clearly did quite a lot to mobilize the image of this attraction around the US and the world. But perhaps more relevant here is the fact that the film introduced an exciting cinematic experience for viewers around the world, who did not actually have to go anywhere to experience this thrill. The 'flying' sensation that such a film simulates for the viewer is like a primitive version of the IMAX experience today. The sense of flying and motion that IMAX cinema projects upon larger-than-life screens, is largely what attracts patrons. We go to see these films for that sense of adventure impossible in the real world, where we can feel like world explorers while sitting back in our seats. In David B. Clarke's essay "From Flatland to Vernacular Relativity", the author explores the early days of the "stationary trip" (228) through Hale's tours, in which "life-size moving images were projected onto a screen at the front of a mocked-up train, using rear projection to hide the projector from view. Mechanisms swayed the carriage and provided sounds of a moving train" (227). From the very origin of cinema, tourism and film went hand in hand in a natural kind of way: not only allowing us to see parts of the world, but to experience them in a thrilling way. Thus the expectation of excitement is associated with virtual images of tourism and travel.

"We can see the very beginnings of cinema, even 1-2 minute shorts, as being highly focused around this new opportunity to see and project the world."

Virtual Thrill-seeking

It is essentially from the sensations that cinema affords us that we can derive thrill-seeking touristic desires. Yet, the movement and adventure of cinema is not easily replicated when our feet are actually on the ground, even walking through these locations ourselves. The camera creates a distanced and defined way of viewing and experiencing the world, and the thrill-seeking that comes into play in many tourist's expectations can perhaps be tied back to such virtual representations. Any hands-on experiences where we can experience similar thrills must be quite deliberately sought after (and come with a price, both literal monetary expenses, as well as physical danger): 'extreme sports' such as bungee-jumping, hang-gliding, parachuting, and skiing; as well as theme park rides such as roller coasters. Very often, Hollywood films are similarly concerned with portraying travel to exotic lands as rife with excitement, danger, and ultimately an active, 'hands on' experience.

A film like *The Beach* certainly exploits this desire to experience travel in a thrill-seeking way through Richard (Leonardo DiCaprio), its male protagonist, who pronounces the moment he steps off the plane that he is looking for adventure, something entirely different. His journey across Thailand, from Bangkok to its extreme outskirts, is an appropriately daring adventure. Perhaps the way that he and his two French traveling companions must 'plunge' off of a high cliff into a lagoon below, before they can encounter the paradisiacal beach, is directly correlative to this fantasy of the active adventure. They journey across the country by train, ferry, then smaller boats, until finally they must cast most of their belongings aside to swim a couple miles to reach the island. Richard and his friends' willingness to 'give up' their possessions correlates with the idealized notion of the anti-materialistic, Western life-traveler who is merely weighed down by luggage and other tangible ties to home.

Over the course of the film, Richard partakes in 'extreme' and comically exaggerated activities like drinking snake's blood and killing a shark in the ocean with just a knife. Though *The Beach*'s view of Southeast Asian travel is quite problematic, and it is never quite clear whether or not it is taking a somewhat reflexive stance towards its protagonists' adventures, the film is not without its redeeming elements. For instance, there is the relevant insight that Richard views his travel experience much like playing a video game (and oddly enough he manages to obtain a GameBoy while on the remote island commune, directly contradicting any notion that this group of life-travelers have actually given up the commodities and comforts of home): even while experiencing something, we try to channel our experiences into a coherent narrative which would afford us with the clear direction and accomplishment of playing a video game. At one point in the film, isolated

in the woods, Richard descends into '*Heart of Darkness*' mode and pictures himself inside a video game, chasing down his enemies, winning points for his achievements. The entirety of the film's plot coincides with the sense of purpose a video game gives us, which is so lacking in reality: within the first ten or so minutes of the film, Richard receives a map to a paradisiacal, isolated beach. Thus he gains a clear 'mission' to accomplish and a sense of purpose, something that is really only experienced in video games and narrative representations of adventurous travel, so far from the wandering aimlessness we may experience on even the most well-planned getaway.

Our familiarity with the narrative structures of Hollywood films themselves (with the standard expectations of accomplishments, turning points, and closure) could be said to influence our perception of the world and our lives. When it comes to travel, we relate a Hollywood sense of structure to our journeys, forming similar expectations of self-discovery and authenticity to the protagonists of films like *The Beach* and *The Sheltering Sky*. The irony is that Richard's journey (despite the veneer of purpose in his map and mission) is quite aimless and floundering, embedded in the same desire to retreat from the world that we also see (albeit more explicitly) in *The Sheltering Sky*. Travel for the protagonists of both films is an *escape route*, yet there is no real sense of *what* they are escaping from, other than a vague desire to live a more authentic and free lifestyle. In *The Beach*, the commune of Westerners on the deserted island in Thailand is essentially a *retreat* from civilization, a way for its citizens to remove themselves and to have as little impact on the world as possible, as well as to smoke as much free hashish as they can. The film's conclusion is intriguing in the sense that it attempts to erase the many traumatic things that have happened along the way and Richard's direct responsibility for those events, as well as to try to distract from the thought that he hasn't really gained much positivity or self-knowledge from this experience at all. The film's 'happy ending' features Richard receiving through email, significantly, a photograph Francoise (Viriginie Ledoyen) had taken of the (nearly all white) beach commune, jumping joyously into the air. The photo is captioned "parallel universe" and the film ends with Richard musing that all that matters in life is finding a place where you belong, even if it's temporary — isn't that kind of temporary satisfaction the ideal of travel?

"The impact of standing behind a camera and seeing the world is a curious one, as it distinctly *alters* our perceptions of reality."

Cameras – Capturing but Missing the Moment

It is significant that in many of these tourist/traveler films, we see protagonists using and standing behind cameras. The impact of standing behind a camera and seeing the world is a curious one, as it distinctly *alters* our perceptions of reality. A central part of tourism seems to be the consumption of images, the preoccupation with seeing and capturing the world through a camera lens:

> [Tourists] know the rituals, how we are supposed to behave, and where we are expected to point our camera, if we want to capture the 'true essence' of the 'authentic' scene before us. And yet, in holding a camera to our eye, we also effect a sense of distance, ostensibly removing ourselves from our surroundings. It is as if we can glimpse - for a fleeting moment - a world somehow made strange by the very act of observation.(Dicks, xi).

The strangeness and distance towards our surroundings created by the act of standing behind the camera is very similar to the distance we effectively experience when, as travelers, our expectations of the world are shaped by virtualities such as cinematic representations of various familiar (and unfamiliar) locals. This preoccupation with capturing the authenticity or essence of a place essentially *distances* us from that place.

The very beginning of *The Sheltering Sky* reflects the touristic obsession with photographing a destination in order to 'capture' it, before ever really seeing or understanding it. After the small rowboat carrying three American travelers – husband and wife Port and Kit (John Malkovich, Debra Winger), and their friend Tunner – mysteriously arrives in Africa, Tunner (Campbell Scott as the 'tourist' of the trio) immediately takes a photograph with the young African boys who help them with their luggage on the dock. Though cameras are not a prominently featured subject after this moment, this observation of the tendency of tourists to photograph a place before even experiencing it is an apt one: this initial image will essentially prove to be a false impression of what becomes a disastrous trip. This opening sequence relates to the film's prominent theme of 'missing' an experience while one is experiencing it. Throughout *The Sheltering Sky*, Kit and Port seem to keep "missing each other": though they travel together, they sleep in separate beds, and one is always asleep while the other is awake. Occasionally they find themselves separated from each other by great distances, as well as they each take turns being unfaithful. Finally, Kit and Port manage to spend some time together, taking a bike ride into the desert. "I miss this" Port says to Kit while they ride together; a curious, but not unusual, sentiment considering they are experiencing the moment in the present. Bertolucci is certainly concerned here with the idea of missing out on experiences while they happen, this scene in particular reflecting the ways in which we tend to channel our experiences in the present as if already looking back on them as memories or photographs. How often on a vacation do we think about capturing the sights and places in front of us in order to later show off to others, to tell a good story? Kit and Port's scene together goes further to show how the two awkwardly

romanticize this moment between them in the desert. As Port brings Kit to a high cliff from which they can only see endless desert below, they are drippingly ecstatic, and make love while Port rambles on about how here the sky is protecting them. Ultimately what *The Sheltering Sky* is concerned with is the fleeting nature of such experiences, just as the mysterious old man narrates at the end of the film: life often seems limitless, and time seems inexhaustible, yet how many more times will we actually do something or go to a place in our lifetimes? Taking a picture becomes a way to freeze time eternally, even if the image of reality created is different from what we actually experienced at the time.

Finally *The Beach* toys with the idea of the 'disposable camera,' and perhaps kind of disposable memories – disposable in the same sense that Richard seems to fleet from one cheap thrill to another, always ready to move on (and naturally, forget) in pursuit of something more exotic and enticing. Francoise (Richard's French love interest), who previously photographs the night sky and stars, must leave her manual camera behind as the group has to plunge into the water just to get to the beach. Once on the beach she obtains a disposable camera (where she takes the group photo that Richard receives at the end): it is ironic then that this 'disposable image' is the one that ends up framing the end of the film, and leaving Richard as well as the viewer with a completely different impression of the commune than the wild deterioration and destruction we previously observed. But quite notably, the film doesn't end here – a credits sequence intercuts with gorgeous images of the beach and national park location – now completely empty and beautiful. Citing Benjamin, Bella Dicks explores the way in which camera close-ups and detailed shots do not only "'make more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear'; rather, they restructure the subject's relation with reality itself" (Dicks, 20). These final images appeal most directly to our touristic senses, and as will be explored more in detail later on, emphasize a desire to go and see for ourselves – a strange mixed message in that the appeal of the beach in the film was that it was completely isolated from tourists.

One of the striking similarities of *The Beach* and *The Sheltering Sky* is their preoccupation with the "authentic" experience of being a traveler, as opposed to being a tourist.

Tourist and Traveler Fantasies, Expectations, and Countercultural Ideologies

One of the striking similarities of *The Beach* and *The Sheltering Sky* is their preoccupation with the 'authentic' experience of being a traveler, as opposed to being a tourist. From the very start, each film has its characters overtly state that they are somehow outside of the mainstream. As Richard arrives in his hostel in Bangkok, he speaks of his fellow adventure-seeking travelers with a degree of contempt: "The only downer is, everyone's got the same idea. We all travel thousands of miles just to watch TV and check in to somewhere with all the comforts of home, and you gotta ask yourself, what is the point of that?" Richard defines himself as a lone traveler who is seeking something different and expresses his disdain throughout the film for going the conventional, touristy route. The dichotomy between tourist and traveler is made more explicit from the first moments of *The Sheltering Sky* as Kit and Port speak to Tunner about their undecided plans to stay in Africa for "a year or two":

Tunner: We're probably the first tourists they've had since the war.
Kit: Tunner, we're not tourists. We're travelers.
Tunner: Oh. What's the difference?
Port: A tourist is someone who thinks about going home the moment they arrive, Tunner.
Kit: Whereas a traveler might not come back at all.
Tunner: You mean I'm a tourist.
Kit: Yes, Tunner. And I'm half and half.

So ultimately, tourism is associated with a conventional, safe way of experiencing a foreign land — as if the attachment to home makes a person weak, and unable to 'truly' experience something of depth through travel. Being a traveler essentially describes a lifestyle choice and a flexibility to stay somewhere for a long time if it seems fit. In *The Beach*, though the beach commune collapses at least within a few months of Richard's arrival, he is prepared to live there for "a year or two" as well.

Another striking connection between each film's central trio of travelers, is the way that we know essentially nothing about these characters' pasts: they are 'romantic' figures who arrive out of nowhere, with no attachments to society, family, or the past. Once again, we do not know what they are trying to escape, only that they desire to. The first lines Richard speaks in *The Beach* are: "My name is Richard. So what else do you need to know? Stuff about my family, or where I'm from? None of that matters. Not once you cross the ocean and cut yourself loose, looking for something more beautiful, something more exciting and yes, I admit, something more dangerous." In *The Sheltering Sky* when Port is asked what his travel plans are, he responds "My only plan is, I have no plan." All we know about these people are that they are American, their plans are open and undefined, and that they are 'artists' with a countercultural, bohemian stance towards life and convention.

It is no coincidence that the central protagonists of both *The Beach* and *The Sheltering Sky* are essentially (at the least) middle class, bohemian/ countercultural types: the aim or promise of self-discovery upon travel is

essentially a desire/expectation which is strongly linked to a countercultural stance on the world. Essentially, we can link this desire to travel freely and not to adhere to the conventions of Western society's touristic norms to a countercultural way of thinking (and thus the ideals of *The Beach*, a Hollywood production, which criticizes tourism at the same time as it promotes exploitative travel, are quite conflicted). Certainly, all of those who travel may not identify with bohemian ideals, but it is a fair estimate that those who are traveling into the non-Western world are certainly likely to have inclinations to at least temporarily depart from the mainstream. Those who identify themselves as, or aspire to become 'life travelers' are Westerners with an illusion that their ventures outward into the world are a successful way to escape conformity and the dullness of their ordinary, 'oppressive' lives in the Western world. Considering the gap previously explored between the Western world and the less developed world's exclusion from the privilege of tourism, the problematic issues of this Western 'oppression' are rendered clear, as well as the ultimate folly of expecting to be liberated upon encountering the East. It is in this way that we can see the inherent self-deception of the countercultural traveler who thinks that traveling to Asia will make him more "free". In *The Rebel Sell*, author Joseph Heath critiques this fantasy projection of the West onto the non-Western world:

> Westerners have been using Third World countries as a backdrop for their own personal voyages of self-discovery for decades. The temptation to do so flows quite naturally from the countercultural idea. If our own culture is a system of total manipulation and control, perhaps the best way to shake ourselves free from the illusion is to immerse ourselves in some other culture—preferably one that is as radically distinct from our own as possible.
>
> Thus the countercultural critique has always been tempted by exoticism—uncritical romanticization of that which is most different. One can indulge in the exotic through travel, to places like India and Central America […] In every case, the goal is the same: to throw off the chains of technocratic modernity and to achieve the revolution in consciousness that will allow us all to live a more authentic life (Heath, 252-53).

Essentially the protagonists of both *The Beach* and *The Sheltering Sky* embody this idea of seeking escape from the 'shackles' of their middle-class existences back in the US. Yet it is a notably aimless, drifting search, and there is no 'coherent vision' of authenticity and freedom ultimately represented in these films. Essentially, the protagonists of the films remain attached in some ways to their old lives and certain comforts of home. Their encounters are highly traumatic, resulting in sickness, violence, murder, and death; ultimately they must return back to their homelands at the end. The trauma encountered in an exotic world, as well as the inevitable exile, seem to be mainstays of films that portray American travel to the East.[3] This traumatic removal from these lands directly conflicts with the Western countercultural desire to escape. The culture does not meet 'authentic' travelers with open arms (if they even attempt to engage with the national culture at all), and they eventually find that they were better off where they came from.

"Essentially the protagonists of both The Beach and The Sheltering Sky embody this idea of seeking escape from the 'shackles' of their middle-class existences back in the US."

Heath writes that whether a subject takes a journey outward into the exotic, or a journey into the self, "either way, escapism became a central preoccupation of the counterculture" (255). It becomes clear in both *The Beach* and *The Sheltering Sky*, that what starts as a journey to the outskirts, to find what is "off the beaten-trail" – increasingly further away from large, "tourist friendly" cities – eventually becomes an inward retreat for the protagonists. In *The Sheltering Sky*, the endlessly expansive Sahara desert itself becomes a manifestation of the isolated retreat and self-reckoning the protagonists experience. Similarly in *The Beach*, Richard and his friends' journey pushes into farther less-traveled terrain, and finally to the isolated beach, where the commune of fellow nearly-all Western "travelers" becomes a kind of regressive retreat back to a different kind of society, albeit with all the same kinds of people.[4] The commune members seem to believe they have accomplished something revolutionary, but in their very retreat from the world, they are deluding themselves into believing they are leading lives of authenticity. The commune is not changing the world, but ultimately experiencing a life of leisure, casual sex, and drug use.

Even the attempted retreat from Western society and capitalism is contradictory and certainly unsuccessful in these films -- or, it can be argued, this retreat is impossible since it is the Westerner's wealth which has afforded them this very luxury of escape into the non-Western world. The commune society of *The Beach* and the increasingly fragmented trio of *The Sheltering Sky* all at some point desire and rely on the comforts of home. As Dicks writes: "What [tourists] are getting away from are societies which are disproportionately affluent, consumerist, technologized, centralized and regulated. This inevitably shapes the kind of escape that is sought" (Dicks 48-49). Just as much as the protagonists attempt to escape from these 'oppressive' ideals of Western consumer society, they ultimately come back to these

[4] It is a telling detail that not one native of Thailand inhabits the beach, the only Thai people on the island are the hashish harvesters who guard the supply and mysteriously allow this select group to remain on the hidden beach.

same values. In a central scene of *The Beach*, Richard and Sal must go to the mainland to stock up on supplies for the commune: the requests that are put in show that in no way are the group surviving 'off the land,' requests ranging from batteries to toiletries.

Even more telling is their dependence on a rice supply, which proves their inability to feed themselves from fish and vegetation on what is a quite lush island landscape. In *The Sheltering Sky*, Tunner's smuggled bottles of champagne become the only way for Kit to survive train rides, as well as more generally the misery of the group's North African travel. Food and water essentially will be the cause of Port's illness and death by typhoid fever. The need for a doctor and proper hospital care is one thing that Port can't obtain in the outskirts of Niger, and despite the Foreign Legion's efforts to save him, he cannot survive, leaving Kit in a state of insane wandering.

Essentially it is this series of marked traumas encountered upon traveling in each film that stand in the most direct opposition to an exotic romanticization of travel. Port dies, Kit is left alone to become a Muslim man's concubine. Richard is sent to live alone in the forest for a few weeks and regresses to a primal state, has a direct hand in four fellow American tourists being shot dead by Thai druglords, and ultimately is responsible for the deterioration of the commune and leads the human raft in exile from the island back to the mainland. It is curious that these essentially negative portrayals of travel experiences are the final outcome of these films which deal with travelers' desires and expectations. *The Sheltering Sky* is certainly more critical and concerned with the fleeting nature of time and experience, but for *The Beach*, a Hollywood film, to end so disastrously is worth further consideration. Though the brief ending with Richard at an internet café seems to quickly pass over the major damage which has been done, the attempt at a 'happy' summarizing of what Richard has learned is unsettling for the viewer. Richard narrates as if he has learned something important, but if we evaluate the film, we may arrive at the conclusion that Richard's attempts at authentic, adventurous travel was excessively misguided, selfish, and disastrous for most of those he crossed paths with. The values of "home" and the West are reinforced in the film as Richard comes to the conclusion that one must always return to where one came from. Despite Richard's affirmations that he learned something, the overall "message" of the film seems to be that following the more-traveled path of tourism is the safe way to be. Or perhaps the key to understanding *The Beach*'s highly conflicted messages is once again in the gorgeous, travelogue-style images of Thailand's Maya Bay which end the film. It is these images which we are left with and remember, as if the film can't decide whether or not it wants to critique a traveler's impulses and desires, or to actually promote tourism.

"Despite Richard's affirmations that he learned something, the overall 'message' of the film seems to be that following the more-traveled path of tourism is the safe way to be."

Cinema's Global Impact: Tourism and Production

It is likely that *The Beach*'s conflicted representation of tourism on film, which at once critiques the 'herd mentality' of must-see tourist locations, actually increased the influx of tourism to Phi Phi Islands National Park (on Maya Bay of Thailand) with its fetishistic cinematography of beautiful, exotic landscapes. Certainly this should be viewed as a great irony, considering that in the film this same beach is constructed as a hidden, sacred paradise where only select people may tread. Indeed, the film's actual ending with these final images of the island — now empty, now appearing even more beautiful and pristine than before — perhaps was a specific inclusion on Fox's part in their deal with Thailand's government to help promote tourism.

Despite *The Sheltering Sky*'s more abstract approach to the landscape, the marketing taglines for the film itself reflect a distinct attempt to attract viewers through the promise of lush scenery: "sensual and erotic," "every fantasy is brought to light." Though possibly not a film that makes a viewer want to run out and travel the Sahara, one cannot deny the gorgeous desert cinematography and experience pleasure from a virtual engagement in travel through the film's treacherous land and cityscapes. Further, despite being on an opposite pole from the production process of *The Beach* (in terms of its Hollywood production, and controversial case of damaging the national park), *The Sheltering Sky's* production also required a significant reconstruction of the landscape. Camels had to be imported for filming, and a fort was built in the middle of the Sahara. Never before had Niger seen such a production take place (*The Sheltering Sky*). In this way we can look at Bertolucci's film in a new light: an art film, which still had to capitalize on its exotic images to sell itself, and a production which altered, at least temporarily, the landscape of the Sahara Desert.

When we consider the way that transnational productions themselves impact the environments where they locate themselves, as well as creating increased desires to visit these places through their manipulated images and landscapes, it raises all kinds of questions of just what is a real 'natural' environment or city anymore. *The Beach* is a particularly famous and controversial case in this respect. Toby Miller's *Global Hollywood 2* focuses on the increasing ways that production is being outsourced in an exploitative manner to Third World and less developed nations (for the same reason that tourists go to less developed nations: because simply put, their money can go a long way). In the case of Thailand: "at 2002 rates in

U.S. dollars, here is one example of a budget calculated for production in the U.S. versus Thailand that covers labour, equipment hire and fees. It helps to explain why low-budget U.S. features are increasingly locating there" (Miller , 167). Once again, we can tie global tourism to the Hollywood industry: the desires of Westerners are put to the center, and they are able to take advantage of less developed nations' weaker economies for their own pursuit of pleasure and adventure.

Paradoxically, the lawsuit that Thailand's government filed against Fox is an exemplary case of striking back against Hollywood's careless domination. Environmental activists in Thailand protested the "arrogant despoliation" they observed take place as Fox produced *The Beach* in Maya Bay, part of Phi Phi Islands National Park:

> Natural scenery was bulldozed in late 1998 because it did not fit the fantasy of a tropical idyll, sand dunes were relocated, flora rearranged and a 'new' strip of coconut palms planted. The producers paid off the government with a donation to the Royal Forestry Department and a campaign with the Tourism Authority of Thailand to twin the film as a promotion for the country. Meanwhile, director Boyle claimed the film was 'raising environmental consciousness' among a local population that was allegedly 'behind' US levels of 'awareness'—typical Hollywood arrogance, and especially idiotic when there was no US legislation capable of handling the environmental scandal, which was dealt with in overseas litigation where proper laws and precedents existed, via the Environmental Act (Justice for Maya Bay International Alliance; 2000; Ghosh, 2003; Flanigan, 2002: 84). (Miller , 167)

Despite Thailand's strike against Hollywood, ultimately we see the nation caving into the pressures and economic advantages that supporting Hollywood productions can afford: Miller writes that Thailand formed a Film Commission in 2003 to *encourage* the NICL, rather than to prevent natural despoliation. Furthermore, it announced tax levies on foreign actors, as well as intentions of becoming "Asia's filmmaking hub via joint ventures" (Miller 167).

Perhaps we should see Fox's bulldozing of Thailand's beaches as a metaphor for the way that Hollywood tramples heavily upon the world, no doubt responsible for a great global ecological footprint. Certainly *The Beach* is not the only case of a production which caused damage to the physical environment, but it is fascinating that a film so overtly concerned with a certain kind of critique of tourism and exploitation, expressing disgust at the way that tourists abuse Southeast Asian nations, not only reaped physical damage upon a national park itself, but actually used tourism promotion as a way to get the production out of trouble. An influx of tourism to a natural area subsequently results in more physical damage. The cycle of contradictions in purpose and point of view of a Hollywood production seems endless here.

"Perhaps we should see Fox's bulldozing of Thailand's beaches as a metaphor for the way that Hollywood tramples heavily upon the world..."

It is also notable that the remote and pristine beach essentially was not good enough on its own for the film to proceed: once again the idea of the virtual nature of cinema is complicated. Not only is the cinematography of the landscape fetishised and presents the viewer with an image that can't be replicated in real experience, but the "natural landscape" of the film is actually no longer natural, leaving us with the question of what places in the world we can actually consider "natural." Are there really any places which haven't been made virtual in some way?

Essentially, through representations of travel and tourism in cinema we can more clearly see the way that Hollywood and the West's touristic gaze views the rest of the world as a kind of virtual playground to be experienced, conquered, consumed, captured, and which should also teach the traveler something about him or herself. And it is a world that is becoming increasingly virtual as Westerners leave their mark. Perhaps the traumas encountered by tourists/travelers in films such as *The Beach* and *The Sheltering Sky* which transplant American tourists in the non-Western world, must be viewed as an acknowledgement of the gap between two very distinct worlds — the mobile minority, and the immobile majority. Or perhaps the idea of the 'traumatic encounter abroad' comes as a fear that one day the rest of the world will strike back against Western dominance (certainly a foreshadowing fear, that since 9/11 has multiplied infinitely). One thing is certain: in a world which is becoming increasingly uncertain and uncomfortable with American dominance, these films become a way to sit back and travel in a way that allows us to see the world in ways in which we never possibly could otherwise, as well as they ultimately suggest that perhaps the smartest and safest way to travel is through this very virtual experience of the world.

Works Cited

Clarke, David B. and Marcus A. Doel. "From Flatland to Vernacular Relativity", in *Landscape and Film*, ed. Martin Lefebvre. New York and London: Routledge, 2006

Colorado Historical Society. *Georgetwon Loop Railroad*. accessed: 13 Dec 2006. <http://www.georgetownlooprr.com/about_us/history.shtml>

Dicks, Bella. *Culture on Display: The Production of Contemporary Visitability*. England: Open University Press, 2003

Friedberg, Anne. *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*. University of California Press, 1994

Heath, Joseph and Andrew Potter. *The Rebel Sell*. Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., 2004

Miller, Toby, et. al, *Global Hollywood 2*. London: BFI, 2005.

Longley in Fragments:

An Interview with Award-Winning Filmmaker James Longley

R. Colin Tait

This past September, at the 25th Annual Vancouver International Film Festival, documentary filmmaker James Longley was on hand at the Canadian premiere of his important and timely film *Iraq in Fragments*. This film, in addition to winning all the major documentary awards at the Sundance Film Festival in 2006, was nominated in the Best Documentary Feature Category at the 2006 Academy Awards. The documentary, which chronicles the unfolding reality of the year in-between the invasion of Iraq by American forces and the lead up to the civil war in the country, records the three major regions of the country and presents a compelling portrait of the people, their landscapes and their hardships that face their daily lives in Post-War Iraq.

Cinephile was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to sit down over breakfast to discuss Longley's important film with him.

Colin Tait – First off, let me say that I was really impressed with your film. I think it's obviously timely, not only given what we continue to find out coming from Iraq, but also a really important historical record.

James Longley – Thanks.

CT – I really appreciated how you managed to put a human face back onto the Iraqi people. I wonder if using children to tell the story of the new Iraq was part of a strategy on your part.

JL – Well, maybe. But mainly it's merely practical. It's just far easier to film kids than adults. Adults, they want to go to work, it's just harder. With kids, they're interested. They get excited by the idea; nobody pays attention to them, they like it if someone pays attention to them. Generally, nobody

wants to know their opinion and suddenly someone asks them about their world. So I think for kids, being in a film like this, we filmed for a year, they're more interested in it. It becomes cathartic for them. And also they just tend to be better subjects. They're changing really fast, their lives are moving from being a kid to a teenager within a couple of years after that so it's possible to capture the changes in their lives. So for longitudinal documentary work they just tend to be richer material.

