CINEPHILE

The University of British Columbia's Film Journal

Guy Maddin Interview
by William Beard

High Concept Hitler
by Steffen Hantke

CINEPHILE

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Editor's Note

Outfit a scantily clad model with an SS symbol and you're sure to grab people's attention and elicit some strong reactions. Lest you be fooled by our cover model, let us be clear: our journal has no neo-Nazi aspirations. *Cinephile*, however, has never shied away from controversial topics. From Slavoj Žižek's "The Family Myth in Hollywood," which examines the 'true Evils' of so-called 'utopian socialist' gated communities, to Brenda Cromb's "Gorno," which grapples with the recent cycle of 'torture porn' films, *Cinephile*, it seems, is fixated on contentious and unsettling art. So it is only fitting that, in this, our 5th anniversay issue, we set out to navigate the murky and uncharted depths of 'alternative cinema'. But carving out an epistemology of this amorphous cinema is no small endeavour—and what do we mean by 'alternative cinema' *anyway*? On the one hand, it is always evolving, always repositioning itself outside mainstream modes of representation: once the mainstream appropriates elements of alternative style, new configurations naturally spring up in response. At the same time, it has no singular mandate, no fixed ideological underpinnings, and is beholden to no specific national cinema or film movement.

Rather than restricting ourselves to film studies jargon and taxonomies (such as 'art-house', auteurist second cinema, or the politically alternative third cinema), we have taken a different tack. We purposely cast a wide net to dredge up a diverse mix of strange and lesser-known fish, discovering in the process, counter currents to the mainstream of Hollywood's global vernacular—the biggest fish in the pond, so to speak. From the nasty and the deviant, to the politically radical, to auteurist fare that tests the limits of style, taste and formal experimentation, anything which defies, perplexes and sits at odds with convention lies within our purview. Our intention is to introduce new viewpoints and new language for speaking about these unusual creatures. This issue ought, finally, to resemble something of a mirror ball, reflecting back to the reader flashes of insight, but offering no dogmatic, universal conclusions; any emergent conception of alternative cinema must take into account its perpetual state of flux, and thus its resistance to rigid formulations.

What insights and new language, then, have we discovered in mapping this course? We begin with two essays that address the problematics of Third Reich representation: Steffen Hantke complicates notions of high concept in his keen observance of the act of performing Hitler, whereas Graeme Krautheim delves into Nazi sexploitation films (a cycle long ignored by scholarly research) arguing that these 'deviant criminals' can actually be viewed as historical documents. Thomas R. Britt examines how two films, infamous for their sex and violence, actively unify excessive content with structural, visual and psychological depth. In a more political vein, Jerry White demonstrates how mixing media facilitates the aesthetic and ideological ambitions of Finnish director Pirjo Honkasalo, while Tia Wong surveys alternative modes of spectatorship and the resistant gaze in two of Alanis Obomsawin's documentaries. Unearthing alternative national histories, Colleen Montgomery explores Alexei Balabanov's 'heritage porn', and Laurynas Navidauskas discusses 'prosthetic memory' in Sally Potter's *Orlando*. Finally, William Beard's interview highlights the importance of serendipity and technical inexperience in the birth of Guy Maddin's distinctive style, while Brenda Cromb puts to question her own cheerful embrace of sleaze in her review of Jeffrey Sconce's *Sleaze Artists*.

Informed by both a scepticism of aging theoretical frameworks and an enthusiasm for new, interdisciplinary perspectives, this collection of articles is aptly suited to the journal's mandate of stretching the bounds and habits of the film studies discipline. We invite research attuned to the dissolution of boundaries (film/cultural studies, film/video, high/low art, etc.) and encourage articles that deploy film theory with a clever balance of novelty and irreverence. Emergent trends within the industry, mixed media, changing distribution, exhibition and reception patterns all peak our interest, and if these discussions may be complicated or contentious, so much the better. In keeping with this mandate, *Cinephile* is expanding, moving to bi-annual publication (watch for Vol.5 No.2, "The Scene," in summer 2009!), partnering with UBC's Ejournal project to create an open access venue and offering a host of new multimedia features on our website, cinephile. ca. We couldn't have done it alone though, and wish to acknowledge our advisor Ernest Mathijs, our 'go-to' people, Gerald Vanderwoude and Jennifer Suratos, our illustrator, Bobby Mathieson, our layout editor, Andrew deWaard, our editorial board and, of course, UBC's Department of Theatre and Film—whose continued support has allowed the journal to grow and flourish.

Satisfy your inner cinephile and become a subscriber! In addition to our penetrating, original content, *Cinephile* is guaranteed to keep your coffee table on the cutting edge—after all, an SS cover model is sure to make for a lively and certainly *alternative* conversation piece.

- Colleen Montgomery and Brent Strang

Contributors

William Beard is a Professor of Film Studies in the Department of English and Film Studies at the University of Alberta. In addition to articles and book chapters on a variety of film-related subjects, he has written books on Clint Eastwood and David Cronenberg, and has just finished a book on the cinema of Guy Maddin.

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Brenda Cromb recently completed her M.A. in Film Studies at the University of British Columbia, with a thesis about the ambivalent melodramas of Pedro Almodóvar. Her writing has appeared twice in past issues of *Cinephile*, on cinematic depictions of the first Gulf War, and on 'Gorno'. In the past year, she has given conference papers about John Waters and *Gossip Girl*.

Steffen Hantke has written on contemporary literature, film, and culture. He is the author of *Conspiracy and Paranoia in Contemporary Literature* (1994), as well as editor of *Horror*, a special topics issue of *Paradoxa* (2002), *Horror: Creating and Marketing Fear* (2004), and *Caligari's Heirs: The German Cinema of Fear after 1945* (2007). He teaches in the American Culture Program at Sogang University in Seoul.

Graeme Krautheim is an M.A. candidate in Film Studies at the University of British Columbia, writing his thesis on pornography and counter-memory in Liliana Cavani's *The Night Porter*. Among his publications are "Virtuous Violence: The Displacement of Socialism on to the Maternal Body in *Good Bye, Lenin* and *Die Unberührbare*" in *fait accomplit* and "Aspiring to the Void: The Collapse of Genre and Erasure of Body in Gaspar Noé's *Irréversible*" in *Cinephile*.

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Desecration Repackaged:
Holocaust Exploitation and the Marketing of Novelty

Graeme Krautheim

Frequently dubbed 'Nazi-porn', the cycle of Nazi sexploitation films that emerged from Italy in the late 1970s is, I argue, the most deviant and severe example of the entire medium. In this paper, I will incorporate brief excerpts from Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* and the writings of Primo Levi into an examination of this notorious cycle of films that depict excessively trivial and incompetent representations of concentration camps. Though I am referencing Italian examples as they are the most well known (and explicit), this type of film has been linked to several national cinemas, including American and Canadian.[1] It further warrants mention that their origins date back to a literary aesthetic that is beyond my scope here.[2] It is my objective to explore how this uniquely marginal cinema not only impacts established discourses in a way unlike any other, but also destabilizes theoretical frameworks frequently taken for granted in academic circles. In a letter to the

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1. Including the notorious *Ilsa* series, beginning with *Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS* (Don Edmonds, 1975)
2. Examples include Yehiel De-Nur's Holocaust memoir *House of Dolls*, originally written in Hebrew, alongside Israeli pulp novels referred to as 'Stalags'.

Italian newspaper *La Stampa* in 1977, Holocaust survivor (and author of the seminal *Survival in Auschwitz*) Primo Levi directly addressed the Nazi sexploitation cycle with a logic that is more relevant today than ever.[3] Levi's discussion of the films' ideological consequences is central to discussing their broader historical implications. To a greater extent than even slasher films or hardcore pornography, Nazi sexploitation has long been banished to the outermost

where history and memory work are violated by a product designed, as exploitation films are, to be momentary and ephemeral. To carry this analogy a step further, this elaborate transfer to DVD is indicative of the films, after years 'on the lam', finding immunity through connections with 'friends in high places' (referring to the cultural-elevation of being deemed valuable enough to be worthy of such a transfer). In this capacity, not only have the films ultimately 'gotten

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Nazi sexploitation is so single-minded in its pursuit of financial profit that to accuse it of harbouring a sociopolitical agenda is to ascribe it an intelligence and ideological trajectory that it simply does not have.

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peripheries of culture—a consequence of the fact that it does not merely seek to repulse, but actively incorporates inane sexual imagery to invoke an eroticized, 'masturbatory' reaction to the historical memory of the Holocaust. The films rely on enormously problematic historical implications which they themselves demonstrate absolutely no interest (or competence) in addressing. I base my position on what I see as a general consensus of the artistic legitimacy (or 'cultural capital') of Nazi sexploitation being nonexistent. This provides an ideal vantage point from which to examine Bourdieu's assertions regarding the relationship between taste and social class.

What makes an examination of this cinema timely is that, in 2005, the Exploitation Digital label released several particularly severe (and previously-unavailable) Nazi sexploitation films on glossy uncut digital DVD transfers, including *SS Experiment Love Camp* (Sergio Garrone, 1976) and *Gestapo's Last Orgy* (Cesare Canevari, 1977).[4] The assemblage of this new DVD establishes each film as its own 'art object' insofar that its transference to digital media has produced the sharpest possible print and features extras, including theatrical trailers and interviews with the directors. In response to restrictions previously forced upon the films by the MPAA (X-ratings, of course), Exploitation Digital sidestepped the process altogether by releasing the restored versions unrated. What is so significant about these new transfers is how the format of their presentation has invested them with a newfound cultural value. The 'crimes' committed by the films coalesce into a cultural 'hit-and-run',

away with' their 'cultural crime', but their transference to a fresh (and easily accessible) DVD makes their cultural capital initially difficult, on the surface, to differentiate from the important and culturally valuable films released on the Criterion label. The Exploitation Digital label has elevated these pieces of low art to such heights that they, at least via their packaging, appear to hold the same cultural stock as *Triumph of the Will* (Leni Riefenstahl, 1935) or *Night and Fog* (Alain Resnais, 1955). As vehicles manufactured exclusively for the purpose of economic gain, Nazi sexploitation films were built, first, for speed rather than distance, and second, to retain indifference toward anything they 'ran over' (history, memory, suffering). The Exploitation Digital label has reassembled these films (via a complete cut, in the case of *Gestapo's Last Orgy*) and placed a new rebuilt engine into their bodies (via their digital transfer) that enables them to operate in contemporary culture as novelty objects.[5] With the re-release of Nazi sexploitation for a new era, we must consider both the implications related to mass consumption and memory work, and acknowledge that the easy modern accessibility of such films requires us to be responsible for and accountable to our own history in a way that we have never been before.

The historical representations themselves are frequently so outlandish and so completely divorced from all logic that they somehow defy comprehension. In these alarming and trivial representations, buxom young women (consistently depicted in various states of undress) portray prisoners in concentration camps with such stunning un-

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3. As reprinted in *The Black Hole of Auschwitz* (37-8)
4. These two particular films are frequently considered low-rent remakes/rip offs of Liliana Cavani's controversial art film *The Night Porter* (1974).

5. In 2008, the Danish DVD distributor Another World Entertainment followed suit, releasing the films on Region 2 DVDs in Europe. These releases feature subtitles in Danish, Swedish, Norwegian and Finnish, making them accessible to a much wider international audience.

wittingness that one is left pondering whether anyone involved had any knowledge of the history to begin with. The women engage in extreme and degrading sexual acts with Nazi guards, and further, are sadistically tortured and subjected to ludicrously represented medical experiments. The forced labour in the camps is depicted as though it were a series of remedial chores, and the poorly-dubbed dialogue is casual and devoid of any suffering. A grotesque banquet scene in *Gestapo's Last Orgy* features a group of lust-crazed

Nazis discussing a large-scale plan to eliminate the Jewish population in the camps by *eating* them, all the while, devouring the meat of an aborted fetus. They subsequently strip a prostitute who has fainted from shock and proceed to lustfully smother her in cognac and flambé her. In *SS Experiment Love Camp*, when a German soldier realizes that he has been surgically castrated, he shouts to his superior (the recipient of the transplant), "What have you done with my balls?" These films are fundamentally indifferent to the historical context that they claim to represent, as well as to any cultural 'damage' they may do in the process. The representations are so humourless, incompetent and extreme that the entire filmic medium seems to collapse into a state of simultaneous nausea and delirium.

THEIR WEAPON WAS DESIRE...
FOR WHICH THERE WAS NO DEFENSE!

SS GIRLS

the next two decades, heavily-censored and poorly-dubbed VHS cuts of the films circulated among underground enthusiasts and collectors. With regard to other forms of exploitation cinema, I emphasize that it is Nazi sexploitation specifically that interests me, and that exploitation film as such does not apply to my position. Blaxploitation cinema, for example, has been acknowledged as important to the empowerment of Black communities, just as more conventional sexploitation films have been read within feminist scholarship as indicative of female sexual agency—although such assertions are admittedly problematic in their own right.[6] Nazi sexploitation cinema quite simply empowers no one—there is no minority for whom it speaks and no mode of discourse that would benefit from an association with it. It is vital to make clear that these films harbour absolutely no anti-Semitic or fascist sentiments. These representations are so inane, and so damaging to the credibility of anything with which they are associated, that not even those who willfully perpetuate hate or the negation of historical fact (meaning anti-Semites or Holocaust deniers, for example) would further their cause from aligning themselves with these films. Nazi sexploitation is so single-minded in its pursuit of financial profit that to deem it insidious or to accuse it of harbouring some sociopolitical agenda is to ascribe it an intelligence and ideological trajectory that it simply does not have. Made quickly on extremely low budgets, the films are so preoccupied with immediate profit that they have no comprehension of, or concern with, possible 'costs' to culture, memory, or for that matter, anything at all.

If Nazi sexploitation were completely divorced from the facts and circumstances of the Holocaust, it would be

Scholarly acknowledgment of Nazi sexploitation cinema has been largely limited to a discussion within the context of the BBFC (British Board of Film Classification), which introduced the Video Recordings Act in the U.K. in 1984. A movement by the conservative media fuelled a large-scale banning of (largely low-budget horror and exploitation) films dubbed 'video nasties' by the popular press. The initial banning of the films was based on the arguments of there being no possible reason to 'enjoy' them, and that the nature of their subject matter may be damaging to the minds (and moral codes) of children. For

6. See Isaac Julien's *Badasssss Cinema* (2002) and Kristen Hatch's 'The Sweeter the Kitten, The Sharper the Claws: Russ Meyer's Bad Girls' (145), respectively.

more easily reconciled and dismissed. These films however, make reference to actual historical atrocities, of which there are virtually no other cinematic representations. It is no surprise that cinema has never broached the subject in any serious way; the unquantifiable bodily violence inflicted upon the prisoners included (but certainly was not limited to) mass sterilizations, the severing of limbs, exposure to radiation, and the deliberate injection of diseases such as typhus, tuberculosis and syphilis.[7] In an interview on the

when one views this film on the basis of novelty, historical context easily becomes an afterthought. To the producers of Nazi sexploitation films, Levi has stated, "No, the women's concentration camps are not indispensable to you: you can leave them alone, and not be any the worse off for it" (38), indicating that the use of the camps as a backdrop did not even contribute to the box-office of the films (insofar that the demographic would be indifferent to the historical context). The films' excesses are thus puzzling in that they seek

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DVD extras to *SS Experiment Love Camp*, Garrone situates his film within a historical framework: "When I was offered this film, I did research with authentic documents." However, with regard to the film's depictions of torture and graphic medical procedures, he states, just moments later, "If you don't have ideas, you just throw in tomato sauce… or scraps from the butcher. You take pork rind… put it in a close-up, cut it open with a scalpel, and it looks like human skin." Garrone points to the film as an authentic historical recreation, only to interchangeably and indifferently describe techniques used to achieve a purely sensational effect. Further historical atrocities have been extensively documented where, for example, mass groups of prisoners were packed into freight cars where the floors were lined with quicklime.[8] In *Gestapo's Last Orgy*, the nude female prisoners are playfully pushed down a makeshift water slide into a pool of quicklime, which merely resembles a harmless white solution. The incompetence of the representations almost begs to be laughed at, yet for anyone who understands the larger context there is no human reaction more unimaginable. As stated by Aaron Barlow, "the DVD has thrown us unprepared into a whole new cinematic possibility where, among other things, the integrity of the film is of higher importance than ever before and its life is immeasurable" (xi). While Barlow's statement may sound obvious, his use of the term 'unprepared' is salient because,

to be as hideous and reprehensible as possible for no clear or practical reason. Without any motive for this violating and ideologically destructive trajectory, their criminality is not only naïve, but sociopathic, and even nihilistic.

Central to Bourdieu's position is a claim that one's individual tastes are predicated upon cultural capital as it relates to education and social class. Bourdieu considers two relative certainties:

> […]on one hand, the very close relationship linking cultural practices (or the corresponding opinions) to educational capital (measured by qualifications), and, secondarily, to social origin (measured by father's occupation); and, on the other hand, the fact that equivalent levels of educational capital, the weight of social origin in the practice-and preference-explaining system increases as one moves away from the most legitimate areas of culture. (13)

I see the entire concept of taste as being uprooted by Nazi sexploitation. By nature of its very title, *Gestapo's Last Orgy* was produced and marketed without any consideration whatsoever of taste—on the contrary, the film's all-out negation of the tasteful is largely the fuel upon which it operates. With a tone of pity, Levi has asserted the demographic for Nazi sexploitation to be "young and old men who are timid, inhibited and frustrated [… who] want the image of an object-woman because they can't have her in flesh and blood" (38). While the original audience for Nazi sexploitation was clearly heterosexual men, its repackaging has opened the floodgates to a more expansive popular audience whose interest stems from curiosity. Although Levi's statements with regard to the films' demographic are relevant, I argue that to place moral judgment on these one-dimensional representations (or those who watch them) only

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7. *When Medicine Went Mad: Bioethics and the Holocaust* (10) features a collection of essays exploring the continued ethical issues faced by medical professionals with regard to experiments conducted during the Holocaust and *The Holocaust: Selected Documents in Eighteen Volumes – Vol. 9: Medical Experiments on Jewish Inmates in Concentration Camps* features extensive reproductions of original documents.

8. See, for example, Robert M. Spector's *World Without Civilization: Mass Murder and the Holocaust, History and Analysis: Vol. I* (435).

results in the films folding in on themselves. There is nothing productive about simply accusing Nazi sexploitation of being careless, misogynist or historically inaccurate—such statements go without saying, and to consider the films with the hostility that they actively invite is completely counterproductive. While it may sound ridiculous to treat Nazi sexploitation cinema 'gently', that is exactly what I propose. To return to my analogy of these films as deviant criminals, I align them with a naïve sensibility insofar that they are too elementary to even comprehend the social and cultural damage that they do. It is as though the proverbial criminal were revealed to only house the intelligence of a child, and would not, as such, be fit to stand trial. Because the films' representations are so absurd and simplistic, they simply cannot withstand an aggressive academic interrogation, just as a criminal without the intellectual capacity to comprehend his crimes must be evaluated under a different set of criteria.

Despite the new 'elevations' of these films, there are, nonetheless, socially ordained codes to which even they must adhere. Central to the deviant nature of Nazi sexploitation is its total absence of humour, despite the absurdities of its representations. The informal tone of the plot details, however, on the DVD for *SS Experiment Love Camp*, makes clear the tongue-in-cheek conditions under which Exploitation Digital has released it. The text reads: "Seems the white race just isn't superior enough for those nasty Nazis"—indicating, the elaborate packaging notwithstanding, that the film can only be discussed with informal, joking language. The 'humour' of Nazi sexploitation is largely derived from how the films *do*, in fact, take themselves very seriously.[9] Exploitation Digital, however, protects itself (and its own cultural capital) by

phrasing the plot details as it does. Similarly, the DVD for *SS Camp Women's Hell* (Sergio Garrone, 1977) states, "[…] this harrowing and tasteless follow-up makes its first (and likely last!) appearance on American DVD" as though the product itself were expressing a genuine surprise at its own existence. In a sense, the marketing of the films *needs* to clearly indicate that they are not to be taken seriously if they are to be permitted to exist in culture at all.

Because the films are so cheap and trivial, it may appear that the consumer is simply amused by the inane dialogue or the ridiculous narrative trajectories. What he is laughing at (or perhaps, even being aroused by) is the representation (however inept) of absolutely unspeakable, unquantifiable human suffering. The naïveté of Nazi sexploitation is intrinsic to its own subversive nature. By this, I mean that the films do not understand the enormity of their own historical implications. Despite Levi's own disgust with the films, he nonetheless retains the objectivity to acknowledge that simply banning them would be to miss the point:

Invoking censorship would mean putting ourselves in the hands of inept and corrupt judges, breathing new life into a dangerous mechanism. We already have censorship, but it confiscates only films that are intelligent, if at times questionable. Obscene films, as long as they are idiotic, present no problem. (38)

Levi's statement is as salient now as it ever was insofar that the films' evident incompetence creates the illusion that they are somehow less problematic.

Because Nazi sexploitation exists so far down the scales of cultural capital, it must be able to compromise fidelity to its formal elements (via title changes, alternate cuts) in order to navigate its way through distributional frameworks.

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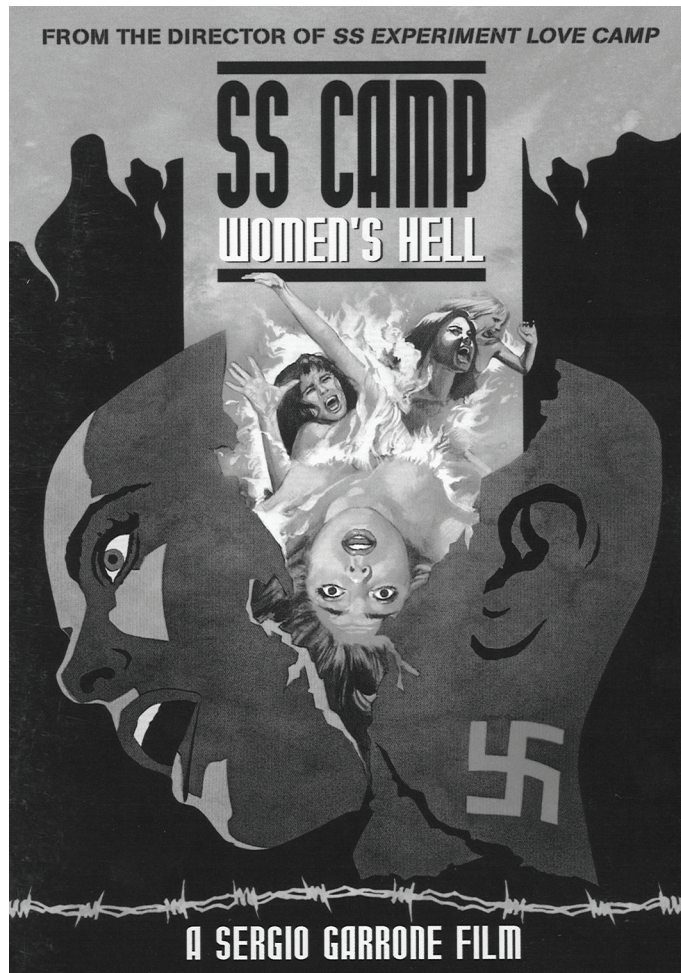
9. The lead actors of *Gestapo's Last Orgy* assumed pseudonyms for their roles (Adriano Micantoni is credited as Marc Loud and Daniela Poggi, as Daniela Levy). Similarly, Bruno Mattei directed *SS Girls* under the name Jordan B. Matthews.

