

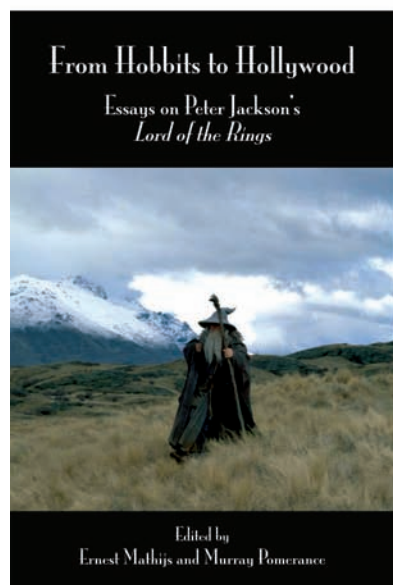
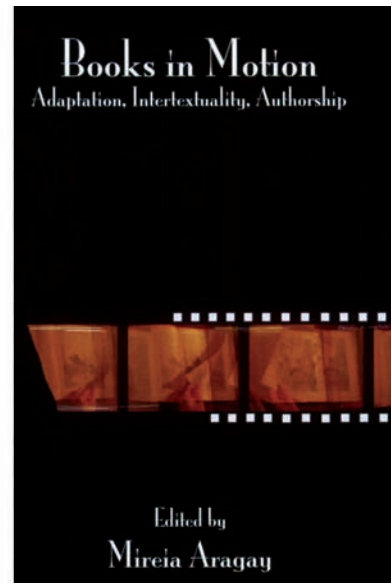
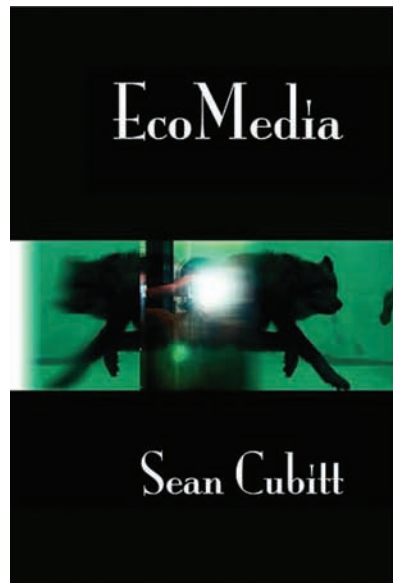
Volume 4 | Post-Genre

summer 2008

# CINEPHILE

university of british columbia's film journal





Contemporary Cinema is a series of edited volumes and single-authored texts focusing on the latest in film culture, theory, reception and interpretation. There is a concentration on films released in the past fifteen years, and the aim is to reflect important current issues while pointing to others that to date have not been given sufficient attention.

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# Editor's Note

Oh, the era of the *posts*, what a wonderful time it is – err, was. Somehow, we have managed to conceive of culture as perpetual aftermath. Apparently we live in the wake of modernism, industry, colonialism, structuralism, feminism, humanity, trauma, punk – you name it, we've done it, and we're already past it. I can't wait for what we'll be post next, maybe post-global? Surfin' the interplanet. Post-race? Well, as *Curb Your Enthusiasm* reminds us, "if we all keep fucking each other, then we're all gonna be the same race sooner or later anyways." Post-irony? I guess sarcasm would implode on itself, forming a black hole of irony only *The Simpsons* could have predicted: "Are you being sarcastic man?" "I don't even know anymore." Post-violence? Well, genetic manipulation *is* making a lot of progress... In these days of the cultural arms race, the next post is right around the corner. I'm anxiously awaiting post-*nouveau*; I want to be too cool for what's not even here yet.

In the meantime, what we can tell you is that we are **Post-Genre**. Film genre is the most abused and weakened of the major film studies approaches; even auteur theory – the other battered victim on the proverbial playground – has more vitality than genre. But like auteur theory, we continue to use genre because, well, we like it. We all love certain directors and we all love certain genres; there is no denying it. Hitchcock and Noir will remain beloved for time immemorial. Genre may be an easy or convenient starting point for analysis and interpretation, but how much does it really matter anymore? Maybe the core film genres have just been around *too long*; they've been maimed and manipulated to such a degree that they no longer resemble their 'original' self in any substantial way. Oh sure, part of what makes genres tick are their penchant for constant reinvention, but how useful is it to analyze a film from the perspective of it being a scary movie or an epic movie when there is *Scary Movie* and *Epic Movie*? Somewhere, someone is writing *Genre Movie*, and when it finally comes out, genre is officially over.

But alas, like all of the other posts, we can't seem to fully commit to our self-imposed exile. We can't really leave genre behind anymore than we can abandon modernism or industry or structuralism – we've just mutated it to the point that it somehow *feels* new or different. Maybe we should start thinking 'post' as less of a temporal marker and more like computational logic. Let's think of it as an upgrade: Genre 2.0, based on the same fundamental hardware, but with such forward-thinking software that it hardly warrants comparison. DOS and *Pong* don't matter anymore, why do our dated conceptions of genre still proclaim relevance?

Behold, Post-Genre, in which the rules no longer apply. Or, the rules are so flexible that characterizing them as 'rules' is a tremendous disservice to how genre now functions. The following eleven genre-interjections speak to this liminality. What if, as Susan Ingram ponders, a new generation of 'glurban' filmmakers are creating their own, distinctly 'European' genre of film? And what if their linguistic specificity, which Colleen Montgomery explores, is depoliticised with inadequate and insufficient subtitling? What about when explicit preoccupations with the body, as Graeme Krautheim and Brenda Cromb evaluate, overwhelm traditional conceptions of genre? And what if certain cycles of film can be more appropriately perceived as distinct cinemas; Andrew Patrick Nelson identifies a Cinema *from* Attractions, while Brent Strang demonstrates a Cinema of Cruelty. From an industry standpoint, HBO proves an important aberration, as R. Colin Tait shows in his analysis of the television network's reliance on and transformation of traditional film genre, while Alasdair McMillan focuses in on *The Wire's* transcendence of genre. Gender can be seen as another transformative component to genre, as Barry Keith Grant shows in his reconsideration of masculinity in the work of D.W. Griffith, I show in my melodramatic reading of the 'hood film, and Katherine Barscay finds in the work of Kathryn Bigelow.

All bets are off. This is no country for old genres.