CT – So it's not necessarily a metaphorical choice?

JL – It also works on that level, but when you're making a documentary your first considerations are practical. If you're not going to have access, if you're not going to have permission, then you can't make the film.

CT – It's interesting in the first section, dealing with the child Mohammed, almost this wisdom that he seems to have in these monologues that are overlaid in the film. Which is opposed to the fact that he can't write his father's last name...

JL – Right. He's uneducated. But as Iraqi kids go, he's fairly inarticulate. When I was first interviewing him I was thinking to myself "do I really want to interview this kid?" I'd ask him to tell me about his family and he'd say "I have three uncles, and three uncles…" and he'd be repeating himself all the time. He was so shy that he could barely speak. And normally he's okay, but on camera, it took him about a year to get into it.

CT – In terms of filming, I know you spent two years doing it, but did you do a cycle of two years by visiting one spot after another…?

JL – Yes. I would start a story then move on. I filmed the Baghdad story for a month or two then before I wore out my welcome, I'd take a break from it, go start a different story and then film that for a while, build up those relationships and then come back to the first one for a week or two.

You have to start the story early and follow it no matter what happens. No matter whose life it is things are going to happen. Pick anybody practically. Things are changing, their wife is having a kid or they're about to get married…

CT – So the chances are eventually…

JL – There are actually story elements like you would need in a fiction film that are taking place in people's lives. So those anchor the bigger picture; things that you're trying to do. The thing is a lot of times in documentary you find yourself essentially making a film that follows a lot of the rules of fiction just to keep the audience interested.

CT – Right.

JL – There are a lot of documentaries that don't do that, but they might not appeal to such a broad audience and no one will ever see them. As a documentary filmmaker you want people to see your work. Even if you're making a film about a difficult subject in a foreign language, you want it to be accessible in some way. The way that you do it is having these characters you can identify with and things that are happening in their lives. A plot emerges. There's some kind of arc. This film doesn't really follow that in a conventional way but as a filmmaker you still have to pay attention to these things. I feel like I have to.

CT – One of the things that the film reminded me of is the post-World War II films like *Rome: Open City*…This idea of a look to what is essentially a brand-new country…

JL – Yeah. It's very old, it's very new. Things are happening all the time. People's ideas are changing. In that first year, people went from accepting Americans and thinking that they were doing something good to sort of hating them and hoping they would leave…

"I just didn't want to be in the situation where the United States started dropping bombs and you really have no idea anymore what the truth is."

and wanted to kill them, you know? So on that level things are changing a lot.

As a filmmaker, that's exciting to be in a place where things are changing and it's not just things that are happening in the lives of your characters but things are happening in the life of the country. If you have that situation where you can be recording things on a lot of different levels – the country, the personal level, it is to me, the most exiting kind of filmmaking.

CT – This film really takes place in, not a magical time, but the in-between time that you described as the current civil war situation and the invasion of Iraq by America. That's what is really compelling about the film.

JL – You know, it's a gradual slide.

CT – …and that's clear. You can really see this trajectory within the course of your film.

JL – Thanks.

CT – The obvious question now would be what was your impetus for making the film?

JL – Mostly I just wanted to see the country. I knew that the United States was going to invade and I was upset about that. Not just me but most of the other people I know. I just didn't want to be in the situation where the

United States started dropping bombs and you really have no idea anymore what the truth is. Do you know what I mean? It goes out the window…and I just hate being lied to. I hate it. I really want to know what's going on, and I want to have my own opinion based on my own experience. I don't want to be told what to think. I have that kind of compulsion.

you have to always go through the process of people discovering, bit-by-bit… (*mockingly*) "Oh my god, there's a civil war?" and "Oh my God, they hate us?" and then gradually come to the inevitable conclusion that they have to withdraw from the country. But it takes so long, and so many people get killed in the meantime, but here we are.

"So is it better? I don't know, I don't think it is. I'd prefer not to be responsible for that death rate. I don't know, I say we give it to Saddam if that's the choice."

So I wanted to go there. I wanted to see it; I knew it was going to happen. It wasn't something that I thought I could *stop*. I mean, I spoke out against it. So in the end I wanted to be there to see it myself. To really know what was going on. To be able to have a conversation with someone and really know what I'm talking about.

CT – What's interesting to me is it seems to stand as a record. Like you said, there weren't a lot of non-embedded journalists in the country.

JL – Yeah. And it's no big secret the direction the country is going and people's opinion of it. I think there's a Zogby poll or something. Two-thirds of Baghdad residents oppose the occupation and want the U.S. to leave. So if you think about it, if you're in the United States and you know that two-thirds of the population opposes you being there there's some sort of contradiction going on.

The fact is from the very beginning you could say that the whole trajectory of how this was going to go was clear.

CT – Yeah.

JL – This has happened before in history. This is not the first time that a Western power invades a country for imperial ambitious reasons. We know how it's going to end, essentially. There's no mystery here. And yet, still

CT – There were a couple of people during the Q and A following the film who seemed to have a great deal of resistance to some of the ideas, not *your* ideas, but the question of whether Iraq is a better place now. What do you think accounts for that kind of resistance? There were repeated questions relating to the idea that people are no longer being killed by Saddam Hussein and that this is a good thing.

JL – I don't know what to say. It strikes me that if you're a person, it makes no difference to you whether you're going to be killed by Saddam or by someone else. The death rate because of politics is just as high, if not higher than before. So is it better? I don't know, I don't think it is. I'd prefer not to be responsible for that death rate. I don't know, I say we give it to Saddam if that's the choice.

CT – If you read the *New York Times*, and read someone like Thomas Friedman's column, he's always talking about how Muslims need to have an open dialogue about their culture. But what's interesting about your movie is that it seems like all the characters in your movie, that *all they do is talk about politics*…

JL – What was the first part of your question?

CT – Well, Thomas Friedman is always telling us that the moderate Muslim population of the world needs to have a dialogue amongst themselves…

JL – Thomas Friedman is an idiot. I'm sorry but he is. Anyone who argues that having a larger number of McDonald's makes you safer and more democratic is just talking out of his ass. He was a good correspondent back in the day when he was covering Beirut in '82 but…I'm sure he's a smart guy. But ever since he started getting paid to stay in nice hotels and talk to all the right people I think he just really lost it.

CT – I guess what I'm asking is that from the media depiction of the Muslim world it looks like that no one is talking about anything at all, but…

JL – The only thing that people do is talk about their situation and what's going on.

CT – They seem, at least in your film, to be *very aware* of what's going on…

JL – And if you go to United States, there's no real debate. You know, people watch TV. The official debate and the actual debate that goes on in the United States is kind of on the level of…well, what is it on the level of?…Terry Schaivo and that kind of thing. They're not really thinking about the larger issues.

The United States just did away with *habeas corpus*. That's a big deal! But that's not up for debate. That's not a big issue on the public's mind. I didn't see any headlines about it in the newspaper. We just did away with the most basic fundamental rights in a system of laws and democratic representation and so forth and so on and nobody says 'boo' about it. Whereas, in Iraq, people are concerned about it, all this stuff that's going on, and they talk about it.

CT – Maybe they don't have a 'star culture'?

JL – They just don't trust the TV as much.

CT – In *Fahrenheit 9/11* one of the biggest attacks against the film was

leveled at the scene that takes place just before the bombing of Iraq. People seemed really offended by this 'Utopian' imagery of Iraq as a place where children play and that kind of thing…

JL – Yeah, the kid flying the kite, right? I mean, the fact is, kids did fly kites before the war. I was there. I saw it! (*laughs*). I guess Michael Moore may have fallen into the position of having to describe too much while having too little time. He only has five seconds to cover pre-war Iraq so he throws in the shot just to remind people that there *are people in Iraq* and if you bomb them, that's not necessarily great.

I think Michael Moore is a nice guy, but I wouldn't want to make Michael Moore movies. It's not my style, but I know where he's coming from. It's not like he keeps it a secret (*laughs).*

CT – I guess my next question would be, since your film begins with this similar expression of the beauty of Iraq…

JL – The thing is in my film, it's different. Because, it's being portrayed as the subjective view of this kid. In his mind, the pre-war Baghdad is far more pleasurable because there's security. You could go out, you're not afraid… etc…Whereas now, he talks about how scary the war is and how frightening it is now with all the gunfire and 'we're afraid to go outside.'

That is the majority of the opinion for the non-political Iraqi. But what are you going to do? If you're living in a dictatorship, as long as you don't oppose the dictatorship, you can get by.

If you're living on a subsistence level, your main concern is the stability to earn a living for your family. It's not like, "Oh can I write an article in the newspaper and not get tortured…" So the majority of the population is really operating on that level, the level of "is the society working?" on a day to day level.

CT – Right.

JL – And it was before, it's just that it was a dictatorship. But it works, you know, the trains run on time, more or less. It's cleaner. The state is functioning. They're living under draconian sanctions, so of course it's falling apart, but, it was working better than under American occupation with total anarchy. You know, an astronomical crime rate, people getting killed in the street…and this uncertainty.

Before there were rules, right? Don't oppose the regime, do your bit and you'll probably be alright. Now there are no rules. You go out and you try to drive to work, maybe you get killed. So people are afraid to go outside, they're afraid to send their children to school. It's a civil war. There's this slowly boiling civil war going on and absence of security and so on…

In that power vacuum these religious groups, the militias are coming to power because people want that. They *want* security. They *want* someone in charge and if the government is weak, it will be someone else. And maybe it's just a micro-thing like Sadr City is controlled by the Sadr militia and Motkada al-Sadr, and those are the people who keep security. They're the people you'd go to if you need something, like if your house has been destroyed or whatever, they'll help you out. They've become the new *de facto* government. Do you know what I mean?

CT – Is it the kind of thing that has happened elsewhere with any nationalist/factionalist group…?

JL – This is politics. But people forget that politics is not about Republicans and Democrats having their ad on TV, politics in that kind of place is more about functional politics.

CT – You mentioned al-Sadr. I thought it was interesting that your film also documents his, I don't know if I know enough to say "rise to power," but definitely the shift in his policies at the very least. Like the change from being a political figure to a militant one.

JL – But the film really isn't about him though. I didn't have the access. Even if I had wanted to. I never interviewed him. I filmed one of his press conferences and some speeches.

You know, he's not a great speaker. His father, that's something else. This happens all the time, you know, the father is famous and well-respected and then he's out of the picture and gets assassinated in 1989 and then his older brother is killed, who was apparently more 'with it' than he was. (*laughs*) And then you get this guy who's really young, I mean, he's in his twenties, coming to power with not a lot of experience and people follow him because of the legacy.

CT – What do you think of the whole Orson Welles statement, where he said something to the effect that if he didn't have to do all of his own fundraising he could have made lots more films?

JL – Well, his problem was that he made fiction films. In my case, if I want to make a film, I'll find a way to do it. In these two documentary features I've made, I haven't had to ask anyone's permission. I just go do them. And then once you've been in Iraq for two years and filming three hundred hours of footage you'll always find someone who will want to put in the money to finish it. Because no one else has that.

If you work for TV chances are they'll never allow you the ability to go somewhere for two years and film. They'll say "you're working for us, do you have insurance?" It suddenly becomes more complicated, do you know what I mean? Whereas, if you work for yourself, you don't have to worry about any of that.

CT – So you won best director, best editing, best cinematography, at the Sundance Film Festival *and* you did the sound and music…

JL – (*laughs)* They don't have a sound award…

CT – But if there was one, you obviously would have gotten it there. Is that a practical issue or a megalomaniacal issue?

JL – Maybe if I had the money to hire a great composer or something or maybe if I had some guy to follow me around with a bunch of microphones to record all the sound I would have done it.

Although, it is actually an advantage to be by yourself. I mean I was always working with one Iraqi guy. And I only have this three-hundred dollar microphone. In the future, finances allowing, I might get a nice *stereo* microphone…

CT – …To replace the three-hundred dollar microphone…

JL – …and train the translator guy how to use it. Because otherwise, they get bored. Especially when nothing's being translated. Usually I just tell them to get lost for a while, so maybe I'll give them a job next time. I mean, that's the way it goes.

It's a low budget film and most composers would probably want the equivalent of the entire budget to do the soundtrack, and I don't have that kind of money, so it's just cheaper to do it yourself. If you don't know how to make music, you learn (*laughs*). And if you don't want music, just don't have it.

CT – Yeah.

JL – I do know how I want things. On the other hand on my first documentary I did everything myself. I mixed it myself, I did everything on my computer and it was just the translating that I needed help with. I do like to make my own music though...

CT – So you can pick up that last award?

JL – I don't think about it in those terms. I don't know about *auteur* theory, but I do like to be the author of the movie. I don't like anyone else telling me what to do on a creative level on the film. I like to work with other people but I want the final word on how it's going to be. The thing is sometimes you'll be working with someone and they'll show you something and you'll say "Okay great" and it goes into the film…

CT – You also talked about objectivity a little bit last night. What are your views on objectivity in documentary?

JL – People have this idea that documentary is supposed to be *objective*, fair and balanced and all this stuff. But that's a lie. That's not how it goes. Everybody is subjective.

CT – What do you think about the resurgence or popularity of the documentary form?

JL – Michael Moore deserves some credit for making it more populist and making films that could appeal to everyone, and they're kind of funny. My films aren't big on humour, though.

From my point of view, I like to make documentaries that are theatrical. I'm not interested in television. I like the idea of the 40-foot screen and the audience and as I say, I like fiction cinema as much as documentary. I really like that aesthetic.

Even though I'm interested in subjects that are real, I'm not really interested in fiction film, although I like to watch it. Because I feel like, "why would you want to make stuff up?" there's so much going on.

There are so many reasons. In doing documentary instead of fiction there's the independence of it. You don't have to ask anybody because it's so cheap and you can just go do it yourself. And not have to wait. Just like Orson Welles said, why waste all this time waiting for funding? You don't want to do that. Life is short, and you only have so much time.

If it takes me three years to make a film, I'm only going to make eight films in my life. This is a big consideration. I don't want to have to wait five years between projects. I need to go out and make another film.

CT – How long did it take you to edit this film?

JL – I was editing in Iraq and doing translation. There are about two thousand pages of translation that are all time coded. You know, time code to time code, sentence to sentence. We would do that with the translators sitting in a room in northern Iraq, that part. So I would type in the translations and they would be feeding me dialogue.

So I edited the rough cut of the first chapter while I was still in Iraq and then the last two chapters were finished in Seattle. So it took from April 2005 until last November [2005]. And then all the post-dubbing, sound mixing, colour correction stuff happened in early January.

CT – What's next for you after the festival circuit?

JL – I don't know. I've been looking around a little bit. I just went to Lebanon. I think that I would like to do something in Iran, but I don't know whether or not they'll give me a visa. We'll see. If I had my choice of anywhere to make my next film it would be Iran.

"This is politics. But people forget that politics is not about Republicans and Democrats having their ad on TV, politics in that kind of place is more about functional politics."

War Films Without War:
The Gulf War at the Movies

Brenda Cromb

It has become a cliché to say that war has changed since the end of the Cold War; but have war movies changed? Though Slavoj Žižek does not explicitly mention the Persian Gulf War of 1991 as an example of what he calls "war without war," Jean Baudrillard's ruminations on the stage-managed conflict make it clear that it can be seen as an example of modern warfare, where technology decreases the risk of deaths (on "the right side"). Žižek states that "the public expects a guarantee that there will be no casualties," and that the news media's coverage of a modern conflict tends to undermine deaths on both sides (2000, 33). Baudrillard notes that CNN's coverage had such tendencies in the Gulf War, complaining that "[i]t is a masquerade of information: branded faces delivered over to the prostitution of the image, the image of unintelligible distress. No images of the field of battle, but images of masks, of blind, defeated faces, images of falsification" (40). Žižek writes that:

> this tendency to erase death itself from war should not seduce us into endorsing the standard notion that war is made less traumatic if it is no longer experienced by soldiers (or presented) as an actual encounter with another human being to be killed, but as an abstract activity in front of a screen or behind a gun far from the explosion […] While such a procedure makes the soldier less *guilty,* it is open to question if it effectively causes less *anxiety*…(33).

That the technological screen distances soldiers from their enemy – like the American (and coalition) soldiers who fought in the Gulf War and who largely avoided close contact with the Iraqis – may not actually protect them explains much of the obfuscation and misdirection engaged in by movies dealing with the Gulf War. Žižek goes on to ask the question that seems to be at the heart of Gulf War cinema:

what if the truly traumatic feature is NOT the awareness that I am killing another human being (to be obliterated through the 'dehumanization' and 'objectification' of war into a technical procedure), but on the contrary, this very 'objectification,' which then generates the need to supplement it by the fantasies of a authentic personal encounters with the enemy? (2000 33-34)

"Remarkably few feature films have been made that portray the events of the Gulf War onscreen, especially given the popularity of Vietnam and World War II films."

In the few films that actually do deal directly with the Gulf War, we can see attempts by the filmmakers to resolve the anxieties around the enemy and the "realness" of a war experience that Žižek sees this "warfare without warfare" (2002, 11) producing.

Žižek spends a small portion of *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime* discussing the depiction of brutality in war films. Using Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) as an example, Žižek explains that in the depiction of war, the brutality of hand-to-hand combat may *seem* like the horrifying Real, but is in fact the fantasy. He contrasts the privileged face-to-face encounter to the realities of modern, technology-driven, push-button warfare, in which there is little to no contact with the enemy. Žižek contends that what is often presented as "harsh realism" in Hollywood movies is, in Lacanian terms, anything but. This formulation provides a way to get past the "politically correct" reading of an "important" film that purports to show the "real horror" of any human tragedy. As Žižek puts it:

the images of utter catastrophe, far from giving access to the Real, can function as a protective shield AGAINST the Real. In sex as well as in politics, we take refuge in catastrophic scenarios in order to avoid the actual deadlock (of the impossibility of sexual relationship, of social antagonism) (34).

These suppressions of deadlock are one reason we turn to Hollywood; they are especially common in films that deal with real-life catastrophic events, like war films.

Of course, the first sequence in *Saving Private Ryan* is balanced by the remainder of the film's highly conventional, conservative narrative, as Krin Gabbard notes (135). Gabbard goes on to question the ideological purpose of a film that valorizes soldiers in traditional warfare in a time when war no longer means invasion and hand-to-hand combat. "As an apparatus of the state, *Saving Private Ryan* does what it has to do: it re-creates a fascination and a reverence for war so that, someday in the not too distant future, the state can put this fascination and reverence to use once again," Gabbard writes (rather presciently in 2001, just before the dawn of the ongoing "war on terror") (138). In the same anthology, Frank P. Tomasulo echoes these concerns: "Although set in the past, Spielberg's 'antiwar' film has ideological ramifications that affect spectators now and in the future, and provide the self-perpetuating jingoistic justifications for future unilateral military invasions, incursions and interventions" (127). Though made after the Gulf War, *Saving Private Ryan* clearly still presents an image of war as "a necessary and life-defining experience" (138); it is under this type of narrative that films about the Gulf War are operating. The Gulf War's failures as a "war" in the Spielbergian sense are likely responsible for how rarely the War has made it to the screen, and how it is generally not fodder for more traditional "war films."

Remarkably few feature films have been made that portray the events of the Gulf War onscreen, especially given the popularity of Vietnam and World War II films. It appears that the desire to weave the Gulf War into the symbolic narrative, to create a cinematic "Gulf War" – the way Vietnam films have done for the Vietnam War, or World War II films have done for World War II – is simply not present. One explanation is that, as Baudrillard titled his controversial essay: "[t]he gulf war did not take place." While something definitely *did* take place, it was so radically different than our traditional understanding of war that we may not even be able to call it 'war' anymore. Žižek describes this as well:

It is already a journalistic cliché that a new form of war is now emerging: a high-tech war in which precision bombing, and so on, does the job, without any direct intervention by ground forces […]. Old notions of face-to-face conflict, courage and so on, are becoming obsolete (2002, 35).

Because of this conflict between what war is symbolically supposed to mean and what the Gulf War actually was, filmmakers have sidestepped the war itself or otherwise distanced the war-time events from it, often depending on older films or other narratives as shorthand, as opposed to showing the purported "real catastrophes" of war. These issues may be less pressing now than the were before the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and their attendant violence, but the legacy of the first Gulf War is still well worth teasing out.

In one of the *Jarhead*'s (Sam Mendes, 2005) most intriguing sequences, the men are assembled in a movie theatre, watching *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979). The men all sing along loudly with "The Ride of the Valkyries" as, in the film, the helicopters prepare to attack a small Vietnamese town. The theatre is full of cheers and Anthony Swofford, our hero, clutches his face ecstatically as women and children are showing fleeing the hail of bullets dramatically unleashed by Robert Duvall and his men. There is a clear irony intended in the scene. Though *Apocalypse Now* is known as a quintessential *anti-war* film and that scene in particular is famous for its portrayal of the "real" horror of war, for all the jarheads, it is thrilling.

In a 2005 *Harper's Magazine* article, Lawrence Weschler discussed this sequence at length in light of Anthony Swofford's claim in his memoir (of which *Jarhead* is an adaptation) that "Vietnam films are all pro-war" (quoted on Weschler 65). Weschler describes how Walter Murch, editor of the original Valkyrie sequence, was the one had to "harrow the distinctly unsettling task of revisiting and revisioning a scene he labored over for months almost thirty years ago […] this time, alas, in an entirely new and even more disturbing light" (66). Weschler posits that the Valkyrie scene's implication of the audience in war pornography "somehow magically [serves] to inoculate the film against any form of eventual co-optation," and suggests that *Jarhead* represents "the unlikely achievement of a war film that might in fact never be susceptible to military pornographic co-optation" (76). That may be true, but the pop cultural recycling that dominates the film makes it much more a film about films than a film about war. *Jarhead* – and the other Gulf War films I will discuss – reflect a problem removed from the actual human death in warfare: the (always failing) measure of experience against representation, to the point that representations overwhelm experience. Postmodernism is a well-worn trope, but it is one that fits here: the eliding of "real" wartime catastrophes to place the war into comprehensible narrative tropes, the avoidance of consideration for the people on the other side of the buttons that were pushed (because that would require them to have existed).

"That may be true, but the pop cultural recycling that dominates the film makes it much more a film about films than a film about war."

"I am the enemy": Friendly Fire

In both Edward Zwick's *Courage Under Fire* (1996) and Jonathan Demme's *The Manchurian Candidate* (2004), Denzel Washington plays a Gulf War veteran investigating an incident that took place during the war, only to learn that soldiers he had assumed were killed by the Iraqis were actually the victims of "friendly fire," the real life leading cause of death during the war. In the former, he plays Lieutenant Colonel Nathaniel Serling, charged with investigating the possibility of giving a posthumous Medal of Honor to Captain Karen Walden (Meg Ryan). The film follows Serling on his interviews of the men who were with Walden on her last mission. Though the men's stories do not match, but there is pressure from the army and from the White House to close the investigation and award Captain Walden the medal, as it would make her the first woman to receive the Medal of Honor for combat duty. The bluntly stated desire of the government, a big Other[1] if there ever was one, to create a traditional story of heroism about the war is emphasized with an underlying sense that "what really happened" will never match the official, more traditional story.

The film is heavy-handed about Serling's negotiation of traditional ideas of heroism and courage in his investigation; it becomes more than his job, it becomes a quest to find a 'true' story of uncomplicated heroism. This is meant to be motivated by Serling's inability to cope with his own wartime experience, in which he gave the order to fire on a friend's tank, assuming it to be an enemy vehicle. He tells a reporter: "I just want to get something clear this time, just want somebody to be a hero." A rare unmotivated flashback – one that is not driven by a story being told by one of the soldiers Serling interviews – shows Walden singing "Angel from Montgomery," including the line "just give me one thing that I can hold onto," implying that she, like Serling, longs for a something simpler and more clear-cut than her own experience of war. However, though the film constantly alludes to the failures of official narratives of war, it does resolve with what the viewer is meant to take as "the truth": it turns out that one of Captain Walden's men shot her after disobeying an order of hers. When help arrives for the group, whose helicopter crashed in a dangerous area, Walden sends her men ahead to save a more severely injured man. She tells them to come back for her. Instead, when they have boarded the rescue helicopter, Staff Sergeant Monfriez (Lou Diamond Phillips) tells the pilot that Captain Walden is dead, paving the way for the planes that came with their rescue to firebomb the area. Her death was caused not by an Iraqi soldier, but indirectly by her own men and directly by the American bombing. Though the Iraqi enemies presumably were the ones who shot down Walden's helicopter, the real enemy turns out to be within the army itself. The shooting that another group just above them heard as they were being rescued is revealed to have been Karen, fighting right up until the end. In other words, the official story put forth by the big Other turns out to be true. *Courage Under Fire* – through Denzel Washington's character – asks the viewer to distrust the authority of the army and the simplicity of the "official story," but in the end, this authority is reaffirmed. They are right to honour Walden: she *is* a hero, clear and simple. And so is Serling: the opening sequence of the film shows the first part of a tank battle. Incidentally (and notably), all the Iraqi combatants

[1] In Lacanian theory, the big Other is the illusion of an outside subject that orders the world: God, for instance, is a big Other. "The Army" is also a big Other.

are seen through the technological distortion of night vision goggles. In the chaos, one of his men mistakes a tank from their squadron as belonging to the enemy and Serling gives the order to fire. The scene ends abruptly as he realizes that the tank he has

"It is almost as though the story was produced in order to justify the deaths and work them into a comprehensible Hollywood narrative, so unfathomable is it that the men could have been killed by the invisible Iraqi enemy."

hit was that of his friend; his actions throughout the film, including his drinking problem, are presented as stemming from his guilt surrounding this battle. Toward the end of the film, Serling allows a reporter to listen to an audio-tape of the proceedings of that night. The other half of the opening battle sequence is revealed: after the incident, Serling orders all tanks to turn on their lights, which, as his commanding officer asserts, prevents the loss of countless more lives (but notably because they would have killed each other, not because the Iraqis would have killed them). The problem is not that Serling is not a hero, it is that he cannot see himself that way.

The effect of the broken up battle scene is similar to that of the initial mismatches in the men's stories. The latter occurs *not* because everyone perceives events differently and there can be no uncomplicated "truth," but because the men are consciously lying to conceal the "objective" truth. Serling is presented throughout the film as a failure, an image of the American soldier robbed of his heroism, but then the film rehabilitates him. The sin for which he is punishing himself – through his drinking, his self-imposed exile from his family, his willingness to ruin his career in the army, the only thing he has ever wanted to do – is proven to be eminently forgivable, both by the viewer, who learns that Serling saved more men than he harmed, and by the dead man's parents, who literally tell Serling that he should learn to forgive himself. It turns out that the President can put that medal on Walden's pretty little girl just as the White House aide had hoped, in a sequence that is edited in parallel to Serling's visit to his dead friend's parents. It is as if *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) were remade, only Kane's friends *do* have all the answers, and instead of being burned, Rosebud is placed in a museum.