Amid the controversy surrounding the release of *Caligula* (Tinto Brass, Bob Guiccone, 1979), the Magnum label promptly latched *Gestapo's Last Orgy* on to the hype and retitled it *Caligula Reincarnated as Hitler* in its VHS (and later, DVD) release. Just as the film demonstrates indifference to its historical representation, even elements that 'house' or contain it (such as its title and box-art) are always negotiable, and the fact that it has no association with Ancient Rome (as depicted, albeit superficially, in *Caligula*) is of no consequence. *Gestapo's Last Orgy* has the unique ability to latch on to any potentially lucrative context because (in a total absence of its own cultural capital) it has nothing to lose.[10] In keeping with the criminality of the films, the restored cut situates *Gestapo's Last Orgy* as equivalent to a criminal body whose limbs have, in the wake of being severed, been superficially glued back on in order to celebrate its status as a retro object. As stated by Raiford Guins in his research on the remediation of Italian horror films into contemporary American culture:

> It is fair to wager that most Italian horror films to reach American shores as video-cassettes were cut to satisfy MPAA censorial policies. This is perhaps the most marked example of Italian horror being positioned as an object of low quality, low value, and further removed from any claim of authorial intentions. In addition to retitling, poor dubbing, and non-'original' cover art, it should be stressed that any judgment as to the quality of a particular film was a judgment passed on an incomplete and severely cut print. (21)
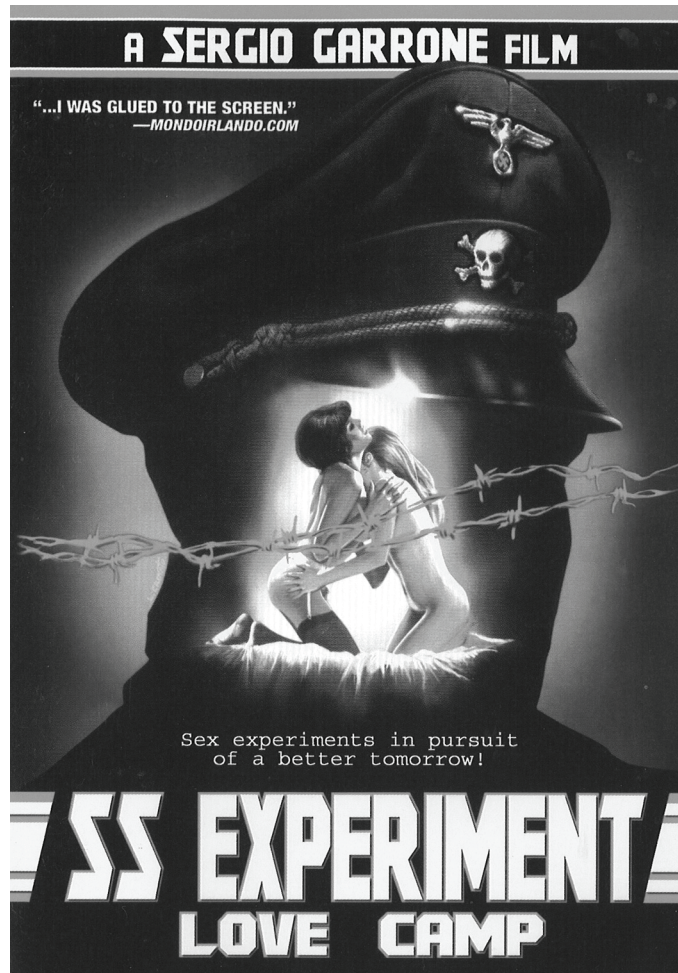

A SERGIO GARRONE FILM

"...I WAS GLUED TO THE SCREEN."
—MONDOIRLANDO.COM

Sex experiments in pursuit of a better tomorrow!

SS EXPERIMENT LOVE CAMP

What differentiates the Nazi sexploitation cycle from other Italian horror films (such as those of Dario Argento and Mario Bava) is the simple fact that, because quality *as such* was of no consequence to Nazi sexploitation, there was no 'artistic legitimacy' to jeopardize when they were censored. When films such as these are heavily cut, it is easier to protest via a political argument (with regard to freedom of speech) than one defending their artistry. The reassembled cut opens with the statement: "The following presentation of *Gestapo's Last Orgy* was completed using multiple sources. We hope the differences in quality do not detract from your enjoyment of this nasty little picture." Part of the experience of watching the film entails an acknowledgment that it cannot possibly be reassembled perfectly (some of the restored footage comes from deteriorated videotapes with inferior picture quality). After having stagnated in the sewers of culture for decades, the print naturally has some battle scars. I think here of the films as characteristic of a substance with the viscosity of slime – something capable of gluing itself to other forms of culture, and reattaching back to itself, even after it has been severed. This slime has, thus, effectively been cut apart (via censorship and title changes), yet does not suffer artistically when it is excessively edited because it has no artistry to compromise. The films' slime aesthetic also makes them slippery, able to ooze through the cracks of culture for decades, only to ultimately emerge complete.

Central to Nazi sexploitation is the simple fact that there is absolutely no ambiguity with regard to what these films are; in other words, there is nothing that could possibly be done to a film titled *Gestapo's Last Orgy* (or *Calgiula Reincarnated as Hitler*, for that matter) that could genuinely raise it from the cultural gutters. As I touched on previously, this cinema is so deviant that, not only can

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10. The film, further, opens with a quote from Nietzche in reference to his *Übermensch* (Superman) that is not only out of context, but misspells his name (without the 't'). Similarly, *Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS* opens with a quotation from Thomas Jefferson.

it not be elevated, but, as the ultimate cultural deadweight, it actually obliterates the credibility of anything with which it is associated. Consequently, the new and elaborate Exploitation Digital DVD transfer does something that is very important—it communicates the fundamentally-constructed nature of how 'high art' is celebrated, represented, and understood. If a film deemed 'tasteless'—with a total lack of any cultural capital—can receive a new, clean digital transfer, then it stands to reason that absolutely any film could. While I certainly admire the lush and elaborate digital transfers made available on the Criterion label, when a similar-looking DVD of *Gestapo's Last Orgy* is released, a 'curtain' of sorts is pulled on the Criterion label (and everything else that purports to represent high art), revealing behind it, a select few whose position it is to pick and choose that which is worthy. It is here that I am reminded of the curtain being pulled on the booming voice in *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939), only to reveal an ordinary man (Frank Morgan) at the helm of the machinery, influencing innumerable people via illusion. The Nazi sexploitation cycle, in a way unlike any other cinema, pulls the curtain on the inherently constructed and artificial nature of our own hierarchies.

Although I am largely examining how Nazi sexploitation films tear at established institutions, it is important that that not result in a reading of the films as, in any way, progressive. Consider the anxiety of history being forgotten, as expressed by Michel Bouquet in *Night and Fog*—particularly in the film's final, incomplete phrase: "…those of us who see the monster as being buried under these ruins, finding hope in finally being rid of this totalitarian disease, pretending to believe it happened but once, in one country, not seeing what goes on around us, not heeding the unending cry—" Bouquet's statement is salient in that it is simply not acceptable for the discussion of Nazi sexploitation films

to end with their being subsumed in a postmodern context as deviant novelty objects. This new packaging alludes to them as somehow being contained, tamed or reconciled by culture. What disturbs me about the re-release of these films as retro products is the impression that we have simply come to terms, not only with our history, but also with the implications of its representation. I have discussed how the films' re-releases necessitate that they be packaged in such a way that they can be laughed at, but at the same time, I wonder how this laughter could be anything beyond a defense mechanism given that any enjoyment of these films necessarily requires the spectator to ignore what they are really about. Through their ludicrous representation, the films tell their spectator that they are not about anything, and therefore not worthy of further consideration. I propose that there remains an enormous gap between the formal simplicity of the films and the complexity of the cultural discussion that their existence necessitates. Insofar that the mere concept of the Holocaust dwarfs mankind in its scope, the process of packaging these films so as to make them graspable to us is also part of a historical delusion in which the Holocaust itself is made possible to reconcile.[11] These films demand a serious academic interrogation that dares to consider them without judgment, and further acknowledges them, not as trash, but as historical documents in their own right.

As they stand today, Nazi sexploitation films (inadvertently) initiate a dialogue that culture simply does not know how to have. In an effort to reconcile how these films were made and how we must come to terms with them, I borrow a statement from Theodor

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11. 'High art' Hollywood melodramas such as *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) are equally applicable to such an argument.

Adorno, perhaps most famously recognized for his claim regarding the barbarity of writing poetry after *Auschwitz*:

> Guilt reproduces itself in each of us—and what I am saying is addressed to us as subjects—since we cannot remain fully conscious of this connection at every moment of our waking lives. If we […] knew at every moment what has happened and to what concatenations we owe our own existence, and how our existence is interwoven with calamity, even if we have done nothing wrong, simply by having neglected,

ing them to the absolute furthest outskirts of the medium would perhaps alleviate a larger social guilt. With the resurgence of these films into the mainstream—marketed as something to laugh at, the repressed has returned in a tangible way. These films represent our own guilt in a state of stagnation—something that we have too long turned away from—and which is, whether we like it or not, a reflection of our own repressions having gone to rot.

Gestapo's Last Orgy and *SS Experiment Love Camp* may initially appear unworthy of close analysis. It is however,

These films demand a serious academic interrogation that dares to consider them without judgment, and further acknowledges them, not as trash, but rather as historical documents.

> through fear, to help other people at a crucial moment, for example—a situation very familiar to me from the time of the Third Reich—if one were fully aware of all these things at every moment, one would really be unable to live. One is pushed, as it were, into forgetfulness, which is already a form of guilt. By failing to be aware every moment of what threatens and what has happened, one also contributes to it; one resists it too little; and it can be repeated and reinstated at any moment. (113)

In keeping with Adorno's claim, the actual medical experiments conducted on camp inmates during the Holocaust represent suffering so disruptive that it is impossible for culture to address head-on and still be left intact. These representations belong exactly where they are—their formal incompetence is necessary, as it is only within the context of nauseated mockery that we can even begin to scratch the surface of what these experiments entailed. Adorno's assertion that our own social functioning is somewhat predicated on our processes of forgetting is valuable in that it is simply not possible for one to even begin to comprehend the violence inflicted upon the women of the camps and subsequently go on to live one's own life. Not only do we need these representations, we also need them to be as phony and frivolous as they are—forever on the periphery of cinema, but never completely gone. Culture has thus saddled these films with its own repressed guilt and subsequently expelled them as a scapegoat. It seems here that censors have made effort to persuade themselves of their own civility by banning the films, as though banish-

the influence of our own cultural hierarchies that has enabled them to fly for so long under the academic radar. Any representation designed to elicit such base loathing or appearing to otherwise not be deserving of close consideration, is that which must most urgently be examined. I propose that we discard our cultural hierarchies and examine them as though we would a violent criminal with a childlike understanding of the world. Nazi sexploitation films have demonstrated resilience through past decades, and their recent repackaging has effectively put culture and academia in such a position that it is impossible to continue looking away. From the standpoint of studies in both Film and History, we must, without judgment, closely regard the grotesque representations of Nazi sexploitation because the blood that the films spit back at us is, in a sense, our own.

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Lower Depths, Higher Aims:

Death, Excess and Discontinuity in
Irreversible and *Visitor Q*

Thomas R. Britt

Bodily destruction guides and binds many popular subgenres of violent cinema. From *gialli*[1] and international mondo[2] and splatter[3] films, to many Hong Kong works bearing the Category III rating,[4] to more recent films with the specious torture porn designation,[5] a common prevailing priority is to shock the audience through boundary-breaking acts of onscreen violence. Yet for all of their innovative attention to bloody atrocities, these strands of cinema often use reductive narrative techniques to string one death to another. In such films, merits of plot, structure, and extra- and subtextual significance are usually appreciated ironically and/or dismissed as unintentional. Just as Hollywood's tired narrative formulas become predictable and unadventurous over time, even outsider violent cinema loses its spark if it fails to do anything but recycle its own well-worn tropes (however shocking they might have once been).

Gaspar Noé's *Irreversible* (2002) and Takashi Miike's *Visitor Q* (2001), on the other hand, represent a distinctive alternative to both mainstream Hollywood cinema and other films with a single-minded intention to shock. While their excessive content transgresses even further beyond mainstream taste than much of the cinema described above, their structural vigor and keen attention to processes of spectator perception and participation, buttress the films with a depth and unity that is missing from much of 'shock cinema'. These works, as variations on the Orphic myth, use exaggerated corporeal violence in order to explore intense psychological and societal struggles.

At the center of these films are reactive heroes who hurtle towards death to reconcile the ruptures that have separated them from their objects of desire. That shared central dramatic action is the catalyst for the films' most alternative quality, which is a rare blend of nihilism and humanism. Noé and Miike tap into an almost unbearable darkness as a means of hinting at the possibility of salvation. The films use physical violence to spiral outward towards a larger rumination on mortality rather than to simply link one bloody act to the next. This sense of development, crucially missing from the kinds of cinema outlined above, is also a departure from Hollywood horror, which arouses its audience through the promise of climactic violence but for several reasons—ratings restrictions, the dependence on making a profit, and the promise of additional box office money generated by sequels—safely avoids communicating anything meaningful about death. Eli Roth's *Hostel: Part II* (2007), which simply exchanges the first film's male victims for female victims in its gallery of homicide, is a sort of synthesis of both tired trends: a cynical cash-grab that fundamentally fails to develop as a narrative.

Both Noé and Miike use psychologically motivated narrative trajectories and aesthetic qualities, in addition to a focus on generative and restorative mother figures in order

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1. The Italian *giallo* films shifted the pulp origins of their literary source material into associational, episodic showcases of violence. Examples include Sergio Martino's *Torso* (1973) and Dario Argento's *Deep Red* (1975).
2. Mondo films, like *gialli*, are associated with Italian cinema because of *Mondo Cane* (1962), directed by Paolo Cavara, Gualtiero Jacopetti and Franco Prosperi. The pseudo-documentary subgenre expanded to include international titles such as *Faces of Death* (1978), directed by John Alan Schwartz.
3. Onscreen gore is the hallmark of the splatter film, which was inaugurated by Herschell Gordon Lewis and popularized by Stuart Gordon and Lucio Fulci.
4. Herman Yau's *The Untold Story* (1993) and *Ebola Syndrome* (1996) typify the narrative elements of the non-softcore porn Category III films: infectious disease, domestic violence and dismemberment.
5. See Eli Roth's *Hostel* (2005) and Roland Joffé's *Captivity* (2007).

to explore fractures in romantic relationships and a decaying social fabric. The function of mother characters here is particularly radical when compared to Hollywood horror films, which readily exploit the whore and virgin characters but nervously avoid or insecurely misrepresent the mother's role.[6] This combination of formal elements increases the impact of the strong violence and, in the process, evokes a sort of foreboding that acknowledges the inevitability of death but also suggests reversal and rebirth.

The inevitability of death is the conceptual starting point for *Irreversible*. A prologue introduces the phrase "time destroys everything," and the plot sets forth in keeping with that expression. But Gaspar Noé's narrative trick is that the film's twelve scenes unfold in reverse order, from effect to cause. This reverse-causality puts the audience in a power position, aware of the brutal end that awaits the characters. The film opens on the last sequential event of the story: Marcus (Vincent Cassel) and his friend Pierre (Albert Dupontel) emerge from a gay club. Pierre is under arrest and Marcus is on a stretcher. As the subsequent scenes play out, the friends frantically search the club, a hellish, dungeon-like environment, for a character called Le Tenia (Jo Prestia). Pierre savagely murders the wrong man—someone he believes to be Le Tenia—after that man breaks Marcus' arm. Later, a reluctant Pierre and an obsessed Marcus desperately look for the club and the audience eventually discovers the origin of Marcus' rage, which is the rape of his girlfriend, Alex (Monica Bellucci).

Alex is the centerpiece of the film's most infamous scene, which is a significant fulcrum for both the raw plot and the film's rumination on death. She is introduced as beaten, bloody and on a stretcher, while the next scene reveals what brought her to this state. The extent of her wounds raises a number of possible causes, and the film responds to and realizes the spectator's fears of those possibilities with the rape scene, as Le Tenia attacks her in an underground tunnel. After that scene, the film follows all of the key characters' activities from earlier in the evening—though even the lighter moments are tainted by the unavoidability of the attack.

The post-classical narrative construction of *Irreversible* has the potential to distract the viewer who reads it as an excessive device. But since the reverse-order approach is consistently applied and clearly indicated from the pairing of the first two proper scenes, it is easy to grasp the concept and continue to engage with the other elements. Additionally, the psychological motivation for the structure, which tests the spectator's response to violence and vengeance, elevates the intensity of the effect. In this manner, *Irreversible* is not merely a narrative about violence, but rather a

violent narrative. This stands in contrast to a contemporary mainstream violent film like James Wan's *Saw* (2004), in which the torturer/victim relationship plays out in one of two predictable ways: a potential victim becomes ensnared in a complicated situation of peril and must beat the odds to escape, or a detective (or detective surrogate) discovers an already expired victim and the film flashes back to reveal the method of death to the audience. Both such constructions treat death as a quasi-climax that excites but does not quite sate the spectator's appetite for violence. Matthew Kieran writes:

> In a culture increasingly tolerant of the appetite for violence, violent films may not only reflect but cultivate the delight taken in it. What is peculiar about films that indulge and revel in the gratuitous infliction of violence, and sadism generally, is the celebration of this delight. (122)

The serial plotting of Hollywood horror promises a continuing spate of murders, which lessens the impact of the individual moments of violence and extends the spectator's search for delight. In *Saw* (as in the *gialli* and slasher traditions), the gravity and finality of death is undermined by the episodic narrative construction, which essentially renews the body with each fresh victim. As a result, the audience for these films fails to significantly experience the "negation of body" as it does while watching *Irreversible* (Krautheim 17). By frontloading the film with protracted violence, Noé structurally extinguishes the spectator's desire. He does not seem to want to punish the viewer so much as reorient their relationship to screen violence, replacing pleasure with revulsion.

Noé connects his structural strategy to a visual one, which heightens audience identification. The film's hero is Marcus, though his behavior (a revenge rampage) is probably outside of the mainstream viewer's first-hand understanding. The visual elements, however, communicate Marcus' experience by making the spectator feel what he feels, moment to moment. Of the constantly roving camera, Noé says, "It links me to [Marcus]… Although the guy has no philosophical depth in the film, his feelings are close to mine. I understand these brainless impulses—I would go for revenge in similar circumstances" (qtd. in Morrow 2).

The club at the beginning of the film is a location that evokes many traditional representations of the underworld. Screaming, spiraling dark passages, fire and torture, are just some of the sights and sensations Marcus confronts during his descent. The viewer does not have any context for the location or for Marcus' his condition, but since the camera so powerfully and convulsively links them to his rage, they cannot keep any distance from him and his actions.

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6. Rob Zombie's 2007 remake of *Halloween* is an example of this tendency.

To watch the film is to accompany Marcus and Pierre on their journey. The audience wants to know what brought these men to this point. But the fulfillment of the desire to know this information comes at a price: Marcus is nearly sexually assaulted and then his arm is broken at the elbow. In response, Pierre brutally pummels a man to death with a fire extinguisher.

To make the excess of this scene apparent, I will use Tim Merrill's succinct description of the scene: "Blow by blow, under the force of the heavy canister, the man's head actually breaks apart. His teeth cave in, his face cracks open, his skull shatters, his brains leak out. All this happens in one shot" (1). Because this action takes place so early within the

place in transitional spaces: a car, a train, an elevator, and a tunnel. Warmth, stillness and lushness only enter into the film during the final scenes at Alex's apartment, which fulfills that Levinasian notion of "the utopia in which the 'I' recollects itself in dwelling at home with itself" (*Totality and Infinity* 156).[7]

In contrast to this utopian domestic ideal Levinas describes, *Visitor Q*'s protagonist is the patriarch of a family caught in a sort of physical and psychological apocalypse. The middle class home as a site of terror is a common motif of other strands of shock cinema, particularly the Category III Hong Kong films. And on a strictly surface level, *Visitor Q* does resemble Category III films such as Kai Ming Lai's

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Through unique formal strategies, Noé and Miike situate their characters on a spectrum of mortality and invite the spectator to also face the finality of death.

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narrative, viewers do not perceive it as the chronological climax of the film and do not recognize any legitimizing function for the extreme violence. And in keeping with the film's hyper-articulated inversion device, only at the moment of violence does the camera calm down and allow the spectator to have an unimpeded view of the action. But while the audience's connection to Marcus and Pierre's predicament is more visceral than experiential, Noé's choice to place them in a compromising position at the beginning of the film has telling implications for another of the film's concerns, which is the polarization of male and female sexuality. Noé says, "I think having the male lead almost raped at the beginning, feminizes the male audience to a degree that they find challenging. And so, when they are then projected into the mind of a woman being raped, they can't cope" (Morrow 2). This scene is therefore an extension of Noé's reorientation of the spectator's response away from arousal and towards identification with the victim.

The camera is again conspicuously still during Alex's rape, another moment in which the audience becomes potentially complicit, as the voyeuristic composition feeds a desire for revenge. But since Noé has already purposefully conveyed the empty futility of revenge, this arousal is also false start. So the movement from the threat of male rape (effect) to the actuality of female rape (cause) appears to be part of Noé's overall organizing strategy to move from the masculine to the feminine. Marcus and Pierre's effort to avenge Alex's rape plays out within a space entirely populated by males. The atmosphere of total destruction that Noé equates with the masculine space is never again present within the film. By design, most scenes that follow take

Daughter of Darkness (1993), the plot of which involves a family slaughter brought on by sexual abuse. Michael Atkinson, in "Extreme Noise Terror," describes *Visitor Q* as "A shabby home-video visit with a ridiculously monstrous family unit [….] If Herschell Gordon Lewis had adapted O'Neill, it still wouldn't out-thicken the muck of Miike's anti-achievement" (1). But the mucky *Visitor Q* achieves more than exploiting the possible horrors of the home. Miike uses a disintegrating household to indict a Japan that is in dangerous flux and in need of an apocalyptic restoration. His reflexive use of a filmmaker as a lead character also brings the media into the scope of his criticism.

At the start of the film, Kiyoshi Yamazaki (Kenichi Endo) visits his daughter Miki (Fujiko) at a comfort house as part of his planned television documentary on sex and violence among youth. Kiyoshi proceeds to have sex with his daughter. He meets a stranger, Q (Kazushi Watanabe), who hits him over the head with a rock and follows him to his chaotic home. Keiko (Shungiku Uchida), Kiyoshi's wife, is a heroin addict who prostitutes herself to support her habit. Takuya (Jun Muto), the son, physically and emotionally abuses his mother. Throughout, bullies assault Takuya and the family home. Visitor Q eventually transforms the family by awakening passions in each of them: Kiyoshi murders his nagging co-worker and defiles her corpse, Keiko discovers her lost maternity, and Takuya realizes that he should

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7. The film's concluding sequence connects the inviting apartment with a renewed Alex and pays honour to the regenerative power of the female without demanding that she be stereotypically 'domestic'. Some critics of Levinas interpret him to suggest that the wife's duty is to subserviently provide a comforting home for her husband.

study more and stop abusing his mother. Finally, Kiyoshi and Keiko murder and dismember Takuya's bullies and restore peace to the home, and daughter Miki returns to her family.

As is likely apparent from this summary of the film's key events, transgression is the central point and preoccupation of *Visitor Q*. In the first half of the film, its checklist of taboos forms its very structure, as well as the method through which the excessive elements invite audience participation. An example of this is the line, "Have you ever done it with your dad?" which introduces the comfort house scene. Subsequent lines that are directed to the audience include, "Have you ever been hit on the head?" and "Have you ever hit your mother?" Miike's engagement with fantasy here extends to both the characters and to the audience. In response to the questions, the characters act out these events onscreen, and Miike directs the audience members to recall their participation in such activities. Thus the spectator attempts to link actual events and images from his/her past to the imaginary events taking place on screen, much like the process Freud describes as "the hallucinatory revival of […] perceptual images" (367). As *Visitor Q* goes considerably further than *Irreversible* in its presentation of excessive activities, it also acknowledges the audience's participatory role to a greater extent. While Miike seems to share Noé's impulse to reorient the audience's appetite for violence, he also opens up a kind of subjective spectatorship that involves Freud's dream-regression into past experience—a merging of perception with participation.

As it relates to the text, this interactive formal strategy is in keeping with Kiyoshi's goal (perhaps shared by Miike) to grapple with the problems of sex and violence in Japanese society. The character's documentary project requires his partaking in the behavior, ostensibly to expose the problems to an audience. This occasionally places the film's audience at an uncomfortable nexus similar to that of the rape scene in *Irreversible*. Miike de-eroticizes Miki's body through a near constant stream of reminders that this is her own father taking advantage of her. As Kiyoshi progresses with his sexual act, he repeats, "This is no good" and "It's our little secret." But Kiyoshi's obsession with documenting social problems does not seem to be accompanied by the awareness that his participation in the problems has destroyed his own sphere of society. Also, by shooting all of the footage (both the interior reality of Kiyoshi's television shows and the exterior reality of the family at home) in home video, Miike foregrounds the interconnection between the two. The aesthetic doubling communicates Miike's arguably moral concern that media exploitation of personal dysfunctions and misfortunes will create those very tribulations in the homes of its purveyors and consumers.