Welcome to the fourth incarnation of *Cinephile*, a project that would not have been possible without the support (financial and administrative) of our wonderful department at UBC, our fearless (and patient) advisor Ernest,<sup>1</sup> my ever-helpful associate editor Brenda, our editorial board, our extremely talented illustrator Bobby, and many others.<sup>2</sup> When we sent out our Call for Papers last fall we asked for "brave new approaches to film genre, of any shape or form" and required that they be "forceful, pithy, and poignant interventions that are just as bold as the medium they are exploring." On behalf of everyone involved, I am proud to present our fulfillment of that plea, and hope you enjoy our hard work. Afterwards, you'll have ample cocktail party fodder with such chic terminology as 'Gorno' and 'Cosmotrash.' You're *so* post-nouveau.

- Andrew deWaard

1. ...who graciously suggested meeting at the pub more than we did.

2. I can't express my thanks enough to Barry Keith Grant, who not only provided us with an exciting glimpse from his new book, *Shadows of a Doubt: The Fallacy of the Crisis of Masculinity*, but did so from a hospital bed recovering from multiple by-pass surgery! Dr. Grant, you sir, are a gentleman and a scholar.

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# Cosmotrash:

## A New Genre for a New Europe



### Susan Ingram

The premise of this piece is that what some still insist on calling the “revolution” of 1989 reverberated into a new type of film, in which anxieties caused by the new socio-political realities of the post-Soviet era were reflected in a new imaginary, literally a new vision, that is in an important way ‘European.’ Following Barry Langford’s processural understanding of genre, I am interested in the emergence, “the social” to speak with Gledhill, the “making” in the socio-historical, cultural and economic rather than film-making sense, of a distinct strand of cinema: grungy yet stylish, youth-oriented, urban films able to achieve more than a modicum of global popularity in no small part due to their protagonists, who are depicted as somehow managing to get ahead despite being positioned as part of the growing underclass needed to service new forms of the disorganized global finance capitalism theorized by John Urry and Scott Lash. Films like *La femme Nikita* (Luc Besson, 1990), *Lola Rennt* (Tom Tykwer, 1998) and *Yamakasi* (Ariel Zeitoun and Julien Seri, 2001) appeal to, and harness, creative and political energies by interfacing the urban and the global, which one could term the ‘gl-urban,’ echoing the ‘glocal’ terminology of globalization studies. This can be distinguished from the

new impulses from different reconfigurations of revived realist traditions that European cinema received during the same period, which offer relatively straightforward social commentaries on difficult, often ethnic working and living conditions – for which *La Haine* (Mathieu Kassovitz, 1995) has become paradigmatic (see Mueller) – and also to be distinguished from the seductive, violent nihilism of films like *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994) and *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1996), which lack historical or utopian potential. Those who have made these films have recognized that they are in control of a key means of symbolic production, which, as Sharon Zukin explains in *The Cultures of Cities*, is increasingly the motor of urban economies. These filmmakers work against the aestheticization of diversity and fear by politicizing it in their films in a way that attributes agency to marginalized individuals rather than depicting them simply as ticking time bombs against which the mainstream needs to protect itself. As spaces and cultures understood as public in the sense of the journal *Public Culture*, “a forum for the discussion of the places and occasions where cultural, social, and political differences emerge as *public* phenomena” (<http://www.public-culture.org/about>, italics added), become increasingly cor-

poratized and regulated, these spaces, their inhabitants and their histories are being reclaimed through representation in film. Zukin stresses that:

People with economic and political power have the greatest opportunity to shape public culture by controlling the building of the city's public spaces in stone and concrete. Yet public space is inherently democratic. The question of who can occupy public space, and so define an image of the city, is open-ended. (11)

What Zukin leaves unstated is that this question is also open-ended because the image of the city is not only defined by those who occupy or build public space, but also by those



who represent it. So while cities may increasingly be turning to culture to build up their economic bases in attempts to become 'global' or 'world' cities, it has been possible for some cultural producers to use some cities and the materiality of those cities' histories and the histories of those who live in them to at least symbolically retake the streets, if not reverse the tendencies towards privatization, militarization and surveillance that we are increasingly forced to learn to live with. Cinema is thus not merely "an important factor in the social, political and cultural mutation of memory in the twentieth century, as analyzed by Pierre Nora and others in the early 1980s,... [taking] on the task of preserving and remembering, [and] indirectly institutionalizing forgetting" (Habib 124), one strand of it in particular has also been an equally important factor in the social, cultural and political reimagining of increasingly fragile public space.

Considering this type of film as an emerging genre, that is, naming and describing it as a cultural phenomenon, allows us to understand the appeal of a certain style of dislocated youth that have been depicted as coping with the socio-economic pressures subsumed in the term 'globalization' and to investigate the educational and political potential of these films, or, following Gayatri Spivak, to see how far they constitute "a program of the rearrangement of desires that education must assume" (10). The provisional answer I put forward here has to do with the re-imagining of

European 'public-ness' Spivak invokes in referring to Europe as a "public concept" (2) in a complex narrative that contrasts but is imbricated in national forms of identification, which she identifies as more personal:

In your heart's core you are Italian, you are English, American; in different ways. 'Europe' will still seem a public concept... The kind of statelessness that had moved Ursula Hirschmann to claim 'Europe' in the private core and sanctuary of her heart and thus to move out towards its public space, its public realization, has changed in the history of the last sixty years... now. The sense of being without a country is overcharged with an ontological excess of country in the enclaves where gender festers in today's 'Europe.' If, one might even say, you will not let me belong to your country you must build a simulacrum of the place where you and I both think I might belong, although, when I am there, I am 'European' now. (2)

My claim is that the films that belong to the emerging genre under discussion here reflect and offer a direction out of the ethnic and gender impasses Spivak evokes in this passage, impasses also evident in revived realist films such as *La Haine* but presented as intractable. As will be shown here, the concepts of cosmopolitanism and the lumpenproletariat can help to identify the specificities of a particular new type of film and locate the trajectory of the flight out it gestures towards. It is thus that I suggest designating these films as "Cosmotrash." Cosmotrash refers to an alternative, post-1989 filmic imaginary of Europe, one which resists: 1) the 'Eurocrat' imaginary associated with the pragmatic, supranational yet regional priorities of the European Union; 2) the more traditional "high culture" imaginary associated with Old World coffee-houses, castles, Mozart, Beethoven, etc, and 3) national imaginaries for which trash, as Caryl Flinn points out, "has always been critical" (140). The pattern of these films detailed next will then be situated at the nexus of lumpens and cosmopolitans.