In *The Manchurian Candidate*, the battles that American soldiers fight are not with themselves and each other, but they are still pointedly not with Iraqis. It turns out that the battle that Ben Marco (Washington) and his comrades remember – one for which Raymond Shaw was a decorated hero – was in fact a false memory, implanted by corporate America. The film never shows us any parts of the war that *actually happened* in the diegesis. The events that the soldiers falsely remember are rendered in a computer-generated, cartoon-like format. Unlike in *Courage Under Fire,* which begins with a montage of real news footage (as if to establish that the Gulf War really *did* take place), *The Manchurian Candidate* makes sure that everything the viewer actually sees of the war (besides a long sequence at the beginning of the film that shows the soldiers playing poker and listening to rap music at the front) turns to be actually false: for Ben Marco, his frightening discovery is that the Gulf War – at least, the Gulf War he remembers – did *not* take place.

It would be easy (and perhaps, partially correct) to read the film as simply an allegory for the manner in which the war was sold through the (corporate-owned) media. The traditional narrative of heroism that we see being told over and over on television reports on the film's faux-CNN – in the exact same "talking points" – about Vice-Presidential candidate Raymond Shaw's single-handed heroism in battle turns out to be nothing more than a manufactured story to jumpstart Shaw's career, just as much as a simulacrum as Baudrillard's vision of the Gulf War as media puppet show. At one point, corporate-sponsored political candidate Shaw tells Ben: "I am the enemy," effectively erasing the threat of any external enemy. This is especially compelling given the film was made while the United States was again engaged in a controversial war in Iraq.

However, the question that is never asked about the invented battle and the time Shaw and Marco spend time under hypnosis is this: why did the two young men who were murdered – by a hypnotized Marco and Shaw, respectively – need to be killed? Why could they have not been brainwashed as well? Their deaths seemed to feel natural because they needed to fulfill genre requirements. Though *The Manchurian Candidate* is not a war film, it is a conspiracy film. It would not have been a very good conspiracy without the discovery that the men had been killed by their own leaders. There is a circular logic to the deaths: they are part of a plot to use the war in order to make Shaw into a hero, but the only sensible explanation for their deaths is that they were really at war. It is almost as though the story was produced in order to justify the deaths and work them into a comprehensible Hollywood narrative, so unfathomable is it that the men could have been killed

by the invisible Iraqi enemy. This filmic representation of "friendly fire" involves a much more complex chain of reasoning than the earlier *Courage Under Fire*, which was produced more recently after the war and perhaps reflected a desire to redeem or at least make sense of all the actual friendly fire deaths which occurred. By 2004 when *The Manchurian Candidate* came out, the wounds were not as fresh.

In both cases the films deal with the erasure of the enemy by redirecting the enmity to an enemy within – either to other people in the army or to corporate and political power brokers. Essentially, we can take this as evidence that the Iraqis are *Homo sacer*, a concept that Žižek borrows from Giorgio Agamben. Agamben uses the term – *sacer* meaning a mix of the sacred and profane, referring to a member of a society who is banished and separate from the rules – in terms of "the radical transformation of politics into the realm of bare life" (120). Žižek deploys it to discuss the way war is now presented, with the enemy treated as an entity separate from humanity. If the enemy is outside the bounds of humanity, it is impossible to conceive of meeting him face-to-face on the battlefield, as in traditional warfare. In having the slain soldiers turn out to have been killed by other Americans – and at least in part by American corporate capitalism in *The Manchurian Candidate* – the filmmakers create an enemy that can be faced and comprehended. In re-casting the disconnected war experience – one in which the mythic face-to-face encounter with the enemy is replaced by night-vision goggles and fire-bombing – as a way for Americans to kill each other and prove themselves, the Gulf War becomes a comprehensible experience.

"Any political statement about the growing influence of corporate money on American politics is mowed over by the family drama: the war is narrativized into politics, which are then narrativized into an Oedipal drama."

"Fuck Politics": The Erasure of the Political

It would be difficult to argue that a film about a US presidential election erases politics, but *The Manchurian Candidate's* politics are notably non-partisan: the television news coverage that dominates the film is notable in its careful refusal to name a political party or stance, where the real CNN always includes an (R) or (D) after a politician's name. The avoidance of party labels is only the tip of the iceberg: it soon becomes clear that "politics" are just a backdrop for other intrigues. It becomes clear that the official motivation for the brainwashing scheme – a bid to further the political influence of Manchurian Global, a fictional corporation with a name retrofitted to the title of the film's forbearer – is not the only issue at play. The formidable Senator Eleanor Shaw (Meryl Streep) betrays her co-conspirators to increase her own power and that of her family, as well as to keep her adult son close to her. Any political statement about the growing influence of corporate money on American politics is mowed over by the family drama: the war is narrativized into politics, which are then narrativized into an Oedipal drama. The film makes this an inescapable conclusion. Shaw bluntly describes their relationship in dialogue, at one point blaming his mother for breaking up his relationship with the only woman he has ever cared for. In a later scene, Eleanor is shown caressing Raymond's bare chest and kissing her hypnotized son on the lips. This utterly literal take on the Oedipal drama – and the figure of the overbearing mother of the 1960s film transformed into a senator (who could presumably could be a presidential candidate herself) – implies a kind of desperation to frame the Gulf War as a familiar conspiracy theory. In both *The Manchurian Candidate* and *Courage Under Fire* the catastrophe of war is scaled down to a catastrophe of individual psychology: the catastrophe is that the war was not a war. This allows the characters to avoid the impossibility of the sexual (or really, any human) relation, the Lacanian idea that true intersubjectivity remains impossible due to the barrier of language, an incomplete system of signification. In *Courage Under Fire,* Serling's guilt allows him to avoid his wife and family; in *The Manchurian Candidate* Ben's being haunted by his hypnosis is a convenient way for him to explain the emptiness of his current life and as for Shaw – he can just blame his mother. For a war against Iraq and protecting Kuwait, the Gulf War seems to have very little to do with Iraqis or with Kuwaitis.

Of course, *The Manchurian Candidate* is not a story that originates

[2] Both films are also based on a novel by Richard Condon. However, the 2004 film also lists George Axelrod's 1962 screenplay as a source and Tina Sinatra, whose father starred in the 1962 film. is a producer. Both of these would indicate to me that the 2004 remake is a clear attempt to capitalize on the success of the earlier film.

with the Gulf War – it is a remake of John Frankenheimer's 1962 film of the same name.[2] The remake updates the source of the brainwashing (and rewriting of battlefield events) from the Communist threat to corporate capitalism. In bringing the Gulf War into a familiar framework (instead of creating a somehow Gulf War-specific story), Demme is pushing the viewer to see the Gulf War as interchangeable with earlier wars. In short, in allowing the Gulf War to be tied to other narratives, instead of treating it as a new kind of war, the film disguises many of the anxieties that might arise from the disappearance of the "face-to-face" encounter as the essentially "real" experience of war.

Jarhead follows a Marine sniper squadron through their training and deployment in the run-up to the Gulf War. As the men are being trucked through the desert, one of them voices familiar objections to the war, noting that they are just protecting Kuwait because of its oil reserves and pointing out that the United States trained Saddam Hussein's army and provided them with weapons when they were at war with Iran. "Fuck politics," Troy says, "We're here. All the rest is bullshit." All the men nod in agreement and this is the end of any acknowledgement by the men that they are in the desert for any reason other than to "get some action." When the Marines arrive in "the desert," as the film vaguely describes it, they are greeted by their commanding officer, who proceeds to give a crowd-pleasing speech that equates loud enthusiasm with sexual arousal. He shows the troops a picture of one of "Saddams's victims," a small child injured through chemical warfare. He does this only to tell them that while their mission is currently to protect the Saudi oilfields until the politicians catch up with events and allow them to go kill some Iraqis as, he intimates, they would be right to do.

For all these Marines, their only prior impression of war is through war movies. In the aforementioned *Apocalypse Now* scene, it becomes clear that any action is good action. For the Marines in the film, war is no longer about courage or protecting one's country or discerning right from wrong: it is merely about being part of a story, of getting in on the action. More than something to focus on to avoid the deadlock of social antagonism, the catastrophic becomes the whole point. Film references recur continuously in *Jarhead*: it is as though the characters would not know what to do without the movies, and Mendes uses them as cinematic shorthand. As they do, they ironically re-enact scenes that were originally known for showing the brutality of man, but these imitations are stripped of their original horror. The scene in which the bored men pit scorpions against each other is a version of the opening scene of Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969), but it is clearly taken lightly by all the men. The early training sequence trades on ironic music tracks (like playing "Don't Worry, Be Happy" as recruits are verbally and physically abused) and the viewer's pop cultural knowledge of the stereotypically cruel drill sergeant (like in *Full Metal Jacket* [Stanley Kubrick, 1987]). The difference is that in the Kubrick film, the drill sergeant's cruelty had devastating consequences; in *Jarhead*, the man's abuse means nothing at all – it is brushed aside with a snappy voiceover. In another scene, the Marines, while on a break from the front, gather to watch a tape of *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, 1978) that someone's wife has sent. They cheer until they realize that the film has been taped over with the man's wife having sex with her neighbour. When the group has been convinced to leave the room out of respect to the traumatized man, Swofford remains, demanding to watch the homemade pornography again, because, he tells Troy: "I want to see what it's like to watch somebody else fuck your girlfriend." The implication is that Swofford cannot understand anything unless he sees it on a screen – and it furthers his obsession with the idea that his girlfriend is cheating on him. Here, one catastrophe replaces another. When all the men are having a party after the cease-fire has been called, Swofford realizes that he has never fired his gun, so he shoots it into the air. His comrades follow; Staff Sergeant Sykes (Foxx) fires his machine gun one-handed, while smoking a cigar, perhaps thinking of *Scarface* (Brian De Palma, 1983). War is not about two countries fighting each other for principled reasons, it is about getting to act like you are in the movies.

"Film references recur continuously in *Jarhead*: it is as though the characters would not know what to do without the movies..."

The glossing over of the political in war films is hardly new: one hardly expects real political engagement from Hollywood. What does distinguish *The Manchurian Candidate* and *Jarhead* is that they acknowledge a political dimension and only *then* dismiss it bluntly. They refuse to search for answers or to offer up any historical or political explanations for the perceived "meaninglessness" of the war, engaging instead in reproducing old stories in new settings. In couching the story in terms of the men's experiences of generic Cold War-era narratives, *Jarhead* is making interesting implications about how Hollywood shapes even our most extreme experiences. However, it ultimately does not provide any resolution to the anxiety that arises upon the realization that the modern version of warfare can never match up to the stories we try to tell about it, or even to what the word "war" is supposed to mean.

"Getting Action"

Perhaps the emphasis on traditional narratives of war, which elevate the experience of a face-to-face meeting with the enemy**,** explains why Swofford and his colleagues have so much difficulty dealing with the "new warfare" in *Jarhead*. The scene in which a bored and stir-crazy Swofford

threatens to kill fellow marine Fergus over a petty argument is shot intimately, with medium close-ups in shot-reverse shot formation. The scene emphasizes how *close* Swofford is to Fergus, showing the gun he is holding in Fergus's face in the frame in both set-ups. Contrast this with the tower scene, in which Swofford and Troy finally get the opportunity to kill an enemy, but are ultimately not needed, as air support arrives in time. It emphasizes the men's distance from their Iraqi target: the audience only ever sees the doomed man through the crosshairs of Swofford and Troy's rifle sights.

The latter scene emphasizes the trauma of the "new warfare" for the men who fight it. The "system" is still prepared for "old war," in which snipers are important, so Troy and Swofford feel cheated that they were essentially flown to the front to see people die and clean out toilets. The film narrates clearly the difference between the "real" terror of the scorched bodies the men find on the "Highway of Death" and the Real truth that war can be executed technologically, through air support. The positioning of this scene in the film is important. It suggests that the real trouble with war is not the sheer number of Iraqis killed, but that these strong American men are being primed up to fight the enemy – their training tells them that "without their guns, they are nothing" – and that ultimately they will never be able to live up to these expectations. The face-to-face encounter that Žižek mentions as being essential to the experience of warfare is denied by the presence of 'air support.' If the traditional soldier is becoming obsolete, how are we to conceive of any narrative of warfare? *Jarhead* dramatizes this problem, but it does not offer an answer. For all its cynicism in the training sequence, *Jarhead* asks the viewer to sympathize with the military man, who, like Lt. Col. Serling in *Courage Under Fire,* so identifies himself with his symbolic mandate that he is not able to conceive of life outside his role. As Swofford's voiceover explains, the Marines demand this kind of institutional association: "A flashlight was a moonbeam. A pen was an ink stick. My mouth was a cum receptacle. A bed was a rack. A wall was a bulkhead. A shirt was a blouse." The organization re-establishes the symbolic to the point of having its own language, striving to control every aspect of the recruit's life, eventually even winning over Swofford, who spent his first few days at the base taking laxatives and reading Camus. The film ends with Swofford's voice over explaining that no matter what else a Marine does, part of him is always at war; as he looks out a window – which is transformed into a blurry shot of camouflaged figures trudging along with their guns. "We are still in the desert," Swofford's narration intones. What seems to haunt Swofford even more than his war experience is his *non-war* experience: the emphasis in the film is on the long time spent waiting for the war to start, waiting for his skills to be needed, waiting for his rite of passage, for his face-to-face encounter. The messiness and pointlessness of Swofford's experience in the Gulf – at one point he runs through incoming fire, some of it from American planes, to bring someone a dead battery – seems to be *why* Swofford feels stuck in the desert. Wartime experience will never match up with the official narrative.

The "Media War"

All four films being discussed here acknowledge the role played by the press in creating the publicly consumed version of the Gulf War: *Courage Under Fire* and *Three Kings* (David O. Russell, 1999) both feature reporters as key characters; *The Manchurian Candidate* is constantly underscored by a running cable news broadcast, which appears in various characters' apartments and even in the street; and *Jarhead* actually shows the squadron being told what they can and cannot say in speaking to a reporter, emphasizing the role of the military in shaping public opinion by controlling media access to stories. At the beginning of *Three Kings,* Conrad exclaims "The only action we've seen is on CNN" – the war is a media war even to the people *in* the war. The measure to which, as far as anyone was concerned, news coverage *was* the war, calls to mind the surreal real-life situation described by Paul Patton in his introduction to Baudrillard:

> Occasionally, the absurdity of the media's self-representation as purveyor of reality and immediacy broke through, in moments such as those when the CNN cameras crossed live to a group of reporters assembled somewhere in the Gulf, only to have them confess that they were also sitting around watching CNN in order to find out what was happening (2).

Baudrillard's discussion of the war's "not taking place" – published while the bombing was ongoing – emphasizes the extent to which the Gulf War was seen as a product of media bombast.

This is most clearly emphasized in *Three Kings*, in which Major Gates' (George Clooney) *job* is to handle a reporter. The film closes with an ironic series of subtitles explaining what happened to the characters at the end of the film, indicating that the three men – who had broken a ceasefire and gotten one of their own killed in an attempt to steal Kuwaiti gold from 'Saddam' – were given honorable discharges thanks to reporter Adriana's coverage of their heroism in helping the Iraqi refugees across the border to Iran. Clooney's character asks Adriana to cover the story because he knows that the army would not discharge them if they are shown as heroes on CNN, for fear of bad press. The film's cynicism about the press lends it an air of authenticity, implying that the viewer is seeing what 'really happened.' However, the film itself is trading in its own fantasmatic version of the war – and of Iraq – as will be discussed later.

In *Courage Under Fire*, reporter Tom Gardner is represented at first as a villain, harassing Serling about the events to the point of calling him at home and following him around, but in the end turns out to be a sympathetic figure. He is the one who tells Serling that he is a hero; there could be no heroes without the press to tell us they are heroes. The events at the front, however feature no news crews, which – after the montage of CNN footage that opens the film – indicates that the viewer is seeing the parts of the war that they were not told about on television. But does acknowledging the role of the media really prove that the filmmakers are giving the viewer the 'inside story' that the press did not want to tell them? Of course Baudrillard would say no, claiming that the images generated by the press

are simulacra of a war, and that film images that trade in authenticity are no more 'real.' Given the way in which *Courage Under Fire* actually upholds the "official" narrative, and the value of having an official narrative, it becomes clear that the acknowledgement of media construction is nothing more than lip service.

Iraq Without Iraqis: The Enemy Disembodied

Even more than the erasure of any Iraqi responsibility for US deaths, Iraq war films are reluctant to show Iraqis. In *Courage Under Fire*, the Iraqis are seen through night-vision goggles and as shadowy figures. Baudrillard observes in discussing the historical Gulf War that "[t]he isolation of the enemy by all kinds of electronic interference creates a sort of barricade behind which he becomes invisible" (40). It is not surprising that technology (especially the dull green of night-vision goggles) plays a large role in most of these films, emphasizing the distant and almost fantasmatic nature of the enemy. The constantly suggested presence is analogous to Žižek's "stain," which is "not a signifier but rather an object resisting symbolization, a surplus, a material leftover circulating among the subjects and staining its momentary possessor" (2001, 8). The utter suppression of the Iraqis in three of the four films suggest that the sense of the invisible enemy that was created in the coverage of the war has carried through, reducing the Iraqis (and Arabs in general) to stains upon the desert landscape. Žižek further describes the stain thusly:

> in what I see, in what is open in my view, there is always a point where "I see nothing," a point which "makes no sense," i.e. which functions as the picture's stain – this is the point from which the very picture returns the gaze, looks back at me (15).

The sight of "the stain" is a traumatic experience, just as is any encounter with Iraqi humanity in three of our four films. Because of the erasure of the Iraqi people, the war becomes almost meaningless, as if the characters are at war for the sake of war. Because there is no way to make sense of the Iraqis without the realization of the war's technological horrors, they are simply erased from their own homeland.

Although the bulk of *Jarhead* takes place in the desert near the Iraqi border, the viewer sees only three

encounters with Iraqi or other Middle Eastern people. In the first, scenario, the squadron encounters a group of men who have apparently had one of their camels die and so are wandering the desert on foot. When Swofford goes to speak to them, the camera does not follow him, as it usually does. Nor is there a voiceover allowing the viewer privileged access to Swofford's thoughts, as there sometimes is. Instead, it stays with the anxious squadron, building suspense; Swofford and the man he is talking to are shown, stain-like, in a hazy long shot. It is as though in going to talk to an Arab man face-to-face is analogous to entering another world. Shrouded in mist, absent of voiceover, the encounter with the other cannot be symbolized, and is never further explained in the film.

The next encounter, such as it is, is with the charred bodies the men run across on the bombed "highway of death." Though we can see the bodies their features are blackened by charring and further obscured by darkness. Also, the men are disturbed by their lifelikeness: it is not the fact that there are dead Iraqis that seems to bother Swofford, it is the fact that they were trying to run. These blackened bodies that are not human (according to the *Homo sacer* doctrine to which the men ascribe) are disturbing in their insistence that they *are* human. They are poorly lit and quickly passed over by the camera, as if looking at their charred and all too human flesh is impossible.

Even when Troy and Swofford *do* get close enough to see their enemy, it is still mediated by technology: Swofford (and the viewer) sees the man through the crosshairs of his gunsight as Troy says "That's what they look like, huh?" The way the film is 'supposed' to end – according to a narrative that prizes the face-to-face encounter with the enemy – is with Troy and Swofford successfully killing the man and learning what it truly *means* to be at war. But the stain of the Iraqi enemy resists being brought into this narrative: the "target" resists his convenient symbolization and cannot be made a comprehensible part of the picture. As Baudrillard puts it: "The Americans inflict a particular insult by not making war on the other, but simply eliminating him" (40).

This elimination is what Žižek discusses in terms of *Homo sacer* in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. In film, the stain, which resists symbolization, and the *Homo sacer* can in this case be conceived as overlapping. *Jarhead* appears to indict the dehumanization of the Iraqi enemy – consider the disgust with which the Marine who christens a corpse "Ahab the A-rab" is treated. However, it is telling that even in the film, the Iraqi people (and the civilians who died as result of the war) are still visualized as stains: this is not othering, it is elimination. Perhaps this is one of the ways that anxiety about redefinition of war is played out: rather than force the audience to accept the Iraqis as people on equal footing with the American soldiers, the filmmakers treat them as outside the symbolic order. However, they cannot be completely erased – in *Jarhead,* their absence is all too present. This underlines what we can see as the true Real: the cold, distanced methods that ensure fewer casualties – at least on 'our' side.

***Three Kings*: Love Thy Iraqi?**

At first glance, *Three Kings* appears to correct the absence of the enemy that has been present in so many filmic versions of the Gulf War. The film opens with Troy (Mark Wahlberg) shooting a visible Iraqi in the neck. His friend Conrad (Spike Jonze) exclaims "I didn't think I'd actually get to see anyone shot in this war." The scene continues as he and several army colleagues go out into the desert on a mission to steal gold that Saddam Hussein supposedly stole from Kuwait, after pulling a map out

of a prisoner's rectum. Troy uses racial slurs like "towel head" and "camel jockey" to refer to the Iraqi enemy – he clearly has been led to see the Iraqis as *Homo sacer.* When the group drives into the Iraqi town where the bunker full of gold is supposed to be, they are accosted by the locals who think they have come to save them from Saddam, but they are scared of the Iraqis. At one point, Troy places a gun to the head of a woman who comes to him begging for milk for her baby, as if he is scared that she might come closer. Then, he is captured and tortured by a member of Saddam's army (a young father who joined the army for money, just as Troy himself did). Shortly after Troy's release he – his humanity and commitment to beating Saddam presumably awakened – approaches an Iraqi freedom fighter with a gun, but then, upon realizing that he had seen the man's wife shot earlier, gives him a bear hug and asks what he can do to help him. The switch from gun to hug marks a direct reversal of the earlier scene: Troy has learned to love his Iraqi neighbour.

Those two scenes sum up the journey of the soldiers in the film. The four men start out selfishly, planning to rob Saddam's bunkers "without firing a shot" – much like the "bloodless war" they have just finished not fighting – out only to get what they can from the war for themselves. By the film's end, they have come to understand the Iraqi resistance. The film also addresses political specificity more or less head-on, with Gates ruefully explaining that the Iraqi villagers are all expecting the Americans to come help them rise up against Saddam, despite the fact that Bush's call for them to rise up was, in his eyes, an abdication of responsibility. To prove their change of heart, they give up the gold to help a group of them cross the border into Iran. Russell was obviously trying to make a film that humanized Iraqis and protest the United States' unwillingness to risk casualties to help the Iraqi people overthrow Saddam.

However, it must be asked: are the Iraqi resistance fighters really believable as Iraqis? When Archie and Chief are walking with the group of refugees, Amir, the man who has just seen his wife murdered by Saddam's soldiers, explains that all his friend wants to be is a barber. He does not care whether he cuts Sunni or Shiite hair, he just wants to run his business. It is no doubt made easier for Troy Barlow and his friends to embrace these Iraqis as they appear to only want the capitalist American dream. They are in Iraq without being Iraqi: not only are they cheerful small businessmen, they are not even slightly sectarian, and they seem to actually *like* the American army. It seems awfully easy to love one's Iraqi neighbour, as Žižek would put it, when he turns out to be simply an American in funny clothes. Imagine a film in which George Clooney helped a vocally sectarian Muslim who advocated jihad and was virulently anti-American: it is doubtful that it would earn the same critical acclaim. This is not to say that there are not Iraqis like Amir and his friends, but rather that Troy Barlow and friends were not really forced to confront any Iraqis who are appreciably *different*. *Three Kings,* with its grainy film stock, cynicism about the role of the media in the war, and shots that actually show bullets penetrating internal organs, is most assuredly purporting to show "what really happened." But instead the fantasmatic nature of the film's story of American-Iraqi friendship ultimately underscores the final impossibility of an American *truly* embracing an Iraqi. Žižek's deadlock comes into play here: the film creates a fantasmatic relationship between Iraqi and American by erasing the difference between them.

Films dealing with the Gulf War may seem quaint in a decade, as the current conflict between Iraq and the U.S.-led coalition rages on. However, many of the ideas that Žižek proposes about the new state of warfare and its psychological meaning are revelatory in terms of the films that have dealt with the conflict. Žižek's use of Agamben's *Homo sacer* in terms of United States-Arab relations – and the importance of loving one's neighbour, even though they are truly *other* – is instructive in the way "the enemy" has been conceived in the post-Cold War world. Žižek's insistence that "in fact, that is the difficult test for Israelis today: 'Love thy neighbour!' means 'Love thy Palestinian' (who is the neighbour *par excellence*) or it means nothing at all" (2002, 116) can be just as easily applied to Americans dealing with the Arab other. Though "Saddam" was deposed following an American invasion and was recently executed, the Gulf War – perhaps the only war that can truly be seen as a "war without war," in the Žižekian sense of "war without risk" – still has a great deal to tell us. The**se** films all have their own ways of resolving the tensions surrounding the unwarlike nature of the Gulf War. It is unsurprising that the common problem in all the films was the redefinition of the enemy, so absent were the Iraqi people from the 'official story' that the filmmakers could not conceive of symbolizing them at all. *Three Kings*, the only film to give an Iraqi a speaking part, makes a generous gesture, but ultimately erases any difference between Iraqis and Americans, effectively erasing their Iraqiness. And without the mythic "face-to-face" encounter that allows the soldier to prove himself, war becomes an empty experience. Gulf War cinema all seems to transparently attempt to give the war meaning for Americans. And the people who lived in the war zone? They are lucky to be extras.

Works Cited

Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1998.

Baudrillard, Jean. *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place.* Trans. Paul Patton. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1995.

Gabbard, Krin. "Saving Private Ryan Too Late." Lewis 131-138.

Lewis, Jon, ed. *The End of Cinema As We Know It: American film in the Nineties*. New York: New York UP, 2001.

Tomasulo, Frank P. "Empire of the Gun: Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* and American Chauvinism." Lewis 115-130.

Weschler, Lawrence. "Valkyries Over Iraq: The trouble with war movies." *Harper's Magazine,* Nov. 2005: 65-77.

Žižek, Slavoj. *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway*. Seattle: University of Washington, 2000.

---. *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*. New York: Routledge, 2001.

----. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real.* London: Verso, 2002.

The Family Myth in Hollywood

Slavoj Zizek

Michael Crichton is arguably the successor of Arthur Hailey, the first great author of "capitalist realism" (whose bestsellers back in the 1960s – *Hotel, Airport, Cars…* – always focused on a particular site of production or complex organization, mixing melodramatic plot with lengthy descriptions of how the site functions, in an unexpected replica of the Stalinist classics of the late 1920s and 1930s like Gladkov's *Cement*).[1] Crichton gave to the genre a postmodern techno-thriller twist, in accordance with today's predominant politics of fear: he is the ultimate novelist of fear – fear of the past (*Jurassic Park, Eaters of the Dead*), of the nanotechnological future (*Prey*), of Japan's business (*The Rising Sun*), of sexual harassment (*Disclosure*), of robotic technology (*Westworld*), of medical industry (*Coma*), of alien intrusion (*Andromeda Strain*), of ecological catastrophy (*State of Fear*). *State of Fear*, his last book, brings an unexpected final twist to this series of shadowy forces which lurk among us, poised to wreak havoc: America's fiercest enemies are none others than environmentalists themselves.[2]

---

[1] To this series, one should add Leon Uris's *Exodus* as an exercise in "Zionist realism."

[2] He already resorted to a similar reversal in *Disclosure*, the sexual harassment novel, in which a woman harasses a man.