Miike's critique, however, extends beyond just the media. Kiyoshi's emasculation is in keeping with the Japanese mass media's theory that "the paternal principle—law, discipline, independence, objectivity, the privileging of public virtues over personal desire and so on—has been greatly eclipsed in society at large" (Yoda 239). The purpose of Kiyoshi's labour is, we assume, to restore order to his own life, but his actions are at odds with the paternal principle. His labour aims to understand and communicate the disintegration of Japanese culture, but he is instead absorbed by its most destructive tendencies. His attempt to ward off the threat of insignificance and absorption into maternal society has reached a sort of last resort: He turns the camera onto his wife and children, thus exploiting them as subjects and capitalizing on his disintegrating home.

This sort of exploitation should be familiar to anyone who has watched reality programming that punctuates its artifice and irresponsibility by loudly insisting upon its own authenticity and worth. In his pitch to his co-worker, Kiyoshi says, "It can't get any more true than this. I'm the father. I mean, this is the real thing." He later performs for the camera, documenting the moment when school bullies shoot fireworks into his home, addressing the audience: "How am I supposed to feel? I don't know how a father should feel. But I know my family is being destroyed." Again, this self-awareness might sound genuine, but it obviously is not profound enough to motivate Kiyoshi to put down the camera and defend his home and family.[8] So while Kiyoshi participates in his own destruction, the Visitor, Q, who might be a surrogate for the audience, encourages the wife, Keiko, to take the lead.

Keiko, whose track marks, scars and other wounds make her torment clear, finds Q in Miki's room, which is presented as a restorative space free from the chaos that assaults the rest of the home. With Miki's picture situated in the foreground, Q fondles Keiko's breasts until she starts lactating. His caress awakens something resembling sexual ecstasy within Keiko, and she produces breast milk that showers the room. Son Takuya watches from the doorway. In another fresh recontextualization of the primal scene, this moment makes Takuya realize his mother is available to him again. His apparent mistrust of her falls away, and this is a breakthrough shared by the audience, assuming Miike's images have provided a vivid enough hallucinatory revival. Additionally, this is a fulcrum within the narrative, because it is only after the past rupture is resolved that Keiko emerges as a force of reconciliation within the home.

8. Kiyoshi here exhibits Kieran's 'celebration' of the delight of violence.

The restoration of Keiko's femininity is rearticulated later, when she produces a literal pool of breast milk in the kitchen and tells Q, "I realized something when you were holding me. I'm not a special woman or a pathetic woman. I'm just an ordinary woman." This tender moment is crosscut with Kiyoshi defiling the corpse of his female coworker who he murdered earlier for insulting him. At this perversely comic turning point, Kiyoshi becomes physically attached to the corpse and requires Keiko's help. For the remainder of the film, Keiko exuberantly aids Kiyoshi's project. They murder Takuya's tormentors and dispose of the various bodies that have collected around them. Despite all of these excesses—sadomasochism, incest, necrophilia, and dismemberment—Miike's truly subversive stroke is to posit the maternal principle as the solution to Kiyoshi's problem, and possibly the problems of society at large. As Steve Rose says, "Beneath the veneer of shock […] Miike's films challenge Japanese identity […] Against traditional national values like honour, order and emotional restraint, Miike sets excess and exuberance" (1). The final shot of the film features Keiko cradling Kiyoshi and Miki at her breasts, nursing her husband and daughter. In this final tableau, *Visitor Q* explicitly promotes the mother as the site of restoration, where "the woman is the condition for recollection, the interiority of the Home, and inhabitation" (Levinas 155). Before I conclude, I will briefly counterpoint the function of the mother specter in *Irreversible*.

Irreversible's epilogue completes Noé's movement from the destructive masculine to the restorative feminine by moving the narrative, for the first time, to a daytime exterior. In the final bedroom scene, Alex indicates to Marcus that she might be pregnant. When he leaves the space, she takes a pregnancy test and her reaction (a gesture towards her stomach) indicates that she is expecting a child. The final image of the film, a rotating overhead shot of mothers and children in a park, is fecundity writ large. This dual conclusion/origin further explains Marcus' rage because the spectator realizes that it was not only Alex he was attempting to avenge at the beginning of the film, but rather infinity itself. By destroying the mother, Le Tenia has also obliterated Marcus' discontinuous future. To illustrate this concept, I will turn to Levinas one last time:

> The encounter with the Other as feminine is required in order that the future of the child come to pass from beyond the possible, beyond projects. This relationship resembles that which was described for the idea on infinity…The relation with such a future, irreducible to the power over possibles, we shall call fecundity. (267)

Arriving at a skewed humanism via a journey of total destruction, both films affirm the mother as the only one who has the power to usher in the future.

In conclusion, the fragile, discontinuous future of each protagonist is the basis for the secular eschatology that links these works. Through unique organizing formal strategies, Noé and Miike situate their characters on a spectrum of mortality and invite the spectator to also face the finality of death. Marcus and Kiyoshi confront the same central dramatic action—that of a man trying to recapture a partner without whom life spins out of control. True to form, the films' radical resolutions offer no traditional narrative or emotional closure. Marcus, under a time that destroys everything, cannot reverse that which has interrupted his reproduction, and Kiyoshi is (perhaps literally) infantilized through the re-establishment of the maternal order. Finally, while many horror films conclude by testing the female lead's odds at cheating death, the culminating focus on the mother in both *Irreversible* and *Visitor Q* draws attention to her essential ability to sustain life rather than to simply remain alive.

Neither film fits comfortably in the mainstream multiplex, nor do they belong in that diverse, disorganized filmic ghetto that houses exploitation films of all stripes. However, as critics, audiences and filmmakers continue to open up to the hidden pleasures of cult films from around the globe, it is also worthwhile to recognize films such as *Irreversible* and *Visitor Q,* which can be considered 'alternative' even to those bloody, sexy films that are seditious to the mainstream. These works occupy a third space by actively unifying excessive content with structural, visual and psychosocial depth.

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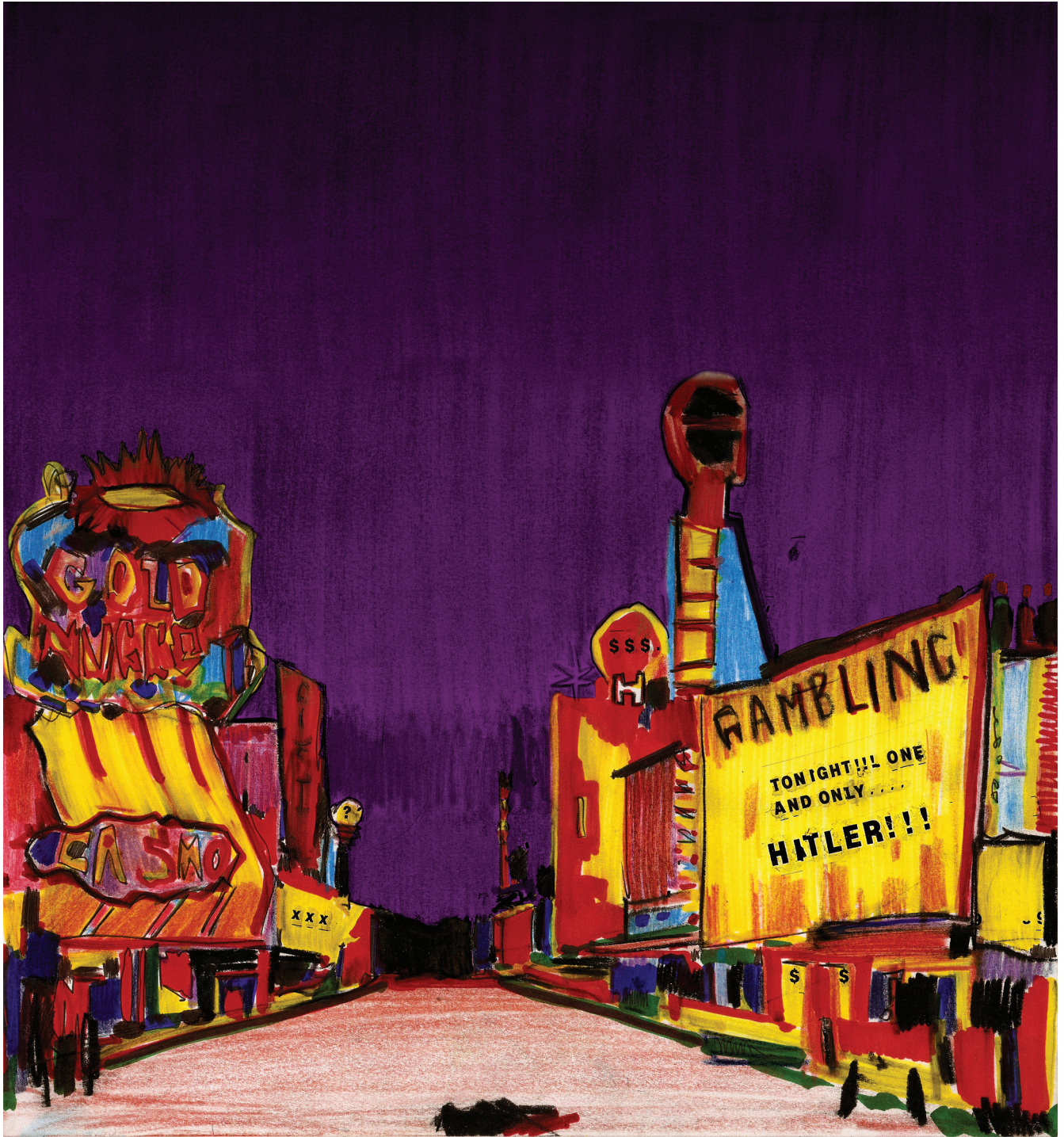
Hitler as Actor, Actors as Hitler:

High Concept, Casting, and Star Performance in *Der Untergang* and *Mein Führer*

Steffen Hantke

Face pale and lined.
Flaccid mouth.
Smoothly curved jaw.
The famous mustache.
- Don DeLillo, *Running Dog* (235)

'He was on again last night'.
'He's always on. We couldn't have television without him'.
- Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (63)

Introduction: Routine Transgression

In these two passages, one from *Running Dog* and one from *White Noise*, Don DeLillo charts the discursive rules of how, more than half a century after the end of the Third Reich, the figure of Adolf Hitler is framed in popular culture. There is, on the one hand, Hitler, the cultural icon: readily represented in visual shorthand, utterly familiar and easily recognizable, a staple of public debate, endlessly explicated and commented upon. On the other hand, there is Hitler, the enigma: an elusive and incomprehensible numinous presence, the very name unmentionable, taboo, too dangerous to speak out loud. DeLillo illustrates what is clearly the discursive expression of historical trauma—a collective inability either to talk about something, or to stop talking about it.

Given this dilemma of too much or too little representation, it is hardly surprising that the prospect of evoking Hitler in a motion picture still gives pause to many producers, directors, and actors. Nowhere is this more acute than

in Germany, where, understandably enough, the strictures of cultural and political decorum surrounding the representation of German fascism are more elaborate and complex than anywhere else.[1] Any film taking on this subject matter inevitably places itself in a discursive field that, more than its own deliberate and explicit agenda, will determine how it is perceived and evaluated. If not hypersensitivity, then at least interpretive hypervigilance is a crucial requirement for all those who aim to operate within this field.

Nonetheless, the difficulties with which texts have to struggle in establishing themselves within the discursive field have not been a hindrance to the production of hundreds of films about the Third Reich. The existence of a 'Third Reich Industry', an adjunct perhaps to what historian Norman Finkelstein has controversially described as the "Holocaust Industry"—a vast body of cinematic representations of Nazism, a substantial part of which originate in Germany—testifies to the willingness on the part of filmmakers to take the risks involved, as well as, perhaps, to a continued audience demand for such cinematic representations. In fact, one might argue that it is exactly the charged nature of the subject matter and the audience's concomitant hypervigilance that attracts filmmakers to the subject. Making a film about the Nazis, one might easily

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1. On the commentary track to DVD release of *Mein Führer*, Dani Levy remarks, for example, that he considers cinematic representations of the Holocaust as "presumptuous," given the impossibility of representing something that is essentially unrepresentable. "No representation of this reality can even approach this reality . . . And then there I was, on the grounds of the concentration camp *Sachsenhausen*, with actors in makeup and costume…"

err in a number of directions; but being altogether ignored or dismissed for one's frivolity or triviality—that's far less likely.

After so many films have been made about this topic—Nazi Germany and, at the heart of it, the numinous presence of Adolf Hitler himself—it is surprising that the taint of transgression is still attached to the subject matter. In fact, the discursive mechanism regulating public discourse seems capable of reconciling the regularity with which new films are being made and released on the one hand with the note of transgression that, with equal reliability, echoes through the media whenever a new film is released. If such a thing is possible, one might speak of routine transgression—a cultural reflex that, periodically revitalized by the political and social instrumentalization of collective historical memory at the hands of a variety of different social agents, never ceases to kick in when confronted with the right/-wing stimulus.

The instances in which this element of trangression strikes me as particularly interesting are not small auteurist films or low-budget paracinematic productions, which, being situated on the margins of the film industry, have the freedom to be truly transgressive, to indulge in bad taste, or to explode the regulatory framework altogether. The films I have in mind—from Syberberg's *Hitler: A Film From Germany* (1977) to Christoph Schliengensief's *100 Jahre Adolf Hitler: Die letzte Stunde im Führerbunker* (1989)—are the cinematic equivalent of "Springtime for Hitler," that jaw-droppingly offensive musical thought up by a demented Nazi in *The Producers* (Mel Brooks, 1968). Unlike productions that aim to please a mainstream audience, these films can claim to shock, scandalize, or antagonize their audiences to a degree that would spell commercial disaster for a larger, more commercial mainstream production. It is here in the mainstream that films have to tread lightly, laying claim to the transgressive nature of the material without antagonizing their respective audiences.

An example of the regulatory framework surrounding the figure of Hitler in mainstream productions would be the rule that Hitler can never be the protagonist. Both the films I will discuss, Dani Levy's *Mein Führer* (2007) and Oliver Hirschbiegel's *Der Untergang (2004)* follow this rule, positing a character who serves as a point of entry for the viewer into the film and functions as a witness, observer, and narrator of Hitler himself (the Jewish acting coach Grünbaum in Levy's film; the secretary Traudl Junge in Hirschbiegel's). As part of its explicit intention, the device prohibits identification with Hitler by establishing a perspective of distance; nonetheless, the introduction of a perceiving consciousness also allows for the possibility of fetishizing Hitler, reiterating the idea of Hitler's charisma, which would be far more difficult to communicate if view-

ers had to be enthralled by Hitler without the guiding intervention of a mediating consciousness.

These two German films—*Mein Führer* and *Der Untergang*—strike me as particularly interesting examples of this balancing act between transgression and containment. As productions located squarely in the mainstream of the German film industry, both films received a high degree of media attention for what was perceived to be a risky, potentially transgressive conceit: an intense focus on the figure of Adolf Hitler as the film's central character. More specifically, both films explore—or exploit—their unique use of the figure of Hitler as the hook or punch line of what new Hollywood has been calling "high concept."[2] Responding originally to television's need to summarize an entire film in a thirty-second advertising segment, the term is linked largely to the Hollywood blockbuster. Though neither one of the two films falls, strictly speaking, into this category, they nonetheless provide insights into other national film industries and their appropriation and modification of the economic and aesthetic model developed in the U.S. They are, one might say, German interpretations of American 'high concept'. This applies not just in the sense that their basic plot premise is simple and striking and easily summarized in a sentence or two ("a unique idea whose originality could be conveyed briefly" Wyatt 8), but, more importantly, to the fact that their marketability is largely "based upon stars, the match between a star and a premise, or a subject matter which is fashionable" (Wyatt 12-3). In other words, the casting and performance of the actor portraying Hitler can—and does, in these specific cases— serve as the lynchpin of the public debate as it is constructed and structured by the films' own marketing campaigns.

Upon the films' release, the debate was often more prescriptive than descriptive; the central question seemed to be how an actor *should* play Hitler: is it, for example, acceptable or politically prudent to play him sympathetically, to humanize him, or to offer, through script and performance, psychoanalytical explanations for his personality? From this debate the more central questions remained curiously absent: how *did* the actor actually play Hitler, and how did the film contextualize this central performance? Aside from praise or criticism for the actor in the controversial role, very little detailed description and critical analysis of the performance was actually presented. To the degree that these two questions remained unasked, and thus largely unanswered, I will try, in my own discussion of the two films, to analyze the cultural significance of casting and acting performance in Hirschbiegel's and Levy's films.

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2. For a more detailed definition, which includes further bibliographic references, see Blandford, Grant, and Hiller, "High Concept" in *The Film Studies Dictionary* (121).

Mein Führer

As signaled by its playful, highly ambiguous title, Dani Levy's *Mein Führer—Die wirklich wahrste Wahrheit über Adolf Hitler* [My Führer—The Truly Truest Truth About Adolf Hitler] comes across as an inventory of the tropes and themes assembled in various configurations by all preceding cinematic representations of the Third Reich and, more importantly, of Hitler himself. Its basic premise—a Jewish actor is recruited by Joseph Goebbels (Sylvester Groth) from the *Sachsenhausen* concentration camp, three months before the inevitable collapse of Nazi Germany, to coach Hitler for a final rousing speech to the harried citizens of the ruined Berlin—helps to unfold some of the meanings of the film's title. Based on the formal address to Hitler by all those in close proximity to him, the possessive pronoun "my" in "my Führer" points to the fact that, at the end of the coaching process, Hitler is, in fact, the product of his Jewish acting coach, Professor Adolf Israel Grünbaum (Ulrich Mühe)—a fact the film literalizes by having Grünbaum, hidden from view, speak the words that Hitler himself, having lost his voice, is incapable of uttering. This act of ventriloquism, the title suggests, also applies to Levy himself, who acknowledges that his film—any film—about Hitler is less a representation of historical fact than a personal interpretation.[3] There is no Hitler; there are only multiple 'Hitlers', and each one is always only *somebody's* Hitler.[4] "In 100 years, authors are still going to write about him," Grünbaum's melancholic voiceover from beyond the grave closes the film, "actors, great ones and hams, are still going to impersonate him. And why? Because we want to understand what we will never understand."

This Beckettian pronouncement at the end of the film, with its mixture of futility and resignation on the one hand and obsessive determination to continue on the other,

explicitly recognizes that all representations of Hitler exist in an enclosed discursive field from which there is no release. Consequently, the film is full of intertextual references to its predecessors: every comically extended barrage of Hitler salutes brings to mind Lubitsch's *To Be Or Not To Be* (1942); in the scene in which Hitler greets Grünbaum for the first time, he stands next to a globe reminiscent of the one with which Chaplin's Hitler performs the famous balletic sequence in *The Great Dictator* (1940); the final scene in which Grünbaum ventriloquizes for Hitler hidden underneath the speaker's podium harks back to the scene in Schlöndorff's *The Tin Drum* (1979) in which Oskar Matzerath disrupts a Nazi rally by, literally, having the assembled guests dance to a different beat (halfway through Hitler's own speech, Grünbaum abandons the script and begins, instead, to speak truth to power, deriding Hitler's audience openly for their uncritical support of the regime and its obviously insane leader, which costs him his life).[5]

Grünbaum's final voiceover is also symptomatic of another aspect of the film's central conceit: though rife with symbolic and metaphoric significance, the film does not encode its figurative content but projects it onto the allegoric surface. Symbols and metaphors are always clearly marked for what they are; instead of letting us figure out what something means, the film will tell us. Everything is explicit, obvious, direct, and simple. Viewers are asked to recognize, not to decode. Hitler and Grünbaum, for example, are both named Adolf because they are doubles, sharing the same narcissistic mania to reshape reality to fit their own desires—this we are told explicitly by Elsa, Grünbaum's wife, just in case we missed even the none-too-subtle play on the shared name. Just as Grünbaum's final voiceover, addressed directly to the audience, didactically articulates what a more modernist aesthetic would have communicated more subtly or obliquely. The film openly reiterates, time and again, its point that Nazism is essentially a hollow spectacle, a performance which, despite the awful actors enlisted to enact it, has the power to lead nations to their doom. Goebbels' remark to Grünbaum, delivered with a knowing wink—"staged reality: your and my special area of expertise"—is repeated for emphasis.

This self-conscious aesthetic places the film's tone squarely in the tradition of farce. Goebbels' indefatigable womanizing; Himmler's arm in a brace, suspended in a bothersome perpetual Nazi salute; Hitler's conciliatory remarks to Grünbaum about the Holocaust ("Please don't take it personally"); the punctuation of the conversation between Hitler and Grünbaum with sight and sound gags

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3. Though Levy makes it explicit and explores it playfully, the idea itself has already been part of the discursive field. Rudy Koshar, in a 1995 essay on Syberberg's *Hitler*, points out that "Syberberg himself argues that his film is only marginally concerned with the Hitler of Nazi Germany, being a representation of the 'Hitlers' that appear in different historical contexts; it is a film from Germany, not about it" (Koshar 156). I am citing Koshar on/and Syberberg here not to show that someone has beaten Levy to the punch, but to underline my argument that Levy's film is not out to break new ground but to reiterate, explode, and reassemble the elements that constitute the discursive field, regardless of its own originality.

4. To the extent that he has lost all will to lead, the film's Hitler is also to a large extent the product of Joseph Goebbels, who sets his restoration at the hands of Grünbaum in motion, and, unbeknownst to everybody else, plots a final act of assassination in which Grünbaum will serve as scapegoat. In the final scene, Hitler speaks not only with Grünbaum's voice, but also—having lost his own mustache in an accidental swipe of the hand by the woman prepping him for the rally—wears the mustache of one of his guards glued under his nose (visually, a reference to Groucho Marx's proudly fake mustache).

5. Since the closing scene returns to the opening sequence, which has Grünbaum, blood trickling down his face from having been shot below the speaker's podium, we know that Grünbaum narrates the film from beyond the point of death—a gesture reminiscent of Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950).

from Blondie, Hitler's German Shepherd; the scrawny soldier sporting an exact replica of Hitler's own mustache; two Nazi officers bickering about a missing form while being strafed and bombed by an enemy fighter plane; the switching of identities in Grünbaum's final act of ventriloquism—all of this is blunt, clunky humour straight out of the playbook of farce.[6]

Nonetheless, it is important to remember that, as an exercise in postmodern storytelling, the film is not committed to this farcical tone; instead, it is free to change pitch, shift register, and switch genres. The danger to Grünbaum's

modernist fashion, looks for a grounding reality beneath all the shifting layers of representation—which is obviously not the case. Ultimately, we are not to decide whether the psychoanalytical approach is valid or not, but simply to acknowledge it as one of the vast number of elements that constitute the discursive field.

What makes this exercise in postmodern ambiguity palatable to a large audience, however, is Helge Schneider in the role of Adolf Hitler. Schneider's casting, on par with the surreal absurdity of the Jewish actor coaching the Nazi leader, is what makes the film high concept. Public discus-

There is no Hitler; there are only multiple 'Hitlers', and each one is always only *somebody's* Hitler.

family is all too real and Grünbaum himself is a tragic figure. There is much in the film that is intended to move the audience with an unironic emotional intensity inverse to the levity of farce. Similarly, the film's insistent psychoanalyzing of Hitler, framing him as an abused child acting out its infantile psychoses throughout its ascendancy to the stage of world history, comes across as incompatible with the thrust of farce. As Hitler reveals this childhood trauma in his weaker moments, Grünbaum, the narrative's moral center, shows empathy for the abused child—a response that, again without a hint of irony, invites the audience to share this empathic sentiment. Critics have remarked upon the dissonance between these moments of empathic intensity and the farcical tone in which they are embedded, complaining that Levy fails to find the right tone or, having found it temporarily, fails to sustain it properly.[7] This criticism, however, applies only if one assumes that the film, in

sion of the film before its release was centered almost exclusively on this fact; reviewers tended to spend considerable time on what might have prompted Levy to pick Schneider for the part, and whether the 'actor' had pulled it off; and in the marketing and packaging of the film, its central casting choice took up considerable time.[8]

Audiences outside of Germany—who are not familiar with Schneider's persona from his standup comedy and performance pieces, especially since the early 1990s—will have difficulties grasping the weirdness of the man and his act. Much of Schneider's persona is defined by a lowbrow tone, verging on the infantile, which will often extend its own tongue-in-cheek knowingness to the audience only to retract it at the last minute, leaving viewers uneasy about the lack of sophistication of the performance. Delivering kitschy sentimentality with a straight face, often in the form of a smarmy pastiche of kitsch phrases, Schneider's performances are neither satiric nor nostalgic. Similar to American standup comedians like Gilbert Gottfried, Schneider almost never abandons this persona in public, carrying it over and sustaining it as he has moved from music (where he can provide sterling credentials as one of Germany's prime jazz pianists), to standup, to writing novels and musicals, and, finally, to character acting.[9] With Schneider

6. This is perhaps where Levy is most susceptible to criticism: many of these jokes are, arguably, in poor taste. Some critics have pointed out that Levy, who had been commercially and critically successful with farce in his previous film (*Alles auf Zucker* [2004], the story of greedy relatives who must adopt Judaism in order to inherit a fortune), is often granted more leeway than other directors with this combination of tone and subject matter because he himself is Jewish ("As a filmmaker with Jewish roots," Jörg Buttgereit—himself no stranger to controversy—argues in his review of the film, "Levy could have gotten away with a lot" (*Manifest* 2007).