Protagonists in Cosmotrash films exist at an interesting crossroads: excluded from but necessary to the maintenance, smooth functioning and reproduction of the global capitalist status quo, they are able to find ways to beat the system at its own game, often literally. For example, in *La femme Nikita*, Luc Besson's 1990 thriller about a young junkie "offered a new identity and the chance of relative freedom if she agrees to act as a highly trained government assassin" (DVD promotional material), the main protagonist is not a Cold War spy but rather an attractive young female drug-addict turned contract-killer for France's foreign intelligence agency, DGSE. Trained to snipe away enemy targets in scenes that were to become the stuff of news reports from the Balkans in the mid-1990s, Nikita proves able to turn the new urban identity given her into a means of breaking away from the agency, with the help of a love-interest she literally runs into in the quintessential urban environment of a supermarket. In *Yamakasi* (Ariel Zeitoun and Julien Seri, 2001; co-written

by Luc Besson), a gang of gymnastically-inclined, multicultural youth from the banlieue who specialize in free-running and sky-scraper-climbing, reach such cult status that school-children start to emulate them. When one is injured doing Yamakasi moves and requires an organ transplant that the French medical system is unable to provide and the boy's family is unable to afford, the gang is motivated to help. By breaking into the lavish homes of the directors of the private firm that brokers organs for the hospital, they are able to get the money that's needed and thereby work to alleviate the racial and spatial divides in the city. Another film in which a city is virtually retaken in this manner is Wolfgang Becker's 2003 hit *Goodbye Lenin!*, which literally draws concrete attention to a successful reimagining of the way the physical landscape of Berlin was corporatized after reunification. Unlike in more realist efforts, such as *Nachtgestalten* (*Night Shapes*, Andreas Dresen, 1999) and *Berlin is in Germany* (Hannes Stohr, 2001), the protagonist of *Goodbye Lenin!* is able to create a fantasy space, which allows his mother to recover from her coma and die a less traumatic death than doctors had predicted. A similarly successful retaking of Berlin occurs in Tom Tykwer's *Lola Rennt*, when both Lola and Manni manage to get back the 100,000 marks Manni inadvertently leaves behind upon dashing out of the U-Bahn to escape ticket inspectors. They are thus able to walk away at the end of the film not only with Manni's gangster-boss off their backs but also with money in the bag. In another likeably radical Berlin film, *Die fetten Jahre sind vorbei* (Hans Weingartner, 2004, distributed internationally under the clever English title *The Edukators*), the characters are idealistic young anarchists who break into mansions and villas in Berlin that are the equivalent to those the Yamakasi gang break into in Paris. They rearrange furniture and artwork, put statues in bathtubs, stereo equipment in fridges, leave messages saying "You have too much money," and end up inadvertently but successfully kidnapping an industrialist when he arrives home unexpectedly. Finally, an English-language example: *My Name is Modesty: A Modesty Blaise Adventure* (Scott Spiegel, 2003) is an action film championed by Quentin Tarantino, which was shot in 18 days in Bucharest in 2002 so that Miramax could maintain rights to the source material (British author Peter O'Donnell's popular novels and comic strips about cult-fave heroine Modesty Blaise). In this film, the eponymous heroine, a young refugee from the former Yugoslavia, breaks out of a refugee camp with Lob, 'the Professor,' a wise old man who once taught history in Zagreb, educates her in the literary and martial arts, and then is blown away when they are caught in mortar fire. Modesty is left to make her own way to Tangiers and conquer her own kingdom, a casino, which she eventually does, putting a lovely spin on the phrase "nights of the round table."

All of these Cosmotrash films feature a cosmo-lumpen sensibility. Very hip, grungy-looking young adults are depicted not simply as drug addicts or two-bit hustlers, but rather

as part of quasi-collectives with albeit partially-tenuous and disorganized agency that is able to do battle with the forces of disorganized global finance capital that, as Saskia Sassen likes to say, "hits the ground" in global cities. Cosmotrash films can be understood as an analysis of what happens when those forces hit what at the end of WWII was rubble, imbuing in the process the lumpenproletariat with politically cosmopolitan sensibilities.

Lumpenproletariat is the well-known Marxist term for the unproductive members of society: "this scum of depraved elements from all classes" as Engels called them in *The Peasant War in Germany* (Stallybrass 88); "the passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of old society" as they were described in *The Communist Manifesto*, while in the *18th Brumière* they are "the dangerous class, the social scum," "not just the lowest strata but... 'the refuse of all classes'" (Stallybrass 85). Cosmopolitans have traditionally been understood as the opposite end of the spectrum: "men/citizens of the world." According to Diogenes Laertius, the term cosmopolitan was coined by Diogenes of Sinope (c. 404-323 BCE), founder of the Cynic school, at the time of Alexander the Great. In response to a question about his origins, Diogenes reportedly claimed to be a *kosmopolitis*, a citizen of the world, who "refused to be defined by his local origins and group memberships...; instead, he defined himself in terms of more universal aspirations and concerns" (Nussbaum 6-7, cited in Ingram). Kant did much to modernize the concept, notably in his 1784 essay on the "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View" and the 1795 "Perpetual Peace," which contains the storied passage:

The peoples of the earth have entered in varying degrees into a universal community, and it is developed to the point where a violation of laws in one part of the world is felt everywhere. The idea of a cosmopolitan law is therefore not fantastic and overstrained; it is a necessary complement to the unwritten code of political and international law, transforming it into a universal law of humanity. (Kant 107-8)

This rational ideal is no longer of much use in helping us "to negotiate the transnational space that global capital [increasingly] produces," which Ackbar Abbas sees as posing a critical question at the turn of our millennium: "Can there be a cosmopolitanism for the global age, and what would it be like?" (226). Yes, Abbas answers in "Cosmopolitan De-scriptions." Befitting someone from a city enmeshed first by British imperialism and then by global finance, namely Asia's "world city" Hong Kong, Abbas's answer is "arbitrage with a difference," playing with the distinction between arbiters (who see themselves as having the ultimate authority in a matter – the standard positioning of traditional Kantian cosmopolitans) and arbitrage, "the simultaneous buying and selling of securities, currency, or commodities in different markets or in derivative forms in order to take advantage of differing prices for the same asset." Arbitrage with a difference, cultural arbitrage



does not mean the use of technologies to maximise profits in a global world but refers [rather] to everyday strategies for negotiating the disequilibria and dislocations that globalism has created. Arbitrage in this sense does not allude to the exploitation of small temporal differences but refers to the larger historical lessons that can be drawn from our experiences of the city... [meaning that] the cosmopolitan today will include not only the privileged transnational, at home in different places and cultures, as an Olympian arbiter of value... [but] will have to include at least some of the less privileged men and women placed or displaced in the translational space of the city and who are trying to make sense of its spatial and temporal contradictions. (226)

In this sense, makers of Cosmotrash films can be understood as cultural arbitragers. They exploit as they add to the larger historical lessons that can be drawn from explicitly and specifically urban experiences.