As many a critic has noted, Crichton's books aren't really novels, they are more a kind of unfinished drafts, prospectuses for screenplays; however, it is this very feature which makes his work interesting for an analysis of today's ideology: the very lack of quality, the totally 'transparent' mode of writing, allows the underlying ideological fantasies to be staged at their embarrassingly-desublimated purest, in a naked form, as it were. Exemplary is here *Prey*, in which a nanotechnological experiment in a laboratory in the Nevada desert has gone horribly wrong; a cloud of nano-particles – millions of microrobots – has escaped. The cloud – visible to observers as a black swarm – is self-sustaining, self-reproducing, intelligent, and it learns from experience, evolving hour by hour. Every effort to destroy it has failed.[3] It has been programmed to be a predator; humans are its prey. Only a handful of scientists trapped in the laboratory stand between it and the release of this mechanical plague on a defenceless world… As is always the case in such stories, this 'big plot' (the catastrophe that threatens to ruin humanity itself) is combined with the 'small plot,' a set of relations and tensions among the group of scientists, with the troubled role-reversal married couple at its center. Jack, the novel's narrator, was the manager of a cutting-edge computer program division in a media technology company before he was made a scapegoat for someone else's corruption and fired; now he's a house-husband while his wife, Julia, is the workaholic vice-president of Xymos, the nanotechnology company which owns the Nevada desert laboratory where the catastrophy occurs – erotic, manipulative, and cold, she is a new version of the corporate vixen from *Disclosure*. At the novel's start, Jack has to cope with their three children, discusses Pampers versus Huggies with another father in the supermarket, and tries to handle his suspicions that his wife is having an affair.

Far from providing a mere human-interest sub-plot, this family plot is what the novel really is about: it is the prey of nano-particles which should be conceived as a materialization of the family tensions. The first thing that cannot but strike the eye of anyone who knows Lacan is how this prey (swarm) resembles what Lacan, in his Seminar XI, called "lamella": the prey appears indestructible, in its infinite plasticity; it always re-assembles itself, able morph itself into a multitude of shapes; in it, pure evil animality overlaps with machinic blind insistence. Lamella is an entity of pure surface, without the density of a substance, an infinitely plastic object that can not only incessantly change its form, but can even transpose itself from one to another medium: imagine a "something" that is first heard as a shrilling sound, and then pops up as a monstrously distorted body. A lamella is indivisible, indestructible, and immortal – more precisely, undead in the sense this term has in horror fiction: not the sublime spiritual immortality, but the obscene immortality of the "living dead" which, after every annihilation, re-compose themselves and clumsily go on. As Lacan puts it, lamella does not exist, it insists: it is unreal, an entity of pure semblance, a multiplicity of appearances which seem to envelop a central void – its status is purely fantasmatic. This blind indestructible insistence of the libido is what Freud called "death drive," and one should bear in mind that "death drive" is, paradoxically, the Freudian name for its very opposite, for the way immortality appears within psychoanalysis: for an uncanny excess of life, for an 'undead' urge which persists beyond the (biological) cycle of life and death, of generation and corruption. Freud equates the death drive with the so-called "compulsion-to-repeat," an uncanny urge to repeat painful past experiences which seems to outgrow the natural limitations of the organism affected by it and to insist even beyond the organism's death. As such, lamella is "what is subtracted from the living being by virtue of the fact that it is subject to the cycle of sexed reproduction": it precedes sexual difference, it multiplies and reproduces itself by way of asexual self-division.[4] In the novel's climactic scene, Jack holds in his arms Julia who, unbeknownst to him, is already infected by the swarm and lives in symbiosis with the nano-particles, receiving from them an over-human life-power.

"I held her hard. The skin of her face began to shiver, vibrating rapidly. And then her features seemed to grow, to swell as she screamed. I thought her eyes looked frightened. The swelling continued, and began to break up into rivulets, and streams.

And then in a sudden rush Julia literally disintegrated before my eyes. The skin of her swollen face and body blew away from her in streams of particles, like sand blown off a sand dune. The particles curved away in the arc of the magnetic field toward the sides of the room.

I felt her body growing lighter and lighter in my arms. Still the particles continued to flow away, with a kind of whooshing sound, to all corners of the room. And when it was finished, what was left behind – what I still held in my arms – was a pale and cadaverous form. Julia's eyes were sunk deep in her cheeks. Her mouth was thin and cracked, her skin translucent. Her hair was colorless, brittle. Her collarbones protruded from her bony neck. She looked like she was dying of cancer. Her mouth worked. I heard faint words, hardly more than breathing. I leaned in, turned my ear to her mouth to hear.

'Jack,' she whispered, 'It's eating me.'" (468-69).

This separation is then undone, the particles return to Julia and revitalize her:

"The particles on the walls were drifting free once more. Now they seemed to telescope back, returning to her face and body. /…/ And suddenly, in a *whoosh*, all the particles returned, and Julia was full and beautiful and strong as before, and she pushed me away from her with a contemptuous look…" (471).

In the final confrontation, we then get both Julias side by side, the glimmering Julia composed of the swarm and the exhausted real Julia:

"Julia came swirling up through the air toward me, spiralling like a corkscrew – and grabbed the ladder alongside me. Except she wasn't Julia, she was the swarm, and for a moment the swarm was disorganized enough that I could see right through her in places; I could see the swirling particles that composed her. I looked dawn and saw the real Julia, deathly pale, standing and looking up at me, her face a skull. By now the swarm alongside me become solid – appearing, as I had seen it become solid before. It looked like Julia"(476).

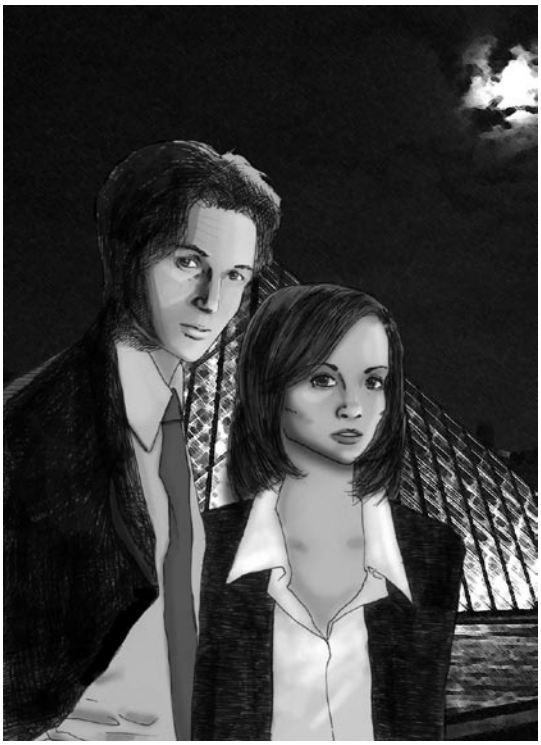
---

[3] In a rude Marxist reading, one is tempted to see in this fear of the prey of nano-particles self-organizing itself out of control of its human creators the displacement of the fear of the worker (or other oppressed group) class-consciousness.

[4] No wonder that the first climax of the novel is when a group of battling scientists progress into a hidden cave in the desert, the site of Evil where the swarm regenerates itself, and destroy it – similarly to *Eaters of the Dead*, in which the group of Vikings warriors has to penetrate the cave in which the matriarchal chief of the Neanderthal tribe of cannibals dwells, and kill her.

Here, we are not talking science, not even problematic science, but one of the fundamental fantasy-scenarios, or, more precisely, the scenario of the very disintegration of the link between fantasy and reality, so that we get the two of them, fantasy and reality, the Julia-swarm and the 'real' Julia, side by side, as in the wonderful scene from the beginning of Terry Gillian's *Brazil*, where food is served in an expensive restaurant in such a way that we get on a plate itself a small patty-like cake which looks (and probably tastes) like shit, while above the plate, a colour photo is hanging which shows us what we are "really eating," a nicely arranged juicy steak…

This, then, is how one should read *Prey*: all the (pseudo) scientific speculations about nano-technology are here as a pretext to tell the story of a husband reduced to a house-job, frustrated by his ambitious corporate vixen of a wife. No wonder that, at the novel's end, a 'normal' couple is re-created: at Jack's side is Mae, the passive but understanding Chinese colleague scientist, silent and faithful, lacking Julia's aggressiveness and ambition. And *Prey* is, as such, typical of the Hollywood matrix of the production of a couple, in which everything, from the fate of the Knights of the Round Table through October Revolution up to asteroids hitting the Earth, is transposed into an Oedipal narrative. (A Deleuzian would not miss the chance to point out how the main theoretical support of such familiarization is psychoanalysis, which makes it the key ideological machine). For this reason, it is of some interest to focus on Hollywood products which, unexpectedly, undermine this matrix – amongst them are two recent big commercial movies.



In March 2005, no less than Vatican itself made a highly publicized statement, condemning in strongest terms Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* as a book based on lies and spreading false teachings (that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene and that they had descendants – the true identity of Grail is Mary's vagina!), especially regretting the fact that the book is so popular among the younger generation in search for spiritual guidance. The ridicule of this Vatican intervention, sustained by a barely concealed longing for the good old times when the infamous Index of prohibited books was still operative, should not blind us for the fact that, while the form is wrong (one almost suspects a conspiracy between Vatican and the publisher to give a new boost to the sales of the book), the content is basically right: *The Da Vinci Code* effectively proposes a New Age re-interpretation of Christianity in the terms of the balance of the masculine and feminine Principles, i.e., the basic idea of the novel is the re-inscription of Christianity into the pagan sexualized ontology: the feminine principle is sacred, perfection resides in the harmonious coupling of the male and female principles…The paradox to be assumed is that, in this case, every feminist should support the Church: it is ONLY through the 'monotheistic' suspension of the feminine signifier, of the polarity of the masculine and feminine opposites, that the space emerges for what we broadly refer to as 'feminism' proper, for the rise of feminine subjectivity. The femininity asserted in the affirmation of the cosmic "feminine principle" is, on the contrary, always a subordinated (passive, receptive) pole, opposed to active "masculine principle."

This is why thrillers like *Da Vinci Code* are one of the key indicators of today's ideological shifts: the hero is in search of an old manuscript which would reveal some shattering secret threatening to undermine the very foundations of (institutionalized) Christianity; the 'criminal' edge is provided by the desperate and ruthless attempts of the Church (or some hard-line faction within it) to suppress this document. This secret focuses on the 'repressed' feminine dimension of the divine: Christ was married to Mary Magdalene, the Grail is actually the female body…is this revelation really such a surprise? Is the idea that Jesus had sex with Mary Magdalene not rather a kind of obscene secret of Christianity known to all, a Christian *secret de polichinelle*? The true surprise would have been to go a step further and clam that Mary was really a transvestite, so that Jesus' lover was a young beautiful boy!

The interest of the novel (and, against the suspiciously fast dismissal of the film, one should say that this holds even more for the film) resides in a feature which, surprisingly, echoes *The X-Files* where (as Darian Leader noted) the fact that so many things happen "out there" where the truth is supposed to dwell (aliens invading Earth) fills in the void, i.e., the much closer truth that nothing (no sexual relation) is going on between the couple of two agents, Mulder and Scully. In *Code*, the sexual life of Christ and Mary Magdalene is the excess which inverts (covers up) the fact that the sexual life of Sophie, the heroine, Christ's last descendant, is non-existent: SHE is like contemporary Mary, virginal, pure, asexualized, there is no hint of sex between her and Robert Langdon.

Her trauma is that she witnessed the primordial fantasmatic scene of the parental copulation, this excess of *jouissance* which totally "neutralized" her sexually: it is as if, in a kind of temporal loop, she was there at the act of her own conception, so that, for her, EVERY sex is incestuous and thus prohibited. Here enters Robert who, far from being her love-partner, acts as her "wild analyst" whose task is to construct a narrative frame, a myth, which would enable her to break out of this fantasmatic captivation, NOT by way of regaining 'normal' heterosexuality, but by way of accepting her asexuality and "normalizing" it as part of the new mythic narrative. In this sense, *The Da Vinci Code* belongs into the series we are analyzing: it is not really a film about religion, about the "repressed" secret of Christianity, but a film about a frigid and traumatized young woman who is redeemed, freed of her trauma, provided with a mythic frame that enables her to fully accept her asexuality.

"In this sense, *The Da Vinci Code* belongs into the series we are analyzing: it is not really a film about religion, about the 'repressed' secret of Christianity, but a film about a frigid and traumatized young woman who is redeemed, freed of her trauma, provided with a mythic frame that enables her to fully accept her asexuality."

The mythic character of this solution resorts clearly if we contrast Robert as its proponent to Sir Leigh, the counterpoint to Opus Dei in the film (and novel): he wants to disclose the secret of Mary and thus save humanity from the oppression of official Christianity. The film rejects this radical move and opts for a fictional compromise-solution: what is important are not facts (the DNA facts that would prove the genealogical link between her and Mary and Christ), but what she (Sophie) believes – the movie opts for symbolic fiction against genealogical facts. The myth of being Christ's descendant creates for Sophie a new symbolic identity: at the end, she emerges as the leader of a community. It is at this level of what goes on in terrestrial life that *Da Vinci Code* remains Christian: in the person of Sophie, it enacts the passage from sexual love to desexualized *agape* as political love, love that serves as the bond of a collective. The film thus rejects the standard Hollywood formula: the couple is not created, Sophie finds her way outside sexual relationship.

The other example is Night M. Shyamalan's *The Village*. Those who all too easily dismiss Shyamalan's films as the lowest of the New Age kitsch are in for some surprises. *The Village* takes place in a Pennsylvania village cut off from the rest of the world and surrounded by woods full of dangerous monsters known to the villagers as 'Those We Do Not Speak Of.' Most villagers are content to live with a bargain they made with the creatures: they don't enter the forest, the creatures don't enter the town. Conflict arises when the young Lucius Hunt wishes to leave the village in search of new medicines, and the pact is broken. Lucius and Ivy Walker, the village leader's blind daughter, decide to get married, which makes the village idiot really jealous; he stabs Lucius and nearly kills him, leaving him at the mercy of an infection that requires medicines from the outside world. Ivy's father then tells her about the town's secret: there are no monsters, and the year isn't really 1897. The town elders were part of a 20th-century crime victims' support group which decided to withdraw from it completely; Walker's father had been a millionaire businessman, so they bought a bunch of land, called it a 'wildlife preserve,' surrounded it with a big fence and lots of guards, bribed government officials to reroute airplanes away from the community, and moved inside, concocting the story about 'Those We Do Not Speak Of' to keep anyone from leaving. With her father's blessing, Ivy slips outside, meets a friendly security guard who gives her some medicine, and returns to save her betrothed's life. So, at the film's end, the village elders decide to go on with their secluded lives: the village idiot's death can be presented to the non-initiated as a proof that the creatures exist, confirming the founding myth of the community.

Sacrificial logic is thus reasserted as the condition of a community, as its secret bond – no wonder that most of the critics dismissed the film as the worst case of ideological cocooning: "It's easy to understand why he's attracted to setting a movie in a period where people proclaimed their emotions in full and heartfelt sentences, or why he enjoys building a village that's impenetrable to the outside world. He's not making movies. He's making cocoons."[5] The desire underlying the film is thus the desire to recreate a closed universe of authenticity in which innocence is protected from the corrosive force of modernity: "It's all about how to

[5] "Village *Idiot. The Case Against M. Night Shyamalan*," by Michael Agger, http://slate.msn.com/id/2104567.

protect your innocence from getting hurt by the 'creatures' in your life; the desire to protect your children from going into the unknown. If these 'creatures' have hurt you, you don't want them to hurt your children and the younger generation may be willing to risk that."[6]

in the best 'totalitarian' manner staged by the inner circle ('Elders') of the community itself, in order to prevent the non-initiated youngsters to leave the village and risk the passage through the forest to the decadent 'towns.' The 'evil' itself has to be redoubled: the 'real' evil of late-capitalist

"And what if this is true in a much more radical way than it may appear? What if the true Evil of our societies is not the capitalist dynamics as such, but the attempts to extricate ourselves from it (while profiting from it), to carve out self-enclosed communal spaces, from 'gated communities' to exclusive racial or religious groups?"

Upon a closer look, however, the film reveals itself to be much more ambiguous. When reviewers noticed that "the movie is in H.P. Lovecraft territory: severe, wintry New England palette; a suggestion of inbreeding; hushed mentions of 'The Old Ones,' 'Those We Do Not Speak Of'",[7] they as a rule forgot to mention the political context: let us not forget that the 19th century self-subsistent community also refers to the many utopian-socialist communities that thrived in the late 19th century US. This does not mean that the Lovecraft reference to supernatural horror is just a mask, a false lure. We have two universes: the modern open 'risk society' versus the safety of the old secluded universe of Meaning – but the price of Meaning is a finite closed space guarded by unnamable Monsters. Evil is not simply excluded in this closed utopian space – it is transformed into a mythic threat with which the community establishes a temporary truce and against which it has to maintain a permanent state of emergency.

The "Deleted Scenes" special feature on the DVD release all too often makes the viewer only realize that the director was right to delete these scenes – however, in the DVD edition of *The Village*, there is an exception to this rule. One of the deleted scenes is that of a "Drill": Walker rings the bell, giving to the community the signal to practice the fast retreat into underground shelters in the case of the creatures' attack – as if authentic community is only possible in the conditions of a permanent threat, in a continuous state of emergency.[8] This threat is, as we learn, social disintegration has to be transposed into the archaic magic-mythic evil of 'creatures.' The 'Evil' IS a part of the 'inner circle' itself, IMAGINED by its members. Are we here not back at Chesterton's *Thursday*, in which the highest police authority IS the same person as the super-criminal, staging a battle with himself? In a proto-Hegelian way, the external threat the community is fighting is its own inherent essence…[9]

And what if this is true in a much more radical way than it may appear? What if the true Evil of our societies is not the capitalist dynamics as such, but the attempts to extricate ourselves from it (while profiting from it), to carve out self-enclosed communal spaces, from 'gated communities' to exclusive racial or religious groups? That is to say, is the point of *The Village* not precisely to demonstrate that, today, a return to an authentic community in which speech still directly expresses true emotions, etc. – the village of the socialist utopia – is a fake which can only be staged as a spectacle for the very rich? The exemplary figure of Evil are today not ordinary consumers who pollute environment and live in a violent world of disintegrating social links, but those (top managers, etc.) who, while fully engaged in creating conditions for such universal devastation and pollution, exempt themselves from the results of their own activity, living in gated communities, eating organic food and taking holidays in wildlife preserves.

[6] Quoted from http://glidemagazine.com/articles120.html

[7] David Edelstein, on http://slate.msn.com/id/2104512.

[8] One of the more stupid reproaches to the film (not unlike the same reproach to Hitchcock's *Vertigo*) is that it spoils the suspense by disclosing the secret already two thirds into the film – this very knowledge makes the last third all the more interesting. That is to say, the film's last third – more precisely, Ivy's painfully slow progress through the forest – confronts us with a clear enigma (or, as some would have put it, narrative inconsistency): why is Ivy afraid of the Creatures, why are the Creatures still presented as a mythic threat, although she already knows that Creatures don't exist, that they are a staged fake? In another deleted scene, Ivy, after hearing the ominous (and, as we know, artificially generated) sounds that announce the proximity of the Creatures, cries with desperate intensity: "It is for love that I am here. So I beg you to let me cross!" – why does she do it if she knows there are no Creatures? She knows very well, but… there is more reality in the haunting irreal specters than in direct reality itself.

[9] Here, Nicholas Meyer is also right in his Sherlock Holmes pastiche *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution*: within the diegetic space of the Sherlock Holmes stories, Moriarty, the arch-criminal – "Napoleon of crime" – and Holmes' ultimate opponent, is clearly a fantasy of Holmes himself, his double, his Dark Half: in the opening pages of Meyer's novel, Watson is visited by Moriarty, a humble mathematics professor, who complains to Watson that Holmes is obsessed with the *idée fixe* that he is the master criminal; to cure Holmes, Watson lures him to Vienna, to Freud's house.

Medea's Family Reunion:

The Lacanian Act & *Aphanisis* as a Challenge to Liberal Humanism

Christine Evans

Is There a Žižekian Act?: From "Nothing is Possible Anymore!" to Contingency and Subjectivity

At the conclusion of Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1969 film *Medea*, Medea – having murdered her children to punish Jason, her husband, for his desertion – stands at the border of Corinth before the distraught Jason, who begs Medea to let him bury his children. Behind her, Medea's house is in flames, and dust and smoke billow around her, occasionally obscuring her from sight. As Jason's pleas are drowned out by clashing cymbals and discordant horns on the soundtrack, Pasolini frames Medea's scowling face in a tight close-up; she shouts to Jason, "Your words are wasted! Nothing is possible anymore!", whereupon the film abruptly ends with a "Fin" intertitle. It is essential to mention that, while Medea's penultimate admonishment of Jason originates in Euripides' play, the final words in the film ("Nothing is possible anymore!") are unique to Pasolini's adaptation. The statement not only renegotiates the myth of Medea, but – more importantly – introduces a vital interpretive dimension which derails the determinacy of Medea's infanticide.

Anyone familiar with Euripides' staged version of the myth is aware that it concludes with Medea, bearing the bodies of her two children, being spirited away on a chariot

sent by her grandfather Hyperion, the sun-god. Contrasting this conclusion to the traumatic terminus of Pasolini's ending, it initially appears that Euripides' Medea certainly comes away with the better deal: rather than remaining irredeemably earth-bound and, as such, fettered to her earthly lawful obligations (in this case, punishment and pain for the murder of her children), the mythical Medea escapes Corinth and leaves Jason to his misery as originally intended. It therefore initially appears that these two versions set out to approach Medea's 'fated' punishment and its reliance on systems of ideological support in entirely different ways: the difference is between the divine respite that allows one to escape or reject the field of ideological meaning (Euripides), and the secularized reality of lawful punishment, of being wholly inscribed in symbolic identification and its ideologico-imaginary support (Pasolini).

However, it is precisely this temptation to read Euripides' redeemed and divine Medea *against* Pasolini's nihilistically secular heroine that should be avoided, primarily because Pasolini's conclusion is itself hardly lacking a 'divine' dimension. The statement, "Nothing is possible anymore" should here be interpreted literally, not only because the film text essentially conforms to the command and ends – thereby negating any further 'possibilities' – but because the statement complicates the logical causality of earthly expectation (namely the spectator's premonition that Pasolini's earthly Medea will be punished for her deeds and will suffer for her transgressions). Unlike her mythical counterpart, the filmic Medea does not escape Corinth in a chariot, but rather appears beset by a variety of all-too human problems: two dead children, a confrontation with her husband (who swears revenge), a burning house, the wrath of Corinth's inhabitants, banishment or death. However, this earthly dimension of crime and punishment (Jason's revenge, Medea's persecution and surrender to the supremacy of the Law) is precluded by Medea's prophetic assertion: "nothing is possible anymore" means precisely that – Medea will neither ascend into the heavens on her grandfather's chariot nor be dealt her earthly comeuppance since both options are equally impossible, and imagining such extra-diegetic epilogues under either divine or earthly governance is one of the many potentialities vitiated by the film's final utterance. What remains is not possibility as a positive attribute or gesture in empirical reality, but total abyssal cessation. In Pasolini's adaptation, Medea does not escape the Law or suspend ideology, but rather casts them into the void along with everything else rejected by her statement's radical finitude: reconciliation, remorse, family, and subjectivity. In short, what occurs 'after' Medea's proclamation is not merely in opposition to, but incongruously outside the Law, not against ideology but beyond it, and not barring but in excess of symbolization: it is, precisely, 'nothing' – pure void.

As previously mentioned, this concluding statement in Pasolini's film impacts our reading of its cause (Medea's murder of her children) which – 'post cry' – acquires a traumatic presence in its erasure of all possibility. The implication of the statement "Nothing is possible anymore" – particularly the negative adverb 'anymore' – is clearly causal and, as such, one can interpret two varying degrees of traumatic inevitability: 'nothing is possible anymore *because* I have killed my children, who were precious to me, and their absence will make life unbearable', *or* 'nothing is possible anymore because I have effectively lost everything, all my symbolic support; I have rejected my family and my ancestral ties to Colchis, been estranged from my husband, exiled from Corinth, and murdered my children. In short, *because* I have killed my children, I am finally able to see that I cannot take refuge from this act in other worthwhile aspects of my life, since the murder has dissolved their symbolic consistency and efficacy.' The crucial (and no doubt contentious) distinction to be drawn here is between the relative worth of 'everything' *qua* the murder; it is not that Medea's life and symbolic ties (history, ancestry, erotic and familial love) were always irretrievably absent and 'impossible' and that infanticide was merely the condition that illuminated their relative meaninglessness, but rather that the murder was directly responsible for the symbolic dissolution of Medea's life. The murder has transformed the very symbolic contours in which it occurred, thereby 'de-ontologizing' everything that preceded it, casting Medea into the "void of self-relating negativity" (Žižek 2001, 158), and retroactively reinscribing life, love, family, and history as meaningless and impossible. In other words, what is witnessed in the concluding sequence of Pasolini's film is a full-scale dramatization of the Lacanian Act.

"In other words, what is witnessed in the concluding sequence of Pasolini's film is a full-scale dramatization of the Lacanian Act."

When one speaks of an Act in psychoanalysis, one is not merely denoting physical animation, performed behaviour, or even a particular variety of activity and its unconscious psychic progenitors, but rather indexing a complex and often unstable term which is more efficiently accessed via the route of what it is *not* than by any attempt at empirical definition. However, the Act's recent renaissance in discourses of political theory and debates regarding philosophy's place in global politics, merits a certain reevaluation of the term's usage and implications. Distantly related to, but not to be confused with, the Freudian concept of 'acting out' in which the subject 'loses himself' in his unconscious fantasies and effectively "relives [them] in the present with a sensation of immediacy which is heightened by his refusal to recognize their source and their repetitive character" (Laplanche and Pontalis 4), the

Act is primarily associated with the theories of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, and particularly with his work on ethics. In this specifically Lacanian context, the Act is intended to displace the notion of the Sovereign Good (espoused in Aristotelian morality), which assumes that all desire is essentially the desire to 'do good' but cannot account for any desire which does not trace back to this apparently formative motivation. In countering this apperception of the Sovereign Good with something other than a 'quality' that is diametrically opposed to goodness (i.e., Evil), Lacan conceives of the Act in a space extrinsic to quality or disposition and, as such, designates the Act as a performance in which the subject "act[s] in conformity with the desire that is in [him]" (Lacan 1986, 314) but does not remain mindful of the symbolically-erected boundaries which encompass goodness.

In this respect, the Act is not constitutive of a rebellious and reactionary 'breaking of the rules' which positions itself against the good and attempts to destroy it; rather, the Act for Lacan involves an outright rejection of the very symbolic contours which comprise this goodness. This distinction between iconoclastic rebellion against the symbolic and its total subversion is essential: the Act as such is not positioned against goodness and the symbolic order, but rather beyond them, 'outside' of them. When an Act is performed, these symbolic coordinates are shaken and destabilized.