7. Derek Elley, for example, writes in *Variety*, "With 'Führer', Levy can't decide whether to make a pratfall comedy, a comedy-drama with a message or a no-holds-barred farce. All three elements jostle for screen space within the tight running time, making the pic seem much longer than its 95 minutes" (January 17, 2007). Christian Ihle, in the German newspaper *taz* echoes this negative sentiment: "Additionally the film is weighed down by the awfully unfunny mix of low comedy and framing 'melodrama', which does not work for one single instant" (January 12, 2007).

8. On the commentary track to the DVD of the film, Levy raves about Schneider's performance: "this subversive comical approach he has to the role; this anarchic element in his interpretation; this unyielding, detailed, minute deconstruction of this character—this is what I find simply spectacular! . . . I'm sorry if I'm raving about the film, but I am, now more than ever, still convinced that Helge Schneider was the best choice for playing Adolf Hitler."

9. To consider Schneider a star in the sense in which, for example, Richard Dyer uses the term, is problematic: despite the consistency of Schneider's persona, which functions within systems of branding and marketing, he has largely resisted the integration of his private life into

being such an unlikely choice for the role of Hitler—if not a gross act of intentional miscasting, as some reviewers continue to insist[10]—the film not only announced its aesthetic agenda; it also channeled its own reception toward Schneider's performance.[11]

Consequently, the long wait, which the audience is expected to endure before they get to see Schneider as Hitler for the first time, is not in anticipation of Hitler, the character, but of Schneider. The montage of archival footage of Hitler that opens the film sets the visual standards of the performance to come, extending a challenge to the actor, and building audience anticipation. After we have seen the historical figure, we must now wait to see the actor playing him. The strategic delays written into the opening events (phone calls being made, forms being stamped, and double-stamped, and stamped again, and a Jewish prisoner being removed from the camp) culminate in a scene in which Grünbaum, flanked by guards, walks into the doorway that leads to the room in which Hitler awaits him. Levy has Schneider stand at the far end of the room, shooting him in a long deep focus shot, maintaining the doorway as a proscenium arch around the configurations of characters. When the film cuts to a reverse-angle shot, Schneider's profile, down to the shoulders, is visible in the foreground, but since this is not a deep focus shot, it withholds a clear view of his features; though clearly visible in its outlines, the face is not discernable in sufficient detail. Just as Schneider has top billing in the opening credits, Levy gives him—Schneider, not Hitler—a memorable star entrance.

Once he has entered the film, Schneider's Hitler is visually circumscribed by the heavy facial make-up the actor is wearing. The layers of latex, which give Schneider's face a heaviness and jowliness it does not naturally possess, draw attention to themselves as external prostheses, even though they are, ostensibly, applied expertly and designed to be invisible as such.[12] The fact that the prostheses

show—and that they are made necessary by the absence of any natural similarities between the actor and the man he plays—signals, yet again, the constructedness of the figure. Schneider's acting is equally self-conscious and deliberately heavy-handed. He does not, in the proper sense, 'play' Hitler; there is little interpretation going on. Rather, he 'does' Hitler, impersonating him, assembling a character that is pulled back from caricature by the impossible and outrageous situations in which the script places him: Hitler in the tub playing with a model battleship; Hitler in gym clothes feigning boxing moves before accidentally being knocked out by Grünbaum; Hitler sneaking out of the chancellery in the middle of the night, dangling his dog by its leash from a ledge; Hitler crawling into bed with Grünbaum and his wife.

This deconstruction of the historical character, and its replacement with 'Schneider's Hitler', culminates in a scene at New Year's Eve in which Hitler sits at the harmonium and plays music for Eva Braun while, in the background, a film reel is playing that shows '*Kraft Durch Freude*' footage of scantily clad Aryans frolicking in Nature. Hitler's love song to Braun is delivered in a halting, adenoidal, half-spoken singing voice, and its lyrics are composed of awkwardly phrased, clunky, hammy sentiments—this is not Hitler, this is Helge Schneider, the standup comedian, striking the signature tone of his public performances. The cognitive dissonance is exacerbated by the archival footage of Hitler himself that appears on the screen as Schneider gets up from the harmonium, gives the Hitler on the screen a friendly nod, and then sits with Eva Braun. In a scene like this one, it becomes obvious that Levy's decision to cast Schneider, as well as Schneider's performance, are perfectly consistent with each other. The film's balancing act between incompatible emotional registers and modes dovetails with Schneider's own performance, in which—exactly as in his previous performative work and his public persona—satiric and sentimental tones are played against one another.

Der Untergang

Though *Der Untergang* could not be any more different in tone and acting performance from *Mein Führer*, Oliver Hirschbiegel's film allows itself a touch of irony every now and then: four soldiers carrying two huge wooden crates with the word "Fragile" stenciled on their sides through heavy artillery shelling; Hitler discussing calmly the best way to shoot yourself in the head with a group of mostly female dinner guests in a polite petit-bourgeois living-room setting; Eva Braun admitting

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his performance. His cutting across different forms of artistic expression also complicates matters, simultaneously challenging the integrity of the persona construct and confirming it. For further glimpses into Schneider's impressive creative output, see his home page at http://www.helge-schneider.de/.

10. See, for example, Christoph Petersen, who initially appears to approve of Schneider's casting ("In the beginning, courage triumphed as cult comedian Helge Schneider was brought on board"), but then comes around to lament that Levy "apparently didn't have a clue what to do with this performance" (Filmstarts.de).

11. This performance has sustained such media appeal that not even the subsequent death of actor Ulrich Mühe, who plays Adolf Grünbaum and who came to stardom when *Das Leben der Anderen* [*The Lives of Others*] (Florian Henckel Von Donnersmarck, 2006) won the 2007 Academy Award for Best Foreign Picture, has managed to shift attention from Schneider to Mühe.

12. For a more in-depth discussion of the aesthetics of special effects, particularly in regard to their suspension between invisibility and con-

spicuousness, see Steffen Hantke, "Consuming the Impossible Body: Horror Film and the Spectacle of Cinematic Special Effects" in *Paradoxa: Studies in World Literary Genres* 20 (Fall 2006), 66-80.

that she is jealous of Hitler's German Shepherd Blondie; the government official recruited to perform the wedding of Hitler and Eva Braun nervously explaining how he is required by law to ask Hitler whether he is of pure Aryan descent; etc. But the humour in these moments never transcends the grimness of the context, historical and atmospheric. Though momentarily alleviated, tragedy is never

ensembles in the bunker to the streets of Berlin where the last battle of the German *Wehrmacht* against the Red Army is in full swing. Instead of integrating these events into the film by way of teichoscopy, as any production on a smaller budget would have been forced to do, *Der Untergang* takes us out into the streets, opening up the claustrophobic space of the bunker and delivering crowd scenes and military ac-

abandoned. There is a gallows humour in the film, but it belongs to the characters and their situation, and never to a detached observer or authorial voice looking in on, or down upon, the diegesis.

To use the term 'high concept' in regard to *Der Untergang* is perhaps less immediately obvious as in the case of *Mein Führer*. Casting is not the film's central conceit, narrative focus is. For the entire length of the film (156 minutes, 178 in the extended cut), we are in the bunker underneath the chancellery, in the presence of Adolf Hitler himself, witnessing the final few days before the collapse of the Third Reich. This is, of course, not entirely true: we do leave the bunker, we do follow other characters (quite a few of them, in fact), and we do go on for well-nigh an hour after Hitler's suicide removes him from the story. Nonetheless, it has always been this tight focus—tightened further by oversimplification—that has elevated the film to high concept. Hence, the film is, or has been consistently framed as, a piece of theatre. Promising to draw us into close proximity or even intimacy with Hitler himself, the film is a *Kammerspiel*, exploring the psyche of a single character under extreme duress.

What complicates this categorization of the film as a *Kammerspiel*, and appears to stand in direct contradiction to the essential austerity of the form, is the fact that *Der Untergang* is also an expensive spectacle, conceptualized, financed, and designed on the level of the blockbuster. This applies not only to a large all-star cast, drawn from the crème of the German film industry, but also to a vast number of extras that appear whenever the film cuts away from the limited spaces and

tion as part of sweeping historical events played out on impressively large sound stages and back lot sets.

This decision to finance and market the film as a German blockbuster cannot be credited to director Oliver Hirschbiegel, whose previous two films were the mid-budgeted political thriller *Das Experiment* (2001) and *Mein letzter Film* (2002).[13] Especially the latter of the two, a digital diary shot entirely in POV of the actress Hannelore Elsner, suggests that Hirschbiegel's qualifications as a director of the intense personal *Kammerspiel* were what lead to his being hired for *Der Untergang*. Making up for Hirschbiegel's relative inexperience with large-scale productions is the film's producer, Bernd Eichinger. With films like Wolfgang Petersen's *The Never Ending Story* (1984), Jean-Jacques Annaud's *The Name of the Rose* (1986), Bille August's *Smilla's Sense of Snow* (1997), and, more recently, Tom Tykwer's *Perfume* (2006) under his belt, Eichinger has specialized in high-profile productions, financed and packaged in synergy with multiple European and American partners and aimed at a global marketplace. Part of his professional profile as a commercially successful producer is also to entrust popular middlebrow literary source material to the most 'Americanized' European auteurist directors and then market the product in competition with Hollywood blockbusters. How much *Der Untergang* is a product of its producer rather than its director is signaled by Eichinger's top billing in the opening credits, a billing he shares only with the production company's name.

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13. I have commented in more detail on Hirschbiegel's *Das Experiment* and its significance as a statement on postwar German identity formation in "The Origins of Violence in a Peaceful Society." *Kinoeye: A Fortnightly Journal of Film in the New Europe* 3.6 (May 26, 2003).

As much as Eichinger is a man of big, loud, busy movies, he takes great care in *Der Untergang* to situate the film in two cinematic and/or theatrical traditions with more legitimate claims to cultural capital than the blockbuster—the psychological drama in the theatrical tradition of the *Kammerspiel*, as mentioned before, and the documentary. The film is based on the book by Joachim C. Fest, a respect-

ed German public intellectual and historian on par with Sebastian Haffner or Golo Mann.[14] Unattached to any institutional academic context, Fest's image as a public intellectual does, however, gravitate toward the popular, putting him in the company of media figures like Guido Knopf and Jörg Friedrich—popularizers of history more than historians in pursuit of academic careers. Though his supporters would stridently deny this claim, Fest has published a well-received autobiography in 2008—a fact that suggests that his role in German culture is less that of anonymous conduit of historiographic research and more that of a celebrity. Through interviews and public appearances, Fest has also contributed substantially to the advertising campaign for *Der Untergang*. Aside from the prominence of Fest among its promotional materials, the film also makes reference to Traudl Junge, Hitler's secretary, whose appearance in the documentary *Blind Spot—Hitler's Secretary* (André Heller and Othmar Schmiderer, 2002) is explicitly referenced in the film's prefatory sequence that features Junge in a brief interview clip (before the film replaces her with Alexandra Maria Lara, the actress playing her). Inserts informing the audience of the time and place of events, as well as an insert sequence detailing further events after the closing of the film, also establish formal links to the documentary form.

The tension—between the spectacular and the sedate, between the blockbuster and the *Kammerspiel*, between producer and director, between fiction and documentary—

is also articulated in the film's central performance by actor Bruno Ganz playing Hitler. A veteran of the New German cinema (Herzog, Hauff, Wenders), with extensive theatrical credentials, Ganz has been a star of European cinema for decades. Despite occasional forays into the American film industry, comparable perhaps to his East German colleague Armin Mueller-Stahl, Ganz has remained a character actor, specializing in subtly nuanced performances, none of which had previously aligned itself with high concept projects.

How Hirschbiegel used Ganz is perhaps easiest to describe in the opening scene—a scene analogous to the star entrance Levy grants to Schneider in *Mein Führer*. In this scene, the camera attaches itself to a group of young women who, flanked by armed soldiers, are walking single-file through the winter woods. An insert POV shot reveals, in medium close-up, the unreadable face of a soldier shining a light into the young women's eyes, while another medium shot shows the back of a soldier walking ahead to lead the way. The group enters a building, as a caption tells us the time and place of the events: "November 1942, *Führerhauptquartier* '*Wolfsschanze*', *Rastenburg*, *Ostpreussen*" [Führer Headquarters . . . East Prussia]. Having taken a seat, the women are told by an officer, "We have to ask you to be patient for another moment. The Führer is just about finished feeding his dog." The delay is stretched out while the women ask how to address Hitler properly. As the officer opens a door, the women, still lined up, crane their heads to look past him through the open door. At this moment, the actor's back is framed in the doorway in a manner that invites a look past him into the room on the other side of the door, and yet blocks that view. As he takes a step forward, the film cuts to a reverse-angle shot of the women, confirming our attachment to their perspective, then cuts back to the doorway, to the women, then back to the doorway again, and holds the shot for a moment. Only then does Ganz, framed by the doorway, make his entry, left to right, into the film. In a subtly low-angled shot, the camera pans to the right, keeping the medium shot centered upon

14. Published in 2002, the book is entitled *Der Untergang: Hitler und das Ende des Dritten Reiches. Eine Historische Skizze* [*Downfall: Hitler and the End of the Third Reich. A Historical Sketch]*, and has gone through six printings so far, the last of which is marketed by Rowohlt, the publisher, as a movie tie-in. Fest also appears, together with Eichinger, as the author of the 'film book', also published by Rowohlt.

him until he stops moving and begins speaking, welcoming the women.

Hirschbiegel's visual decisions in this scene set the tone for the rest of the film. Narrative progression is intensely dramatic, almost melodramatic. Repeatedly, the appearance of what is clearly posited as the scene's visual center is delayed. Like the women, we are made to wait. When the opportunity to steal a glance materializes, it fails to satisfy the curiosity it has stimulated. This anticipatory structure of the scene is indebted to the star entrance, linking Hitler to the discourse on celebrity. But it also derives from the visual logic of the horror film, which similarly delays the appearance of the monstrous entity at the center of its narrative. Conventional horror films, from Val Lewton's 1940s RKO films to modern horror films like Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979), keep the monster out of sight for as long as possible, staging its first appearance as an intensely overdetermined moment.

And yet every moment in the opening scene of *Der Untergang* is structured in a manner that downplays the melodramatic impact it is so obviously trying to achieve. First, there is the fact that the scene comes so early in the film—unlike Levy, Hirschbiegel does not make us wait too long. Then there is the scene's emotional flatness, which is not motivated by the idea that the women are disappointed because, having finally met Hitler in person, he has fallen short of their expectations; when he enters, we do not see him in a subjective POV shot, and when we do see the women, they are obviously nervous, impressed, or even awed. Nonetheless, the scene is masterfully concealing its intense desire to thrill, masking its voyeuristic excitement behind a carefully constrained aesthetics—medium shots instead of close-ups, just a hint of a low angle instead of a more self-consciously expressionistic angle, inconspicuous flat lighting without the use of key lights, a lateral pan instead of an emotionally more intense series of cuts culminating in a close-up or even extreme close-up on Hitler's face.[15] Though Hirschbiegel eschews the explicit trappings of the documentary, which he reserves for later scenes in the film, he does adopt an attitude of objectivity, of moderate interest, of cautious detachment that is reminiscent of the documentary impulse to record rather than interpret empirical reality. Contrasted with the building of narrative suspense, this formal restraint registers all the more as a conscious effort to balance competing impulses. This is a film that is intensely excited but trying not to look it.

Let me cite another scene in which Hirschbiegel finds this point of equipoise between excitement and detachment, that of Hitler's suicide, which occurs about forty minutes before the end of the film. The scene redeploys the visual motif of the doorway, extended into a series of successive doorways, which, introduced in the opening scene, recurs throughout the film. Hitler and his now wife Eva Braun walk out of their final dinner with their staff, as doors close behind them. In a centered long deep-focus shot, the camera peers down hallways and through doors when the fatal shot is heard. When the bodies are removed, invisible under blankets, the camera is in medium-long shot, simulating a subjective POV of one of the lesser bystanders. Eventually, Traudl Junge visits the room in which the suicide occurred: the camera pans across ominously trivial details of furniture and décor, halting briefly as it spots blood, the gun, cyanide capsules. Detached from the momentary POV shots, however, the visual representation of the suicide is as flat in style and tone as the opening sequence. On the one event that holds the highest degree of fascination for most viewers, the film remains visually reticent. One might read this reticence as tact or decorum, or as a concession to the lack of reliable historical data and thus to historiographic accuracy. And yet the effect of this strategy does not distance viewers, neither from the events nor from their own visual desire.[16] On the contrary, their curiosity is intensified, even past the moment of the gunshot—will we or won't we see?—and thus ultimately exploited.[17]

Both the excitement and its containment are ultimately drawn toward the center of the film, Bruno Ganz's performance as Hitler.[18] Aided by an ever-attentive camera, Ganz's performance assembles appearance and body language, as well as face and voice, into an impressive mimicking of the Hitler known from documentary footage. In-

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15. One might think of the famous three-step editing sequence, from medium long shot to extreme close-up, in James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931) in the scene in which we first see Boris Karloff in Frank Pierce's iconic make-up.

16. For an example of how this strategy manifests itself verbally, as part of a film's advertising and distribution, see Heinrich Breloer's TV miniseries on the premier architect of the Third Reich *Speer und Er* (2005), in which Tobias Moretti plays Hitler, and in which, significantly, even Hitler's name is omitted from the title and replaced by the numinous 'He'.

17. Hirschbiegel's stylistic decisions are also reminiscent of the playbook by which American directors would outmanoeuvre the restrictions of the Production Code (one might think of the murder scene in Wilder's *Double Indemnity* [1944] and the intensification of the tension between what is inside and what is outside of the frame in, for example, the torture scene in the opening of Robert Aldrich's *Kiss Me Deadly* [1955]). If Hirschbiegel was inspired by these stylistic solutions, his own film strips the style of its historical context and justification. *Der Untergang* is as bloody and visually explicit as a film can be outside the limits of active censorship, which frees the style itself to serve whatever other agenda it appears suitable for.

18. After Ganz exits the film, i.e. when Hitler commits suicide, the theatrical cut of the film runs for another forty minutes, shifting its narrative focus, which had been attached to Traudl Junge in the opening scene, to her once and for all. It is her escape from Berlin at the very end of the film—shot on location and in natural sunlight for the first and only time—that closes the narrative.

stead of using prosthetics to increase the similarity between actor and character, Ganz concentrates on the pathology of Hitler's body: the palsied twitching of one hand steadied by the other behind the man's back, the complacently self-absorbed vanity of rearranging a strand of hair and smoothing it down, the forward bend of the body that has the shoulders hunched up inside a uniform that rides uncomfortably up the back. Though the parodic, almost anarchic exuberance of Schneider's portrayal is absent, Ganz's performance does

impressed, cowed, touched, awed, and it is their response to Hitler—like the screaming chambermaid who has opened the door behind which the monster of the horror film is lurking—that models our response to Ganz.

A highly regarded veteran actor in charge not only of his performance but also of his career, Ganz must have been worried before accepting the role—more so than Helge Schneider. To a lesser extent, there is the question of what impact playing Hitler would have on anyone's career (where

This is a film that is intensely excited but trying not to look it.

not come across as subtle. Though it is clearly not overplayed, it still emphasizes and highlights traits it considers essential, educating viewers on what deserves attention and what does not. Whenever Ganz decides to reign himself in and hold back, the camera takes over in completing the didactic thrust of the performance, tracking and tracing each gesture with endless fascination, putting it on display with self-congratulatory demonstrativeness.

Like Schneider in Levy's film, Ganz does not aim to discover anything new about Hitler; he only illustrates what we already know. Skilled as he is, he runs through an inventory of familiar gestures and moments, offering one more interpretation of the historical Hitler that was already part of the discursive field before the film came along. Scenes that hit one of the thematic key points are immediately recognizable: at one point, the audience is asked to contemplate Hitler as a kind elderly man, capable of compartmentalizing his private and his public persona; another scene poses the challenge to the audience to feel pity for a man who knows that he has lost everything and is about to die. Ganz's acting illustrates these points, moving seamlessly along the basic premise of psychological compartmentalization. Consequently, the highlights of Ganz's performance often coincide with moments of extreme rage and choleric explosion: Hitler ranting and raving, foaming at the mouth, exhausting himself in intense verbal and gestural frenzy.

Even though this performance largely reiterates all the performative aspects of Hitler that audiences are familiar with from documentary footage, it is the unchallenged center of the film. Hirschbiegel rarely shows Hitler alone but always surrounds him with groups of people, who serve as an audience not only for Hitler, but also for Ganz and for the film's viewers. As Hitler rants and raves, they are

do you go from there? what will audiences remember about you as an actor?), but more importantly there is concern that the performance in *Der Untergang*, part and parcel of a high concept film of blockbuster proportions, might be perceived as showboating, hamming it up, chewing up the scenery. Erroneous or not, audiences might perceive and interpret a performance of this intensity as a direct result of having the dramatic burden of the entire film placed on one actor's shoulders—and that actor overreacting to, overcompensating for, the enormous responsibility.

Der Untergang anticipates this critical reaction and pre-emptively reroutes it into an engagement with the theatricality of Hitler himself, as well as the whole iconography of the Third Reich. Along with constantly surrounding Hitler with an audience for which he performs, *Der Untergang* is permeated with the vocabulary of the theatrical stage, of actors performing and audiences watching. We see, for example, Albert Speer (Heino Ferch) advising Hitler on the question of whether he should escape from Berlin while there is still time: "*Sie sollten auf der Bühne stehen, wenn der Vorhang fällt*" [You should be on stage when the curtain comes down]. In the opening scene, Traudl Junge announces her being hired to her fellow applicants by using the expression 'engaged' instead of 'hired', as if she is an actress rather than a secretary. And, as things inside the bunker grow increasingly grim, we see Magda Goebbels (Corinna Harfouch) lining up her children to perform songs for everyone's edification in what comes across as a complex grim intertextual replay of *The Sound of Music*.

On this thematic level, the film merges Ganz's performance with that of Hitler. The actor is freed from the suspicion of showboating because the character he plays is a ham. Without demanding from Ganz an unconscionable emotional effort and investment in the role, Hirschbiegel

has created a situation in which Ganz can claim the supreme accomplishment of the method actor—total identification with the role—without Ganz having to perform the professionally and morally dubious task of 'becoming Hitler'. The film itself allows the audience to contemplate both Hitler's and Ganz's performance with fascination. Criticized for the exploitation of Hitler, the filmmakers can shift into the register of the actor's performance; criticized for the showboating performance, they can shift into the register of historical accuracy. Unassailable from either side, the film maintains a strategic balance.

Conclusions

If one were to take the conceit of *Mein Führer* seriously, then a high modernist undertaking like *Der Untergang* would have been made culturally irrelevant by its postmodern successor. The latter's highbrow ambitions (or pretension, depending on one's point of view) and adherence to empirical accuracy, signaled by its marshalling of celebrity historian Joachim C. Fest, would seem like an outdated gesture compared to the former's playful summary and manipulation of historical iconography. *Mein Führer* comes along with the self-confidence of being the culturally more comprehensive take on the topic, the happily realistic final word in a world without final words rather than the grimly despondent grappling with empirical imponderabilities.