However, there is more at stake in Cosmotrash film than cultural arbitrage. Triangulating cosmopolitanism with lumpenism and film is a way of deflecting the perennial universalism-relativism debate surrounding cosmopolitanism by literally grounding it within the gl-urban confines of particular representations of cities and thereby also ironically grounding the modern universal aspirations of the term in the free-floating post- or hypermodern space of global urbanity. Cosmotrash filmmakers are cosmopolitans with a difference, and the difference is not that they are among the less privileged who have been placed and displaced in the translational space of the city, although they do depict such characters in their films and do try to make sense of the resulting spatial and temporal contradictions. Theirs is also not “the diasporic, wandering, unresolved, cosmopolitan consciousness of someone who is both inside and outside his or her community” that Edward Said aligns at the end of *Freud and the Non-European* with Isaac Deutscher, the Jewish-British Marxist writer from Chrzanów in Galicia probably best known for his Trotsky and Stalin biographies (53). Unlike these other cosmopolitan consciousnesses, Cosmotrash films reveal one that has an ironically lumpen difference in that it abandons Marx and Engels’ proclivity for production. As Stallybrass lays out clearly, Marx and Engels used the lumpenproletariat in order to transvalue the term proletarian: “Whereas they found it [the term proletarian] as a mark of ‘a passively rotting mass’, they made it into a label of a collective agency. Moreover they inverted the meaning of the term, so that it meant not a parasite on the social body but the body upon which the rest of society was a parasite” (85). And they did so by offloading the fear and loathing that “passively rotting masses” generate onto the lumpenproletariat, which Marx resorted to foreign words to describe: *roués*, *maquereaus* (pimps), “what the French term *la bohème*”, *literati*, *lazzaroni* (“the lowest class in Naples living by odd jobs or begging,” Stallybrass 82-3). This all-too-familiar foreignizing, orientaling impulse re-

flects a nineteenth-century valorization of and beholdness to the ideal of productive action, which the lumpenproletarian disrupted in what was interpreted as their refusal to labor and to labor productively.

We find a similar refusal in the imaginary of Cosmotrash films, in which protagonists live alternative lifestyles and support themselves by non-traditional, often illegal (but never immoral) means. This refusal to labor is both European and public in Spivak’s sense, taking its cues from post-Soviet realities in which Europe has been made vulnerable by the incursion of global finance capital especially into newer E.U. member-states and attempting to raise not awareness or consciousness but rather hope about finding workable tactics in the face of overwhelming challenges. Understanding the precarious yet comradely existences depicted in Cosmotrash films in terms of the relatedness of cinema, cities and intellectual history aims at ensuring that we will have “extricated ourselves from the modernist political imagination that is the legacy of people like Le Corbusier” (Donald 92). Much work still remains to be done in this regard, however. Trash is still all too often treated as a problem in and of itself, in need only of disposal, rather than as a sign of more deep-rooted structural problems which, if left unaddressed, only continue to generate more trash. Cosmotrash films try to make us aware that this process is precisely what feeds the global capitalist machine that tries to turn humanity’s most precious resource – its talented, highly able young people – into trash.

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# Lost in Translation: Subtitling *Banlieue* Subculture

Colleen Montgomery

While the resurgence of a “*cinéma des producteurs*”<sup>1</sup> and the development of the highly popular “*film d’action*” genre (Higbee 298) dominated the landscape of French mainstream cinema in the 1990s, the decade also witnessed the re-emergence of a politically committed, or what Powrie terms “New Realist” French cinema. New Realism, Powrie states, “refers less to a defined movement in French cinema [...] sharing a political agenda, and more to a diverse group of film-makers who effected a re-engagement with sociopolitical subject matter” (16). Film makers such as Karim Dridi and Mathieu Kassovitz, whose films of the early to mid-nineties, *Bye Bye* (Dridi 1995), *La Haine* (Kassovitz, 1995), and *Métisse* (Kassovitz 1993) explore issues of xenophobia, unemployment, the ever-widening ‘*fracture sociale*’ dividing the haves and the have-nots in French society and the important subculture emerging among those most negatively affected by these social iniquities, the youth of the *cités* or *banlieues*.<sup>2</sup>

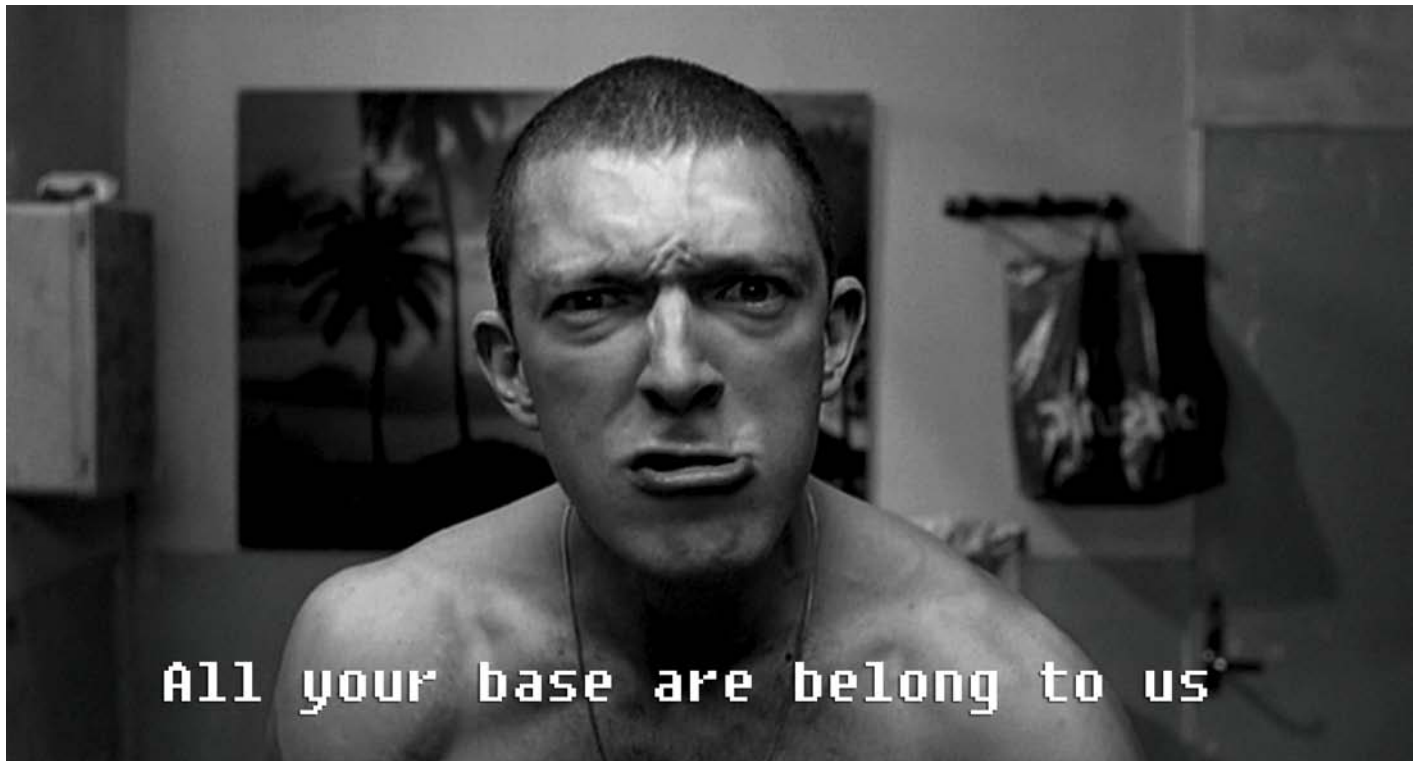
Following Hebdige, I will argue that the *banlieue* subculture which Dridi and Kassovitz examine in their films, constitutes a form of “semiotic guerilla warfare” (Eco 105) waged by the disenfranchised youth of the suburban French ghettos against the “the ruling ideology” (133) of normative French culture. It is, to use Hebdige’s term, a form of ‘noise’ that disrupts and subverts the established order on several levels: musically, through rap and hip hop; graphically, through tagging and graffiti artwork; stylistically, through manner of dress (i.e. oversized shirts, baggy jeans, backwards baseball caps, etc.), and orally, through a lexicon of words and expressions known broadly as the “*langue des cités*” or the “*téci*” (Messili and Ben Aziza 1). Dridi and Kassovitz’s films promi-