Though there is no school of thought in psychoanalysis exclusively devoted to examinations of its permutations, the Act has more recently been revivified in the work of Lacanian-Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek, proliferating in examples from film and literature and often serving as a challenge to the liberal humanist tendency towards absorbing, pacifying, or damning particularly 'inexpicable' outbursts of trauma or violence. While indebted to Lacan's original formulations of the psychoanalytic ethic, Žižek's combined critique of postmodernism and a variety of philosophical sensibilities – particularly the Marxist, Hegelian, and Kantian overtones in his work – have engendered a new politico-ideological awareness of the Act which occupies a more centralized and multifarious position in Žižek's oeuvre than it does in Lacan's theory. Indeed, a number of scholars who are affiliated with the emerging field of 'Žižek studies' – including Sarah Kay (2003), Ian Parker (2004), and particularly Rex Butler (2005) – posit that the Act is a seminal and defining term in Žižek's work, a prominent component in his contribution to original philosophical thought, and therefore uniquely 'Žižekian.' Accordingly, the various interrogations and applications of the Act which appear throughout this paper function predominantly as responses to this distinctly Žižekian variant of the Act – a variant which, I contend, is characterized by problematic, although occasionally requisite, inconsistencies; of particular interest to me in this paper are the specific vicissitudes of the Žižekian Act as it relates to ideology and the global approach to politics.

Žižek's preferred method of approaching the Act in theory is via the route of example and identification (not unlike the analogy between Pasolini's *Medea* and the Act which I have presented above). His books, essays, and lectures are littered with passing references to the Act which, given Žižek's penchant for excitable analysis, are often prematurely abandoned to accommodate other, increasingly complex perversions generated by the Act's tendency to transform the symbolic context in which it appears. There exists no single text devoted to an investigation of the Act across Žižek's body of work, although his most extensive dalliances with the topic appear in *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (1996), *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (1999), and *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (2000).[1] However, despite the Act's more consolidated position in these texts, the reader should be cautioned against relying on any single book or essay for an explication of the Act since Žižek's formulations are hardly stable. It is this very 'instability' which this paper seeks to explore in the context of its essential methodological permutations. Indeed, reading across Žižek's texts, one will encounter a myriad of 'definitive explanations' and countless 'examples *par excellence*' of the Act which – suffice it to say – are rarely in agreement with one another. Narrative-specific and often explicitly violent scenarios from film and literature are presented alongside illustrations of positive politico-historical reform, but all such exemplary agents are eventually abandoned for a properly philosophical dimension which stresses the 'impossible' irreduceability of the Act. The significance of the examples themselves often remain uninterrogated.

Furthermore, while each of Žižek's respective invocations of the 'exemplary' Act serve to individually clarify and contextualize his surrounding theoretical projects, the

"In this respect, the Act is not constitutive of a rebellious and reactionary 'breaking of the rules'... the Act for Lacan involves an outright rejection of the very symbolic contours which comprise this goodness."

1 This text is a conversational series of essays between Žižek, Judith Butler, and Ernesto Laclau.

examples appear rather incongruous when divorced from the specific conditions they support: St. Paul and the Stalinist bureaucracy, murderous parents (Keyser Soze of *The Usual Suspects* [Brian Singer, 1995], Andrea Yates), former President Clinton's proposed Medicare reforms, bipolar pedophiles (Mary-Kay Letourneau), and the terrorist attacks of September 11th are all, according to Žižek, exemplary Acts or actors/agents. Although one would certainly demure from crudely requesting a universalized and reductive definition of the Act or a single 'example *par excellence*', the lack of consistency among Žižek's aphoristic engagements can nonetheless prove frustrating, especially in regards to the mutable psychic position of the subject *in* and *preceding* the Act. If it is possible to distinguish between an authentic and an inauthentic Act, can we similarly differentiate a legitimately 'acting *subject*' from one who fails to fulfill this criteria? What occurs *after* an Act is clear enough – the Act generates its own historical possibility after the fact, such that we are only able (from our present standpoint) to conceive its effects against the background of this Act that 'changed everything', in much the same way that Medea's infanticide in Pasolini's film retroactively dissolves the symbolic consistency of her life and renders everything 'impossible.' Yet addressing the subject *himself* who endeavours to Act, who makes this impossible, 'crazy' choice in the face of forced choice, or is irresistibly compelled to commit this Act for whatever reason, is a far more contentious undertaking. For while the Act involves the "radical gesture of subverting the very structuring principle of [a given] field" (2000a, 121), Žižek's decision to engage the Act *beyond* abstraction, to identify its manifestations in ordinary empirical reality, requires a unique form of justification which accounts for the acting subject's state of mind.

"...when faced with an accusation of some misdeed – infidelity, for example – one simply responds, 'Yes, that's exactly what I was doing!'"

According to Žižek, all acting subjects share a need to "renounce the transgressive fantasmatic supplement that attaches [them] to… the grip of existing social reality" (2000b, 149): much like an accused criminal who realigns the symbolic coordinates of a reproach by refusing to concede to its conditions (when faced with an accusation of some misdeed – infidelity, for example – one simply responds, "Yes, that's exactly what I was doing!"). Yet the Act extends beyond semantic petulance, and such refusals or repudiations on the subject's part are often (self) injurious, striking at the very core of his being. Indeed, Žižek asserts that the radical difference of the Act, in its rejection of the field of possibility in favour of the 'crazy' choice, can be partially attributed to the subject's decision to "strik[e] at himself, at what is most precious to himself" (2000a, 122). In other words: this is not an exercise in praxis[2], where the subject reaffirms his humanity and upholds the fundamental fantasy through some positive action, but rather a recognition of one's own nothingness – a traversing of the fantasy – wherein the subject "accepts the void of his nonexistence" (1999a, 281).

The Stella *Parallax: Still Noble and Senseless*

We can locate a particularly poignant variant of such self-relating negativity or concession to nonexistence in the famous conclusion to King Vidor's 1937 film, *Stella Dallas*. Stella, the film's protagonist, knows that her beloved daughter Lollie will benefit greatly from the wealth and prosperity offered by her fiancé's family; however, Stella also realizes that she must remove herself from Lollie's life, inciting Lollie to abandon her so that Lollie can live happily and without the guilt of knowing that she abandoned a 'good' mother. Orchestrating a meeting with Lollie and her fiance, Stella feigns vulgarity – pretending to be drunk and carrying on an illicit affair – and Lollie, upset and disappointed, abandons her mother and marries her fiance in a lavish ceremony. Most interpretations of the film's conclusion emphasize the noble selflessness of Stellas 'beautiful sacrifice but question the necessity of her forfeiture.[3] Conversely, in Žižek's reading of the film, Stella's sacrifice is so extraordinary because it is one which "every good parent" should make out of love for his child (Rasmussin par. 42). However, the purpose of such a sacrifice is far from narcissistic self-commemoration, meaning that Stella's Act is not motivated by the assumption that Lollie will eventually realize her mistake and marvel at Stella's selflessness and nobility. Rather, Stella's awareness that her daughter's happiness is contingent on her (Stella's) absence compels a total erasure from her daughter's life, deliberately engineered to never attain the dignity of a sacrificial gesture, even in remembrance. In this respect, Stella's decision to 'strike at that which is most precious to her' (her loving relationship with her daughter) does not guarantee her place in history so much as her omission from it, much in the same way that the Act itself – due

2 Lacan defines praxis as a "concerted human action, whatever it may be, which places us in a position to treat the real by the symbolic" (*Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Alan Sheridan. London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1981. pp. 6).

3 In an article comparing Vidor's 1937 version to John Erman's 1990 remake *Stella*, Janet Maslin's analysis of Stella's enduring archetypal charm argues that the character's "popularity as a soapsuds heroine is in no way compromised by the fact that she happens not to make any sense" (par. 3). Suspicious that Stella's sacrificial motivations are contrary to her awareness of her own vulgarity, Maslin questions if "it is really necessary, in any version of this story, for Stella to step out of her daughter's life for the sake of the young woman's happiness? She could accomplish the very same thing by electing not to dress herself like a float at the Rose Bowl parade" (par. 4). (Maslin, Janet. "Shed a Tear for Stella, Still Noble but Senseless." *The New York Times*. Sunday February 11, 1990. http://movies2.nytimes.com/mem/movies/review.html?_r=2&title1=STELLA%20DALLAS%20(MOVIE)&title2=&reviewer=Janet%20Maslin&pdate=&v_id=&oref=slogin&oref=login).

to its monumental impact on historical contingency – must necessarily remain in a perpetual 'beyond,' absent from and unacknowledged by the historical record.[4]

It is via the route of Stella's concession to nonexistence, of her conscious omission from history, of her certainty that the Act will never triumphantly 'belong' to her, that we are now in a position to confront the filmic Medea's final assertion that "nothing is possible anymore." This position's relationship to *Stella Dallas* is hardly incidental, since Žižek's stipulation that Stella's sacrifice (an Act) should be carried out by every parent implicitly appends an injunction to the Act itself: just as one should only have children when one is prepared to sacrifice his own reputation for the child's happiness and – more drastically – devise the child's rejection of its own parent, one should similarly only commit an Act insofar as one is willing to say, "Nothing is possible anymore." This is precisely Žižek's point when he asserts that Medea's radicality is unique in its ability to "out-violence Power itself" or "out-universalize universal Power itself" (2001, 158 fn. 24), but this total negation and upending of Aristotelian morality/the order of powers is likewise the background of every authentic Act: it is precisely the a-heroic dimension which evacuates any psychic logic the subject may ascribe to 'her' Act, effectively vitiating its identity as 'hers' and relegating it to an invisible position of universality in history. In short, the contra-humanist 'risk' which the acting subject, like Medea, must always be prepared to take – which he or she in fact must actively *undertake* prior to committing the Act – is an exclusion from his or her own radical freedom.

That Self-Inflicted Shot to the Foot: Partial Solutions

One question pertaining to the Act which is often implied (but generally elided) by its critics is why anyone would ever want to commit one. It certainly seems an unpleasant and often painfully fruitless ordeal of self-obliteration: concession to one's own nothingness or self-relating negativity, and a radical restructuring of the realm of possibility that one's present/acting self cannot survive or sustain. Noteworthy agents of the Act demean themselves and others so brutally, furthering the social regression from "Bad to Worse" (Žižek 1999a, 377) so utterly (your husband has abandoned you? Kill your children!), that one wonders how an Act could ever suspend its destructive impulses long enough to properly 'address' its ideological effects – 'ideological' here denoting less how the Act comes to change the world so much as our shared ability to acknowledge this change. This is precisely the intimation of political theorist Ernesto Laclau when he critiques Slavoj Žižek's position on the Act and its total structural involution as a failure of global politics.[5] What is at stake in performing a (specifically Lacanian) Act is, for Laclau, the entire dimension of liberal humanism. According to Laclau, Žižek's decision to oppose "partial solutions within a horizon to changes in the horizon as such" (198) reveals the abyssal futility of the Act; for Laclau, partial solutions are the individual conditions of a situation which render it worthwhile, while the horizon itself is purely structural and intangible. In ignoring the constitutive elements of a given horizon, one is undertaking a hopeless enterprise: there can be no concrete achievement/outcome of the Act, no authentic ideological potentiality in its performance, unless we can finally agree "about what a horizon is and about the logic of its constitution." Laclau questions, "Is it a ground of the social? Is it an imaginary construction totalizing a plurality of discrete struggles" (*ibid*)? This response addresses Žižek's contention that the Act cannot be conceived as something which 'strikes out' as a reactionary or curative response to an identifiable injustice. Such an approach to the Act would necessarily inspire a pragmatic evaluation in the reader and anchor the Act to some historicist impasse – i.e., infanticide as a retaliation against a husband's abandonment is surely 'overreacting.' What good would it do? Such evaluative ascriptions are inconsequential for both Lacan and Žižek, since the Act for them does not appear as a solution to a partial problem "within a given field", but rather subverts "the very structuring principle of the field" (Žižek 2000a, 121); the Act is therefore perpetually out of joint with any curative or consequential impulses, and especially with humanist aspirations to 'solve problems.' Recall here Lacan's distinction in *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* between goodness (a symbolic condition) and the ethical Act's radical rejection of the symbolically-mandated margins of such goodness (218-240).

"One question pertaining to the Act which is often implied (but generally elided) by its critics is why anyone would ever want to commit one"

The problem with any philosophical approach seeking a concrete humanism is that it will, like Laclau, object to the Act as insular, 'anti-ideological', and 'apolitical' – at least within that faction of global politics where ethics are conceived against the horizon of the Good. For Laclau, the entire sphere of the Act and its relation to forced choice – "a choice that is motivated by no good" (Lacan 1986, 240) – is nothing if not defeatist, willfully ignorant of its potential for *positive* historical

4 To do otherwise - that is, to fully acknowledge and celebrate the causal chain of Acts - would ensnare us in a fatalistic deadlock, or in a paradoxical 'service of Acts' which would necessitate our reaching ever further back into history to locate *the* generative Act which was somehow more authentic than the others. As such, while the Act may indeed 'change everything', it is a change that can rarely be acknowledged. The failure to write the originary gesture out of history is narratively exemplified in Tom Tykwer's *Run Lola Run* (1998), in which the life or death of Lola's boyfriend is determined by how quickly she runs down the stairs immediately after receiving his phonecall.

change, and "a prescription for political quietism and sterility" (293). The psychoanalytic claim that the Act restructures the very contours of ideology, possibility, and involvement (and can therefore never be 'against' them in the structural sense) is irrelevant to Laclau, since our inability to bridge the gap between (ethical) theory and (humanist) practice denotes a 'fated' and dangerous indifference which is apolitical in itself. In this respect, the 'radicality' of rejecting the pre-inscribed choices of the symbolic universe and refiguring the principles of a given horizon is far from inherent in or native to the Act, since there exists no consensus of what comprises this horizon.

"when we speak of the acting *subject* we include by necessity the subject's founding disappearance into the symbolic fiction"

The Subject of the Other and the Act That Changes the World

What ultimately 'counts' in this formulation of the Act's 'subjective accessibility,' and what Laclau neglects as decisive in the Žižekian Act (and its Lacanian progenitor), is whether or not one is prepared to take as its foundation the subject of *psychoanalysis*. And although this is not at all Laclau's intention when he demands a unified horizon of radicality against which to evaluate all Acts, the subject himself should be the very horizon which Laclau seeks. The fact that this disagreement between Laclau/Boostels and Žižek transpires in the arena of global politics and not in the minutiae of the subject who, in a single motion, effects and disappears from that very politic, prematurely vitiates any consensus on the Act's ideological ground. Recall that, for Lacan as well as for Žižek, the subject is always (and can only be) defined in relation to the symbolic order, and is a 'subject' only "by virtue of his subjection to the field of the Other" (Lacan 1988, 188); in other words, until the subject appears in a symbolic context which precedes him and integrates himself into that order of Otherness, he remains essentially unenunciated.

Yet for Laclau, the Act's violent intrusion into the subject's 'partiality' – his need to address and rectify a given set of partial problems – is ultimately futile and politically counterproductive; the subject must be protected from the Act's totalizing tendency to derail "the social and cultural pluralism existing in a given society" (Laclau, 293). However, the very notion of safeguarding the subject against his own negativity is absurd from a psychoanalytic perspective, since for Lacan it is only in the moment of self-relating negativity that the subject loosens himself from primordial solipsism and takes up a lived position in relation to his Real-Symbolic-Imaginary Other, "the principle of his own disappearance" (Durand, 863). As such, when we speak of the acting *subject* we include by necessity the subject's founding disappearance into the symbolic fiction[6], his 'subjection' to the field of Otherness; the acting subject's gesture never denotes absolute freedom or total hegemonic enchainment, but a double-scansion of inevitability (I must act, regardless of the terrible consequences) and intentionality/responsibility which Žižek abridges as "I cannot do otherwise, yet I am none the less fully free in doing it" (1999a,376). The subject's constitution in the order of Otherness cannot be overlooked, and although the Act may certainly subvert the constellations of symbolization, this says little of the acting subject's relationship to the order his performance casts asunder. The following pages will elucidate the subject's varying positions of 'activity' in regards to the Other's location in the symbolic, Real, and imaginary realms.

An example which accounts for the restructuring of the symbolic order *through* the subject's dual submission to and freedom in the Act, appears in the conclusion to Frank Capra's 1944 film, *Arsenic and Old Lace*. Upon discovering on his wedding day that his beloved elderly aunts Abby and Martha have murdered thirteen lonely bachelors and buried their bodies in the cellar, Mortimer Brewster spends a hectic night neglecting his new bride and attempting to conceal his aunts' homicidal secrets from the various visitors to the house. Despite their bubbly personalities, Aunts Abby and Martha are both clearly insane, and steadfast in their shared belief that their victims were miserable men with "nothing left to live for." After a series of delightful Capra-esque capers and misunderstandings, the director of the local insane asylum arrives with the police lieutenant to commit Mortimer's cousin Teddy for reasons unrelated to the murders, whereupon the aunts unexpectedly protest: "Commit us too!" Mortimer, realizing that his aunts can escape incarceration for their murders in the insane asylum, is delighted by their surprising demand and agrees that his aunts belong in the asylum. The papers are signed, and by the time Aunts Abby and Martha begin to cheerfully relay the details of their murders to the director and the lieutenant, their confessions are overlooked as the wild imaginings of two insane women; the film concludes with the self-committed aunts and

5 Although Laclau is critical of much of Žižek's work, for our purposes his objections will be limited to three of his essays: "Identity and Hegemony: The Role of Universality in the Constitution of Political Logics" (44-89), "Structure, History, and the Political" (182-212), and "Constructing Universality" (281-307) in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*. London: Verso, 2000a.

6 Žižek summarizes this moment as the one in which the subject rejects any infantile claims to uniqueness and irreducibility, and in which "I renounce the treasure within myself and fully admit my dependence on the externality of symbolic apparatuses - that is to say, fully assume the fact that my very self-experience of a subject who was already there prior to the external process of interpellation is a retrospective misrecognition brought about by the process of interpellation" (2000a, 134 fn. 48).

Teddy happily departing for the asylum while the bodies of their victims remain undiscovered in the cellar.

This conclusion (which, despite its moral bankruptcy, is clearly coded as a 'happy ending') can be read via the route of two ascending 'levels' of Lacanian interpretation *qua* the Act. In the first level we have the symbolic order, the domain of the Law and the Big Other[7] 'going about its business' as it does – the police lieutenant and the director of the asylum arrive at the Brewster home in an attempt to restore the peace. What eventually transpires, however, is far from conventional justice: order is indeed restored (the Brewster sisters cannot add to their collection of dead bachelors), but the considerable detour through which this order passes initially appears to demean its efficacy. Essentially, the Brewster sisters are committed because they are perceived as two doddery old women, but the fact that their penchant for serial killing remains unaddressed by the Public Symbolic Law does not detract from the film's happy ending. Why is this? In 'doing the right thing for the wrong reasons', the symbolic order here evinces that such happy endings are always contingent on the smooth regulation of its own self-deception; what the Public Symbolic Law absolutely cannot sustain is the very 'whole truth and nothing but the truth' which it demands of its subjects (to confront it directly would be too disruptive), so it circumvents the truth and, in taking this detour, eventually arrives at some equally valid truth-event. This is a variable outcome what Žižek has termed "the inherent transgression," wherein the system of symbolic domination generates its own obscene supplements and perverse by-products as a means of maintaining its stability and supremacy (2000c, 6, 7). As such, when the subject positions himself against the symbolic order and attempts to destabilize it by transgressing its boundaries, the Big Other has more than anticipated this attack – it has, in fact, preinscribed the disturbance into its very constitution, and offers the transgression to the subject as a forced choice. In *Arsenic and Old Lace*, where the truth revealed by the Brewster sisters is mistaken for delusional insanity, murder is simply an inherent transgression which supports propriety, or the long detour one takes to eventually arrive at a happy, orderly outcome.

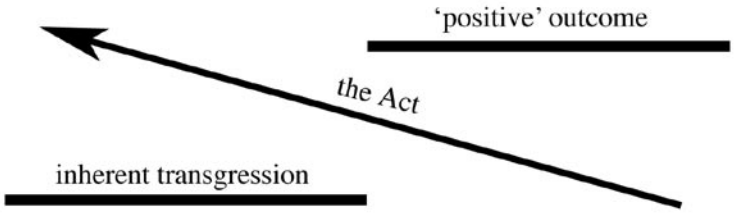


Figure 1

The crucial point not to be missed in this restrictive symbolic strategy is that one can effectively break away from it, but only insofar as one is prepared to commit an Act. As was previously discussed, this Act rejects the forced choices or available transgressions offered as symbolic fictions and, more radically, derails the very concept of choice by opting for free action in all its insanity. In the context of this example, it is the Brewster sisters' decision to commit themselves to an asylum for reasons unrelated to their psychosis[8] that appears as an authentic Act. The Big Other, here poorly disguised as a literal agent of the Law (lieutenant and asylum director), effectively presents Aunts Abby and Martha with the option to either confess their crimes and suffer the appropriate punishment or to remain silent and continue on as before. Unexpectedly, the Brewster sisters demand incarceration *without* punishment, a choice which the Law does not proffer, but which also does not appear to disturb the smooth operation of the symbolic order (the film ends 'happily,' the Brewster sisters escape persecution, the lieutenant and the asylum director have restored order but remain blissfully unaware of its misguided path): in other words, the Act has cut through symbolic determinism, but the Big Other remarkably seems to remain unscathed. This appearance denotes the second level of Lacanian interpretation apropos of the Act.

In my diagram above, the Act is depicted as intersecting the two ascending levels of the inherent transgression and the 'positive' outcome which, when undisturbed, bear witness to the efficiency of symbolic fictions (i.e., despite any number of transgressions, the system's initiation/regulation of these infractions ensures a codified outcome). Yet the Act's radical intervention does not preclude the likelihood of a 'happy ending', even in its retroactive reconfiguration of this very condition of possibility. Furthermore, the appearance of the positive outcome as a triumph of the symbolic order certainly seems to suggest that the Act has effected little more than a minor, inconsequential disturbance – after all, order has been restored, the Brewster sisters are safely locked away, and the Law's success in self-deception is not undermined by its means of arriving at the 'wrong truth.' However, the reader must be cautioned against approaching the Act as such a disturbance, even and especially if the symbolic order appears to

7 A term designating the structurally essential symbolic field, the means by which this field is regulated, and for 'whom' we perform. Introducted by Lacan in 1955, the Big Other is simultaneously inscribed in the order of the symbolic and "is the symbolic insofar as it is particularised for each subject. The Other is thus both subject, in his radical alterity and unassimilable uniqueness, and also the symbolic order which mediates the relationship with that other subject" (Dylan Evans. *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. East Sussex: Brunner-Routledge, 2003. 133).

8 Their primary reason for demanding to go to the asylum is to accompany their nephew Teddy, but later while signing their own commitment papers they comment that the asylum will be a nice change of pace, that they are dissatisfied with their current neighbourhood since it has "changed so much", and that it will be a welcome change to not be responsible for the upkeep of a house.

'regain' its consistency and return to 'business as usual' following the Act's performance. What is at stake here is a total *structural involution* which pivots or turns on the Act, in the sense that the symbolic order does not simply give ground to sanctioning a rebellious display, but is thoroughly duped into a sense of supremacy. The Act does not designate the dissolution of the symbolic dominion in the conventional sense, where some assertion of anti-authoritarian autonomy or Leftist-utopic insurgency would appear as a 'shock to the system' – and nor does the symbolic order work tirelessly to neutralize the harmful effects of the Act or integrate its unsettling subversion into the system the way that political spin-doctors gentrify and clarify the excessive anti-PC blunders of politicians. Rather, despite the fact that the Act is a successful performance in every respect, despite our inability to approach the symbolic order from the same perspective after the Act has repositioned its coordinates, the system of symbolic domination must remain *ignorant* of the Act's effects.

We can therefore see how the operation works both ways, since the Act occurs beyond the arena of forced symbolic choices and the Public Symbolic Law cannot retaliate against and normalize an Act with the preinscribed efficiency afforded the inherent transgression. Simply stated, what the Act achieves is not a momentary suspension of the hegemonic order to initiate some temporary, imminently threatened change, but rather a subversion of the symbolic order which is so irreversible that the order itself remains unaware and unable to predict/preinscribe the reformation – it is limited instead to historically absorbing the Act's effects as a matter of course (*Figure 1*). In this sense, when the Brewster sisters demand to be committed to the asylum with Teddy, they 'change everything' and effectively turn the symbolic order on its head, but the film ends happily because the Big Other is protected from the damning awareness that it has been upended. As Žižek contends, "the point is not to tell the whole Truth but, precisely, to append to the (official) Whole the uneasy supplement which denounces its falsity" (2005, 168). And is this not also a fundamental impasse in Ernesto Laclau's contention that self-relating negativity or 'desubjectivization' is synonymous with dehumanization – something which we, as concerned global citizens, must oppose at every level? Indeed, it is not the subject who must be shielded from the totalizing degradation of the Act (its erasure of his gesture and his person from the historical record), but rather the order which is *constitutive* of the subject that requires protection

from the knowledge that the subject can – and occasionally does – return this gesture of constitution.

In *Arsenic and Old Lace*, the very insanity of Aunts Abby and Martha serves as an adequate metaphor for the Act's relationship to the order of power it rewrites: by the time the world is prepared to accept the Brewster sisters as insane, the truth behind their insanity (the murders) remains unacknowledged and absent from the record – what we witness instead is a semblance of truth which arrives at a similar symbolic destination via a circuitous route, such that some measure of order or truth is achieved, but only by means of a bungled parapraxis. Consequently, the Brewster sisters' confession of the murders – the 'real order of things' – is already too late since the Big Other has accepted their self-diagnosed insanity and its subsequent restructuring of the symbolic field; simply by virtue of its occurrence, the confession has lost any imaginary or phantasmatic support and cannot now or ever be read to have transpired otherwise. Similarly, by the time we are able to conceive of the Act in its original historical context and question its 'undecideability' and potentiality, we are effectively caught in the bind of always-already conceiving this potentiality against the background of the Act – that is, we think differently *qua* the Act.

The Thing That Acts: Monstrosity and Aphanisis *in the Act*

One particular liberal-humanist criticism which is often levied at Žižek's conception of the Act (and one with which I am in marginal agreement), points towards Žižek's tendency to abandon his exemplary acting agents (Keyser Soze, Mary Kay Letourneau, and so on) in favour of removed philosophical treatises, thus appearing to exclude the 'all too human' achievements of master criminals, scorned child-killing women, and libidinal schoolteachers. This methodological flaw can be partially attributed to high theory's 'natural' reliance on lofty absolutes and coincident resistance to exception, but it is more problematically imputed to Žižek's often unclear position on the acting subject's relationship to the Other. In certain accounts (*Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*), Žižek's arguments suggest that the acting subject himself – and not merely the Act he commits – is an exceptional revolutionary figure who effectively 'escapes' or even triumphs over the system of symbolic domination, and "finds himself… by cutting himself loose from the precious object through whose possession the enemy kept him in check" (2000a, 122)[9]. In other writings (*The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*), Žižek's position is similar to the one outlined in the previous section, as he asserts that the Big Other "retreats" in the face of the Act but does not disappear entirely (1999a, 369). And

9 The 'object' to which Žižek refers in this context is the precious object which the subject sacrifices in opting for free action (Stella Dallas' reputation and loving relationship with her daughter, Medea's children, and so on).

finally – and most perplexingly – Žižek occasionally contends that the Act is nothing but a violent suspension of the status quo in which the Other 'speaks through' the acting subject, essentially dramatizing the Derridian concept of "the Other's decision in me" (Derrida, 87). It is, however, in the context of this particular (post) structuralist position that Žižek presents what is likely his

Figure 2

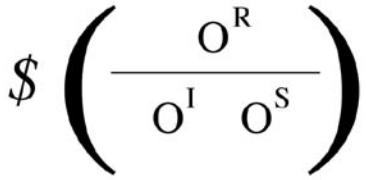


Figure 3

most cogent explication of the acting subject's interrelation with Otherness. I have included a diagrammatical representation of my conception of this interaction to which I will refer throughout.