And yet, as I tried to show in my comparative reading, both films are operating at different points of what turns out to be the same spectrum of cultural production. High concept filmmaking, previously the domain of large commercial Hollywood productions, serves as the unifying factor. To the degree that the hook for a high concept film can be drawn from the repertoire of national, or even international, historical iconography, high concept is not limited to a certain stratum of cinematic production. In fact, it seems capable of reconciling directors with auteurist credentials and producers with mainstream ambitions into projects that transcend the boundaries between high-, middle-, and low-brow altogether. Just as Helge Schneider's star persona is constructed around the transgression of such social boundaries, so Bruno Ganz's appeal as a 'movie star' is tempered by his reputation as, primarily, a character actor dedicated to self-effacing performances. Under the umbrella of high concept, both *Mein Führer* and *Der Untergang* manage to harness such disparate elements that their respective appeal goes to various demographics of a larger mainstream audience.

It is possible to see in these two films examples of a new form of European filmmaking—not only in the sense that they combine the construction and affirmation of national historical identity for their domestic audience with a wider reach for international markets in which this identity is packaged as an advertisement for the national film industry that produced it. It is in this context that the endless string of German films about the Third Reich (with the occasional film about the former East Germany thrown in for good measure) that are ceaselessly being fed by their producers into the international festival and awards circuit must be understood. On an international stage, high concept transcends, for example, the unique cultural decoding skills that only the German audience will bring to Helge Schneider's performance; high concept transcends the taint of sensationalism and exploitation that still hangs around films about Hitler and the Third Reich.

High concept also seems to provide a viable method of approach to complex and, at times, dangerous subject matter. It delivers a spark of daring experimentation and non-conformism, or even an open challenge, to a discursive field which has integrated gestures of transgression into its inventory of acceptable rhetorical moves as a matter of routine. The assembly of diverse elements—in casting, production value, actors' performances, and marketing—under the umbrella of high concept allows for the construction of controversy, as much as for pre-emptive moves in regard to the anticipated criticism that this controversy might elicit. High concept, in other words, allows for a balance between the unique and the conventional. It puts a new spin on old material, but it also puts the reins on the outrageous.

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Guy Maddin & Cinematography: An Interview

William Beard

Between 2005 and 2008 I conducted a number of extensive interviews with Winnipeg filmmaker Guy Maddin as part of a book project. These conversations were always intended primarily for use as a research tool, and never specifically conducted with publication in mind. Still, I think that aspects of them may be of some interest to a wider audience. Maddin has furnished a host of accounts and views of his own work, most notably in Kino Delirium, a book-length interview with his friend Caelum Vatnsdal, and in the director's commentary tracks on the DVD issues of his movies, but also in many, many interviews over the years. One of the tasks I wanted to tackle was to get a comprehensive and detailed narration from him of the birth and growth of his filmmaking techniques and styles.

Maddin's extraordinarily ground-zero beginnings in production—without practical knowledge of any kind, or any kind of institutional affinity—were quite unusual, and from the start the kind of cinema he produced was simultaneously aesthetically sophisticated and technically primitive. One of the several unique things about him as an artist (or at least as a successful artist) was his attempt to do quite ambitious, elaborate and sophisticated things with essentially no materials and no technical expertise.

The somewhat bleeding chunk of conversation you see here is taken from sessions in July, 2006 that concentrated on Maddin's evolving use of the camera, stretching from his first film, The Dead Father (a half-hour short from 1985) until the then recently completed shooting of Brand Upon the Brain! in 2006.

William Beard: I wanted to take you back again to the time you first really got interested in making films. You've told a story about how you basically just got a five-minute course in how to operate a 16mm camera for The Dead Father. I was wondering if you could talk a little about how the camera really became your friend, just as a tool, over the years. Could you talk about what your relationship with it was? I guess at first you just pointed it at stuff and after you figured it out?

Guy Maddin: Well it's true that after the first day of shooting on The Dead Father (well it wasn't even a day, it was more like a few hours), I just called it quits because I was tired, so I scheduled another shoot for 8pm the next night. But my photographer Bob Russek didn't show up because he was depressed and just stayed in bed. So I had to shoot it myself. [...] But I was amazed because even in the beginning of my movie mania days when we were all watching films on a projector in Steve Snyder's[1] apartment, I had to get someone else to thread the projector because I was just scared. [...] So I was pretty astonished that I could learn how to work a light meter. It is just a bunch of numbers, and I didn't know why they worked this way, they just did. I didn't want to know about foot-candles, I just wanted to know what number corresponded to the one I should put on my camera. So I was taught that within five minutes, and how to work the camera. It must have been no more than five minutes. I had my lead actor there, John Harvey, as a backup in case. He also knew how to work a projector. And then I was so emboldened with confidence, technical confidence, that I did work the projector shortly after and even a light. But um, the camera didn't quickly become my friend, and [yet], I liked being the cameraman – something I never expected. Because then you only had yourself to blame if the shot didn't turn out well. You could be angry at yourself, which is a productive rage because then you can forgive yourself, but then learn a lesson from it. Whereas, if you get your rushes back and let some cameraman make

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1. Stephen Snyder, Maddin's mentor, friend and neighbour, was a professor of film at the University of Manitoba.

a bad shot there would be no point in yelling at him. Yeah, just by eliminating the middle-man and going straight to the camera myself I made spectacular and horrible mistakes of ineptitude, but some of them I quickly incorporated into my style. Bob Russek would never have made those mistakes. And then I never would have really had any style because I made my first movie without even thinking of a style; I just made it as a narrative, a story, a script. That is

Tales from the Gimli Hospital (1988)

the way most kids I encounter are. They say, "I have this movie script, and I'd really like to make it," and they don't have any passion for a look or a sound or a style of acting or anything like that. I don't think they're idiots for that because I didn't either, but I count myself as lucky that I chanced into a visual style. [...] When I started making *Tales from the Gimli Hospital* (1988), I still think I was expecting it to look like *Greed* (Erich von Stroheim, 1924) for some reason, even though I didn't have massive locations and lots of costumes and things. I expected it to be mostly sunlit and deeply detailed. I think I was just thinking of *Greed* because it was like *Gimli Hospital*; it had two guys in it that were basically willing to hammer each other to death in some horribly austere place. But then when I set about to shoot it, I had one 350-watt light in my camera and none of it looked like *Greed*; it looked like *Gimli Hospital*.

WB: Would it be fair to say that *Gimli Hospital* ended up looking Expressionist partly just as a result of the shooting conditions, the fact that it was being shot indoors…?

GM: But I didn't know how to shoot any other way. I tried the basic three-light setup very early on and I just ended up with three nose shadows on everybody, and I just unplugged the lights until I got down to one nose shadow, a very dark one and an expressionist one, and then would just reposition the actors. The thing I remember doing, mostly because John Paizs[2] (another filmmaker who has far

more experience than I here in Winnipeg) suggested I do this: always keep your camera on a tripod and frame your shots up nicely, tableau style, and just don't even move your camera.

And now, years later, I do exactly the opposite. But at the time, I think it was good advice, cause it enabled me to at least, you know, I need to attack these movies one step at a time and those little tableaus gave me little building-block units that I could arrange. And they also played into the kind of mannered acting I had. He also suggested a proscenium arch, you know, just above the tableau, and things like that. That's not why he gave me that advice; he told me because that was the way he made movies, and he was just passing on his experience. But it was good advice because other Winnipeg filmmakers were attempting all sorts of hand-held shots, and in the mid-80s that couldn't have been more out of style.

WB: Well, handheld 35mm, which we all saw back in the period of the 70s, was pretty awful too.

GM: It had kind of a thing that quickly went out of style, maybe like air guitar. It was great, but most of it was just intentionally raw. If you watch *The French Connection* (William Friedkin, 1971) where the cameraman is chasing down Gene Hackman, it's perfect now, but you know, you can tell that it went through a period where it looked ugly for many, many years. I love it now, but definitely when I first picked up a camera, that stuff was so out that I thought my only chance of making things look like they had some control was to really bolt the camera down. It wasn't until later that I discovered that through still photography. I couldn't for the life of me take a good still picture of my daughter or, you know, my Christmas presents, things like that. But then I adopted the shoot-from-the-hip method with a still camera. I got way more really bad pictures, but way more good ones too. At least they weren't all mediocre. So I later started shooting from the hip with my movie camera.

WB: When you said you always used a tripod, the first thing that pops into my head is composition, because if you have a stable camera, composition becomes very important. And if you have good composition, you should be able to be a good still photographer.

GM: Yeah I know, that was bothering me, but I found when the black-and-white film came back from the lab it looked nicer, even with a tripod—basically moving still photos. They looked better than the Christmas pictures I took because those were just a flash bulb and there was no *chiar-*

2. Director of a number of films in Winnipeg in the early 1980s, culminating in *Crime Wave* (1985), Paizs was an inspiring example to

Maddin of a local filmmaker who could just pick up a camera and make a feature film with minimal resources.

oscuro. There was no narrative reason for having anyone in the snapshot pictures pose a certain way, and somehow just having a narrative reason to have a pose filled my movie frames with more melodramatic drama and more interest-power for me. I still have problems with still pictures; I just don't think like a still photographer.

WB: It really did seem to me when I was watching *Gimli Hospital* that some strange chemical reaction was taking place while you were making that film where you were discovering a style that would actually turn out to be very potent for you. It looked as if it was coming from the limitations of your production method and the limitations of your expertise.

GM: I was getting pretty high on myself, because I realized that I had already learned all I needed to learn easily [*laughs*], and everyone else was beating himself or herself out trying to master the technology. And I just felt that I had entered the realm of film technology through the back door, without having to pay the price of admission. I was getting away with producing stuff with a visual style that people should know better or acknowledge as having a visual style. I really felt that I had taken a short cut, and that I would have to pay for it eventually if I wanted to make

WB: Just as a viewer, if you go from *Dead Father* to *Gimli Hospital* to *Archangel* (1990), it's an astonishing progression.

GM: Yeah, I was pretty amped up about making huge leaps through film history; it wasn't a programmatic journey, you know. I did go from a half-hour, part-talking *momento mori* to whatever *Gimli Hospital* is, to a war picture with dialogue and recorded oddly. I wasn't literally trying to go through film history, but I did sort of want to touch on as many outré genres, genres that had fallen out of fashion, as possible. Which is why, when someone suggested I make a mountain picture, I was all over it. I had never even heard of them before, and so I really wanted to find more genres. I naively and arrogantly thought I could make a Bollywood picture someday [*laughs*]. I won't be making any Bollywood movies. But I've always loved them.

WB: The bad sound in Bollywood movies would suit you just perfectly though.

GM: Just everything they do. I love the fact that it's just full of a million genre shortcuts that the *hoi polloi* can navigate very easily—[that] is exciting to me. Just the way the film of Hollywood's past years had melodramatic shortcuts and

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By eliminating the middle-man and going straight to the camera myself I made spectacular and horrible mistakes of ineptitude, but some of them I quickly incorporated into my style.

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mainstream Hollywood movies—which I vaguely expected to do one day. But I was happy to pay later, if I could get attention for my pictures now. Maybe that would mean I would get bigger budgets one day.

So it is not that I needed the attention, although I probably did, I was just really happy to advance in any area, whether it be attention or atmosphere. It certainly wasn't in any area of technical expertise; I just learned that a light looks better from here. Yes, it did sort of restrict my compositions to 'tableauish' sort of things, but my tastes ran to the kind of narratives that were actually bolstered by tableaus and melodramatic stylizations, anyways. All of those things were suddenly feeding off of each other, and the thing was kind of just running itself. I got quickly used to what I was doing, and I could even work very fast at this freshly learned skill and so I not only seemed to be the best at what I was doing (maybe the only one who was doing what I was doing), but I was really fast at it too. It wasn't dreary business for me; it was fun.

signs and symbols, signifiers for closeted populations and all that stuff. It was kind of exciting to become, maybe not fluent, but conversant in some of these languages as well and really send out some odd, misleading signals to viewers out there inadvertently. Kind of like being a boor who just learned a new language full of homonyms, and he's using the wrong phrasing around some really delicate subjects.

WB: About your progress. The photography, the look of *The Dead Father* has this very flat documentarist look (even though there are some elements such as the nighttime scenes that are starting to look more dramatic), and then *Gimli Hospital* just suddenly plunges into this Expressionist world. Even though it was intended to look like *Greed,* it ended up looking like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920). (That's not quite right, but you know what I mean.) Everything becomes artifice suddenly. And then in *Archangel*: I've been looking at that film and my admiration for it has always been high, but it has really been blossom-

ing, and I just love it. [...] So much of the photography in it is gorgeous! By the time you were making *Archangel,* were you conscious of being in control of a more complex sort of visual device?

GM: Yeah, I remember thinking to myself—and George Toles[3] had made a comment to me, he said, "I'd like to see for your next film that you don't have so many black backgrounds." Like *Gimli Hospital* had a lot of black because I didn't have sets, just Kyle McCulloch or Michael Gottli against a black background, or my light didn't illuminate their faces so it just faded off to black. So I knew I would need more lights than just one, and I knew I wanted someone who knew how to light for me, and with the good temperament not to fight me. Because on the local film scene I was still being told things like—when I went to try to learn how to load an Arriflex (which would actually enable me, unlike a Bolex, to have shots that would last up to 12 minutes instead of 25 seconds so you could have in

Dracula – Pages from a Virgin's Diary (2002)

sync dialogue), and I went to the Winnipeg Film Group to be taught how to load it and the equipment guy there told me he'd refuse to teach me because "I was a director, and a director shouldn't load cameras, cameramen should load cameras. A director should just…" And so this was the sort of attitude I was facing all the time. Or, I would get someone from the Film Group to just, in *Gimli Hospital*, put his hands in a pair of puppets (I had a puppet show in it) because I needed to work the camera; and he started arguing with me after I did the first take when I said, "Now just switch the hands with the puppets or now get a third character." There was a Punch and Judy scene with the devil or whatever. He'd say, "Well Judy was on my left hand before." And I said, "Well that doesn't matter; this is, ah, later." And then he started getting into a continuity argument with me about where Judy should be. […] These were the kind

3. Maddin's frequent screenwriting collaborator, and probably his most important mentor, Toles teaches English, theatre and film at the University of Manitoba.

of people in the film community you met at every turn, and they were infuriating. So finding a person to help me set up lights—who had the right temperament—was way more important than finding one who knew how to work the lights. It turns out Kyle McCulloch recommended his friend Terry Reimer who never said a word, and who only watched the first 30 seconds of rushes just to make sure there was an image there, and then you would see a door open, a big crack of light and his silhouette in it and then he would leave. [...] The first day's rushes were not quite what I wanted. There was just too much fill light or something. So I showed him a really degraded copy of Renoir's *The Little Match Girl* (1937), and said I just wanted high contrast lighting like this. He just said "K"; just one syllable was his only reply. The last batch of rushes came out looking much better. They didn't look like *The Little Match Girl*, which was fine. That looked like a movie that had been Xeroxed about a hundred times by the time I got my print but he just… I later learned about contrast ratios.

WB: He was just lighting or did he do camera work?

GM: No, I did all the camera work, and I had a camera assistant that just reloaded all the time and occasionally when my eye got sore I'd give him the camera for a while.

WB: Eventually you got around to using a cameraman.

GM: Yeah, I did, on *Careful* (1992). Since Terry was no longer around, I asked another cameraman I admired, Mike Marshall, to come and do some tests with me of colour. I told him what I sort of wanted, and he had his own ideas about some things, but I told him basically that I…I got my way anyways because I was the production designer and I painted everything a certain way. He was really open to experimenting as well. And we agreed that we would basically do what Terry did for the black-and-white sections of that movie. And then for the colour sections of that movie, through our experimenting, [we decided to] overexpose everything by three stops and then have it darkened later back down to proper exposure. It was kind of to repress the colour; we thought we'd go for a 'Repressovision'. [...] I painted the sets—like the blues, I got the deepest blue possible, the most colour-saturated, and I had everyone's faces painted apricot. All the Caucasians in the movie— everyone was Caucasian—they got apricot plus rouge; it was a really saturated flesh colour. The colour was just really saturated, like you took the first colour TV and turned the colour dial all the way up to 11. So I was doing this on the set: literally the equivalent of Antonioni's painting a park green to get a greener green. I was just doing that with my sets, sometimes just reducing the amount of colours in a

frame to two or three, and just controlling it with paint, and then by overexposing it, it would repress it. You know, what I was hoping to get was—and I kind of forgot to do it—was either wobble the aperture or wobble the frames per second, so that the colour, the saturation, would wobble a bit. Like it was trying to come out, as if it were a close-up of a robin's egg with that beautiful robin's egg blue and not a baby birdie, but the actual blue was trying to be born, and it was trembling and pecking at the shell and becoming more or less saturated as its little blue beak gained and lost energy in this exhausting process. So Mike and I got along

there was always someone to double check something. And worse still, I couldn't steal shots, candid shots, of the actors because there was always someone who noticed when I was rolling the camera and run in with a slate. I would just see a look suddenly, a close-up; I'd zoom in on somebody when they were just relaxed and daydreaming. I would see a look I realized I could use somewhere, and I'd start rolling and some really well-meaning crew member would run in with a slate and just get it. Obviously, now I realize I should have just talked to them and asked "Could I just have a tail slate on that?" or "Could you just leave it? Because I'm the

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I always really felt I was at my happiest when I could be at the camera because I was beginning to count on those accidents that only I stumbled upon and which other, more technically proficient, people wouldn't.

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really well, and I had him working with me on my camera. I can't remember the ratio, but I probably got him to shoot about half of *Careful*. Every now and then my eye would get tired, or I would think that I'd better just change up the look here because my tableau vision was really starting to feel limiting, and I needed something fresher. But every now and then I would get some rushes back and think, geez I wish I'd have done that shot because he'd used a fish-eye lens or a wide-angle lens for such a close shot. I knew my film history better than he and the film vocabulary called for no wide-angle lenses. But he gave me things that I could have never have gotten. He gave me lots of good ideas, and I really liked working with him. And I have probably worked with him more than any other cameraman.

WB: What range of lenses did you have? Did you have separate lenses or did you just have the big zoom one?

GM: I just liked having a zoom because then you don't have to move so much you can just zoom in. And I even use a zoom now in the middle of a shot, which was considered very gross for a long time.

WB: Since *Careful* you've had the occasional bump in the road.

GM: Yeah, it wasn't always so happy. Then somehow, I always really felt I was at my happiest when I could be at the camera most of the time or half the time because I was beginning to count on those accidents that only I stumbled upon and which other, more technically proficient, people wouldn't. And I found that as the shoots got bigger and more organized, the accidents were rarer anyway because

editor anyway; I'll figure out where to put it." Then, by the time I did *Twilight of the Ice Nymphs* (1997), Mike Marshall was sole DOP, and we had an agreement with the union, which forbade me from moving the camera. And then it was 35mm, and I didn't understand the magic trade-off between resolution and fakery and the balance was just thrown off. I no longer worked quickly. Mike is really meticulous and we stopped working together because I think he was tired of hearing how slow he was. […] By commercial standards he was fine, but I know in *Twilight* I only got an average of 14.5 shots per day and the industrial average is 25-30 or something like that, which is way too slow for me; I'd prefer 60-150. They are not really setups; I am just firing away. I just need footage, lots of it. My producer in *Twilight* negotiated short days with the union as well – so if I would have had full days I probably would have got my industrial average, but I think the days were negotiated so you couldn't go overtime or something. So I was really hamstrung visually. And it was a really 'talkity' script, so it ended up just being these long tableaus in medium shots of people talking, and it was a visual disaster. So I didn't serve the script well, but I wasn't able to anyway. Everything bad just happened at the same time.

WB: Then on *Dracula – Pages from a Virgin's Diary* (2002) you were in there yourself with your 16mm and 8mm cameras.

GM: Yeah, with *Dracula* I had intriguing and frightening restrictions, which were actually liberating.

WB: Because you were dealing with an already existing production.

GM: Yeah, and I was terrified. I've always been more comfortable with more claustrophobic sets and very small womb-like compositions, encouraged by the fact that the 350-watt bulb, the one I used for *Gimli Hospital,* could only throw about five feet before it got too dark, so everything was kind of composed like a child's story book. Like a story about bear cubs living in a hollow tree or something, there was always something surrounding them, enveloping them in darkness at every stage. So I needed to open up *Dracula* because when a ballerina needs to tell a boy ballet dancer that she loves him, she needs about the space of a football field worth of dance floor to say it. And I realized that the sets couldn't be claustrophobic unless I could figure out ways to capture the motion—breaking it up and using smaller pieces and composing them like a David Hockney. And also, even more frightening, was the fact that dancers can only dance about six hours a day, and the Dracula, the omnipotent Dracula, can't even lift a 90-pound ballerina over his shoulder after five takes, so you have to get everything in one or two takes (which is fine with me because I like moving quickly). So that was when I started covering it kind of like a sporting event: with two or three or four cameras going at once, getting it from a number of angles.

WB: So at that point you had up to three other cameraman with 16mm cameras?

GM: Sometimes, yeah, I was quite often the tertiary or wildcard camera, and my footage wasn't used that much. I had a key camera—this probably should have been reversed—it was a Super-16 camera operated by Paul Suderman who was a nice fellow, but I realized I hated the look of the Super-16 compared to the Super-8 stuff that Deco Dawson[4] would get about half the time. Deco, who ended up virtually co-directing the film, operated the 16mm Bolex about half the time and traded off with me with the Super-8. Quite often Deco got the key close-ups while Paul was changing the head on a giant crane or something like that or while they were trying to figure out a moving camera shot, and Paul would get the master shots or just try to cover the whole ballet from a distance. But the real shots which were the MVP ones and gave the movie a sense of close-ups with faces of the different actors, came from cameras Deco and I quickly were able to go in with. As a matter of fact I remember Deco, quite inventively (because unions forbade us from moving lights), had this really strong light over this panel of storyboards I liked to have and there was enough foot-candle power off the reading lamp in the dark

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4. A young avant-garde filmmaker who had attended Maddin's University of Manitoba film class, and served as a visual diarist, and eventual collaborator, on Maddin's short film *The Heart of the World* (2000) before working as a cameraman, editor and associate director on *Dracula.*

corner of the studio so you could do close-ups. In between shots he would go take the ballet dancers over the reading lamps and get shots of them, and there were no union violations, the lights were never touched. And you just move actors around until lighting was good. So you regulated the lighting by moving the actors, rather than the other way around. So he was just stealing shots. And then I would just hide behind a palm tree and get coverage sometimes.

WB: So for *Saddest Music in the World* (2003), then, you had a DOP?

GM: Well there, by that time I knew, once again, that *Saddest Music* would be my most ambitious picture yet, and I wanted to get really big sets. […] You know, in retrospect, I probably could have gotten away with really small sets and filmed it maybe more comfortably, but I tried to ex-

Cowards Bend the Knee (2003)

periment with really big sets and then I realized I still didn't know how to film them. And half of them don't even appear in the movie anyway, as it turns out, because I kept forgetting to film the big sets. I just kept going, "OK, we're on this set, I'll start with a close-up, and end with a closer close-up," or something like that. But I knew at the beginning I would need a cameraman, once again with a wonderful temperament, who knew his stuff. So I interviewed some people with the help of Rhombus Media and we decided on Luc Montpelier, who's a really good guy. But once again I was the boss in charge of framing the shots up, and I forgot to get the sets and there were some beautiful sets that were built and never photographed, properly, you know. It was really strange.

WB: Well, looking at many of your later films, and I'm thinking of I guess mostly of *Dracula* and *Cowards Bend the Knee* (2003), there's an impression created of more kind of

a hand-held swooping, almost improvised, camera movement. And I do remember seeing a CBC documentary on the shooting of *Dracula*, and there you are just kind of running around with the camera and improvising.

GM: Yeah I'm trying to find the shot… I was getting confident that I could just find something if you just kept moving around, and why not shoot while you're moving around, because if you find it, you'll never find it again.

WB: So *Dracula* is, therefore, much more visually dynamic because there are a lot of other things going on in *Dracula,* too.