nently feature each of these elements of *banlieue* culture from Moloud’s (Ouassini Embarek) recurring rap in *Bye Bye* to Said’s (Saïd Taghmaoui) hip hop inspired outfits and tag art in *La Haine*, but it is on the last form of noise, the *téci* that I will focus in this paper. For while the visual elements of style of dress and graffiti, as well as the musical component of *banlieue* culture remain intact in the subtitled English versions of the films, the oral lexis of the *téci* is greatly impoverished and often almost entirely erased. The elimination of the *téci* in these subtitled English versions of Dridi and Kassovitz’s work, I will argue, effectively silences the ‘noise’ of *banlieue* subculture and undermines the film’s underlying political message of resistance and empowerment.

To provide a basic framework for discussing the specific challenges involved in translating the language of the *banlieue* or *téci* for an English speaking audience, it is important to first note the constraints inherent in the linguistic transfer of an oral source text to a written translation or subtitle. Mailhac identifies several key factors that mitigate the transposition of a piece of verbal communication into written communication within the body of a film, namely: spatial constraints within the film frame, the disparity in time required to cognitively process oral versus written forms of communication, viewers’ reading speed (which will vary in accordance with degrees of literacy, age and fluency in the language spoken), and the need to coordinate the visual appearance of text onscreen with both the image of speaker and the temporal occurrence of the utterance, while taking into account camera movements and frame changes (129). Mailhac concludes that due to both spatial and temporal constraints “the move from speech to writing [in a film] requires a substantial amount of compression” (130) and, one might add to Mailhac’s assertion, also a substantial amount of omission. Some translation theorists contend that preserving the original soundtrack – and thus the audible presence of the source language in a subtitled film – preserves the “foreignness” of the source text, enabling the viewer/reader to “expe-

1. “[B]ig budget films with high production values[...] characterized by continuity; either because of their reliance on tried and tested generic formulas such as comedy, or else through their association with lavish spectacle and high production values of the *tradition de qualité*” (Higbee 298).

2. Broadly translated in English as “suburb” the terms *cit * and *banlieue* refer to the communities or towns on the periphery of urban centres, often consisting largely of socially subsidized housing complexes.



rience the flavour of the foreign language [...] and the sense of a different culture more than any other mode of translation” (Szarkowska). I will argue, however, following Mailhac, that the extensive truncation that subtitling imposes on a filmic text necessarily “leads to a linguistic leveling out of dialogues by neutralizing or eliminating marked features [...] including] syntax, levels of speech, social or geographical origin, and style” (131). Nornes furthers this argument stating that “facing the violent reduction demanded by the apparatus [of subtitling, as delineated above] subtitlers have developed a method of translation [...] that violently appropriates the source text” (18). Thus, subtitling arguably eliminates or domesticates the cultural references or “foreign flavour” of the source text, while simultaneously seeking to “smooth over this textual violence” (ibid) so as to still seemingly deliver audiences an “authentically foreign” experience. Following Nornes, I will strive to demonstrate in this paper that the English translations of *Bye Bye, La Haine*, *Métisse* can be interpreted as a form of textual violence that silences the noise of the *téci*, and thus depoliticizes the films’ representation of *banlieue* subculture.

### “Le Téci”: The Language of the Banlieue

The *téci* (an inverted and truncated term derived from the phrase “*langue des cités*” or language of the suburbs) is, as Messili and Ben Ben Aziza explain, a “diverse, codified language” (2), both a product and an expression of *banlieue* subculture. The *téci* violently alters and appropriates

normative French, primarily through the processes of *verlanisation* (word inversion) truncation, the violation of standard French grammar and syntax, and the inclusion of words from a variety of other languages. It is a “*fracture linguistique*” (Messili and Ben Aziza 3): a linguistic manifestation of ‘*la fracture sociale*’ that, in violating the structural, stylistic and grammatical rules of academic or standard French, functions as a rejection of cultural heterogeneity and xenophobia in contemporary French society. In creating for themselves a shared and hermetic form of communication, the youth of the *banlieue* reverse the exclusion they feel as outsiders in French society as a result of intense racial discrimination, unequal access to education and employment opportunities, and relegate the French establishment to the position of outsider or other. The *téci* both willfully mutilates the French language, and simultaneously provides the formerly excluded subset of the French population, the *banlieuesards*, with their own exclusive community, united through shared language. Thus the *téci* is arguably both a marker of otherness for the youth of the *cit * (in relation to mainstream French society) and a marker membership or belonging (in relation to the community of the *banlieue*) that denotes an individual’s class and social status.