In the subject's standard or day-to-day interactions with an Other (*Figure 2*) which simultaneously exists within him (as a precondition of his subjectivity) and radically external to him[10], the Other itself is positioned on three interdependent levels: the symbolic Big Other (*OS*), which was previously discussed as a social substance, the domain of the Public Symbolic Law; the imaginary Other (*OI*), which manifests itself in other people with whom the subject interacts – the people "'like [him]', [his] fellow human beings with whom [he is] engaged in the mirror-like relationships of competition, mutual recognition, and so on" (2002, 163); and the Real Other or Other as Thing (*OR*), the "'inhuman partner', the Other with whom no symmetrical dialogue, mediated by the symbolic order, is possible" (*ibid*). All of these various facets of Otherness, distinct as they may be, materialize in every interaction but are always in counterpoint to one another, each essentially pacifying the other's effects to ensure against an unbearable excess of relativity. For example, one's relationship with a lover simultaneously accounts for the imaginary support of the relationship itself, for symbolic signification (the very titles which designate the parameters of one's identity, such as 'lover', 'couple', 'snookums', and so on), and for a monstrous, unfathomable, and traumatic Real Otherness that must be gentrified by the "impersonal symbolic order" (165) so as to retain some minimum of distance or cognate humanity. The interrelatedness of the three dimensions simply illustrates the fact that, beneath the lover as social symptom, there always exists an "unfathomable abyss of radical Otherness, of a monstrous Thing that cannot be 'gentrified'" (164-165) – but also that, beyond the lover's impenetrable actuality as Thing, there exists a "'normal fellow human'" (*ibid.*) who is illuminated by the symbolic order.

However, in the performance of an Act, this regulatory tripartite semblance of the subject *qua* Other dissolves, leaving only the radical dimension of the 'Other of the Real Thing' (*Figure 3*). The difference which makes this encounter so extraordinary and "unprecedented", Žižek asserts, is that in the insane free choice of the Act, the subject does not merely position or define himself against the Other – the basis is not in relativity, as it is in his everyday interactions – but rather in an absolute, fully-assumed monstrosity in which, "for a brief, passing moment… [he] directly *is* the Thing" (163). While the symbolic (Big) Other eventually – and, as previously discussed, tardily – 'responds' to this Act precisely by misrecognizing it, this secondary dimension exists only as divisible by the subject's direct identification with the Thing (*Figure 3*). This total, traumatic identification with the Thing therefore exempts the subject from symbolic regulations and allows him to Act 'as if' from nowhere, "without reflection [or]… deliberation" (162). The Act as such is not at all "pathologically motivated" (Žižek 1992, 36), since its agent's reconstitution in absolute monstrosity (the Other-Thing) temporarily precludes symbolic identification and imaginary/phantasmatic support[11], and effectively 'opens the space' for a total "empty set" (*ibid*) – a Real event "which occurs *ex nihilo*" (Žižek 1999a, 374). Not only does this formulation account for the Big Other's ignorance of its own subversion in the Act (its unawareness can be attributed to a structural disconnect given that the subject as Other-Thing excludes the symbolic register from 'involvement'), but it likewise justifies the Act's 'identity' as anti-ideological. It is not that the Act – as Ernesto Laclau would have us believe – appears in response to ideology, deliberately and terroristically 'dehumanizing'

10 The mathematical construction of the diagram uses brackets to represent the field of Otherness as both a 'given set' and one against which the subject must be 'counted' or multiplied.

11 As illustrated by *Figure 3*, these conditions are only made available successively, essentially as 'divisible by the Real.'

or 'apoliticizing' everything in its wake, but rather that ideology always implies an Other that is 'caught up' in the imaginary and symbolic fields. Conversely, the Other as Thing is aligned with the absolute void of the Act, its resistance to imaginary support and symbolic gentrification, and its status as the point at which "every 'foundation' of acts in 'words', in ideology, fails: this 'foundation' simply falls short of the abyss announced in it" (Žižek 1992, 35).

Although this explanatory passage in *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?: Five Interventions on the (Mis)use of a Notion* certainly clarifies Žižek's position on the specific Other-identity to whom the subject is 'subjected' in the Act (i.e., neither the Big Other of symbolic domination/state-imposed control nor the linguistically-construed Other of structuralism), Žižek's reasoning nonetheless appears somewhat circuitous upon further inspection. How can one commit an Act? By fully assuming a position as the Other-Thing. How can one fully assume a position as the Other-Thing? By committing an Act. It is my contention that such obliqueness institutes a premature short-circuit between the Act and its ideological ground, since something is evidently 'lost' in the imaginary space between the two diffuse repetitions of a tautology. In this sense, what is required to 'fill the gap' is a third agency which falls between the Other-Thing and the Act's occurrence, between impossibility and politicization, and which recovers this missing dimension by addressing the subject at the level of his original (primordial) subjectivization.

Žižek hints at the presence of this apparently "irreducible" gap when he claims that the Act's primary, traumatic impasse is located in our shared inability to actively conceive it:

> what is so difficult to accept is not the fact that the true act in which noumenal and phenomenal dimensions coincide is forever out of our reach; the true trauma lies in the opposite awareness that there are acts, that they do occur, and that we have to come to terms with them (1999a, 375).

"How can one commit an Act? By fully assuming a position as the Other-Thing. How can one fully assume a position as the Other-Thing? By committing an Act."

The implication of the subject's aptitude *to act* is a significant component of the aforementioned third agency of subjectivization. And while Žižek's statement is certainly true in the context of the Act's perpetually surprising/unexpected appearance 'as if from nowhere', the above citation also represents a rare Žižekian suspension of the *strico senso* Act – the Act as absolutely phenomenal at the expense of its noumenal auxiliary components – in favour of addressing the more elusive dimension of the subject's potential as an agent of the Act: the term which I should like to invoke to indicate such potentiality in the subject is *aphanisis*.

The term *aphanisis* has an extensive and somewhat controversial history in the psychoanalytic canon. Introduced by Ernest Jones in 1928 as a variation on Freud's concept of primary anxiety, the term in the 1950s developed a clinical association with schizophrenia, and was refined by Jacques Lacan in his seminars (1956-57 and 1964) to designate a psychic aporia which forces the subject to assume an absent position or undergo erasure while simultaneously and vitally 'subjectifying' him and shaping his relationship to desire. Also defined by Lacan as the necessary "fading" of the subject, his "manifest[ation] of himself in this movement of disappearance" (1981, 208), one can certainly trace self-erasure's relatedness to the Act, but the aphoristic potential of this 'definition' (and here it should be noted that Lacan often provides several – sometimes opposing – definitions of his psychoanalytic terminology) has resulted in the critical appropriation of *aphanisis* as a 'condition' – or, more specifically, an event or happening – which is synonymous with amnesia, mass annihilation (genocide, massacres), suicide, and rebirth. As such, the moment of *aphanisis* in contemporary literature and film analysis can equally designate a conditional absence or vanishing (Beckman, 192), a specifically textual "pleasurable anxiety" (where withheld narrative information grants unexpected agency to the reader himself) (Sajé, 167), or the "self-erasure of the subject when she approaches her fantasy too closely (Žižek 1997, 175) – as well as a myriad of other symptoms and effects which concurrently signify disappearance and subjectivization. Suffice it to say that the inconsistencies in definition surrounding *aphanisis* have yielded its dissemination across a range of scholarly fields, from clinical psychoanalysis and psychotherapy to narrative studies. Simultaneously existing as symptom, outcome, and structuring semblance, a psychic event and a narrative conceit, *aphanisis* belies and indeed often vitiates the delimited specificity of its definition as a symbolizing process through which the subject's desire must pass in order to be sustained or solidified in the signifier. Indeed, the subject's only 'hope' of "[setting himself] up as a subject, as something other than the product, the effect, of the signifying division" (Harari, 247) is to essentially *fade* in the overwhelming presence of demand and in the face of the object (Lacan 1981, 221). Ironically, then, what truly 'counts' in this process is the subject's approach to, approximation of, or even his dangerous self-awareness of, his own fading.

While Žižek certainly makes frequent mention of *aphanisis* in a variety of conceptually discrete contexts (rape, death, the Stockholm

Syndrome), his discussion of *aphanisis* apropos of the Act is comparatively minimal. For Žižek, *aphanisis* designates the moment that the subject approaches too closely that which is essentially resistant to symbolization in him – the phantasmatic kernel of his being – whereupon he loses his symbolic consistency, "it disintegrates" (1999b, 97). This conception differs substantially from the Act, in which the subject makes no initial 'claim' to the symbolic order, let alone a need for its regulating/normalizing effects, and Žižek clarifies this distinction between the Act and *aphanisis* by perceiving the latter only as a possible outcome of the former. In this sense, when the subject approaches his Act too closely, he has no choice but to 'fade' in its overwhelming, irreducible presence, abandoning his own symbolic consistency and essentially integrating or 'losing himself' in the Act, becoming its cause. Žižek states that,

> The standard subject's reaction to the act is that of *aphanisis*, of his/her self-obliteration, not of heroically assuming it: when the awareness of the full consequences of 'what I have just done' hits me, I want to disappear (1997, 223).

However, is it not also possible to imagine *aphanisis* as a certain *condition of possibility* in the Act's authenticity, a mediator between (theoretical) impossibility and (actual) politicization? Considering that the true measure of an Act does not aim at some "momentary enthusiastic outburst" (1999a, 135) but at a total historical obliteration, the subject's ability to "accept and endorse his own 'second death', to 'erase himself totally from the picture'" (379), it therefore follows that *aphanisis* is itself such an irreversible obliteration/erasure. Were the subject to experience *aphanisis* before his undertaking of the Act and not after it (as Žižek suggests), would he not essentially bypass the entire symbolic dimension of the inherent transgression and truly 'act' – in an unprecedented and truly anti-ideological fashion – from an empty place?

The familiar paradox involved in claiming an anti-ideological stance is that such an assertion is itself 'ideological' to its very core, such that any attempt at asserting free action prematurely 'overloads' the empty set of the Act with symbolic qualifiers. According to the position that ideology is inescapably 'everywhere', one can only assume a legitimately anti-ideological stance in a state of ignorance, and this position confirms the relationship between an Act and the agent's 'forewarned' knowledge of it: namely, the agent's awareness of his potential for radicality will effectively preclude the successful performance of the Act. To invoke Žižek's example:

> Oedipus didn't know what he was doing (killing his own father), yet he did it. Hamlet knew what he had to do, which is why he procrastinated and was unable to accomplish the act (1999a, 386).

Yet is it at all possible to test this ideological hypothesis against an Act and, more specifically, against an instance of *aphanisis*? If a subject has already effectively 'disappeared', is he privy to the same dangerous knowledge/awareness, or does his self-erasure allow him to assume the space of free action precisely because he *does not know*?

This anti-ideological hypothesis is addressed in Todd Haynes' 1995 film *Safe*, which details the gradual deterioration of a blank and psychologically inaccessible San Fernando Valley housewife, Carol, to a mysterious illness. Finding herself increasingly unable to tolerate toxins and pollutants, Carol succumbs to what is eventually (and tenuously) identified as an 'environmental illness.' When her condition makes life in the city unbearable (seizures, nosebleeds, allergic reactions to her favourite foods, inability to breathe), Carol locates a healing centre which accommodates people with her condition, and leaves her husband and stepson for the Wrenwood Centre. This compound-like retreat inspires suspicion (one initially assumes that the staff of Wrenwood and its charismatic director Peter Dunning will be exposed as manipulative swindlers) and a certain relief in the spectator – now that Carol is amongst fellow sufferers and experts on 'environmental illnesses', perhaps an accurate diagnosis will finally be made? Haynes' narrative strategy, however, is patently uninterested in the medical aspect of Carol's illness – we are never explicitly informed as to why she became ill, and nor do we know what actually constitutes her illness – and instead focuses on the social dimension of the compound.

Initially, it appears that there is no particular directorial agenda pertaining to Wrenwood, and the absence of any 'position' on Haynes' part institutes a deeply unsettling feeling that itself occasionally 'fills in' the empty set that is the compound: what the spectator assumes is a sinister feature

"aphanisis designates the moment that the subject approaches too closely that which is essentially resistant to symbolization in him – the phantasmatic kernel of his being – whereupon he loses his symbolic consistency, 'it disintigrates"

of Wrenwood, an empirically-present or positive condition subversively articulated by Haynes, is actually an absence of any articulation at all. The patients and staff are not malicious or ill-intentioned people, but are simply a community and, as such, intimate all the perverse component qualities entailed by such a designation (amalgamated identity, distressingly intense faith in their belonging, inspirational singalongs, and so on).

This lacking formal dimension is mimicked in the New Age gnosticism which regulates the lives of the patients and urges them to 'find themselves' and 'learn to love' their illnesses. Each patient is encouraged to designate for himself an empty space – necessarily spiritual but possibly physical – in which he can retreat to escape the overwhelming 'toxicity' of the world and be alone (with his illness). However, as Carol herself seeks out ever 'safer' spaces, we realize that there truly is something sinister at work here; because these spaces have been emptied in advance, because they are intended as spaces in which the patient is entirely alone and unburdened by the troubles of the world – ultimately *because* and not *despite of* these reasons – the 'safe' spaces to which the patients flee from pollutants and toxins are ultimately not ideology-free zones. The result is not the subject's aphanized fading in the face of his illness (the New Age variant presented to the patients involves an 'emptying' of the self which opens the space for a redemptive new beginning), but rather an excess of symbolization, a total bombardment of the subject with the very symbolic coordinates he is attempting to escape. In other words, because these safe spaces position themselves as hospitable to some redemptive Act (in which the patient finally confronts himself and his illness in a state of total Zen-like emptiness), they ensure in advance that this will never occur. And this is also the horizon against which we should read Haynes' direction, or that open presentation of his viewpoint as a neutral gaze which refuses to evaluate/reduce Carol or the inhabitants of Wrenwood: the very assumption of this anti-ideological stance already guarantees the triumph of ideology, and Haynes' deft formal traversal of the space between deliberation and an aphanistic emptiness coincides seamlessly with the film's equally duplicitous narrative content.

"The result is not the subject's aphanized fading in the face of his illness...but rather an excess of symbolization, a total bombardment of the subject with the very symbolic coordinates he is attempting to escape."

In this sense, it appears that one's assumption of an aphanized obliteration of self-conception is not an adequate means of evacuating that self-defeating 'knowledge' of his own potential to Act. *Aphanisis* is therefore not to be opposed to knowledge as such, since the erasure is itself a 'forewarned' knowledge, an effective depreciation of revolutionary potential in favour of an insistent return to an ideological dimension.

Everything but the Kitchen Sink: The Family Aphanized

Yet is it nonetheless possible to conceive of this ironic knowledge and 'agency' against the background of a subject who has undergone *aphanisis* and is now acting 'from an empty place?' A particularly explicit representation of *aphanisis* as the antecedent-guarator of, or condition of possibility for, an Act's performance occurs in the conclusion to Michael Haneke's 1989 film *The Seventh Continent*. This film, which superficially occupies a place in the postmodern 'traumatic tedium' canon[12], details the calm, orderly, and psychologically impenetrable self-destruction of a Viennese family. We are subjected to their monotonous daily routines in a claustrophobic aesthetic of tightly-framed medium shots which often record the repetitive activities of hands but crop heads and faces from the frame; we become familiar with a variety of soulless bourgeois features of their house, such as their generic art prints, enormous and glacial fish tank, and the television set which, when turned on, blares American hit parade programmes and fixates everyone's attention – although we have no conception of the physical space of their home. When Georg (the father) and Anna (the mother) decide to kill themselves and their young daughter Eva, we are given no indication of motivation, but suspect that it involves a desperate retaliation against their azoic bourgeois existence. However, the standout feature of this film is its drawn-out conclusion – less for the family's ugly suicide-by-poison than for the total destruction which precedes it. Totaling at approximately seventeen minutes of footage, this extended sequence mimics the visual style of its monotonous forebears by consisting almost entirely of tightly-framed medium shots of hands as they methodically and efficiently destroy everything in sight: tearing and shredding piles of clothing, cutting photographs in two, snapping records, smashing furniture and appliances, and flushing money down the toilet.

What fascinates about this sequence is its explicit presentation of a shared self-erasure, an *aphanisis* which 'infects' an entire family unit as a necessary precondition of their suicide. This *aphanisis* is necessary precisely in the sense that the family unit assumes the authentic (political) position of an absolute absence in

their Act – a Schellingian '*ex nihilo*' which extends to even the acting agent – and 'opens a space' for the Act's performance through an antecedent erasure.[13] Regardless of whether one elects to read either the family's eventual suicide or the smashing of their house and accouterments as

"the family's orderly attack on their earthly possessions aims precisely at this intent, but actually achieves it...in advance of the Act: nothing can succeed the family after it finally self-destructs, and they leave no legacy of their humanity – only a zero-point."

the film's 'authentic' Act, it is self-erasure's double-scansion of fading and figuration which ultimately guarantees meaning 'over the family's dead bodies'[14]: that is, between the Act's impulses of impossibility and politicization, self-erasure's appearance heralds the subject's performance from "Another Space which can no longer be dismissed as a fantasmatic supplement to social reality" (2000b, 158). Furthermore, this sequence of aphanistic destruction evinces the guarantee of permanence and irreversibility endemic to every authentic Act by efficiently accomplishing the total dissolution of symbolic consistency and instituting a zero-point, a second death, *in advance*. The destruction of the family photographs and the money are particularly effective in this aim of preemptive obliteration, since the photographs are loaded symbolic and imaginary supports, the destruction of which is portentous (the family is being/has been eradicated, and so on), while the money has no personal significance. In other words, while most of the wrecked items can be ascribed some signification and can effectively aid in pathologizing the family's *aphanisis* and Act (i.e., the spectator's self-deception that everything was destroyed for a reason – the clock was a gift from Granny, etc), the object-money itself 'means' nothing to the family, and its destruction cannot be justified as retaliatory in the conventional sense. If indeed one of the objectives of the authentic Act is to enjoin in the subject an "accept[ance] and endorse[ment] of his own 'second death', to 'erase himself totally from the picture'" and to "obliterate the dead totally from historical memory" (379), then the family's orderly attack on their earthly possessions aims precisely at this intent, but actually achieves it (with characteristically dispassionate efficiency) in advance of the Act: nothing can succeed the family after it finally self-destructs, and they leave no legacy of their humanity – only a zero-point.

The Global Act

In the conclusion of *The Coming Community*, a text which explores the shifting linguistic boundaries of a given social set and its opponents of 'immutable' state-imposed control, philosopher Giorgio Agamben sets forth the argument that the 'active absence' of any identity in a subject is precisely that which cannot be endured by the State: "What the State cannot tolerate in any way… is that the singularities form a community without affirming an identity, that humans co-belong without any representable condition of belonging" (1993, 86). Differentiating identity (a social bond which ensures belonging) from singularity as such (which, for Agamben, needs not constitute an identity), Agamben makes two claims which are relevant to a discussion of the Act *qua* its agent: primarily, he insists that "a being radically devoid of any representable identity" is nothing less than a enemy of the State (*ibid*), someone who essentially remains radically impervious to symbolic reduction and, by extension, the oppression of the State. Concurrently, the sphere of contemporary politics designates for Agamben a revolutionary undoing which "empties traditions and beliefs, ideologies and religions, identities and communities" (83).

While this formulation may strike

12 Which is also inhabited by directors such as Bruno Dumont (2003's *Twentynine Palms* and 1999's *Humanity*), Catherine Breillat (2001's *Fat Girl*, 1999's *Romance*), and films such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Why Does Herr R. Run Amok?* (1970) and Gaspar Noé's *Irreversible* (2002). These films typically call attention to the spectator's perverse investment in (and desire for) the intrusion of brutality into otherwise monotonous routine. In all of the aforementioned films - including *The Seventh Continent* - extreme but comparatively fleeting moments of violence puncture an otherwise reified, complacent surface (usually at the end of the film) and aim to confront the spectator's tedious tolerance with an unsettling sense of relief.

13 Additionally, the aphanistic destruction distinguishes Haneke's film significantly from 'similar' postmodern fare such as *Twentynine Palms* or *Fat Girl*. Although the family's smashing-spree is initially a cathartic release from tightly-wound routine, its grueling temporal duration of 17 minutes (coupled with its insistently tight medium-shot aesthetic) eventually begins to take its toll. Unlike the brief but 'orgasmic' and relieving violence of Breillat and Dumont's films, the family's outburst in *The Seventh Continent* is as controlled and regulated as their daily lives, and the spectator is eventually left with the realization that things have gone - appropriately in the context of the Act - "from Bad to Worse" (Slavoj Žižek. *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*. London: Verso, 1999a. pp. 377).

14 This turn of phrase is borrowed from Žižek's *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway*. Seattle: Walter Chapin Simpson Centre for the Humanities, 2000c. pp. 9.

one as somewhat nihilistic in its apparent enjoinment of the reader to thwart the State by dissolving his own symbolic consistency (however 'illusory' it may be), this nihilism is – in a sense – constitutive of Agamben's very project to approximate a political language (*experimentum linguae*) with which we can finally 'reveal nothing' or "reveal the nothingness of all things" (82). For Agamben, what truly 'counts' in contemporary politics is a self-consciousness in speech which, in "bringing language to language" (*ibid.* 83), takes nihilism *to its endpoint* or "carries it to completion", but crucially does so "without allowing what reveals to remain veiled in the nothingness that reveals" (*Ibid*). Agamben's position is not explicitly Lacanian, and he does not index the Act in any concrete way, but his statements in this global linguistic context certainly recall the Act's propensity for retroactive transformation (as is evinced by Medea's cry in Pasolini's film). It is particularly Agamben's encouragement to pursue this 'nihilism' or global variant of "Nothing is possible anymore!" to its end which is striking since – like the Act – this *experimentum linguae* only reveals its potentiality in that moment of 'ending', or, more precisely, in that moment where it retroactively 'becomes' something else/new entirely.

The notion of the Act as a harbinger of positive political change is certainly not a dazzling new epigram, especially since historical Acts of the past are always being revisited and (re)inscribed into political consciousness – but my project throughout this paper has aimed less at the identification of Acts than at the very background against which we are always recreating the conditions of an Act's appearance. In this respect, I have not set forth a model of 'how to successfully commit an Act' or how to become a meaningfully radical global citizen via the Act, but have rather proposed a structural horizon of agency which acknowledges the subject in his capacity to Act, while also accounting for his subjection to this Act. What I would like to caution against in this sense is an overly effusive, sentimentally humanist approach to the Act's agent which posits him as an imperiled iconoclast who is goaded into rebelling against the symbolic order. This, I believe, is the same position which would inspire the assertion that we 'need' the Act today more than every (i.e., in our current age of totalitarian 'anti-terrorist' measures, fear-mongering, the complacency and alienation of cyberspace, etc). Rather, acknowledging from an ethico-political perspective that we 'need' the Act in our current global climate is contingent on our realization that the Act has always been necessary, but never at any point has it been 'more necessary' than ever before.

Works Cited:

Beckman, Karen. *Vanishing Women: Magic, Film, and Feminism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

Butler, Judith and Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek. *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*. London: Verso, 2000a.

Derrida, Jacques. *The Politics of Friendship*. Trans. George Collins. London: Verso, 1997.

Durand, Regis. "On *Aphanisis*: A Note on the Dramaturgy of the Subject in Narrative Analysis." *MLN*. Vol. 98, No. 5 (December 1983): 860-870.

Evans, Dylan. *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. East Sussex: Brunner-Routledge, 2003.

Harari, Roberto. *Lacan's Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: An Introduction*. New York: Other Press, 2004.

Jones, Ernest. "The Early Development of Female Sexuality." *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*. Volume VIII, Part 4 (October 1927): 459-472.

Lacan, Jacques. *The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*. Trans. Anthony Wilden. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1968.

-----. *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Alan Sheridan. London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1981.

-----. *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. Trans. Dennis Porter. London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1986.

-----. *Seminar II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Sylvana Tomaselli. London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1988.

Laplanche, Jean and J.B. Pontalis. *The Language of Psycho-analysis*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Norton, 1974.

Maslin, Janet. "Shed a Tear for Stella, Still Noble but Senseless." *The New York Times*. Sunday February 11, 1990. http://movies2.nytimes.com/mem/movies/review.html?_r=1&title1=STELLA%20DALLAS%20(MOVIE)&title2=&reviewer=Janet%20Maslin&pdate=&v_id=&oref=login

Rasmussin, Eric Dean. "Liberation Hurts: An Interview with Slavoj Žižek." *Lacan.com*. September 29, 2003. http://www.lacan.com/zizekillinois.html

Sajé, N. "Artful Artlessness: Reading the Coquette in 'Roderick Hudson.'" *The Henry James Review*. 18:2 (Spring 1997): 161-172.

Žižek, Slavoj. *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*. London: Verso, 1991a.

-----. *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

-----. *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters*. London: Verso, 1996.

-----. *The Plague of Fantasies*. London: Verso, 1997.

-----. *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*. London: Verso, 1999a.

-----. *The Žižek Reader*. Eds. Elizabeth Wright and Edmond Wright. London: Blackwell Publishing, 1999b.

-----. "When the Party Commits Suicide." *New Left Review* 238, November/December 1999: 26-47

-----. *The Fragile Absolute: Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* London: Verso, 2000b.

-----. *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway*. Seattle: Walter Chapin Simpson Centre for the Humanities, 2000c.

-----. *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism: Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion*. London: Verso, 2002.

-----. "The Antinomies of Tolerant Reason: A Blood-Dimmed Tide is Loosed." *Lacan.com*. 2005. http://www.lacan.com/zizantinomies.htm

-----. *The Parallax View*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006.

(Zombie) Revolution at the Gates:

The Dead, The "Multitude" and George A. Romero

R. Colin Tait

I. Introduction

But if you go carrying pictures of Chairman Mao,
You ain't gonna make it with anyone anyhow...
– The Beatles, 'Revolution'

Your revolution is over Mr. Lebowski. Condolences – the bums lost!
– The Big Lebowski

Revolution is not exactly what it used to be. Historically an activity where the sleeping giant of exploited workers/nations/people awoke to address the brutal inequities of a specific system of oppression (be they bourgeoisie, colonizers or nations), the term, sadly, has become devalued and is now most often used to sell us something, or to tell us how much more the product that we ought to buy has improved (with its *revolutionary* new process of air-freshening/space-saving/cutting things). While the terms 'revolution' and 'revolutionary' still imply participation, the nature of this participation has been utterly transformed in the contemporary cultural milieu from an active process specifically designed to incite change to the contemporary imperative to *actively consume*, a process that is itself ultimately passive.

Faced with the seemingly infinite options of revolutionary activities condoned by the market, how can the contemporary subject possibly be expected to choose one over another? Does he/she, for instance, join the Green Revolution or the Pepsi Revolution? Does he/she discuss the Cultural Revolution or play "Dance Dance Revolution Extreme"? The time-honoured symbols of revolution offer no comfort for this individual, though it is true that the iconic image of Che Guevara actively adorns the T-Shirts, hats and jean jackets of the latest generation in a dazzling display that likely have Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes and of course, Karl Marx, screaming to us from beyond their graves: their prophetic words echoing in our over-stimulated ears.