GM: Deco Dawson really encouraged me there too, you know, because he somehow (even though his own student movies in my class had never been quite that dynamic—

and we agreed that a far more athletic and primitive and rough-and-tumble kind of dance would be more interesting anyway. He had no qualms about the dancers' bodies being cropped off and the dancers liked having close-ups more than that tasteful distance all the time. They loved their close-ups. The only thing he [Mark Godden] hated, was when you shot a dancer from behind. I never knew about that, I'm still not sure about it, but dance-pieces are always choreographed for the house, and there is a kind of prestidigitator's set of secrets that are given away if you show clumsy old Orson pulling the concealed rabbit from the seat of his pants before pulling it from a hat. This is what you are doing to these dancers if you shoot them from behind. But that is what I had to do from behind a potted palm or a bank of fog because the choreographer kept flipping the dancers around on me whenever he saw a camera pointing at them. But I was determined to get 360-degree

they were dynamically edited, but they didn't have that much camera movement), all of a sudden […would] hurl himself onto the dance floor and slide up into a position right next to the dancers. And so I let him do that for a while because I was too fat; the dancers would bounce around too much. And he seemed to really know what to do too, so he was really capturing a lot of the motion in the bottle. That was my chiefest fear—getting the motion of dance in the most interesting way because dance films are so boring to me and to most dancers too. I even asked the dancers what their favourite films were, and they said they were bored by most of them. It was when I was actually up on the dance floor with them watching *Dracula* for the first time that I noticed that the dance floor gave when they landed beside me, that I got sprayed with their sweat, that their tendons and panties ripped, [that I could] hear their stomachs growling, little moans; it was more like football practice or a hockey game than the dance we see in dance movies. They always try to make it elegant in dance films, and I talked to the choreographer [Mark Godden],

coverage of them, so I feel that was the only score on which I betrayed him. I did make him cry, and he was no sissy.

WB: Were they not pleased with the result?

GM: They may have had some reservations, but they never voiced them to me. I think they were pretty pleased, and the producer was pleased. And the producer and choreographer and I are speaking about working together again, so I think everything was okay.

WB: So then you had Super-16mm and Super-8mm on *Saddest Music*.

GM: Yeah, I kind of thought it worked on *Dracula*, and I just thought I know that the look of the three different formats, it's so smooth. Whereas with a Bolex, it's 24 frames per second, but I think some of the shutter speeds are 1/60th of a second and some are like 1/58th or whatever. So there is a subliminal flicker, and it slowly fades out of sync dur-

ing 30 seconds of wind. But if you get a more sophisticated Super-16 or one of those 16s with a crystal shutter or crystal mechanism to keep the sound in sync, it looks like video instead of Bolex 16, and then there is Super-8 which looks even more filmic still. You are really in contact with your inner 'grainiophile' when you are watching Super-8. So I just thought that for this movie I still wanted as an insurance policy three different formats—those three just to keep as part of the vocabulary any acting inconsistencies or any editing inconsistencies. [...] Just a kind of primitivity that I thought, if it was ingrained right into the randomness of the film stock used, then I could buy some good will from the viewers in some of the other inconsistencies. Unfortunately, whenever someone was talking you had to use the sync sound camera so it ended up becoming kind of the main camera. And then the silent montage stuff became Super-8 so it became too...the three existed in ghettos. And I didn't really like that. That has to be planned out more next time.

WB: And for *Cowards Bend the Knee*?

GM: That was just straight Super-8. I thought that *Cowards* was going to [be] about 12 or 15 minutes long, but I scheduled five shooting days because I don't like working long and hard days, and I just kept shooting without even consulting my script. [The finished film runs 66 minutes.] I guess I had just boiled the script down so much that I had it in my head. I just shot it in script order as much as possible, […] set up the actors, and then just started swish-panning around and quite often not even looking through the camera. And if I wanted a close-up of somebody, I would just suddenly find that person and start walking toward them with the camera and get to their face, not really looking through the camera. And the cameras just got comfortable acting. Somehow, the more I just swish-panned back and forth between actors—or maybe I was shouting orders out at them, or maybe they just got into the spirit of the rhythm, my arm extended rigidly with a camera at the end of it, must have reminded them of a metronome—and the faster I swish-panned back and forth, it seemed like a cue to them to just rip-dial up their performances as well. So I felt like a conductor with a baton, sort of whipping up an orchestra into a fury when I had like seven main characters.

WB: You were the only one with a camera, I guess.

GM: Yeah, that time I just shot by myself. And I was shooting my own autobiography so it didn't occur to me to have someone else. No, that is not true. I did, I had my friend Rubén Guzmán. He shot Super-8 on *Saddest Music* and sort of replaced Deco as my wildcard. I just, to this day, I

just feel better if I just restructure the hierarchy that hasn't been working so well for Canadian film. It's just hard to be that person who adds another person to the hierarchy, but he definitely seems grafted on. And Deco suffered pretty badly the contempt of everyone else in the crew on *Dracula* because there was no place for (he was called an 'associate director') but there was no place for an extra cameraman. They were used to taking orders from just one cameraman; it is hard to take orders from two. It was like adding an extra rank in an army all of a sudden and not telling everyone about it.

So it didn't go that well, and Rubén was going to be that on *Cowards* but then he just preferred just pre-lighting some of the larger sets for me the day before I was due to go into the beauty salon set. He took pride in adding more than one light in some of the wider shots. So he lit, while I shot. I think he only shot one scene in the movie, and then on *Saddest* he did all the Super-8 stuff, but he suffered, even worse than Deco, the ridicule of the crew members who didn't want Super-8 photography there.

WB: It sounds very tribal…

GM: I guess it was just their nature, or maybe I didn't make it clear enough to everyone that they needed to respect him as much as they respect me. So he got chewed up pretty badly, but he also got some really beautiful footage.

WB: And then *Brand Upon the Brain*?

GM: That one I co-shot. *Brand* had an all-Seattle cast and crew. They had a cinematographer there, his name is Ben Kasulke, he's really great, really nice—and I just asked if he would mind if I did most of the photography. And he said that was great, whatever. He was just happy for help wherever. And we quickly developed a rapport where we realized while I was shooting he might as well be shooting too, from a different angle. And so I can't even remember which shots are his and which are mine. We must have shot the movie about 50/50. Only if there was a close-up and only one angle did maybe I shoot alone. But a lot of times I would just say, "My eyes are tired, you shoot." It's approximately 50/50 that we shot, and I can't even remember which shots I did and which he did. So, two human metronomes with cameras beating out the beat for the performances sort of waving at each other and every now and then we would film each other, we'd see each other swishing past each other in the rushes. It was quite nice, but I have never seen a guy more adaptable to the spirit of the thing. I think good DOPs are like editors, they somehow get right inside the mind of the filmmaker or get into the spirit of the project and adapt themselves to it somehow.

From Ingushetia to the Finland Station

Jerry White

What are the attributes of this brave new cinematic world that we supposedly live in now, all cellphones and YouTube? I'd propose the following as the key recurring topics in most discourse about cinema's technological shift: (1) the dissolution of the distinctions between film and video; (2) a freedom to move beyond conventional narrative, a freedom that results from the low cost of new technology; and (3) a newly nomadic globalism, as images are made and distributed more easily than ever. If I may be forgiven a momentary, grouchy digression, I hardly think I am going out on a limb when I say that the work that has come to define this shift is not exactly visionary. I confess that I find viral videos of young Russian men doing deranged 'street gymnastics'[1] oddly addictive, but if this is the way forward for cinema (and it basically fits all three of the categories I just named), I'm switching back to literature. I take comfort, though, in the thought that this is not really the future, or not the only one, anyway. Pirjo Honkasalo's 2004 film *The 3 Rooms of Melancholia* is the future too.

Even though it won a lot of film-festival awards (and had its US premiere at Sundance), the film is not well known.[2] Honkasalo is a Finnish documentarian who has been working for several decades now, and while she's well-respected in European documentary circles, her films don't circulate very widely outside of television and festivals. She is, in many ways, a seminally European kind of filmmaker; she has worked steadily for many years, has maintained a fair bit of independence, and has been able, every once in a

while, to make a major contribution that moves the art forward. *The 3 Rooms of Melancholia* is such a contribution.

It's not so much that Honkasalo ignores differences between film and video as she moves flexibly between the two media. The first of her 'rooms' is the Russian military academy on Kronstadt, which is sometimes known as the 'fortress island' (it's in the Gulf of Finland), where young boys learn, in essence, to be Czarist soldiers. The film's press notes state that the military school there was founded in 1995, and 'represents an attempt to revive Czarist military traditions, and is under President Putin's special protection'. This sequence is shot on 35mm, and well it should be. Most of the first room's most memorable images are rendered in a late-in-the-day, mid-winter light, giving the whole place a richly sad sense. Indeed, there is a distance to a lot of these images that the 35mm makes even more vivid; I'm talking here of close-ups of a boy's face as he sits on a bus, but I'm also talking of extreme long shots of the 'fortress island', shot from the Russian mainland. This section is a symphony in snow and slush, and visualises Kronstadt as a place that is cold and unwelcoming; the quality of light is key to that sense. These images are sharp and clear, but they have the quality of twilight to them.

The images of the 'second room' are shot on video, and these images are quite lovely; that is to say, they look as they should. This room is Grozny, capital of Chechnya, and if Kronstadt was a symphony of slush, this is a study in mud. We switch to black and white here, a choice that is more complex than it may at first appear. A shot where Russian tanks come in and out of the picture, framed within the frame of the car windshield Honkasalo is shooting out of, is a kinetic, deep and visually complex image. A minute or so later, she has a series of images taken inside of a car approaching a checkpoint, and she manages to make the enclosed space both intimate (through the use of well-

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1. http://ca.youtube.com/watch?v=b1EelXhRGwc, if you must know.
2. Facets Multimedia reports it as being soon to be released on video. At the moment it is distributed by Icarus Films (icarusfilms.com).

framed close-ups) and deep (a shot from the back seat that has headscarf-clad women in both the back and front seats and a muddy road on another, farther plane is quite striking). These are images of despair and of deprivation, and the use of a visually deprived format seems appropriate. Thus this change to black and white, and this shift to squalor, is a more complex matter than a simple 'impoverished region, impoverished image' sort of strategy. Indeed, the *aesthetic* is not impoverished; Honkasalo's compositional sensibilities relies on cultivating a feeling of cultural unfamiliarity and yet is always unavoidably tied to the culture of a very few imperial powers. Globalisation hasn't yet done much for Pirjo Honkasalo's visibility, or that of the great Chadian filmmaker Mahmet-Saleh Haroun, or that of the indispensible young Québécoise Catherine Martin; it's done a lot for the career of Danny Boyle, someone who, ahem, didn't really need the help. Portable, flexible image technology seems like it can transcend borders; you can film anywhere,

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This section is a symphony in snow and slush, and visualises Kronstadt as a place that is cold and unwelcoming; the quality of light is key to that sense. These images are sharp and clear, but they have the quality of twilight to them.

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are quite intact. It's just that a grainy, even slightly dirty, image is grimly appropriate for fleeting images of an annihilated landscape. That graininess, that dirtiness, is highly composed. The lightweight video camera allows Honkasalo to ride in a car through stop-checks in a way that would indeed be difficult with a 35mm, thus a new sense of flexibility inherent to portable and lower-resolution camera technology is unquestionably present. What is also present, though, is the visual rigour that she brought to the 35mm sections.

The flexibility, both in terms of structural eccentricity and documentary aesthetics, that low-cost digitial video makes possible, is also present in the third room, Ingushetia. This is the Russian republic that neighbours Chechnya and is the site of a large refugee camp (the titles tell us that we are four miles from the Chechen border). Here, though, Honkasalo shows boys not doing drills in sterile hallways, but wandering through empty fields. Indeed, Ingushetia emerges as a kind of mirror image of Kronstadt. The authority figure is the mother-like Hadizhat Gataeva, who looks after dozens of orphans, whereas the school in Kronstadt is ruled over by stern, male officers; Ingushetia is green where Kronstadt is icy, foggy where Kronstadt always seems a bit under-lit, still engaged in traditional Muslim worship where Kronstadt clings to military ritual. Images of Islamic and military ritual are linked to Honkasalo's precise, almost classical framing, but the contrast between the two is sharply evident. Ingushetia is, in short, a different country, but one that Honkasalo shows us to be unmistakably connected to Russia; we are somewhere else, and yet somehow not.

This sense of uncertain internationalism is not a bad metaphor for globalization as a whole, a phenomenon that and then upload these images for viewing anywhere.

But of course it is not that simple. Honkasalo knows that well, and is using an aesthetic that shifts between film and video, and using the portability of video to show us that nomadism is not only a herald of a brave new world of free movement and cultural understanding, but a way of existence that makes it clearer than ever how much of this globalised world is defined by military roadblocks on muddy non-roads, or by reborn nationalism that saves its most richly realised ritualism for adolescent boys sent to a frozen island. The differences between these two spaces is explicit, but it is their juxtaposition that makes their interconnectedness just as clear. Putting film alongside video, like putting Czarist imperialist ritual alongside the daily life of the imperial possessions, is part of the same philosophy of internationalism, the same ethic. It is easier than ever to visualise cultures that are very different from one another, just as it's more possible than ever to visualise different formats and aesthetic possibilities; it's also more urgent than ever to understand that the interconnectedness between such different forms illuminates both the continuing relevance of humanist idealism about shared experiences and the reality of a world now defined by insidious new forms of neo-imperialism.

In an interview published in *DOX #39* (February 2002), Honkasalo argued against the use of digital video. While she acknowledged that it opens up access and reduces pretences of professionalism among filmmakers, she also warned that "the danger we face with all the digital is that we forget that film is also an art of the image." *The 3 Rooms of Melancholia* shows us that this does not have to come to pass, that the fundamentally image-based quality of the cinema can be retained by someone shooting in

video, provided that she knows what sort of images video can produce, and what those images can express. Cinema is now undergoing a complete and irreparable transformation. Barriers between film and video are disintegrating; thus, the choice to shoot the island fortress on 35mm and Chechnya on black and white video feels like a *real* choice, and can, at the best of times, be deeply expressive. Lightweight technology does make it easier to move about the world freely, like a drifter; thus a film made by a Finn moving between Russia, Chechnya and Ingushetia is a lot easier to realise now, and that's a good thing given how urgent

it is that the changing nature of imperialism be submitted to the rigorous analysis of committed filmmakers. And lightweight technology does make it easier to slip free of convention, given that it lowers the financial stakes so drastically, and that allows ambitious artists like Honkasalo to link their political commitments to equally intense (and philosophically connected) aesthetic commitments. *The 3 Rooms of Melancholia* is truly a film for the digital age of cinema; Honkasalo understands the possibilities of that age, and understands just how hard you have to work to really live up to those possibilities.

Post-Soviet Freakonomics:

Alexei Balabanov's Dead Men and Heritage Porn

Colleen Montgomery

> 'The economy' is, after all: a thicket of information about jobs and real estate and banking and investment. But the tools of economics can be just as easily applied to subjects that are more— well, more **interesting**.
>
> - Levitt and Dubner, *Freakonomics* (13)

Whether conceived as art, propaganda, or entertainment for the masses, cinema has held a central position in Russian culture and society for over a century. Lenin's famous declaration that, "of all the arts, the most important for us is cinema"[1] has long been reflected in the Russian/Soviet state's ideological and financial investment in the cinema. So too has it been evidenced by Russian audience attendance levels, which, up until the 1990s, consistently remained among the highest in the world per capita. In the early 1990s, however, a series of cultural and economic changes resulting from the dissolution of the Soviet Union led to an unprecedented period of decline for the Russian film industry. In spite of this, many prominent critics and filmmakers faulted a 'weak cinema mythology' for the dwindling state of their national film industry, and called for filmmakers to create a new national mythology to lift the spirits of the Russian people and reinstate the cultural and economic weight Russian cinema once held on a national and international level. In 1992, Daniil Dondurei, chief editor of the foremost Russian film journal *Iskusstvo kino*, called for Russian filmmakers to "create a new national hero" instead of "wasting time on films […] that simply reopen wounds." In 1998, during his address to the Russian Filmmakers' Union Congress, acclaimed Russian director Nikita Mikhalkov[2] advocated the "creation of a positive film hero" to help restore Russian cinema to its former glory (qtd. in Hashamova 296). Numerous Russian filmmakers, including Mikhalkov himself with his 'heritage films' *Burnt By The Sun* (1996) and *The Barber of Siberia* (1999), as well as Alexander Sokurov, with his groundbreaking epic *Russian Ark* (2002), heeded this call in fashioning new, positive national myths and heroes that "idealize Russia's imperial past and culture" (Hashamova 296). Alexei Balabanov's post-Soviet films, on the other hand, with their macabre forays into the realms of pornography, exploitation, criminality and the Russian mafia, carve out a markedly alternative mode of post-Soviet cinema. Rather than offer a nostalgic view of Russian history and culture, his films—furnished with a host of 'freakish' and unsavoury characters far from the kind of 'heroes' Dondurei and Mikhalkov envisioned—cast a bleak light on Russia's imperial past and propose no new national mythologies for the future.

In the first post-Soviet decade, Russian filmmakers "watched their domestic audience, their international renown, and their cultural authority shrink and all but disappear" (Larsen 491). In 1991, the almost overnight dissolution of the Soviet nation-state—which once occupied one sixth of the earth's surface—into fifteen independent states had devastating effects on the Russian economy and many of the country's national industries. The transition from communism and state-ownership of resources, to democracy and a free market economy, had particularly catastrophic consequences for Russia's film business. National, centralized systems of production and distribution disappeared and state subsidies—on which the industry had always relied to finance and distribute films—were all but eradicated, sending Russian cinema into a period of unprecedented crisis. Further driving down ticket sales (particularly for Russian films) to an all-time low were: the deterioration of state-run studios and distribution systems, outdated and poorly equipped Soviet-era cinemas, growing television and video markets, widespread video piracy, and a rapid, unchecked influx of American films into Russian theatres.[3]

While there was a brief but intense boom in production between 1991 and 1992, during which time three hundred films were produced,[4] domestic attendance levels and returns on Russian films remained at record lows. In fact, Russian films accounted for just three to eight percent

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1. As stated in a 1922 conversation with Anatoly Lunacharsky (quoted in Christie and Taylor 57).
2. In his 2006 *Sight and Sound* review of *The Barber of Siberia*, Julian Graffy argues, "for two decades, Nikita Mikhalkov […] has been the most famous and successful of Russian filmmakers in his own country and abroad" (39), having won both the Palme D'Or and the Academy Award for *Burnt By the Sun*.

3. According to the 1995 *Eureka Audiovisuelle* bulletin, American films occupied between 75 and 85 percent of Russian cinema repertoires in the early 1990s (Stojanova 1).
4. Many scholars have theorized that a significant number of films in this boom were simply money-laundering vehicles for private investors and members of the Russian mafia, and thus "an entirely artificial branch of industry" (Beumers 74).

of total box office revenues for the decade and it is estimated that, on average, Russians purchased less than one film ticket per year in the 1990s (Lawton 98-102). While Dondurei and Mikhalkov sought to rescue Russian cinema from this state of near-ruin by crafting films that celebrate and glorify Russian history and aim to promote nationalist pride, Alexei Balabanov's films offer a radical alternative to this form of post-Soviet heritage film. Looking at two of his most widely distributed, yet very stylistically divergent films, *Of Freaks and Men* (1998) and *Dead Man's Bluff* (2005), I will discuss how Balbanov's post-Soviet films: deconstruct long-held national mythologies, particularly those relating to the history of Russian cinema; create a new type of anti hero—a ruthlessly capitalist, deeply individualist figure lacking any overarching moral code or ethical imperative; and, lastly, shed light on the socio-economic impact of the introduction of a Western capitalist system to post-Soviet Russia.

'Heritage Porn': Re-visioning Russian Film History

From Eisenstein to Vertov, Pudovkin and Tarkovsky, Russian filmmakers have long held a prominent place in the canon of global film history and film theory. This 'most important of all the arts' has also been a central part of Russia's national mythology since the medium's very inception. However, amid the political and economic uncertainty ushered in by the demise of the Soviet state, the soundness of such national ideologies and mythologies was called into question. Free of the strictures of Soviet state-regulated censorship that once greatly limited any such questioning, many writers, artists and directors of the post-Soviet era, including Balabanov, began to openly interrogate and deconstruct these mythologies. As Balabanov stated, "I am part of the first generation not limited by censorship. When I started making films, it was possible to do anything you wanted" (*Guardian* 12). *Of Freaks and Men*, which one critic labelled "heritage porn" (Clarke 16), is exemplary of Balabanov's perverse revision and questioning of the official (and esteemed) history of Russian cinema. Set in St. Petersburg in the late 1890s, the film is centred on a gangster-turned-pornographer, Johann (Sergei Makovetski), and his sordid relations with the people who buy, produce and participate in his fetish photographs (and later, films), which depict young girls being spanked by an older 'nanny'. With its monochrome stock and use of intertitles, the film is artfully crafted to replicate and pay homage to the visual style of turn-of-the-century films. Simultaneously, however, it presents an unofficial, alternate history of Russian cinema: one of pornography, and mafia bosses-turned-directors, rather than one of technical innovation and revolution, of pioneering theorists and auteurs.

Thus, in this sepia-toned tale of flagellation, exploitation and murder, Balabanov effectively strips away the sheen of grandeur with which official film history has, for so long, endowed Russian cinema, and instead explores (quite literally speaking) its fleshy underbelly.

Balabanov articulates this revision of Russian film history, first and foremost, via the character of the filmmaker/cinematographer, Putilov (Vadim Prokhorov). Far from being a visionary artist or intellectual, Putilov is neither 'kinoeye', nor 'kinofist', but simply 'kinoteen'. Though he is admittedly fascinated with his recently acquired movie camera and the prospect of capturing, for the first time, 'moving pictures', Putilov not only has no political or artistic mandate, but no real say at all over the films that he makes. He simply captures what is put in front of him to record, partly out of sheer fear of his gangster boss, Johann. Johann himself, arguably both the creative director and executive producer of the flagellation films, is equally far from attaining 'auteur status'. He is a ruthless businessman looking to profit, at any cost, from the soft-core pornographic images he creates and circulates throughout St. Petersburg with the help of his henchman Viktor Ivanovich (Viktor Sukhorukov). Composition, framing, lighting, narrative, and more generally, the artistry of filmmaking as a whole, seem to be of no concern to Johann. His is a cinema of a sole attraction: sexual titillation. The portrayal of these two men, the first a bewildered teen and the second a mob boss bereft of any artistic vision, points to Balabanov's own scepticism as to the illustrious reputation of Classical Russian cinema. He not only calls into question the cultural elevation of the Classical Russian auteur; he willfully deconstructs the image of Russian filmmaking as a revered and respected art.

Post-Soviet Freakonomics

While set in 1890s Russia, *Of Freaks and Men* expresses economic concerns very much rooted in the film's 1990s post-Soviet context. Surveying the socio-economic landscape of post-Soviet Russia, Anuradha Chenoy argues that, as the collapse of the collective system gave way to privatization, ownership of some 100,000 state-owned enterprises throughout the former Soviet Union was transferred to an emergent "new class of individual entrepreneurs" (190). Although there is no state-imposed economic reform in the late 19th century world of *Of Freaks and Men*, a similar transfer or shift of ownership and economic power drives the film's narrative progression. At the film's outset, the representatives of the Russian bourgeoisie, the Chekhovian patriarchs, Engineer Radlov (Igor Shibanov) and Doctor Stasov (Aleksandr Mezentsev), possess the greatest social and economic agency. The mem-

bers of the Russian underclass, the Radlovs' maid, Dariya (Tatyana Polonskaya), the Stasovs' maid, Grunia (Daria Lesnikova), Grunia's brother, Johann, and his second in command, Viktor Ivanovich, all serve the traditional heads of household in some form—making deliveries, fashion-

six dollars a month (227).[6] *Of Freaks and Men* mirrors this economic upheaval as characters representative of the intelligentsia, Doctor Radlov and Engineer Stasov, are violently overthrown by their servants and employees. Thus, just as the introduction of Western capitalism in post-Soviet Rus-

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ing portraits and cleaning house. As the film progresses, however, just as the pornographic pictures infiltrate and disturb the quiet order of the Radlov and Stasov homes, so does the underclass gradually penetrate and seize control of these bourgeois spaces, assuming all the socio-economic clout of the previous inhabitants. It is not by accident that it is Johann, the character who has recently returned from an extended period of time living in the West, who initiates this overturning and restructuring of the hierarchy of power. Johann provides the startup capital (also a central motif in *Dead Man's Bluff*), which he acquired in the West, that sets the wheels of the pornography industry—and thus the central conflicts of the narrative—in motion.