The English translations of the aforementioned films, however, ‘smooth over’ the elements of resistance that are at the core of the *téci* (and *banlieue* subculture) in three primary manners. First, the transposition of the *téci* into normative English or widely recognizable and commonly used forms of English slang, prevents the *téci* from functioning as a marker

of both otherness and membership and thus impoverishes the dialogue the films construct between the normative and the marginal. Second, the English subtitling of the *téci* in the aforementioned films eliminates both the temporal and regional specificities that characterize the *téci* – a vibrant and ever-evolving language – and renders it as geographically heterogeneous and temporally fixed. Finally, the translation of all three of these texts frequently privileges the substitution of complex subcultural linguistic creations for simple comprehensible references vis-à-vis the language and culture of the target audience.

### The *Téci* as Marker of Otherness

Of the three films discussed in this paper, the use of language and the *téci* to differentiate characters in terms of their social and class backgrounds is perhaps most salient in Kassovitz's *Métisse*. In *Métisse*, Kassovitz ironically reverses the colonial dichotomy of the 'rich white Parisian Frenchman' and the 'poor black man of the ghetto,' presenting instead a distinguished, rich black man originating from a long line of diplomats, and a poor white man indoctrinated into the ghetto culture of the *banlieue* in which he lives. In the French dialogue there is a marked difference between Félix (Mathieu Kassovitz) and Jamal's (Hubert Koundé) speech in terms of speed, enunciation, syntax, grammar and use of slang and *téci*. Jamal speaks noticeably more slowly than Félix, clearly enunciating his words, using proper syntax and grammar. Though his use of slang increases through the course of the film as he becomes friends with Félix, his slang is largely of the repertoire of standard "*Français familier*" or familiar French slang that would be both used by and comprehensible to the average French person. Félix on the other hand, employs a much greater amount of slang and *téci*, most notably, *verlanised* words such as "*meuf*" in the place of *femme*, *keuf* in the place of *flic* (cop) as well as a large number of mild to moderate expletives such as *merde*, *putain*, *cul*, etc. Félix also reverses the traditional word order in certain sentences, thus violating syntax and grammar rules, saying for example "*la ferme*" instead of "*ferme la*" (an expression which loosely translates as "shut it") and using an assortment of English words (a characteristic element of the *téci*) such as "*du shit*" for drugs, or "*flipper*" for "freaking out" or "flipping." The English translation of the characters' dialogue, however, significantly reduces the marked differences in their style and levels of language. Félix's *téci* is largely downplayed and translated to common English slang words. *Meuf* for instance, a word which at the time would only have been used by a *banlieuesard*, becomes "babe," a term that also qualifies as slang in English, but does not carry the same social and class connotations as the *verlanised* *meuf*. Moreover, his improper word order is rearranged in English to conform to standard grammatical sentence construction, and his English slang loses its significance as an element of subversive

language when it fits seamlessly into the text of the target language. Thus the translation of elements of the *téci* into normative English or widely recognizable English slang impoverishes Kassovitz's subversive dichotomy of the 'gangster white boy' and the 'sophisticated black man,' diminishing Félix's otherness in relation to French mainstream culture.

Though all of the main characters in *La Haine* employ the same general level and style of French, as they all speak predominantly in *téci*, there is still a palpable loss of otherness in the English translation of their dialogue. What is most noticeable in the translation of *La Haine* is the simple omission of a great deal of *téci* dialogue. This is likely due in part to the characters' wordy, rapid-fire conversational style that, as previously stated, must be truncated in order to conform to the spatial and temporal restrictions of subtitling. Furthermore, the characters' prolific use of *verlan* or word inversion loses its political meaning in the transition from French to standard English slang. Though it may seem a simple game of syllabic reversal, the *verlan* is more complex than it may at first appear. The *verlan*,<sup>3</sup> in fact operates as a sort of re-encoding of a text through the reordering of the alphabetical structure and syllabic intonation of a word. According to Messili and Ben Aziza, there are three principal ways in which a word is *verlanised*: a simple inversion wherein *Paris* becomes *ripa*; an inversion and the subsequent addition of another sound as in the case of *soeur*, which becomes *reus*, and subsequently *reusda*; and finally an inversion and subsequent suppression of the final vowel or syllable of the *verlanised* word as with *flic*, which becomes *keufli*, and finally *keuf*. Words, however, are not limited to one of the processes of *verlanisation* and some words can undergo all three processes. For example, the *verlan* of the expression "*en douce*" (on the sly) is first inverted to become *en ousde*, then an additional sound is added to generate *en lousde*, and finally the last syllable is suppressed, producing the final *verlan* expression – *en lous*. In each of these three cases the syllabic intonation, which in French generally falls on the last syllable, is transferred to the second last syllable (as with *Paris* and *ripa*). The *verlan* is therefore both an appropriation and rejection of standard French, that defiantly changes the look and sound of a word as an act of rebellion against normative French culture. The *verlanisation* of any given word is thus always subject to a certain amount of random variation and ambiguity, and *verlanisations* tend to emerge organically within the *banlieue* as they are created and put into practice by the inventors and innovators of the coded language. This complex system of random selection that generates the *verlan* helps to preserve the hermetic nature of the language and ensures that the mainstream French community is consistently relegated to the ideological position of the other, the outsider. When *verlan* words are nonetheless successfully integrated into mainstream French (as is now the

3. The word *verlan* is itself a *verlanisation*, of the word "*l'envers*" meaning backwards.

case with words such as *meuf*, *keuf* and *keur*), they are then subjected to a *reverlanisation*, to reappropriate the word for exclusive use within the *cit * community. The implications of this process of *reverlanisation* will be touched upon in greater detail further along in the paper.

Returning to the use of the *verlan* in *La Haine*, it is significant to note that the entirety of the nuanced, intricate series of steps that produce the *verlan* are entirely lost in the English translation of the film. The political significance of these words, constructed as a reversal and rejection of normative French, is rendered invisible in the subtitles, which bear no witness to the linguistic complexities involved in the construction of the *verlan*. The word “pig” for example which often intervenes as a replacement for “*keuf*” (the *verlan* of *flic*- slang for police) in *La Haine* has its own set of connotations as an English slang word, but carries no tangible trace of the political act of refusal, or the linguistic creativity involved in generating the *verlan* source word *keuf*. Certainly, audible traces of the *verlan* are discernable throughout the film, and frequently repeated words such as *meuf* and *keur* may become noticeable even to non-French speaking viewers; however, the fundamental notions of rebellion these linguistic mutations represent are lost in the English translation of *La Haine*.