The same phenomenon occurs with the figures (and images) of Bob Marley and Che Guevara – whose postered countenances grace the walls of many a dorm room in university campuses – and whose iconic presence determines the pretense of an ideological position for the consumer, without them having to do anything besides purchase these symbols that effectively 'stand for' their respective ideological stances (i.e. revolution, Rastafarianism, the decriminalization of marijuana to name but a few).

film, and David Fincher's *Fight Club*, both in 1999) assert that the presence of 'revolutionary' material can now be found within the site of the contemporary Blockbuster. Among the loudest of these voices is Slavoj Žižek, who lifts a line directly from *The Matrix* for the title of his book on the September 11th attacks: "Welcome to the Desert of the Real." In addition to his contention that *The Matrix* is a film worthy of analysis under the rubric of 'revolution,' Žižek presents *Fight Club* as an even clearer example of a

"Rather than feeding a genuine desire to overthrow the system, what these films offer instead is an entry point into the 'revolutionary market...'"

The adoption of a particular 'stance' has its equivalent in cinema, where images and concepts that seemingly 'stand for' something are more likely assuming a popular (and non-threatening) position, or are merely 'posing' rather than making an actual statement. We must consider the relative harmlessness and diffusion of the 'political' content of all of this 'revolutionary material' within the contemporary space of the market.

Though the issue of passive reception has largely fallen out of fashion in contemporary film theory, nevertheless there remain compelling reasons to investigate movies that purport to depict revolutionary activity while at the same time reinscribing the status quo. Often enough a term like the "Freedom Revolution"[1] most often means the opposite of what it implies; namely, tax cuts for the already wealthy at the expense of social programs to aid the lower classes. It is imperative that we trace how this diffusion of political (and, in particular, 'revolutionary') content travels meta-linguistically and comes to inform what is perhaps our most democratic of cultural institutions: the site of contemporary Hollywood film. This phenomenon (the now Orwellian commonplace of words meaning their exact opposite or the "newspeak" of *1984*) is no stranger to Hollywood which, it must be stated, plays a central role in this diffusion (*and emptying out*) of cultural meaning; if it is not responsible for it entirely.

Examining Hollywood's 'revolutionary' films has recently found new utility in the writings of certain (Left) cultural critics, whose analyses of particular movies (including the Wachowski Brothers' original *Matrix* film that offers viewers the subversive pleasure of presenting revolutionary material within the site of a Hollywood and through a model of product consumption to boot.[2] Here, the theorist attributes positive 'revolutionary' qualities to the film (which questions the possibility of the contemporary subject dislodging himself from the Capitalist system) in addition to qualities that actively enable the viewer to imagine what Žižek formulates as the "Leninist break." For Žižek the fundamental problem with the contemporary political debate lies in the discursive schism of "ethics" and "politics." He characterizes this issue as the "deadlock" between the Left and Right which permeates the sphere of modern political theory. Furthermore, he accuses the Left of flooding this sphere with demands that are totally unrealizable, including "full employment" and the absolute return to the "welfare state." These requests, in his view, will always and "by definition fall short of the unconditional ethical demand" (Žižek 2001, 1). Instead, what these pleas represent is the desire by Leftists to advocate "grand projects of solidarity, freedom," while "ducking out" when it is time to pay the cheque (3).

What the Leninist break accomplishes is not only the possibility to realign the system but also that it

> …aims neither at nostalgically *reenacting* the "good old revolutionary times," not the opportunistic-pragmatic *adjustment* of the old program to "new conditions," but at *repeating*, in the present world-wide conditions, The Leninist gesture of initiating a political project that would undermine the totality of the global liberal-capitalist world order and furthermore, a project that would unabashedly assert itself as acting on behalf of truth, as intervening in the present global situation from the standpoint of its repressed truth (4).

[1] This phrase was used by Republican majority leader Dick Armey in 1995, and reflects the growing use of what was previously viewed as the language of the Left not only to bring Conservative movements to power to The United States, but internationally as well. See Paul Krugman, "A Failed Revolution", Op-Ed, *New York Times*, December 29, 2006.

[2] Here Žižek states that "[t]he thing to do…is not aggressively to protect the safety of our [Capitalist] Sphere, but to shake ourselves out of the fantasy of the Sphere – how?" His answer comes in the form of *Fight Club*, a film that he not only calls "an extraordinary achievement for Hollywood," but one which "tackles this deadlock head-on" (Žižek, 2002, 250).

Central to Žižek's thesis is the idea that this break must replay not only the moment that the revolutionary struggle attaches itself to "a collectivity" but also the period before it attaches to a proper institution (*ibid.*).

However, instead of depicting what Žižek characterizes as the appetite for 'revolutionary material' within *Fight Club* and *The Matrix*, this content only serves as a staging ground for exploiting and maintaining what is very clearly *a market*. Rather than feeding a genuine desire to overthrow the system, what these films offer instead is an entry point into the 'revolutionary market' – a demographic which is historically occupied by males aged 16-24 – in short, the precise audience that Hollywood executives have historically always actively sought out[3]. This market thus resembles Hollywood's initial marketing towards (and invention of) the male "teen-age" demographic, where films featuring bikers, hoods and "rebels without causes" merely find their equivalents today as computer hackers, really fast drivers or people who beat each other up in basements. In short, the common denominator linking these films is the basic fact that their protagonists, from Neo to Tyler Durdan all rely entirely on the cinematic template (and thus the generic incarnation) of the 'rebel.'

In this strict sense these movies embody the opposite of what Žižek argues houses their subversive potential; instead of changing the cultural moment that he describes as being characterized by the desires for "coffee without caffeine", "war without war", and "revolution without any blood", the films merely reinforce the status quo (Žižek 2006, 309). This sanitized version of revolution, which Žižek paradoxically argues elsewhere, ultimately ends up resembling the desire of the contemporary Left: the liberal dream of "decaffeinated revolution" fuelled by the desire for "a revolution which will not smell" or "in the terms of the French Revolution, a 1789 without 1793" (*ibid.*).

The imperative question, therefore, not only involves locating the depiction of the "real" revolutionary impulse within the site of contemporary film (if it exists), but also the construction of a template – and perhaps a generic model – for this depiction. Consequently, this essay will test earlier modes of 'revolution' (such as those proposed by Žižek) critiquing them while offering its own solution to the important issues that Žižek raises, namely, what a revolutionary film might look like.

I propose that that we look to the resurgence of the zombie film in order to view how "revolutionary consciousness" is worked out within contemporary movie culture. I will modify early theories of the Horror film (such as those of Robin Wood and Barry Keith Grant) with contemporary Marxist theory – including Fredric Jameson's reading of class and allegory in films he dubs "political" along with Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's writings on what they term "The Multitude" – to reconsider this increasingly popular form. Finally, I will attempt to re-situate the zombie film and its resurgence as a 'political eruption' of subgeneric material, and assert that this specific form (as with other subgenres, such as heist and the conspiracy films) only emerges within a *very specific* set of historical circumstances: circumstances which not only relate to, but that also embody the political climate from which they emerge.

The problem is not that Žižek's theoretical impulse – to test the possibility of revolution within film – is misguided, rather, he simply finds inadequate films to prove these assertions: films that ultimately counter his thoughts via their obvious commodification and easy consumption by audiences. These issues extend to the problematic missing central feature of these films; namely that the representation of the people or, as stated by Gilles Deleuze, the "[p]eople who are missing."[4] In this sense neither *Fight Club* nor *The Matrix* can be considered revolutionary films because they only depict the problems of an 'oppressed' white minority who are saved and redeemed by a violent white saviour. It is impossible to credibly posit the idea of revolution without at least considering the presence of these oppressed workers or those with genuine grievances against the system. We should add that the representation of these demographics, in the form of African, Asian, First Nations and Mexican Americans among many others – barely scratch the surface of Hollywood film, despite their obvious presence in American society. In this sense the missing underclass of proletarians (Marx's *lumpenproletariat*) or even "workers," essential to the history of revolutionary politics, are entirely absent, and as

"In this sense neither Fight Club nor The Matrix can be considered revolutionary films because they only depict the problems of an 'oppressed' white minority who are saved and redeemed by a violent white saviour."

[3] While there are many informed studies on this subject, John Belton's *American Cinema/American Culture*. New York: Rutgers University Press, 2005, pp. 304-325, provides an excellent overview on the development of this demographic.

[4] "This acknowledgement of a people who are missing is not a renunciation of political cinema, but on the contrary the new basis on which it is founded, in the third world and for minorities" (Deleuze, 209).

such, Žižek's assertions lack a suitable cinematic example to apply his theories to.

I maintain that the Zombie films stage and test this political material, and furthermore, that their existence on the margins of Hollywood as a subgenre allow for them to transmit material that is not possible to within the larger context of mainstream Hollywood cinema. This phenomenon can be seen within the resurgence of the Zombie film which offers a vision of what Žižek would describe as the revolution (with blood!). Furthermore, what these films offer is precisely the essential, messy detail that all of his examples lack – the construction, and more importantly the *representation* of 'the masses' – which is not only essential to the consideration of a "revolutionary film," but to the conception of revolution itself.

The Zombie film offers us a meaty solution to this problem, as the recent series of films taken together provide the viewer both the representation of revolution within the space of contemporary popular discourse (particularly in George A. Romero's latest offering *Land of the Dead,* 2005), but do so in such a way that they become legitimately political documents in ways that *The Matrix* and *Fight Club* are not.

II. The Little Red (Zombie) Book

In the opening sequence of *Shaun of the Dead* (Edgar Wright, 2004) several scenes depict the average citizens of London as they begin their morning commute. The homeless, the sick and people listening to their walkmans are all seemingly in a trance-like state. This scene is utilized for comic effect later, as the "infected" that protagonist Shaun encounters – the homeless man he regularly gives change to, the weird guy in the park taunting birds, and the stoned "club girl" – all resemble their incarnations before they became zombies. In short, the zombie world that the film presents *is no different than the world that existed before the infection*.

This phenomenon is similar to Žižek's "thought experiment" regarding Alfred Hitchcock's 1963 film *The Birds*, where the presence or absence of the attacking birds merely serves as a pretense for what was already occurring within the film: namely, the domestic drama between socialite Melanie Daniels (Tippi Hedren), dashing lawyer (and love interest) Rod (Mitch Brenner), and his mother (Jessica Tandy). What occurs throughout this film, in Žižek's view, is that the birds do not simply attack because they are strangely motivated, but rather, that they serve to emphasize what essentially constitutes the domestic drama of the film. In this regard

> …the birds, far from functioning as a "symbol" whose "signification" can be detected, on the contrary *block, mask,* by their massive presence, the film's "signification," their function being to make us *forget*, during their vertiginous and dazzling attacks, with what, in the end, we are dealing: the triangle of a mother, her son, and the woman he loves. If the "spontaneous" spectator had been supposed to perceive the film's "signification" easily, then the birds should quite simply have been *left out* (Žižek 1991, 106).

The affinity between the two forms (*The Birds* and the Zombie film) should be obvious as *Shaun of the Dead* essentially enacts a parallel plot to Hitchcock's film.

Here, a 28-year old electronics salesman (Shaun, played by Simon Pegg) must find a way to fix the errant threads of his personal life that he has ignored for most of his adulthood. These issues encapsulate his domestic sphere: he must deal with his overbearing roommate, negotiate the relationship with his girlfriend Liz (who insists on being taken somewhere else besides the local pub on a date), and reconcile with his stepfather and his mother while at the same time figuring out a way to include his best friend (lazy slob Ed) into his adult life. What the film's strange outbreak of zombies provides Shaun with is the opportunity to step up and solve the domestic issues which plague him.This is exemplified by the 'to do list' that he writes himself on the fridge after a drunken binge. These immediate goals include: "[*sic.*] Go Round Mums" "Get Liz Back" and "Sort Life Out!" Up until this point in the film, everyone that Shaun encounters has looked like a zombie, but not been one (as demonstrated by the scene where he takes a bus ride full of sickly people earlier in the day). It is on this particular morning, when he decides to take action to straighten out his life, that a zombie outbreak occurs and Shaun has no choice but to reconcile these issues by confronting them (and the zombies) head-on.

"What the film's strange outbreak of zombies provides Shaun with is the opportunity to step up and solve the domestic issues which plague him."

Shaun of the Dead's narrative provides Shaun with the opportunity to solve the most important of his domestic relationships (coming to terms with his stepfather, and his buddy Ed) by way of their individual transformations into zombies. These narrative events allow Phillip to tell Shaun he is proud of him – in addition to allowing Shaun a violent literalisation of Oedipal drama in which he kills his step father – and further enables Ed to occupy the same role he inhabited before. In the latter case, Ed's transformation *actually legitimizes* Shaun's friendship with him, and his laziness and video game playing is henceforth justified by the fact that instead of being living and lazy he is now a member of the "living dead." What this brief consideration illuminates is that the logic that Žižek applies to *The Birds* is equally pertinent to the personal dramas of the zombie genre. I will now attempt to apply Žižek's thought experiment to other zombie films – including *28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle, 2002) and *Land of the Dead* – as they are all excellent examples of how this phenomenon manifests itself throughout these films.

Having dealt with the "domestic" inflections of the genre (Žižek's issue of 'failed signification' or the way in which zombies stand as oblique markers of inherent domestic

drama) I would now like to turn my attention to the genre's depiction of politics. Here, I will argue, following the assertions of Robin Wood, that the Horror genre deals with the representation of "repressed material" in general, and that the Zombie film deals with the "repression" of racial politics in particular. As proof I will briefly consider the genre's modern history, ranging from its appearance in the late Sixties, through George A. Romero's subsequent films in the 70s, 80s and 90s.[5] Finally, I will return to my discussion of the genre's recent revival and discuss its ramifications in terms of contemporary 'revolutionary politics.'

It needs to be stated at the outset that the zombie movie, as a subgenre of the horror mode, was always a staging ground for political issues, if it was not inherently political to begin with.[6] *Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 1968) has long been considered one of the most overtly political films of its era regarding the issue of racism and must be seen as tilling the broken ground of Norman Jewison's *In the Heat of the Night* (1967), and Stanley Kramer's *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* (1967). Because these films present an active and capable black protagonist, they must be viewed as films that advance the nascent cause of the Civil Rights Movement. Most importantly, they are inherently political insofar as they actually present other races (Sidney Poitier as a doctor and a sheriff) as sensible people rather than as mere stereotypes.

Robin Wood's early theories of the horror genre are useful here, as he claims that the horror film essentially presents the nightmarish versions of issues that are "repressed" within the "normality" of a society. Central to this discussion is the depiction of "the Other." For Wood, "Otherness represents that which bourgeois ideology cannot recognize or accept but must deal with…" and what takes place either through a psychological process of "repression" or "oppression" (66). Wood's categories of Otherness include other people, women, children, cultures in addition to "*the proletariat"* and "*Ethnic groups within the culture*" (66-67 – italics in original). This representation of Otherness is not limited to the depiction of the "monster" within the horror genre, but is a cinematic tradition which dates back to the "Yellow Peril" films about Fu Manchu in the 1910s and 20s, to the "Indian" in Westerns, and to the portrayal of enemy combatants in War films.[7]

"It needs to be stated at the outset that the zombie movie, as a subgenre of the horror mode, was always a staging ground for political issues, if it was not inherently political to begin with."

These political issues urge us to view the horror film as a mediation of these societal fears. Wood's characterization of the popular nature of the horror film provides a rational explanation for the ongoing appeal of the genre. Here, the author states:

> Popular films, then, respond to interpretation as at once the personal dreams of their makers and the collective dreams of their audiences, the fusion made possible by the shared structures of a common ideology. It becomes easy, if this is granted, to offer a simple definition of horror films: they are our collective nightmares. The conditions under which a dream becomes a nightmare are that the repressed wish is, from the point of view of consciousness, so terrible that it must be repudiated as loathsome, and that it is so strong and powerful as to constitute a serious threat (70).

To return to the opportunity that representing racial politics provides, *Night of the Living Dead* takes this issue a step further as the film's protagonist Ben (Duane Jones) somehow manages to live through the "night" by locking himself in a basement to survive the onslaught. When morning finally arrives, and local militiamen arrive to kill off the zombies, Ben is mistaken for one and is subsequently not only shot, *but thrown on a fire with a meat hook* by the rowdy crowd. This final sequence of the film – rendered by a series of still photographs that resemble existing documents of lynching – even exploits the medium that these events are usually captured by (photography) and the pyre is indistinguishable from the imagery of a KKK rally.

The application of Wood's and Žižek's theories to this horrific image is extremely revelatory, as the previously hidden (repressed) commonplace of racism within the context of the domestic sphere is revealed by the 'phenomenal' expression of zombies. In this precise sense, the manifestation of zombies demonstrates Wood's "return of the repressed" and systematized "oppression" *plus* Žižek's "failed symbolization": a process (the unfurling of the narrative) that reveals both the basic American domestic situation (and by combining these two elements, 'domestically political') circa 1968. What becomes clear (as in the instance of *Shaun of the Dead*) is that the world without zombies and the world with zombies are *inherently the same*.

---

[5] Though other Zombie films have existed before and after this limited examination of them, I have chosen Romero's work strictly because of its distinct political overtones and also his huge influence on the genre: as the filmmaker has made a new *Dead* film in the last four decades, thus making him an ideal case study in this regard.

[6] Wood, among other writers also considers *Night of the Living Dead* among the first forms of protest to the Vietnam War. See Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan…and Beyond,* for more evidence of this material.

[7] In this respect, I am tempted to characterize Ridley Scott's *Black Hawk Down* (2001) as an honourary Zombie film: a category which would also include Howard Hawks' *Rio Bravo* (1959) and John Carpenter's *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976) in terms of the *besieged* (Wood's term) nature of the protagonists as they barricaide themselves against the continued onslaught of "Others."

[8] It should also be noted that this disturbing material is excised from Zack Snyder's remake *Dawn of the Dead,* 2004.

It is clear that the 'domestically political' issue of race stands at the fore of Romero's next film *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) which begins with a dramatic S.W.A.T. team raid of a housing project. While critics have largely ignored this disturbing opening sequence – in favour of reading the film's shopping mall setting as Romero's critique of Capital[8] – it is nevertheless a crucial marker of the zombie films inherent politics. Rather than presenting us with the random rural populace of the outskirts of Pittsburgh, what is so disturbing about this sequence is the transformation the poor residents of this urban housing project. While other characters have the benefit of mobility in the film, it is clear that the misfortune of living in this poor setting dooms the project's residents to a violent, unfortunate death.[9] While the rest of the film essentially follows a band of characters attempt to fortify themselves in a shopping mall, I think that the racial (and class) composition of the zombies in this case, prefigured as they are in this film as *poor,* is crucial for the consideration of the genre as political.

Wood has commented on the shifting portrayal of zombies between Romero's two films, and this is marked by the transition of sympathies (which was alluded to in *Night*, but never made explicit) from the band of survivors to the *zombies themselves*. Here, "the zombies of both films are not burdened with those actively negative connotations" and, in no way resemble what he dubs "the evil incarnate" of other horror films (Wood, 102). Romero's continued work on the *Dead* films accentuates this shift in "humanity" from the side of the protagonists to the side of the Other. In short, by witnessing the survivors' "inhuman" responses to the invasion (by torturing and performing cruel experiments on the zombies) the viewer ends up actively rooting for their ultimate destruction at the hands of the monsters. This is demonstrated by the *28 Days Later*'s jarring ending, where the imprisoned zombie is set free to wreak havoc on his human captors.

"...by witnessing the survivors' "inhuman" responses to the invasion... the viewer ends up actively rooting for their ultimate destruction at the hands of the monsters."

The work of Romero's first three *Dead* films serve as an pretense to demonstrate the inherent *inhumanity* of the survivors, as the zombies are not only killed throughout these films, but in certain disturbing scenes, horribly mistreated as well. This heinous conduct, which usually takes place within the auspices of large groups (the posse of the first film, the biker gang of the second, the scientists and military of the third) is precisely what prompts *Dawn's* protagonist Francine to exclaim "we're them and they're us…"

This shift in narrative agency and audience sympathy is also part of the implicit movement within the series' third film, *Day of the Dead* (1985). This movie, which Wood characterizes as "[i]f not quite about the end of *the* world, it is clearly about the end of *ours,*" (Wood, 294) takes place in a bunker under further deteriorating circumstances – where we are told that the zombie population outnumbers the human population "400,000 to 1" – and where military and scientists band together in order to formulate a "cure" to the outbreak. It is also in this film that Romero adds to the genre's ongoing development with the introduction of "Bub": a zombie who not only undergoes training by the scientists but also dehumanization at the hands of the military.

As with the previous film, where the zombies were impulsively drawn to the shopping mall, returning to a place they felt 'comfortable' while living, Wood cautions our reading this phenomenon as "humanity" outright, but instead "[t]he implications of this definition" (as human) "need to be carefully pondered, as it is obviously both true and false. The zombies are human insofar as they are "reduced to their residual 'instincts.'" Further, they don't communicate "except in terms of an automatic 'herd' instinct, following the leader to their next food supply" (289). A central aspect of *Day* tests Wood's theory directly, as Dr. Logan, chief scientist in the bunker, restores a semblance of Bub's living memories through a series of punishments and rewards (*ibid.*). These impulses include remembering how to shave and appreciating music. When Bub is freed, he also remembers how to carry an M-16 rifle (as he was once a soldier) and shoots the main villain in this film (the military commander Captain Rhodes.)

What this ongoing discussion of the zombies' "humanity" presumably demonstrates is the degree to which the representation of the monster as "Other" changes over the course of Romero's work, and moreover, how this depiction not only comes to positively inform the political discussion of racial representation but its absence in contemporary popular culture. Where for Wood this "herd" mentality basically accounts for the zombies' patterns of consumption, the introduction of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's concept of the "Multitude" can bring to light the action of this new conception (and newly-inflected politicization) of their behaviour. These instincts thus resemble the "network attack" which counter Wood's "mindless consumption," and instead

[9] Here, the "progressive" depiction of blacks in the first film is replaced by their (in Wood's terms) "monstrous" depiction. The content of this sequence also oddly resembles the reports of the 1969 police raid of the Black Panthers, in which one of the group's leadership, Fred Hampton, was killed amongst the building's other residents.

is described as a swarm because it appears formless. Since the network has no center that dictates order, those who can only think in terms of traditional models may assume it has no organization whatsoever – they see mere spontaneity and anarchy. The network attack appears as something like a swarm of birds or insects in a horror film, a multitude of mindless assailants, unknown, uncertain, unseen and unexpected. If one looks inside a network, however, one can see that it is indeed organized, rational, and creative. It has swarm intelligence (Hardt and Negri, 91 – italics in original).

The utility of this passage should be self-evident and can be said to synthesize the issues that Romero's films have presented us with thus far. In other words, the zombies (as 'swarm' in this case) are rational insofar as they possess the ability to look for openings, utilize crude skills, and eventually overwhelm via their inherently cooperative nature. In the zombie film, this continued evolution includes the depiction of positive black protagonists who are killed by mobs (*Night*), the representation of an institutional force taking out what is essentially a poor black housing project (*Dawn)*, and finally to the absolute *re*-humanization of the zombie by way of their increasingly potent mental faculties (*Day)*.[10]

So far, I have attempted to elaborate the particular manner in which the representation of the lower classes is politicized within the site of popular film. The mobilization of these disparate classes should be seen as an alternative to the revolutionary (Leninist) politics that Žižek insists exists within the sites of *The Matrix* and *Fight Club*. The key assumption here lies in the assertion that we accept Romero's *oeuvre* as political reactions to the contemporary cultural milieu particularly as they deal with issues of class and race. Here, the mobilization of zombies resembles the mobilization of the lower classes: a concept that I maintain is essential to the cinematic depiction of revolution.

I want to be clear to maintain that this discussion of racial politics has as much to do with the representation of disparate races, classes and genders within these films than it does to do with the conception of the poor. What I have characterized as the revolutionary action of the zombies also corresponds to the common denominator of all of these issues. Once again, Hardt and Negri's words provide us with a fair guideline, as their views relate not so much to the "suburban underclass" of *Fight Club* but to the proper conception of a revolutionary consciousness. Here, *"*[*t*]*he only non-localizable 'common name' of pure difference in all eras is that of the poor*" (Hardt and Negri, 2000, 156 – italics in original). Further, *"*[*t*]*he poor is destitute, excluded, repressed, exploited – and yet living! It is the common denominator of life, the foundation of the multitude*" (*ibid.)*. At this point the link between the poor as the "excluded…yet living" and the "living dead" is more than apparent, as is the correspondence between the "multitude" and its constitutive unit, the zombie.

"the mobilization of zombies resembles the mobilization of the lower classes: a concept that I maintain is essential to the cinematic depiction of revolution."

III. You *Do Not* Talk About Lenin…

Having traced the history of the zombie film it is now possible to see how these political issues – including considerations of otherness, representation of diverse races in addition to personal issues – inform the recent resurgence of the genre. The opening sequences of both *28 Days Later* and *Dawn of the Dead* foreground the genre's political purpose, but with a slight modification. In both instances the scale of the critical target has changed in addition to its mode of representation. By combining actual media footage of recent anti-globalization (and antiwar) protests with staged footage of a zombie takeover, the connections between global politics and representation of alternative voices becomes immediately apparent. One further characteristic should be noted, as both films emulate recent coverage of the Middle East as well, which serves as a clear indication that the magnitude of the films' political resonance has changed to address the particular concerns of its era. Following my earlier assertions about *Shaun of the Dead* it should be clear that the world as depicted within these films (with their outbreaks of zombies) and the world in which we live are no different from each other. The modification that takes place is from the domestically political (*Shaun of the Dead*), to the nationally political (*Day of the Dead*), to internationally/globally political (*28 Days Later, Dawn of the Dead*).

Though we can attempt a "political" reading of both films, we must be careful in doing so. I propose one final theoretical model that will aid my consideration of the genre as inherently political. While we should keep in mind Fredric Jameson's assertion that political content in Hollywood film is immediately co-opted and digested within the system

[10] I should mention that though Romero does not specifically make a film in the 90s, scholar Barry Keith Grant considers the remake of *Night of the Living Dead* as one of the director's own works. His criteria includes the fact that the script is based on Romero's original and that it is directed by Tom Savani, who worked as Romero's make-up and special-effects supervisor on the original film. This remake makes the class antagonism of the first film even more explicit, with the introduction of new political inflections and "class (stereo)types". These include the overall-wearing "yokel" Uncle Rege, and his nephew and his girlfriend (Tom and Judy *Rose*) who are transformed from two all-American kids in the first film to "bumpkins" as well. Finally, and most importantly, the Coopers (the people who hide out in the basement) are even more obnoxious and Harry is even greedier (and it should be stated, *more stereotypically Jewish*) than in the first film. In short, what the first film does extremely well – in terms of the representation of the various class antagonisms within the overall structure of the film's plot – the 1990 film depicts these issues in an extremely over-the-top (and it should be stated, terrible) fashion.

that produces it, we should also remind ourselves that this is precisely the missing component in Žižek's analyses of *Fight Club* and *The Matrix*. Nevertheless, Jameson states (in a manner resembling Wood's reasoning of the horror film as a nightmare) that films, as works of mass culture, deal with a society's unconscious life. This particular formulation accounts for 'class consciousness' which has all but disappeared within the Capitalist cultural sphere in general, and film in particular. Jameson suggests that certain structures within mass culture (particularly in genre films) must be read *allegorically*. The information that they contain need not be interpreted outright, but should be read polysemeously instead (Jameson, 26). Jameson defines this mode of analysis in his reading of *Jaws* (Spielberg, 1977) where he urges us not to interpret the shark as representative of anything in particular – it doesn't stand for anything – but more importantly he views it as an object which allows the characters in the film (of different social statuses) to rally together in order to defeat it. In Jamesonian terms, the zombies – as the various classes of society – gain the opportunity to rise up against their substandard conditions and rally against institutions – usually the military, police, and industries – of oppression instead. Since our conception of class consciousness has essentially been ruptured via the homogenization of culture, we need alternate means to see that these issues still exist, which is precisely what mass culture can aid us in finding (26-27).