Moreover, Johann's Western capital is arguably representative of the rapid "shock therapy"[5] introduction of Western capitalist economics to the post-Soviet states and the ensuing social transformations it instigated. As Aslund and Olcott note, the transition to a free market economy in the 1990s brought about massive shifts in the balance of power in Russian society. New classes gained control of government and industry, while "beggars and homeless persons [became] frequent sights in the cities, many [coming] from the old Soviet white-collar" (xv). Members of the intelligentsia (specialists, scientists, professors, etc.) were among those most deeply affected by these changes, as cuts in state subsidies drove wages down to unparalleled lows and unemployment levels up to record highs. According to Chossudovsky, between 1992 and 1993, the average university professor in Russia earned just eight dollars a month, and the average nurse working in a Russian urban clinic, just

sia radically upended the nation's class structure, the arrival of Western capital in *Of Freaks and Men* instigates drastic rearticulations of the film's social hierarchy.

Amid an array of pornographers and killers, *Of Freaks and Men* depicts a world devoid of any perceptible hero or positive model according to Dondurei and Mikhalkov's terms. Although the film does at first seem to construct a dichotomy of 'freaks' versus 'men', the borders between freakishness and normality grow increasingly tenuous. As the narrative unravels, it becomes clear that, hidden beneath the intricate Baroque architecture of the city, is a sordid clandestine world and, behind the prim and proper appearances of the normative characters, lurk dark, subversive desires. Ultimately, it becomes impossible to distinguish between freaks and men as the two, once-discrete worlds, collide and finally collude. The freaks are exposed as having distinctly human weaknesses: Johann has an almost tender attachment to his elderly nanny and is so devastated by her death that he suffers a severe epileptic fit; Viktor, in spite of his ominous toothy grin and sinister expression, is painfully insecure vis-à-vis his boss Johann and has a childlike fascination with the conjoined twins Kolia and Tolia (Dyo Aloysha and Chingiz Tsydendambayev). Simultaneously, the vanguards of normativity are either killed (as in the case of Stasov and Radlov) or implicated in perverse or deviant enterprises: Ekaterina and Liza sado-masochistically submit themselves to public flagellation; Putilov assists in, and subsequently profits from Liza's exploitation, stealing the footage from Johann's camera and using it to become a famous director; Kolia and Tolia, become singing sideshows, coerced into touring and starring in Johann's fetish films.

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5. An economic reform model for "instantly creating a free market economy" in the post-Soviet states popularized primarily by economist Jeffrey Sachs, who theorized that "the West should reshape the life of the entire East European region" (25).

6. Calculated in U.S. dollars. In 1993, one U.S. dollar was worth approximately 1,000 rubles (Chenoy 195).

Thus the film stages a series of social upheavals and reversals of power, recalling Žižek's description of the transition from 'really existing Socialism' to 'really existing capitalism' in Eastern Europe, which, he observes:

> brought about a series of comic reversals of the sublime democratic enthusiasm into the ridiculous. The dignified East German crowds gathering around Protestant churches and heroically defying *Stasi* terror, all of a sudden turned into vulgar consumers of bananas and cheap pornography; the civilized Czechs mobilized by the appeal of Havel and other cultural icons, all of a sudden turned into cheap swindlers of Western tourists. (71)

A similar series of 'comic reversals' punctuates *Of Freaks and Men*; though Liza, Putilov, and Kolia and Tolia all defiantly revolt against (and ultimately unseat) the tyrants that have oppressed and dehumanized them, their fervour quickly fades as they take to consuming and participating in 'cheap pornography' and sideshows.

Balabanov's presentation of the birth of Russian film is thus completely de-mythologized. He casts turn-of-the-century cinema, and the players involved in its conception, as amoral, exploitative and more concerned with films as profitable goods than works of art or experiments in the technical possibilities of the medium. Moreover, none of the characters, even those who flee St. Petersburg, seem able to escape their deviant proclivities. Tolia dies of alcohol poisoning in the East and Liza willingly re-enacts her sexual abuse (paying a sex trade worker to spank her in the front window of a sex shop) in an unspecified red light district in the West. At the conclusion of the film, no positive 'hero' is salvageable from the surviving cast of 'freaks'. Like Johann, left aimlessly afloat on the ice floes of the Neva, the viewer is cast adrift in the bleak amorality of Balabanov's post-Soviet parable.

"We're In A Free Country Now!":
Gangsters Run Amok in the Free Market

Dead Man's Bluff, a dark comedy that follows two inept gangster brothers trying to make it big on a drug deal gone bad, opens with a view into an economics lesson at a Moscow university. Though unrelated to the film's central narrative, the opening episode effectively frames Balabanov's film as an examination of free-market economics, crime and amorality in post-Soviet Russia through a farcical story of halfwit gangsters and corrupt policemen. The film, which arrived on the heels of a three-year hiatus and two unfinished projects, received far cooler responses (from both critics and film festival audiences) than Balabanov's previous films. That the film was rather poorly received is not entirely surprising. In terms of its visual style

and tone, it has little in common with Balabanov's earlier work. It is his first comedy, the first of his films for which he did not write the screenplay, and the first not filmed by his long-time collaborator, cinematographer Sergei Astakhov. Shot over the course of a month, the film's visual style is certainly not comparable to the elaborate mise-en-scene and striking cinematography seen in *Of Freaks and Men*. One critic goes as far as to claim that "to speak of cinematography in *Dead Man's Bluff* is akin to discussing the brush strokes of a child's finger-painting" (Seckler, paragraph 4). In response to these harsh criticisms, both Balabanov and the film's lead actors have repeatedly retorted that the film was not conceived as an art house project, but on the contrary, as an intentionally poorly shot joke, a hyperbolically commercial comedy. During the film's press conference at its premier at the 2005 *Kinotavr* Film Festival, lead actor, Alexei Panin, stated "It's a joke! We're joking in this film! The blood, the corpses—it's comical! You need not take it all so seriously!" With sixteen theatrically bloody killings and a multitude of star cameo appearances[7] throughout the film, it seems highly plausible that Balabanov deliberately set out to create a tongue-in-cheek critique of the type of action-packed, star-studded commercial blockbusters that have increasingly dominated the Russian box-office since the late 1990s. In spite of the criticisms waged at the film, and even the filmmaker's own assertion that it is essentially an elaborate joke, on an ideological level, I argue *Dead Man's Bluff* constitutes Balabanov's most subversive deconstruction of Russian national mythologies, the concept of the Russian national hero and Balabanov's most explicit critique of mainstream commercial cinema in post-Soviet Russia.

Dead Man's Bluff begins and ends in 2005, but the majority of it takes place, as a title indicates to the audience, sometime in "the mid-1990s." The film is Balabanov's look back, from a contemporary perspective, at the first post-Soviet decade in Russia, the period in which he first earned his reputation as an alternative Russian auteur. The tagline for the film "for those who survived the 90's"[8] can be read as both a reference to the social and economic hardships Russian citizens faced in the 1990s, as well as to the dismal state of the Russian film industry during that time period. Like *Of Freaks and Men*, *Dead Man's Bluff* actively questions and destablizes Russian national mythology, as well as the notion of the 'liberating' influence that Western democracy, and capital were to have on post-Soviet Russia. In her 2003

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7. Nikita Mikhalhov, himself one of Balabanov's most vocal critics even has a small role in the film, which further suggests that it is indeed intentionally hyperbolic and farcical.

8. The subtitle is also ironic, given that the vast majority of the characters in the film—save the two leads and a few minor players—do not, in fact, survive Balabanov's 'mid-1990s'.

investigation of life in the post-Soviet era, *Russia Between Yesterday and Tomorrow*, Pruska-Carroll argues:

> Now all Russians are free to express themselves. Freedom of expression, that tenet of Western democracy taken so much for granted, is finally a right in Russia. People are no longer afraid to speak. Moreover, they

expression, the fact that dozens of journalists attempting to expose corruption in the Russian government (and collusion with the mafia) have been murdered since the fall of the Soviet Union undercuts the myth that Western ideals have had a singularly liberating impact on post-Soviet society. It is precisely this irony that is played out in the film,

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To speak of cinematography in *Dead Man's Bluff* is akin to discussing the brush strokes of a child's finger-painting.

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have that essential corollary to freedom of expression: access to information. In my opinion, these rights represent the greatest gain in this period of transition and the greatest hope for the future of Russia. (13)

While it is undeniable that the lifting of heavy censorship regulations and isolationist policies in the states of the former Soviet Union greatly impacted citizens' rights to freedom of expression, the opening scene of the mid-1990s storyline in *Dead Man's Bluff* calls into question this belief that Western democracy and capitalism has been a truly liberating force. Foregrounded by rows of pale corpses laid out on tables, a man known only by his moniker 'the butcher' (Kirill Pirogov) talks gleefully about the new post-Soviet condition exclaiming "We're in a free country now!" while preparing to torture an anonymous man (Aleksandr Bashirov) bound to a chair in front of him. In this scene Balabanov highlights the paradox of the post-Soviet era: though it may have abolished certain communist strictures limiting citizens' freedom of expression, it also permitted the birth of a new and highly powerful Russian Mafia. As Chenoy describes:

> The weakening of the state's role and its simultaneous withdrawal from several important functions together with the hurried reform of economic and political processes assisted the rise of the Mafia in Russian Society. The decentralization of state power and the weakening of old safety nets led to an increase in crime [… and] the respect given to capital of any kind, even illegal capital, encouraged economic crimes […] Further, the strict weapons laws of Soviet times weakened and [were] not strictly enforced. The population thus [currently] has 3 million registered weapons and several times more unregistered weapons. (225)

Moreover, while it may be true that, officially speaking, post-Soviet Russians have increased rights to freedom of

as it is the access to and free flow of information/communication (the corrupt cop's [Viktor Sukhorukov] discovery of a note in the pocket of the butcher's torture victim, and Sergei and Seymon's acquisition of the Ethiopian's [Grigori Siyatvinda] home address) that triggers and fuels the film's bloody spate of violent exchanges.

In terms of its discussion of economics in post-Soviet Russia, the film explores, in an exaggerated and bloody fashion, the darker side of the "redivision of property" in 1990s Russia that the economics professor discusses in the film's opening scene. As the professor states, "startup capital is everything." Like Johann and Viktor Ivanovich, the cast of characters in *Dead Man's Bluff* (ranging from incompetent hitmen, to corrupt policemen, and garage drug lab technicians) all ruthlessly seek out this all-important capital to make a new life for themselves in this new Russia. A 2006 review of the film in *The Washington Times* fittingly describes it as "the story of gangsters run amok in the chaotic free-market streets of a 1990s Russia awash in American music and McDonalds." To be sure, the film's setting is nothing short of chaotic, as the pursuit of startup capital fuels the ever-growing death toll in the film. Balabanov portrays, in a highly graphic fashion, the "high human cost" of post-Soviet economic reforms, which made many Russians rich but also "created a vast new underclass" (Aslund and Olcott xv). In *Dead Man's Bluff*, this conception of the 'underclass' is taken to a literal extreme, as the characters who are unable to create capital or turn a profit end up dead. In the post-Soviet world of the film, it seems Western capitalism has entrapped all of the characters in a game of 'Dead Man's Bluff' (Russian roulette) as they gamble their lives for the chance at 'capital of any kind'. As with *Of Freaks and Men*, characters undergo a series of 'comic reversals' in this game: drug lords become doormen and street thugs make themselves over into successful businessmen. However, of the few characters who manage to 'survive the

1990s', all remain inescapably caught in what Žižek terms a "whirlpool of ruthless commercialization and economic colonization"—the 'vulgar consumers' of McDonalds and American pop music (71).

The film thus aims to discredit the myth that "after the Soviet collapse a phoenix of liberal capitalism would arise from the ashes" (Chenoy 217). This 'phoenix' that mainstream post-Soviet heritage films seek to raise (in a glossed-over resurrection of Russia's 'glorious imperial past') is nowhere to be found in Balabanov's films; instead the transition to democracy and the free market is depicted as a violent and traumatic blow to the Russian economy and the Russian people. Finally, of the never-ending array of ruthless halfwit criminals that litter the screen, none seem to operate via any moral code whatsoever, and certainly none qualify, even remotely, as positive new Russian heroes. Gangsters and cops are different in uniform only: both are equally corrupt in their actions. Even the mafia boss' young son appears to be completely morally detached from all of the violence he witnesses, crafting miniature cemeteries for fun. As the promotional material for the film's DVD release states, the film is a meditation "on the mean free market streets of modern day Russia [a] circus mirror world […in which] cops, gangsters, lawbreakers and lawmakers can be interchangeable [and] the only real liberty is the freedom to kill."

Now, nearly two decades after the Russian film industry was virtually decimated in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian directors still struggle to create films with "the power to move post-Soviet audiences back into cinemas" (Larsen 511). Nonetheless, recent Russian box office successes such as Andrei Konchalovsky's *Antikiller* films (2002, 2003) and Timur Bekmambetov's *Night Watch* series (2004, 2006, [the third installment of the series scheduled for release in 2009]), which outsold their American competition at the time of their respective releases, point to a potential resurgence of Russian cinema both domestically and within the international film market. Though Balabanov's films are neither big-budget blockbusters of that ilk, nor the type of heritage film his veteran colleagues called for, they have, nevertheless, helped generate the increased presence and visibility that Russian cinema is presently enjoying at home and abroad. Rejecting the "conventional wisdom" of his cinematic peers, and instead offering a "funhouse mirror" vision of Russian history and post-Soviet life, Balabanov has attained a sort of freakonomic[9] success, examining the perverse "hidden side"

of post-Soviet life (Levitt and Dubner 13-14). However, regardless of one's personal or moral stance on Balabanov's violence, amorality, dark and subversive subject matter, and somewhat uneven aesthetic, his films are undeniably "landmarks in the history of post-Soviet cinema" (Larsen 511) that offer a uniquely alternative (re)vision of Russian history, economics and, above all, its most important art.

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9. Levitt and Dubner's application of the analytical tools of economics to the study of a diverse range of "freakish" socio-political and cultural "curiosities." Freakonomics has as its mandate: "stripping a layer or two from the surface of modern life and seeing what is happening underneath" or exploring, as the book's subtitle reads, "the hidden side of everything" (13-14).

Cinematic Prosthesis:

History, Memory and Sally Potter's *Orlando*

Laurynas Navidauskas

In the heyday of figurative painting, it was customary to classify and evaluate works of art by their subject matter. This tendency is reflected by French chronicler of the arts André Félibien, writing in 1667 that "the most noble of all these [kinds of painting] is that which represents History in a composition of several figures" (qtd. in Duro 2). While the genre of historical painting in contemporary Western art has almost vanished, re-presentations of historical subjects in other forms of art, such as film, occupy very prominent positions. As filmmaker and film scholar Jeffrey Skoller suggests, "fiction and history are genres that signify in the same manner, producing the effects of self-contained verisimilitude" (xxii). Some movies, like Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and *Titanic* (1997), create their own verisimilar narratives, providing a mediated experience of official history shaping national and cross-national collective memory. Curiously, other films, such as *The Alamo* (John Lee Hancock, 2004) and *Miracle at St. Anna* (Spike Lee, 2008), despite having what seemed like the right ingredients and following the usual recipe, fail in all possible respects.

Movies created with some degree of independence from studio systems (either from major entertainment industries, like Hollywood, or from state-sponsored ones) tend to display more flexibility in form, content, and audience impact. Oftentimes, alternative cinema dealing with historical subjects strives to unsettle both historical and fictional verisimilitude. Skoller characterizes James Benning's *Utopia* (1998) as a film that "constructs history as a complex interplay between 'what actually happened' and the virtualities and imaginings to which such events give rise" (101). On a more mainstream end of the spectrum, Mabel O. Wilson discusses Jim Jarmush's *Mystery Train* (1989) in comparison to the re-presentations of official history in The National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, Tennessee, concluding that the latter displays "static historical nar-

rative," while the former with its "playful fusion of local myth, collective memory, and popular culture captures the polyvalent leitmotifs of the blues" (20).

The above examples address historical narratives from the perspective of film production; equally important is the examination of the effects of such narratives on the audience. The impact of movies on the formation of individual and collective memory cannot be understated. Anton Kaes suggests that "surpassing schools and universities, film and television have become the most effective (and paradoxically least acknowledged) institutional vehicles for shaping historical consciousness" (112). Rather than considering alternative production modes, in this article I intend to look at a particular alternative mode of reception. The mode in question was theorized by Alison Landsberg in her 2004 study *Prosthetic Memory*, exploring the process and effects of memory prosthesis in fiction and in reality, creating a more optimistic (and arguably, more constructive) approach than, for example, Kaes'.

In order to formulate a model of alternative spectatorship, I apply use Landsberg's theory of prosthetic memory to analyze Sally Potter's *Orlando* (1992), an adaptation of Virginia Woolf's 1928 novel of the same name. The circumstances of *Orlando*'s production are quite unusual: the film is a co-production of the UK, the USSR, France, Italy and the Netherlands, and was filmed in the UK, Russia and Uzbekistan. The film is far from a conventional historical blockbuster. When discussing its funding, lead actor Tilda Swinton claims that "the Americans didn't understand it at all" (qtd. in Glaessner 13), hence the necessity of finding financing for the film within Europe. The subject matter of the film is equally far from that of a typical historical epic: the title character is a man who later becomes a woman, and who does not age (at our first encounter of Orlando in Elizabethan England he is sixteen; at the end of the novel, in 1928, she is thirty-six). Both the film and the novel span

four hundred years, from Elizabethan to twentieth century England. While Woolf attributes this to Orlando living in a different time than our clock time, Potter attempts no explanations, except for a mysterious invocation on Orlando by Queen Elizabeth in the beginning of the movie: "Do not fade. Do not wither. Do not grow old." Orlando experiences four centuries of England's history, transforming it into his/her own experiential archive.

Contrary to Orlando's experience, prosthetic memories as defined by Landsberg are "memories of experiences through which [the rememberer] did not live" (25). As an example, she cites a short fiction film *The Thieving Hand* (J. Stuart Blackton, 1908). The plot of the film centers on a one-armed beggar who acquires a prosthetic arm, which, unbeknownst to him, previously belonged to a robber. Latent memories contained in the prosthetic arm force its new owner to repeat crimes committed in its previous incarnation, ultimately landing the beggar in jail. In addition to *The Thieving Hand,* Landsberg suggests *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) and *Total Recall* (Paul Verhoeven, 1990) as two texts with examples of (literally) implanted, prosthetic memories.

L andsberg's central thesis is that all mass media, mainstream or alternative, contain the potential of becoming such prosthetic memories (48). Landsberg, however, is not the first scholar to suggest this—Kaes presented a similar thesis in 1990, arguing that, for the most part, history experienced through cinema would most likely "overwhelm and colonize the audience's historical imagination instead of stimulating and liberating it" (118). Searching for alternatives, he discusses three films—Alexander Kluge's *The Patriot* (1980), Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985), and Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's *Hitler: A Film from Germany* (1977)—as having "one thing in common: they defy the all-encompassing, homogenizing power of mass media and their control over public memory" (124). Kaes acknowledges that these films are "marginal phenomena," yet he does not lament this fact; on the contrary, he suggests that "in today's culture hope comes from the margins" (124).

Landsberg takes the idea of cinema's influence on public memory much further. While Kaes sees most historical films as cluttering public memory with homogenized narratives (112), and alternative cinema only puncturing these narratives "in some small fashion" (124), Landsberg begins exploring the nature of memory prosthesis through cinema withholding value judgments. She suggests that the technologies of mass culture not only change the concept of an authentic experience (48), but also, through market mechanisms, make such experiences portable and transferable (27). Moreover, the vividness of film—achieved through means such as invisible editing, suspension of disbelief and

identification with the protagonist—"might affect [people] so significantly that the images would actually become part of their own archive of experience" (30). Thus, Orlando's direct experience of centuries of history becomes a model for the effects of contemporary cinema: we all can obtain similar historical memories vicariously, through the process of cinematic prosthesis.

This observation raises the question of the authenticity of prosthetic memories. Initially, this question may seem to have a very obvious answer: these memories are implanted in the recipient, unconsciously and without prior consent; in Landsberg's words, they defy "the power of biological logic and of 'organic memory'" (28). Surely then, the recipients of such memories must get rid of them in order to reveal their true selves, as seen in, for example, the Wachowski brothers' science-fiction blockbuster *The Matrix* (1999). Such a notion has been addressed within Western liberal philosophy most famously, perhaps, in Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, where he devises a thought experiment of the Experience Machine. This machine, through the use of neuropsychology, "would give you any experience you desired [...] you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain" (42). Nozick proceeds with three reasons why one would not want to be plugged into such a machine: "First, we want to *do* certain things, not just have the experience of doing them. [...] A second reason for not plugging in is that we want to *be* a certain way, to be a certain kind of person. Someone floating in a tank is an indeterminate blob" (43, emph. orig.). Nozick's final objection to such a machine is that the experiences would be man-made, predetermined and ready for our consumption—much like prosthetic memories are.

Landsberg addresses the problem of the authenticity of prosthetic memories, arguing that, contrary to claims made by both Baudrillard and Jameson, even people having mediated experiences, experience them as real (33). Landsberg proceeds with a number of different examples ('experiential museums', historical reenactments, historical fiction blockbusters) where prosthetic memories allow individuals "to experience history in a personal and very bodily way" by providing them "with the collective opportunity of having an experiential relationship to a collective or cultural past they did not experience" (33). Thus, it is possible to provide the first reply to Nozick's three objections—while humans in the Experience Machine are stimulated to feel as though they are having the experiences they desire, in the case of prosthetic memories they are actually *having* the experiences related to prosthetic memories. Even if the acquisition of the memories leading to the experiences may seem inauthentic, the experiences themselves are indeed authentic.

Though perhaps the most conspicuous, the question of the authenticity of such memories is secondary to the question of their impact on the audience's subjectivity and the formation of collective memory. Traditionally, as suggested above by Kaes, all but fringe filmic narratives are used to 'colonize' viewers' historical imagination. *Orlando* is by no means a 'marginal phenomenon' (Glaessner reports a £6.5-million budget [13]), yet it provides alternatives to at least two kinds of homogenized narratives.

Challenging the first and most obvious of the homogenized narratives involves unsettling the mythologies of four hundred years of English history. A notable difference between Woolf's novel and Potter's film is that the latter deliberately tries to move away from the (ironic) historical-document feel of the former. Woolf employs techniques such as specific dates, uses of (fictional) primary sources (*e.g.* Orlando's conference of Dukedom is narrated from "the diary of John Fenner Brigge [...] His manuscript is full of burns and holes, some sentences quite unintelligible" [117]). Woolf's fictional biographer also makes numerous attempts to explain incongruities in Orlando's chronology (91–3) and even provides an index at the end of the novel (297–9).

Potter's treatment of history is different from Woolf's. She abandons exact dates in favour of half-centuries, puncturing the film's flow with intertitles: 1600—death; 1610—love; 1650—poetry; 1700—politics; 1750—society; 1850—sex; birth. (By contrast, in the novel, Orlando's son is born "on Thursday, March the 20th, at three o'clock in the morning" [Woolf 266].) Period music is mixed with a contemporary score, and the costumes and sets are very stylized, created by the production designers using "only a few, typical objects from each period" (Glaessner 14). Finally, Potter herself admits that *Orlando* "is not a historical film. Orlando is a completely contemporary character" (14).

While in strict terms *Orlando* is not a historical film, it nevertheless deals with history. Potter explains the film as her attempt to address "an addiction [of] English culture to mythologies of the past" (qtd. in Glaessner 14). As Potter is working from Woolf's novel, these mythologies are already twice or thrice removed from their origin before reaching the viewer. Mainstream historical cinema, on the other hand, tries to fuse historical mythologies and filmic texts. Marc Ferro discusses four strata of American "visions of history": Protestant ideology, the Civil War, melting pot policies, and the reaction to melting pot policies, showing indelible links between official history, American myth and narrative cinema (146). Potter, contrary to the tradition of the historical cinema of Hollywood, aims to deconstruct the fusion of historical myth and the filmic text.