### The *T ci* as Temporally Fixed and Regionally Specific

As alluded to in the previous discussions of the *t ci*, some *t ci* terms, particularly *verlan* expressions are, over the course of time, imported and integrated into mainstream French slang. Because the *t ci* is devised as a secret language reserved for the spatial and cultural locale of the *cit *, the exportation of words into standard French is highly problematic. *T ci* words that filter into mainstream French become divested of their exclusionary powers and are thus no longer useful in the lexicon of the *t ci* as units of political and cultural rebellion. In order to restore a word’s political agency, it must be put through another series of mutations, to reappropriate it as an authentically *t ci* term. Due to the steady rise in the popularity of rap/hip hop culture in France since its introduction in the early 1980s and through the 1990s, the *t ci*, which can be found in most rap and hip hop songs, has become increasingly accessible and exportable in contemporary French society. Words used in songs by rap and hip hop artists, composing in the *t ci*, are quickly and easily absorbed by young listeners and subsequently incorporated into mainstream French slang. As a result, the rate of mutation of the *t ci* is rather rapid, to the point that words used only a decade ago in *Bye Bye*, *La Haine* and *M tisse* that were, at the time, characteristic of the youth subculture are now considered part of mainstream French. Notably *keur*, *meuf*, and *keuf*, all *t ci* words are even listed in the 2006 edition of the Larousse dictionary. Subsequently, these same words have new, *reverlanised* replacements in the lexis of the *t ci*: *keur* has

become *rekeur*, or *rabzouz*<sup>4</sup>; *meuf* is *feum* or *feumeu*; and *keuf* is *feuk* (a term which has the added bonus of being phonetically similar to the English word “fuck”). Consequently, for a French speaking viewer familiar with French slang and the present day forms of the *t ci*, *Bye Bye*, *M tisse* or *La Haine* betray a specific temporal localization; a time when older forms of *t ci* were still employed within the *cit * and still considered subversive language. The generic English slang used in place of these now-mutated *t ci* terms, conversely, does not give an indication as to the specific temporal setting of the film. The English terms (i.e. babe, chill, and cool) have remained relatively unchanged from the time of the subtitling to the present day, and are still viable slang terms in contemporary English. The translation thus erases the temporal specificity of the *t ci* language used in the films and fails to highlight the dynamic nature of the *t ci* and its ongoing evolution within the French *banlieue* subculture.

Though barely any perceptible difference in style of speech is conveyed in the English subtitling of the three films discussed in this paper, there are significant differences in the form of the *t ci* that is spoken in each film, in relation to the disparate regions from which the respective speakers originate. M ssili and Ben Aziza note that certain *t ci* words have meaning in some neighbourhoods and regions of France, but not in others, and that there are highly perceptible differences between the *t ci* of the Parisian *cit s* and the Provincial *cit s* of Marseille. As previously discussed, there are marked differences in *M tisse* between F lix and Jamal’s style of speech due to their contrasting class and regional backgrounds (F lix is lower class and a *banlieuesard*, while Jamal is upper class and Parisian). Similarly, there are differences in Mouloud’s, (a Parisian boy) and his cousin Rhida’s, (a Marseillais boy) style of speech. Most noticeably, Rhida speaks with the accent Marseillais, an accent colloquially referred to as the accent “*chantant*” or sing-song accent, characterized by a greater musicality and syllabic division of words than Parisian French. Rhida also employs a nuanced variety of *t ci*, using words such as the French slang term “*fada*” to designate someone or something crazy in the place of the *verlan* terms usually employed in the Parisian peripheries: “*ouf*” (the *verlan* of *fou*, the French term for crazy), “*louche*” or “*chelou*” (the former a slang term for crazy, and the latter the *verlanisation* of *louche*), terms that Vinz and Said frequently use in *La Haine*, and that Max and F lix also both use in *M tisse*. Rhida also uses the word *cagole*, a specifically southern slang term for a woman in the place of the word *meuf*, a *verlanized* word for woman that also reoccurs frequently throughout *La Haine* and *M tisse* as well also in Mouloud’s vocabulary (as he too was raised in the Parisian periphery.) Rhida’s vocabulary also links him more closely with the family’s North African heritage. He employs many Maghrebi French slang terms such as “*la gazelle*” (slang for an

4. *Les arabes* with the *liaison* from the *s* forms *zarabes*, which is then inverted to form *rabza*. Subsequently the final *a* is suppressed and the extra sound *ouz* is attached to form *rabzouz*.

attractive woman) in his everyday language, that are absent from Mouloud's vocabulary. Rhida's manner of speech is distinctly characteristic of Marseillaise *téci*, as Maghrebi French slang seems to have migrated more readily to Southern regions of France, a fact likely linked to the relatively small geographic distance between Southern France and Maghreb and the high levels of immigration from the latter to the former. These regional differences however are not perceptible in the English subtitling of the films which renders Parisian and Provincial *téci* as seemingly identical, when in fact the variations in vocabulary, pronunciation, and intonation are great.

Several further challenges in translating the cultural concepts in French New Realist films, aside from the translation of the *téci* are worthy of investigation. In particular, the substitution in *La Haine* of French *bande dessinée* characters for English comic strip characters is highly problematic as it serves to further depoliticize the original French dialogue in the film. As Forsdick asserts, the *bande dessinée*, widely regarded in France as the ninth art, "has a status far surpassing that of the equivalent English-language comic strip" (1) in terms of its historical significance in French society, its political engagement with contemporary issues and its widespread and sustained popularity not only among children, but youth and adults as well. The most arresting replacement made in *La Haine* of a French *bande dessinée* character for an English comic book character is that of *Pif le Chien* for Snoopy. As Horn describes, at the start of the Cold War, the Communist Party in France decided that their journal "*L'Humanité*" could no longer run their staple comic strip *Felix the Cat*, as the comic feline was deemed "too glaring an example of American enterprise to be tolerated any longer in the pages of their official publication" (103). *Pif le Chien* was thus created as an authentically French replacement for the enterprisingly American Felix. Thus, the substitution of *Pif* for the quintessentially American Snoopy changes the political implications of the text, re-imposing an American cultural icon in the place of a fundamentally anti-American, communist character. Moreover, the substitution of Astérix for Mickey Mouse, though apt in terms of the characters' respective celebrity status in the realm of cartoon comics, is also highly problematic. First and foremost, Astérix, like the protagonists in *La Haine*, is also a native of the *banlieue*. Astérix was first drawn by Albert Uderzo, in the Parisian periphery of Bobigny. Though it may seem insignificant, the patrimony of the character would be something of which most French citizens having read the comic would be well aware, and certainly of which residents of Bobigny would be proud. Astérix's protection of his homeland against a military invading force evokes the police-youth conflict in the *banlieue* wherein youth in the *banlieue* see their homeland at constant risk of attack from the dominant ruling force, the police. Though Mickey Mouse is a recognizable character for both a French and certainly an American audience, the political meaning behind *Astérix* is erased in the

English translation. Thus, in both of these instances, as with the subtitling of the *téci*, the translation becomes "a labour of acculturation" (Venuti 5) that appropriates and domesticates the film so as to provide English-language viewers with the "narcissistic experience of recognizing his or her own culture" (ibid) within the film.