Jameson's solution to this problem resides within the very structure of the Hollywood star system, which places greater emphasis on some actors and relegates others to the background. This conception can be put to immediate use in our discussion as it relates to the internal possibility that the form employs. Here, the formal structure of the genre inherently depicts the revolutionary (class) consciousness rather than having to present these issues directly within their narratives.[11] In other words, the "stars" of the zombie film are literally overrun by the "extras": a phenomenon which is emblematic not only of revolutionary consciousness, but essentially resembles the reality of the global situation in cinematic form.[12]

In terms of this "global" reading, *28 Days Later* attempts to mediate the shift from local (and national) to global issues (as exemplified by its opening sequence) in addition to the shift in the scale of the genre. *28 Days Later's* moment of conception, coming after the September 11th attacks, but preceding the invasion of Iraq, also speaks to the ongoing manifestation of authoritarian British culture (as demonstrated by the preceding footage of protests and the brutal response of riot police) in mainstream film in addition to dealing with rhetoric of disease (as exemplified by the SARS outbreak of 2002-03). In these instances, both *28 Days Later* and the remake of *Dawn of the Dead* embody Wood's characterization of the horror film as a collective nightmare, but do so in such a way that it is not the zombies that we are afraid of, but the systems of containment that are established in order to combat them.[13]

28 Days Later features one further transformation that is emblematic of the latest incarnation of the genre. This change takes place within the space of the narrative, where the protagonist, Jim (Cillian Murphy) must essentially inhabit the position of the zombie in order to free his friends from the military installation where they are being held captive. The film makes this transformation explicit, as Jim, shirtless and pale, literally rises from the pile of corpses that he laid in to escape from being shot and

"In other words, the 'stars' of the zombie film are literally overrun by the 'extras': a phenomenon which is emblematic not only of revolutionary consciousness, but essentially resembles the reality of the global situation in cinematic form."

[11] "For the whole qualitative and dialectical relationship is mediated by the star system itself…[i]ndeed we reach each of the major actors in terms of their distance from the star system…" and "our reading of this particular narrative is not a direct passage from one character or actant to another, but passes through the mediation of our identification and decoding of the actors' status as such" (Jameson, 1992, 52).

[12] Here we should recall the situation of *Day of the Dead* where the number of zombies (400,000 to 1) is roughly equivalent to the actual world situation, where 1% of the population owns 99% of the wealth. In short, what the zombie genre's latest "nightmare" depicts – as embodied by its new, "global" conception – is what occurs when the rest of the world's population comes to collect the money they are "owed."

[13] It should also be noted that the Wachowski Brothers latest film, *V for Vendetta* (James McTeigue, 2005) uses this material (a totalitarian government formed in the wake of a chemical attack) as its staging ground as well. *Vendetta*, when considered with Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006) and *28 Days Later* begs for analysis of the cinematic phenomenon of global plague, its specific location in England and an uprising in each of their narratives, but this is the subject of an entirely different essay.

subsequently frees the zombie that the military has been keeping on a leash to aid him. Finally, Jim explicitly employs the "tactics" of the zombies when he bites the esophagus out of one of his captors. What this film presents, therefore, is the possibility (and indeed the necessity) of having to *negotiate* with the "Other" by either assuming their position or by walking a mile in their (zombie) shoes.

There is one final film I will discuss which brings all of this material – ranging from Žižek's Leninist break, to the depiction of otherness within the horror film to the political consideration of the genre's form/content to the shift in sympathy and finally to the assumption of otherness – together, and this is the latest zombie offering from George A. Romero, *Land of the Dead*.

This film, which critic Manohla Dargis describes as an "allegory…of our contemporary landscape" is the logical sequel to Romero's other films, except that this time the zombie population and their human counterparts live in an uneasy balance. Here, the human population has taken refuge in the cities, whereas the zombies largely live in the outlying towns. In order to continue their existence, the humans have developed a system whereby they make daring raids of these small towns in order to get supplies. In terms of this scavenger imagery, the film resembles the works of George Miller and the post-apocalyptic visions of his *Mad Max Trilogy*.

The major modification that *Land* provides – in addition to the cultural capital that the film inherits by way of its genealogy – is the issue that the division of class within society has once again become glaringly apparent. Here, the rich reside in a posh condo development called "Fiddler's Green" (complete with a functional shopping mall at ground level), while the rest of the human populace either work for these figures to fulfill their needs, or beg for scraps in the ever-expanding slums of the city. The film not only presents the ascension of a new human bourgeoisie (who literally rise to the top of their luxurious tower) but also the excess of the human underclass. This formulation is further complicated by the encounter with an entirely new set of zombies, led by "Big Daddy": a black zombie who continues to work at the gas station that he presumably owned in his lifetime. These zombies, the residents of "Uniontown," who seem doomed to perform the same ritual duties that they did in their previous lives, namely they continue to "work" as they did when they were alive.[14] This aspect, combined with the film's representation of ethnicity, gender and class, beg its inclusion for the ongoing evolution (and complication) of the genre's message.

It should also be clear that the issue of class antagonism is present from the beginning, as there are two sets of under-classes (in short, the proletariat and *lumpenproletariat*) in addition to the reconstitution of a post-apocalyptic bourgeoisie. Finally, the portrayal of evil uber-capitalist Mr. Kaufman (Dennis Hopper) brings all these issues into clear focus, as the masses within the film essentially have a target to rise up against.

This is predictably what occurs within the film, as a daring raid by humans on the peaceful zombies of Uniontown (in what is described by one of the humans as "a massacre") prompts Big Daddy not only to become conscious of the "inhumanity" of the situation, but also to assemble the residents and follow the humans to their stronghold. From here Big Daddy somehow wakes up the residents of the outlying towns, teaches them how to wield weapons, and even frees other zombies that have previously been imprisoned by the humans for the purposes of target practice.

When the assembled zombie army finally raids the luxury condo of the rich, they begin to merge with the human population, effectively doubling

"In this sense, the movement of the zombies in the movie resembles the slow gathering of masses in Sergei Eisenstein's *Strike*...which is accented by a flimsy plot which provides a means to ally the audience's sympathies with the zombies' (and human poor's) plight at the hands of their outlandishly rich oppressors."

[14] To follow this discussion up, it is also worth mentioning the recent Canadian zombie film, *Fido* (Andrew Currie, 2006). This movie, set in 1950s small-town America, depicts a world where the zombies have been tamed via control collars and sold by a major corporation, "ZomCon" to families as workers to perform their menial tasks. This role, it should be noted, certainly evokes issues of dehumanization through work at best and slavery at the worst. The plot also modifies Todd Haynes' revision of the melodramatic mode in *Far From Heaven* (2002) further by substituting a zombie in place of (black actor) Dennis Haysbert's portrayal of the love interest in the film. The usefulness in mentioning this movie is that it takes this discussion of representation a step farther, by replacing all visible minorities (or non-white "workers") with zombies entirely.

[15] Reflecting on the film's revolutionary politics and Big Daddy's leadership, Dargis states "I guess Che really does live, after all" (*ibid.*)

the size of their army by combining the army of zombie poor with an army of human poor.[15] In this sense, the movement of the zombies in the movie resembles the slow gathering of masses in Sergei Eisenstein's *Strike* (1925), which is accented by a flimsy plot which provides a means to ally the audience's sympathies with the zombies' (and human poor's) plight at the hands of their outlandishly rich oppressors. Finally, it should be noted that the film continues the movement that I outlined in *28 Days Later* by forcing one of the film's protagonists into the position of the Other. In this case, it is the transformation of Mexican-American, Cholo (played by John Leguizamo, who is already made somewhat of an outcast in the film due to his ethnicity) to the side of the zombie that marks this profound transition. After being both double-crossed by Kaufman, and bitten by a zombie, Cholo somehow retains enough of his consciousness to take his revenge on Hopper's character. The implied institutional racism previously exhibited by my reading of the earlier zombie films is made explicit here, as (Capitalist) Hopper exclaims "fucking spic bastard" while shooting at Cholo. This is followed by a gesture of solidarity between Big Daddy and Leguizamo, as Big Daddy aids Cholo in killing Hopper by burning him alive. What is important here is that their racial differences (which have been foregrounded throughout the film) are eradicated in the face of their commonalities as zombies and that they find a common enemy (Kaufman, as Jameson's polysemous entity) to rally against.

IV. Conclusion - Virtue and (Zombie) Terror

What I have attempted is a systemized approach to the issue of revolution, particularly within the site of popular culture. It was my aim to thoroughly investigate the various assertions on the subject of revolution that Slavoj Žižek scatters throughout his *oeuvre* and specifically those which deal with film. My rationale has been to negotiate the sometimes disparate relationship between what Žižek believes his examples represent and how they actually function. In this manner, the only choice of the responsible critic is to test these theses and to offer a critique of them. My argument has thus taken place within the contested space of contemporary capital, and it should be noted that rather than dismissing Žižek's theories outright, I have actually sought to find more productive examples in order to aid the theorist's vision of revolutionary politics within the site of popular culture.

Here, inspired by Deleuze's statement regarding "a people who are missing," I have attempted to locate the depiction of a revolutionary politics within a mainstream form. Contrary to Žižek's thoughts that we can locate the Leninist Break within the Hollywood films *The Matrix* and *Fight Club*, I assert that this idea comes closer to fruition when a diverse vision of a/the people is represented. In other words, rather than presenting the contemporary subject/consumer with a white revolutionary savior, the zombie film offers a display of absolute difference and leadership through the form of the network. This representation finds its expression within alternate forms than Žižek names. Furthermore, I have sought to supplement his theories by placing them alongside other theoretical models, including Hardt, Negri and Jameson, in addition to the foundational work on the horror genre that Robin Wood provides. Finally, I have centered on a particular form of film that adequately synthesizes all of these concepts, as well as ultimately depicting an allegory of the contemporary sphere of Capital. Such a vision of resistance, it should follow – and which the zombie film represents – would ultimately develop a schema that could illustrate how this movement could occur. It is here that the rationale for my revisitation of the genre should become clear, as I have demonstrated how the zombie film (particularly in George A. Romero's hands) moves from local domestic issues (such as those of racism) to national issues (the depiction of alternate races and classes within the site of contemporary film) to global illustrations of protest (in *28 Days Later).*

Finally, I have discussed a particular film that brings all of these issues into clear focus: *Land of the Dead*. This film serves as a clear example of how revolutionary consciousness can be depicted within the site of contemporary American film, as its narrative not only shows the coming together of disparate classes (the two separate bands of proletariat in the film) but also how the protagonist of the film (Cholo, Big Daddy) comes to assume the position of the Other within the space of the narrative, yet still retains his revolutionary consciousness.

It is only now, having found a suitable object of analysis, that I can follow Žižek's logic of the Leninist break. Moving on from here requires the fact that it is only by depicting a racially distinctive and diverse set of classes that we can even approximate what Žižek calls for and perform the break that will realign the system entirely.

Works Cited

Dargis, Manohla, "Not Just Roaming, Zombies Rise Up," *The New York Times*, June 24, 2005.

Deleuze, Gilles, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. London: Continuum, 1989.

Grant, Barry Keith, "Taking Back the *Night of the Living Dead*" in *The Dread of Difference*: *Gender and the Horror Film*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996. pp. 200-212.

Hardt, Michael & Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. New York: Penguin Press, 2004.

Jameson, Fredric, *Signatures of the Visible*. New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, 1992. pp. 9-34, 35-54.

Wood, Robin, *Hollywood From Vietnam to Reagan...and Beyond*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003. pp. 63-84, 85-11, 287-294.

Žižek, Slavoj *Looking Awry*: *An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991. pp. 69-122.

-----. "Why is Reality Always Multiple?" in *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*. New York: Routledge, 1992. pp. 195-233.

-----."From Christ to Lenin…and Back" in *On Belief*. London: Routledge, 2001. pp. 1-8.

-----."Afterword: Lenin's Choice", in *Revolution at the Gates*. London: Verso, 2002. pp. 165-336.

-----."The Ambiguity of the Masochist Social Link", in *Perversion and the Social Relation*. ed. Mary Ann Rothberg, Dennis Foster. New York: Duke University Press: 2003. pp. 112-125.

-----. "The Lunar Parallax: Towards a Politics of Subtraction", in *The Parallax View*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006. pp. 273-330.

Book Reviews

Ariel Levy's *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rist of Raunch Culture***.**

Lindsay Steenberg

Hollywood's obsession with aggressive female sexuality is long standing and has produced some of the cinema's most iconic characters, from Rita Hayworth's femme fatale in *Gilda* to band geek Michelle, in *American Pie.* From noir to frat pack, the sexual enthusiasm and availability of female characters has shifted in articulation, even as it has remains a central spectacle. Contemporary post-feminist Hollywood celebrates a perceived sexual liberation that is, in fact, a stand in for *sexualised* performance. In her book, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rist of Raunch Culture*, Ariel Levy takes her reader on an anthropological journey into the seamy underbelly of postfeminist sexuality, from mother-daughter stripper-cise to bacchanalian preteen blow-job parties. Along the way, Levy proposes the term "Female Chauvinist Pig" to describe "women who make sex objects of other women and of [them]selves" (4), and argues that "raunch culture" is the sex-as-playboy fascinated cultural context that makes this woman possible.

Levy is a contributing editor at *New York Magazine* and her work has been published in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *Vogue* among others. Her book's attempt at an academic treatment of female sexuality in American culture is compromised at times by her journalist style. For example, she offers descriptions of the personal appearance of every woman she talks about: 70s feminist, Susan Brownmiller "was a fine-featured brunette" (46), CEO of *Playboy*, Christie Hefner "has good skin and a short French manicure" (38). Despite this, the main point of her piece is refreshingly atypical of the neo-liberal popular press: she argues that women are confusing sexual power with the *performance* and *commodification* of sexuality (i.e. being a stripper or a porn star has nothing to do with enjoying sex and everything to do with simulating and selling it). In order to support her argument she draws attention to the troubling contradictions central to cultural phenomena such as the "*Girls Gone Wild*" video series, women's self help books written by porn stars, such as Jenna Jameson, and "cardio-striptease" programmes made popular by Oprah Winfrey.

Levy, like her more academic counterparts, has fallen into the trap of idealising the 2nd wave feminism of the 1970s as the true site of authentic feminism. She creates a utopian picture of the late sixties as sex-positive, revolutionary and populated by educated and uncompromising women who were changing the world for the better. She describes this period as "…the days when feminism was fun, women's liberation was an adventure that involved stakeouts and bloodless coups and victory celebrations for the conquering heroines" (85). Similarly, she uses female appearance as a litmus test for feminist expression, mournfully explaining the difference between a perceived fem-topia of the 70s and post-feminist raunch culture:

> "Instead of hairy legs, we have waxed vaginas; the free-flying natural woman boobs of yore have been hoisted with push-up bras or 'enhanced' into taut plastic orbs that stand perpetually at attention. What has moved into feminism's place as the most pervasive phenomenon in American womanhood is an almost opposite *style*, attitude, and set of principles" (87, emphasis mine).

This deeply ingrained nostalgia for a time when feminism was simple and virtuous is not only a misrepresentation of this complicated and conflicted time in American social history, it is also framed as an ideal against which all attempts at feminism must necessarily fail. Therefore, Levy's is a particularly bleak outlook on contemporary culture, and an ever bleaker outlook on the young women of today; one that trades on the idea of a feminism that existed only in the imagined past. Of teen sexuality, and female sexuality in particular she concludes:

> "None of this can possibly be 'ironic' for teens because it's their whole truth – there's no backdrop of idealism to temper these messages. If there's a way in which grown women are appropriating raunch as a rebellion against the constraints of feminism, we can't say the same for teens. They never had a feminism to rebel against" (169).

This nostalgia is accompanied by a deep anxiety about female sexuality that transgresses the boundaries of the acceptable, and Levy takes a concerned anthropological tone as she interviews lesbian women who identify themselves as "bois", junior high school girls who confess explicit sexual experiences, and drunken college women who happily volunteer to show their breasts on "*Girls Gone Wild.*" Levy frames herself as a shocked tourist in these worlds, with the expectation that her reader will feel the same. In positioning herself above and separate from her subjects in this way, she suggests that these women are deviant at worst, and tragically inappropriate at best. This, in turn, compromises some of the very significant points she has to make about the misogyny inherent in certain sub-cultural sexualities: they can be sexist, conservative and also confuse performing sex (and sexual identity) with enjoying it. Likewise, Levy draws attention to the consumerist drives behind much of the sex industry. After all, she rightly observes, sex *workers* are not enjoying themselves exclusively, but earning money.

In the case of the "bois," she draws attention to their "bros before hos" (138) mantra in which they vilify more traditionally feminine women even as they sexually pursue them. While this is a troubling catch phrase to live by, Levy's superficial treatment of women who identify themselves as bois, leaves no room for possible alternative sexual expression or pleasure. Levy observes (in some detail it must be said) the sexual activities and stories recounted by the bois, labels them anti-feminist and moves on. The same might be said of her treatment of very young women. She journeys into their world, describes their appearance, sexual habits and urban legends; and then despairs over their misguided sexual identity. There is an undercurrent of anxiety in these descriptions: loud, irresponsible lesbians and hyper-sexualised teenagers are something troubling and Levy positions them as threatening to healthy feminism.

However limited and reductive some of her case studies may be, I agree with the cornerstones of Levy's argument: the conflation of commodification and simulation with female sexual liberation; the sexualization of youth in media culture; and the glamorization of the sex

trade. Likewise, Levy's conception of a raunch culture resonates in a solipsistic postfeminist media culture that assumes all women have the choice to become strippers, and the desire to "Make Love Like a Porn Star." A neo-liberal Hollywood film industry feeds this culture and is fed by it. Contemporary films such as the *American Pie* franchise, *Sin City, The Devil Wears Prada* and *The Wedding Crashers* rejoice in representations of female sexuality as self-objectifying. Levy recognises how unpopular it is to draw attention to these facts. Her recurring, and unanswered questions is: "why does the new feminism look so much like the old objectification?"

Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums*

Brenda Cromb

In the March 2007 issue of *Harper's Magazine*, columnist John Leonard described *Planet of Slums* author Mike Davis as "the radical urbanologist who knows everything, forgives nothing, and shows up periodically to terrify the bourgeoisie, less like a MacArthur Fellow than a Chupacabra, the goat-sucking vampire of Latin American folklore" (82). Leonard was talking about Davis' new book, a history of the car bomb, but it is equally relevant to his disquisition on global urban poverty: Davis is not out to make anyone feel better.

And with this subject matter, it is hard to imagine that he could. Though the poor in the "Third World" or the "Global South" or "Developing Countries" (any of those code words that refer to "places that are not Europe, white North America and Japan") are still often characterized as living in rural backwaters, the reality is that growing numbers – more than one billion worldwide – live in slums. This is a staggering number and Davis is full of staggering statistics. The book's first chapter and a half are loaded with numbers and tables, numbers and tables that make one wonder how things could have gotten this bad.

For instance, a table on page 28 lists the world's "megaslums," including *fourteen* neighbourhoods with one million or more residents. That there are enough of them to necessitate the coinage of the word "megaslum" ought to be staggering enough on its own. For the curious, "'Megaslums' arise when shantytown and squatter communities merge in continuous belts of informal housing and poverty, usually on the urban periphery" (26). Mexico City, where as of 1992 an estimated 6.6 million people lived in 348 square kilometers of informal housing, is number one on the list. All those numbers do get overwhelming, not because Davis's writing is dry – far from it – but because of their sheer largeness. The rapid growth of cities, and the percentage of the new city-dwellers who live their whole lives as squatters or renters of crowded tenement rooms – it is hard to wrap one's head around.

All these numbers, all this quantification, is necessary: Davis is counting people who generally are not counted. Not in censuses, not when cities are being planned, not when they are forced out of their neighbourhoods due to development or "beautification" (often literally), not when a city (like Soeul or Beijing) is hosting the Olympics, not when the IMF and the World Bank are demanding debt repayments that cut large swaths through the national budgets of African states. (Davis entitles one chapter which outlines the struggles of the informal worker "A Surplus Humanity?" The question mark, it turns out, is rhetorical.) But Davis does more than count out misfortune: he contextualizes it.

Davis outlines, in jargon-free language, the global geopolitical movements that have left so many people living ten to a room with no hope of getting out. Much (but not all – Davis notes the complicity of corrupt governments and the complacent middle classes, not to mention short-sighted First World "solutions") of the blame is laid at the door of the World Bank and the IMF, especially the "Structural Adjustment Plans" managed by the latter starting in the mid-1980s.

The 1980s – when the IMF and the World Bank used the leverage of debt to restructure the economies of most of the Third World – are the years when slums became an implacable future not just for poor rural migrants, but also for millions of traditional urbanites displaced or immiserated by the violence of "adjustment" (152).

The SAPs, which called for privatization of public services and the abandonment of state-supported development, in order to speed repayments of national debt (including in the Congo, where the World Bank knew Mobutu was funneling much of the borrowed money directly into a personal Swiss bank account, with IMF demanding repayment from ordinary Congolese). Davis pulls no punches in pointing out the absurdity in the fact that "it is taken as 'normal' that a poor country like Uganda spends twelve times as much per capita on debt relief each year as on healthcare in the midst of the HIV/AIDS crisis" (153).

One of the downsides to the privatization of public utilities is that so many in developing countries are unable to afford them. One of the book's most affecting sections deals with "Living in Shit". "Constant intimacy with other people's waste […] is one of the most profound of social divides," Davis tells us (138). This is, of course, not merely because of the smell. This kind of filth carries the kinds of diseases common to Victorian London, and which one would think could be eradicated in the twenty-first century. Post-colonial nations in Africa and South Asia are the worst off: the colonists never much bothered with things like sanitation for the locals, so the new rulers took over already-neglected systems. It is hard to be surprised when Davis – after outlining the health and feminist issues associated with being obligated to defecate in public – turns to pay toilets. For instance, "[i]n Ghana a user fee for public toilets was introduced by the military government in 1981; in the late 1990s toilets were privatized and are now described as a 'gold mine' of profitability" (141). This "gold mine" charges families 10 percent of one day's pay for toilet use.

It does not take much of a Freudian to guess why the very fact of millions of people literally living in excrement gets so little media attention. It is not a sexy problem, but Davis' unstinting exposition of already available data shows the extent to which this is not a series of localized issues, but a *global* trend. Slums and their attendant miseries are the results of capitalist globalization, and Davis is none too optimistic about capitalist plans to make them disappear. *Planet of Slums* is not an optimistic book, but it is not optimistic subject matter.

From Hobbits to Hollywood

Essays on Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings*

Edited by

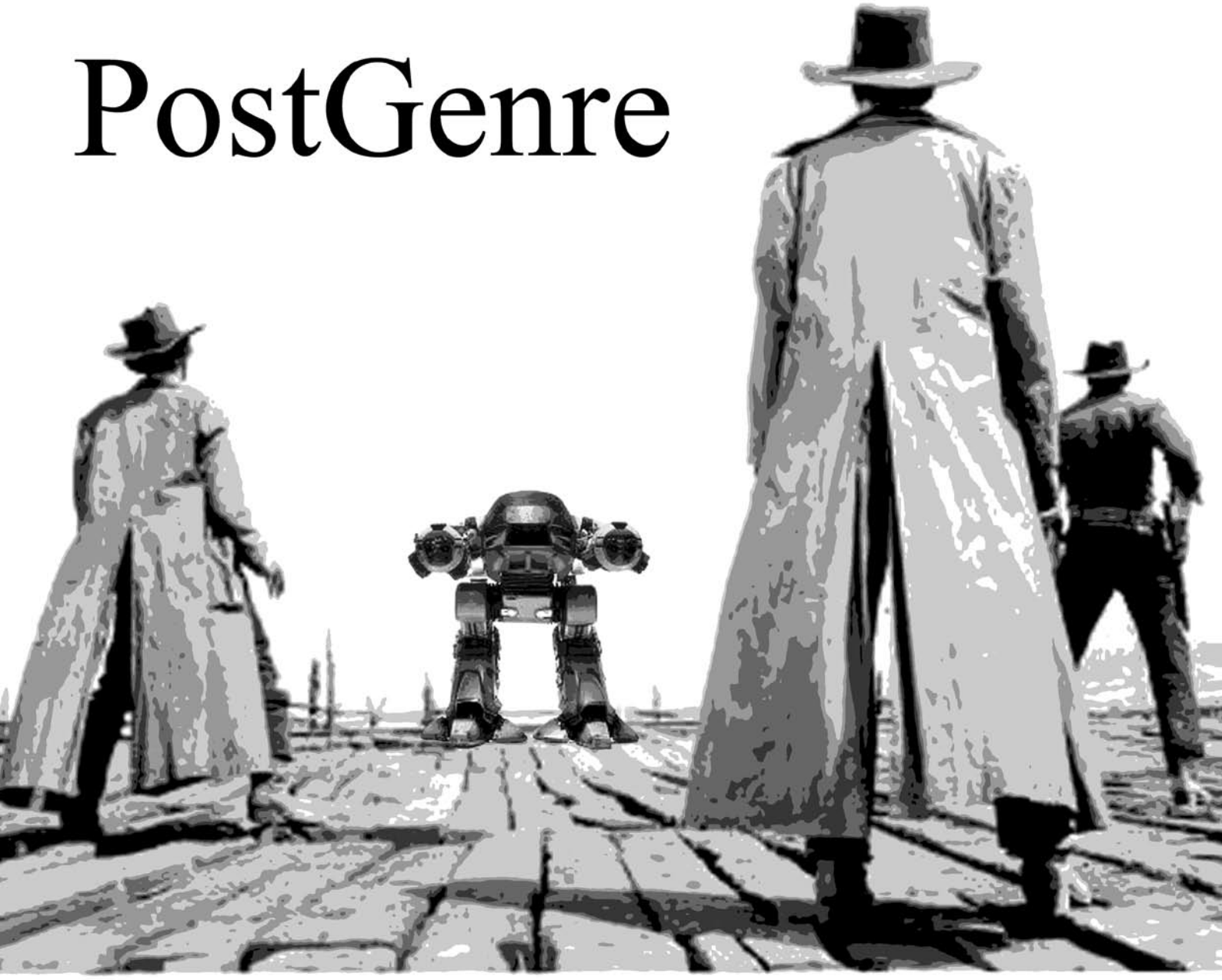
Ernest Mathijs and Murray Pomerance

Available now from Editions Rodopi

Coming Fall 2007

CINEPHILE vol. 3 no. 2

PostGenre



www.film.ubc.ca/ubcinephile