William Guynn, dwelling on Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* (places of memory), states that "film can be a place of memory insofar as it engages the public in a collective recollection that revivifies or creates meaningful links between a past event and the identity of a social group in the present" (178). To Potter, the Elizabethan era is a particular point of origin for common conceptions of English identity, and the dramatic arc of the film is determined by the tension between the burden bestowed by the past, and Orlando's search for personal identity. Potter warns that vicarious memories, even (as defined by Landsberg)

when rightfully belonging to a particular ethnic group, can be excessively burdening. In the course of the film, according to Potter, "Orlando gradually [...] loses everything, but gains herself in the process" (qtd. in Glaessner 14). At the film's conclusion (in distinction to that of the novel), Orlando has a daughter, writes her own biography, and is seen visiting the estate she lost. Potter uses voice-over narration reminiscent of the opening of Woolf's novel to describe this unburdening:

> She—for there can be no doubt about her sex—is visiting the house she finally lost for the first time in over a hundred years... She has lived for four hundred years and hardly aged a day; and because this is England, everyone pretends not to notice. But she has changed. She is no longer trapped by destiny. And, ever since she let go of the past, she found her life was beginning.

The second kind of prosthetic memory in *Orlando* is that of a search for personal identity. While the exploration of historical and national identity is dictated by the historical (or mock-historical) nature of the novel, an even greater identity probe in *Orlando* revolves around gender. The film complicates conventions of gender and sexuality, particularly through casting: Orlando is played by the infamously polyamorous Tilda Swinton; Elizabeth I by English gay icon Quentin Crisp; and another prominent gay figure—singer Jimmy Somerville—appears as a castrato and an angel. The iconography of the film furthers this ambiguity—androgynous Swinton resembles portraits of the young Queen Elizabeth (despite a completely different description of Orlando by Woolf); the sense of androgyny is furthered by the costumes: men look quite effeminate, while Orlando's daughter in the very end of the movie, prior to revealing a braid she wears, could be mistaken for a boy. It is important to note that to Potter "*Orlando* is not so much about femininity and difference as about Woolf's notion of an essential self that lies beyond the gender" (qtd. in Glaessner 14). After Orlando undergoes a sex transformation during the second trance, she looks at her now female body in the mirror and utters, "Same person, no difference at all. Just a different sex."

One of the most influential feminist critiques of mainstream narrative filmmaking has been formulated by Laura Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," where she argues that the techniques of narrative filmmaking privilege an active male gaze (that of the spectator as well as the characters on screen), while the female characters are either constantly fetishized or constantly punished (348–9). Defying one of the most prominent conventions of filmmaking, Orlando often gazes back at the spectator, making her the possessor of the active gaze. Moreover, even though working from Woolf's stylistically rich material,

Potter rewrites most of the dialogue and voiceover, insisting on giving Orlando her own voice, and making Orlando, as suggested above, a contemporary character in non-contemporary settings. Such a quest to establish a character identity that defies the confines of gender, property and cultural myths presents a prominent challenge to patriarchy in cinema and historiography.

Landsberg suggests that in "the modern era, the urgency of memory projects and remembering is an attempt less to authenticate the past than to generate possible courses of action in the present" (45). *Orlando* seems to be a history-based film striving to let go of the past, a prosthetic memory permitting one to redefine identity beyond gender and cultural mythologies. While Kaes saw memory prosthesis through mass media as leading towards, quoting Bruno Strauss, "swiftly spreading identical memories over the earth" (112), filmic texts may also, as my study of *Orlando* highlights, lead to the creation of alternative modes of reception, concurring with Landsberg's suggestion that films as prosthetic memories "may become the grounds for political alliances and the production of new, potentially counterhegemonic public spheres" (34). Thus, the concept of prosthetic memories provides the possibility of not only seeing non-mainstream movies as containing such a counterhegemonic potential, but also of making the audiences central in choosing alternatives to official history and homogenized narratives.

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Eyeing Resistance:

Alanis Obomsawin's Third Cinema/Gaze/World

Tia Wong

There is power in looking.
- bell hooks (197)

I don't want to be an outside eye looking in.
- Alanis Obomsawin (qtd. in Steven 184)

In their manifesto, "Towards a Third Cinema," Solanas and Gettino seek to revitalize cinema's role in revolution and liberation. Third Cinema and its project of decolonization rely on an investment in the audience's active spectatorship—one that does not merely observe; instead, through witnessing the truth of its oppression, the audience challenges (neo)colonialism and the colonial production of national histories. Solanas and Gettino's model of Third Cinema applies not only to the 'Third World', but is also connected to and informs alternative world cinema. The concept of alternativity, however, may be more conducive to Solanas and Gettino's goal of combating (neo)colonialism because it signals a less marginalizing framework for discussing 'Third World' films. Indeed, the discourse of marginality that circulates through the use of the term 'Third World' may be applied unintentionally to discourses on Third Cinema. Thus, although it is productive to ex-amine Solanas and Gettino's model of Third Cinema, it is also necessary to move toward theories of alternativity in order to trouble the limitations inherent in the concept of a 'Third World'.

Third Cinema's links to alternative world cinema foreground the ways in which national cinemas in countries such as Canada are categorized not only within national borders and by national specificity, but also within the larger cultural production and exchanges in a globalized market. As an alternative mode of filmmaking to mainstream, narrative films in the 'First World', Third Cinema's aesthetics remap the political, economic, and cultural conditions of production, distribution, and exhibition of world cinemas. The aesthetic re-visioning of colonialism in Canadian film-maker Alanis Obomsawin's documentaries is just such an example of Third Cinema's objectives being utilized in the 'First World'. Solanas and Gettino's vision of a revolutionary, combative, and decolonizing cinema that attacks the political and legal apparatuses of the dominant nation-state emerges throughout Obomsawin's documentaries.

Obomsawin's work grapples with and unsettles accepted notions of national history and belonging. In *Incident at Restigouche* (1984) and *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Re-*

sistance (1993), the "power in looking" (hooks 197) agitates the naturalized narration of Aboriginal history and disarms colonial representations of Aboriginal people. *Restigouche* presents the 1981 dispute between the Micmac Nation and the Quebec government and provincial police over the government's violations of the Micmac Nation's salmon-fishing rights. *Kanehsatake* documents the 1990 Mohawk Nation protest against a golf course development on their land in Oka, Quebec. By examining the filmmaker's and spectator's roles in Third Cinema, contextualizing this dis-

Figure 1: The Confrontational Gaze. *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* (1993).

cussion within E. Ann Kaplan's and bell hooks' theories on the power in looking, and analyzing how the documentaries' anti-colonial resistance makes visible Kaplan's and hooks' theories, I intend to argue how Obomsawin's work, although produced within the 'First World', establishes alternative ways to view colonial narrations of national history.

Although the films emerge from cultural and political climates dissimilar from those of colonized 'Third World' nations, I locate my analysis of *Restigouche* and *Kanehsatake* within Third Cinema because Obomsawin shares in the desire combat a colonialist agenda and cultivate a spectator-actor-accomplice. In their manifesto, Solanas and Gettino highlight the limits of traditional forms of spectatorship: "Man is accepted only as a passive and consuming object; *rather than having his ability to make history recognized, he is only permitted to read history, contemplate it, listen to it, and undergo it*" (51). Obomsawin subverts this spectatorship by inviting the audience to re-read history. Moreover, the open form of Third Cinema is especially well-suited to First Nations filmmakers because there is a significant continuity between forms of oral tradition and ceremonial story-telling and the structures of reception of Third Cinema. This continuity consists of a sharing of responsibility in the construction of the text, where both the film-maker and the spectators play a double role as performers and cre-

ators (Gabriel 62). Thus, by utilizing cinema in the struggle against the vestiges of colonialism and neocolonialism, Solanas and Gettino's revolutionary impulses converge with Obomsawin's documentary practices despite temporal and geographical distances, as well as diverse cultural and political differences, arising between their works.

E. Ann Kaplan's theories on the power in looking, similarly take up this interrogation of colonial discourse. For Kaplan, women filmmakers who "produc[e] new ways of seeing, new readings of the past, as well as new images of inter-racial looking relations" participate in the "healing [of] imperialized eyes" (219). She reads these filmmakers' ambitions to re-present their histories as a response to the colonial images that were produced for and by the predominately white population. Kaplan's assertion that "easing the pain of having had to endure the imperial gaze is most needed for those whose bodies were damaged by the camera" (222) illuminates the challenge that Obomsawin's films accept. *Restigouche* and *Kanehsatake* destabilize the racist representations of Aboriginal people in order to recuperate their bodies and histories from the "imperial gaze" (222). Indeed, through a dialogue between the past and the present, Obomsawin's documentaries reveal that "the openness of Third Cinema is primarily an openness towards history as a site of possible action" (Wayne 149).

bell hooks also evaluates history as a domain in which looking relations are formed, specifically through the discriminatory relations between the (white) colonizer and the colonized. hooks' essay "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators" addresses how the colonial repression of the act of looking exposes the "power in looking." Although hooks analyzes black female spectators, her discussion of the relationship between colonized peoples and the power of the look is further applicable to Obomsawin's work. For the colonized people, the power in looking facilitates their resistance to the hegemonic imaginary, foreclosing the ca-

pability and desire of the oppressed to be the "creator of ideology" (Solanas and Gettino 51). Similarly, Gittings' discussion of Obomsawin's work identifies it as "a site of resistance to the white colonizing gaze of the Québec state that sutures the viewer into an identification with the Mic-mac [and Mohawk] subject position[s] through interviews and subjective camera shots" (217). Gittings' reading of Obomsawin's films, which informs my own, gestures toward Solanas and Gettino's demand that both audiences and filmmakers actively engage in the process of decolonization.

There are three distinct variations of the gaze in *Restigouche* and *Kanehsatake* that confer power onto the Micmacs and Mohawks and align the spectator with an anti-colonial and defiant Aboriginal viewpoint. In the first variation, which challenges normalized inter-racial looking relations, the Indigenous people adopt a *confrontational gaze* (Figure 1) toward the agents of the nation-state while the spectator occupies an Aboriginal perspective via the camera's positioning. I call the second variation the *covert gaze* (Figure 2), which places the oppressed in the position to look secretly without being seen, to bear witness

of time—a rare onscreen appearance by the Abenaki film-maker whose presence usually takes the form of voiceover. The camera and the audience's gaze remain fixed on the filmmaker, yet this moment is unmediated by dialogue, as she offers no verbal response. Obomsawin's appearance disrupts the visual and aural rhythm of the documentary, emphasizing the ways in which the attitudes of the racist nation-state are incongruous and insensitive to those of the First Nations. Indeed, the silence embodied by the absence of voiceover and dialogue allows Obomsawin's accusatory gaze to penetrate the colonial discourse that Lessard and his parliamentary colleagues traffic throughout the crises featured in both films.

In *Kanehsatake*, the confrontational exchange of looks unravels the obscured links between the colonial 'white man's burden' and present-day racism. In a documentary that uses mostly straight-on medium, medium-long, or long shots to frame dialogue scenes, the medium close-up shot of Aboriginal protester 'Psycho' and soldier Pierre Daigle, framed from a low angle, draws attention both to their gazes and to those of the spectators (Figure 1). The camera's angle is meant to make the audience uncomfortably aware of its inferior position and rupture the privileged

Figure 2: The Covert Gaze. *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* (1993).

without having the look returned. Finally, I discuss the *denied gaze* (Figure 3) and how reactions to an inability to see serve to unmask the colonial ideology still inscribed within inter-racial looking.

The confrontational and inter-racial exchange of looks between First Nations people and their opponents in the two documentaries aims to reconceptualize colonial attitudes. In *Restigouche*, Obomsawin herself is the bearer of a confrontational gaze. After the Province of Quebec's (PQ) Minister of Fisheries Lucien Lessard refers to the events of 1981 and the October Crisis in his discussion of the fishing agreement's negotiations, the camera slowly pans right to explicitly frame Obomsawin for a significant duration

viewing position associated with the typical non-Aboriginal viewer. In this unusual sequence, Obomsawin deconstructs the spectator's "imperialized eyes" (Kaplan 219) and reconstructs the colonial looking relations and images that dominated television news reports of the protest.

Obomsawin's camera, which may be taken to represent the inside eye of the Aboriginal people looking out at the hegemonic white world, not only demands that the spectator identify with the Aboriginal perspective, but also offers a counter-discourse of the dominant nation-state. If equality, fairness, and multiculturalism are synonymous with Canada, then the existence of a counter-discourse would position the nation-state as racist and intolerant. In

Kanehsatake the sequences that enclose the Mohawk band members within a familial and communal space contradict the national news media's use of "images that were anti-Indigenous or anti-warrior" as a "way of deflecting the world's attention away from Canada's oppressive policies and the intense racism demonstrated by the nightly rioters in Chateauguay and LaSalle towards the Kanienkehaka" (Goodleaf 67). The triangulation of the film(maker), the spectator, and the television media's performance of the narrative of the colonial nation embodies the nation-state's archaic and

to the national media reports that "repeatedly quoted officials who criminalized all the Native people behind the barricades" (Greer 20), Obomsawin forces the viewer "to identify with the dispossession of the Mohawks" (Simons 210). This mobilization of the viewer exemplifies the revolutionary, anti-colonial impulse in Obomsawin's film style.

Another route to challenging the nation-state's ideology arises through what I deem the covert gaze. Since this look is neither acknowledged nor returned by the white RCMP and provincial officers, the Aboriginal person's co-

Figure 3: The Denied Gaze. *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* (1993).

Eurocentric rhetoric as well as Solanas and Gettino's realization that "the making of the film and the making of the revolution [are] inseparable" (MacBean 184).[1] For Solanas, Gettino, and Obomsawin, film production and exhibition are essential practices in the decolonization process.

Operating with an awareness that the "camera is the inexhaustible expropriator of image-weapons; the projector, a gun that can shoot 24 frames per second" (Solanas and Gettino 58), Obomsawin arms the audience with the images and information needed to assemble an attack on Canada's political and legal systems. The opening shots of the golf course in *Kanehsatake* make visible the gulf between the Mohawks' cultural and the state's economic interests: The camera—and therefore the viewer—is not able to join the golfers, being physically separated from them by a fence. Later, the camera tracks alongside the golf course, separated from it by trees, then shows closed entrance gates with the camera/viewer on the outside…the viewer is obliged to be part of the Mohawk experience (Simons 210). In contrast

vert gaze redefines the boundaries of inter-racial looking relations. Naficy's discussion of the belief that "eyes are active, even invasive organs, whose gaze is also construed to be inherently aggressive" (33) is particularly instrumental in understanding the power of the gaze. Naficy's reading of the aggressiveness of the gaze parallels Kaplan's and hooks' theories as well as Obomsawin's film style. Following Naficy's reading, then, the Aboriginal person's covert gaze in Obomsawin's films registers as an aggressive act that invades the discursive space of the hegemonic nation-state.

In a sequence that illustrates the power of the covert gaze in *Restigouche,* Micmac schoolboy Jimmy Molley recalls hiding under the bridge to watch the RCMP and Québec Provincial Police (QPP) raid his reserve. Jimmy's voiceover testimony and the film's reenactment of Jimmy watching the QPP under the bridge foreground the ways in which Jimmy's covert gaze offers him the opportunity to recognize that even though he "thought [the QPP] were with [the Micmacs]," they were actually "not on [his] side." Through Jimmy's covert gaze, the spectator is forced to review the actions of the nation-state and participate in these "new images of inter-racial looking relations" (Kaplan 219). Along with the direct, confrontational gaze, the covert gaze shifts the colonial perspective of the national and provincial police as law enforcers to the anti-colonial perspective that racist attitudes, in fact, undergird their actions.

1. I refer to Bhabha's "DissemiNation" (1994) in order to highlight the ways in which white national subjects and, more surprisingly, First Nations people absorb the "nationalist pedagogy" and then repeat the idealized narrative of a free nation. A scene in *Kanehsatake* that illustrates the potency of this narrative particularly well is the one in which a highway confrontation between the police and an Aboriginal woman climaxes at the moment when she shouts, "This is Canada. Canada. A free country. For everyone."

At the beginning of the documentary, Ellen Gabriel's analysis of the *Sûreté du Québec* (SQ) officers is reminiscent of the concept that eyes are aggressive and invasive. Her account of seeing the spiritless SQ 'robots' not only motivates the film to cut to long shots of the heavily armed swat team wearing gas masks, but also exposes their weaknesses as Gabriel explains that "they were scared…they were like young babies" (Figure 2). Gabriel's descriptions create the image of the SQ as a racist state apparatus that methodically excludes Aboriginal people from the colonial nation-state. Symbolic of Gabriel's agential role in the conflict, her images of the SQ as a machine-like mob recur throughout the documentary. Gabriel's covert gaze—which frames both her first impressions of the SQ as well as those of the spectator—illuminates the ways in which the power of her gaze leads to a re-imagining of the globally recognized portrayal of Canadian peacekeepers.

Paradoxically, the event that most explicitly depicts the power of the gaze is the one in which the ability to see is denied. In *Kanehsatake*, the panic that ensues when the Mohawks put up white sheets to obstruct the military's view demonstrates that notions of colonial mastery and domination are still ingrained into the white man's "right to gaze" (hooks 198). As Aboriginal protester 'Mad Jap' declares, the officers "took bayonets to cut the screen down because they can't see…the only reason they are doing this is because they cannot see" (Figure 3). Indeed, the army resorts to using a crane and massive spotlights to regain their "right to gaze." By denying the military the power of the gaze, the Mohawks expose how the ruling classes, "who assume their right to rule as natural," aim to "control the way the nation perceives itself and, just as importantly, they regulate the way other classes are perceived or represented" (Hayward 192-3). The white screen literally and metaphorically disables colonialism's assumed right to hold the Indigenous people under an oppressive gaze and makes visible the connections between inter-racial looking and power.

In *Restigouche* and *Kanehsatake*, the Micmac and Mohawk people intervene in colonial, inter-racial looking relations and reclaim the power of the gaze. Following the theories set out by Kaplan and hooks, my discussion of the power of the gaze attempts to capture how "looking is the means by which the subject appropriates and internalises reality in order to act back upon it. Some spectacles will encourage an internalisation that is critical and questioning, so that the subject acts back upon the world in a way to change it for the better" (Wayne 148). Obomsawin succeeds in creating a space not only for the Aboriginal people to tell their story, but also for the spectator to re-assess Canadian nationhood and citizenship from an Aboriginal perspective—from behind the barricades. These documentaries grapple with the Aboriginal experiences of colonialist and neocolonialist racist attitudes, laws, and representations within the Canadian nation-state. By foregrounding the 'Third World' gaze inside the nation-state, Obomsawin challenges the hegemonic history of 'First World' dominance. From eyeing resistance to inciting revolution, Obomsawin's Third-World-in-First-World gaze and Third Cinema aggressively and creatively address this process of decolonization. *Restigouche* and *Kanehsatake* both give credence to Trinh T. Minh-Ha's infamous statement: "There is a Third World in every First World" (138). Indeed, we might even venture to say that there is a Third Cinema in every First Cinema.

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Book Review

Sleaze Artists: Cinema at the Margins of Taste, Style, and Politics. Edited by Jeffrey Sconce. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007, 352 pp. **Review by Brenda Cromb**

Being one of the jaded cinephiles Sconce describes in his introduction, looking to bad films for "that shock of recoginition, a random moment of poetic perversity, the epiphany of the unexpected," (9) I dove into *Sleaze Artists*, eager to find more facets of sleaze to celebrate. Rather than a series of explanations of the subversive possibilities of violence or the sheer aesthetic experience of sexploitation, I found a range of approaches dominated by ambivalence rather than celebration, demonstrating the versatility of 'sleaze studies'. Sconce divides the collection into two parts: one that considers the films in their historical contexts, and one that looks at how cult followings have carried the films into contemporary film culture. The effect is a shift from the specific to the general, beginning with detailed discussions of films, like Colin Gunckel's examination of Aztec horror and Mexican national identity, as well as Kevin Heffernan's reception history of Mario Bava's *Lisa and the Devil* (1973), and moving to broader deliberations of film and taste culture, with Greg Taylor's "Pure *Quidditas* or Geek Chic? Cultism as Discernment."

This is not to say that the 'historical' section does not provide new insight. Chuck Kleinhans offers a consideration of the cynical voice of 'authority'—more prurient than educational—in sleaze documentaries on sex. Concluding finally that these reflect the commodification of knowledge about sex, he asserts that "these sleazy documentaries present an inversion of art's aspiration to the sublime and become instead examples of the capitalist grotesque" (116). Another standout is Tania Modleski's consideration of sleaze auteur Doris Wishman, in which she contends that Wishman's work, though admittedly as violent, exploitative and misogynist as any of her male peers', may still be read as having feminist possibilities. Modleski's piece, written years earlier, reflects her ambivalence, even as she argues that feminists' insistence on their right to politically incorrect fantasy and behavior has to be seen […]

in light of the repression historically imposed upon them" (69).

The second half of the book takes more sweeping approaches. Chris Fujiwara's intriguing "Boredom, *Spasmo*, and the Italian System," suggests looking at *boredom*, the exact opposite of sleaze's promise, as "a path for research" (245). Also worthy of note is Kay Dickinson's study of the disjunctive soundtracks used in 'video nasties'. Dickinson examines the role of synthesizer music in creating the unsettling power of the Italian horror films banned on video in the United Kingdom.

Though I have only been able to briefly highlight a few standouts, that should not be read as a disendorsement of the rest of the book's essays, from Eric Shaefer's consideration of how sexploitation advertising framed audiences (which provides excellent coverage of the industry) to Harry M. Benshoff's take on films about homosexuality in the pre-Stonewall military. The collection is worth picking up if only for Sconce's closing essay, "Movies: A Century of Failure," which points out film criticism's legacy of disparaging films that fail to live up to the 'true artistic potential' early critics saw in the medium. In 'cine-cynics' who delight in the *Gigli*s that expose Hollywood product as anything but art, Sconce sees viewers who recognize film for what he, somewhat depressingly, concludes it really is. "Camp," he argues, "has always been its own form of deconstructive critical theory and thus remains a crucial tool to help us redouble our Adornoesque vigilance against our own impending mass stupidity and worseness. If the cinema is to be 'saved', it will be by finally and forever reframing it as *practice*" (306). While hardly the unequivocal celebration of trash promised by the *Satan's Cheerleaders* image on the cover, Sconce's collection did give me pause to reconsider my own cheerful embrace of sleaze. The broad range of approaches applied here, allow for sleaze to mean more than one thing—and, taken together, provide insight into how sleaze cinema can be submitted to academic scrutiny, and how bad films will continue to haunt our definitions of film as art.

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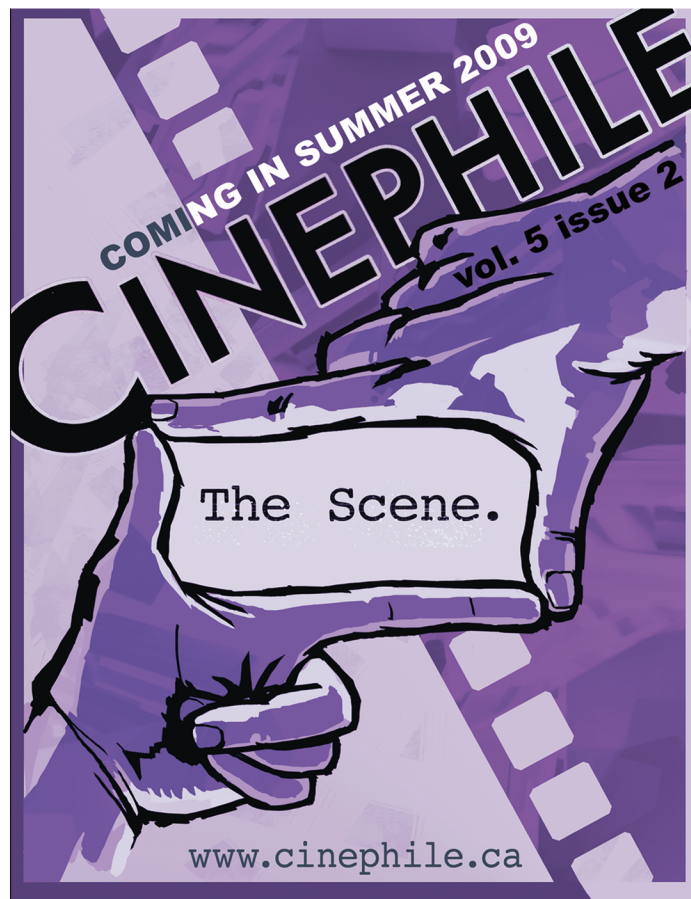
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