The malaise of the youth inhabiting France's marginalized urban peripheries and the subculture that has grown up around them as a result of their sense of exclusion from and subsequent rejection of French cultural norms, has not only continued on beyond the 1990s but has arguably intensified, as the wide spread rioting in *banlieues* throughout France in September of 2005 demonstrated. While the *fracture social* in French society clearly remains, it is my hope that new modes of translation might succeed in mending the *fracture linguistique* between the original French and subtitled English versions of New Realist films. Though, as Chaundhuri writes "whatever creative energies it might unleash [...] a translation or rendering must always be inadequate, never a total reflection or equivalent of the original" (23), I do believe, nonetheless, that new models of translation are necessary to adequately transpose and convey the deep cultural and political implications of the 'noise' of *banlieue* subculture and *téci* for non-French speaking audiences.

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# Aspiring to the Void:

## The Collapse of Genre and Erasure of Body in Gaspar Noé's *Irreversible*



### Graeme Krautheim

In her article “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” Linda Williams isolates horror, melodrama and pornography as the ‘body genres’ – films designed to elicit spectator-response on a bodily level through their respective approaches to excess and temporality. *Irreversible* (Gaspar Noé, 2002) offers a unique approach to Williams’ discussion in that it incorporates each of the three ‘body genres’ within a formal structure that reinterprets bodily excess and its relationship to the spectator. I have chosen to center this paper on the scene of Alex’s rape and discuss how this particular long take is, in effect, the film’s central collision of the ‘body genres,’ and how it operates as the void at the core of the film, draining into itself every event that happens around it. I am also going to discuss how Williams’ belief that the ‘body genres’ act as approaches to cultural problems clashes with that of Noé’s cinematic realm, which seeks not to approach cultural issues, but to portray the annihilation of culture it-

self. Finally, apart from Williams’ analysis, I feel that *Irreversible* should be discussed as a film not simply preoccupied with the destruction of ‘body,’ but also with that of ‘mind.’ *Irreversible* not only unites Williams’ three “body genres,” but does so in a way that reaches beyond the screen, attacking the body of the spectator as well.

The film’s pivotal scene is a single, gruelling twelve minute long take, nine minutes of which involve the rape and subsequent beating of Alex (Monica Bellucci) by a man ambiguously referred to as Le Tenia (Jo Prestia). As Le Tenia forces Alex to the ground, even dialogue itself merges the sexual connotations of pornography with the abject fear of horror as he says, “I’m gonna fuck your ass... I’m gonna blast your shit hole...”. The spectator is subjected to Alex’s brutal rape in a single, uninterrupted long take. For this duration, Alex is pinned to the ground, sobbing powerlessly, her voice muffled by the hand of Le Tenia, as he rapes her anally,

her shrieks of pain and bodily convulsions in sync with his thrusts and moans. The excess and obscenity of the situation is heightened as Le Tenia continues to threaten her: “You shit on me and you’re dead... fucking high class swine.” During this process, Noé essentially disappears behind the mechanics of cinema in that there are no cuts and almost no camera movement. For the full duration, the camera sits on the ground of the tunnel roughly three feet away from the incident, eye level with both victim and victimizer. With Noé not actively acknowledging himself behind the camera, there is no intermediary presence between the body of the spectator and those onscreen, establishing the scene as a “brutal intimacy model [and] test case for film’s continued potential to inspire shock and bewilderment – raw, unmediated reaction” (Palmer 23). In the wake of the rape, the camera moves (for the first time in seven minutes), only to accommodate Le Tenia, who stands over Alex’s body – a camera movement so incremental that, in the wake of the rape, it goes virtually unnoticed. Le Tenia then kicks Alex in the nose, straddles her to punch her eleven times in the face, and then grabs her by the hair and slams her head eight times into the cement floor. The spectator is unable to do anything but simply *watch*. In this capacity, to say that the viewer is subject to ‘violence’ is too vague a term – with ‘violence’ relatable to everything from slapstick humour to classical action movies. This is, instead, an act of all-encompassing bodily annihilation – an attack on physicality so extreme and forceful that the spectator is left powerless to do anything but *react*.

The excess to which the spectator is subjected naturally becomes manifest in his/her own bodily response, whether it be shock, arousal, disgust, or any combination. Williams’ statement that “the success of [the ‘body genres’] is often measured by the degree to which the audience sensation mimics what is seen on the screen” is complicated in that the gaze which the film reverses represents a spectacle so brutal and explicit that the spectator’s bodily response is *seized* involuntarily. Williams discusses melodrama (“tear-jerker”), horror (“fear-jerker”), and pornography (inspiring “jerk-off”) as genres whose relationships with their respective viewers involve a degree of manipulation (705). *Irreversible*, however, is not about manipulation, but rather, forcible extraction. The emotional consent of the spectator is as incidental to Noé as Alex’s bodily consent is to Le Tenia. The film is so severely and unrelentingly brutal that it is virtually impossible for the spectator *not* to experience some sort of extreme bodily reaction, whether it be voluntary or not. The rape scene represents enormous complications with regard to spectator-identification in that there is simply nowhere for any viewer to safely situate her/himself within the *mise-en-scene*. The positions of ‘victim’ and ‘victimizer’ as assumed by Alex and Le Tenia, respectively, exist in perhaps the most extreme opposition imaginable. For the spectator to identify with either body is to subject their own to an indirect experience of the same de-praved violence. The uninterrupted duration of the long take

itself further complicates spectator-identification in that not even the reassurance of montage is present to absorb the impact of the assault. If the shot were to be edited (or if even the camera were to be moved unnecessarily), the mechanics of cinema would be revealed and the spectator would be cushioned from the trauma of the violence. For the spectator to be given the sole option of identifying either with Alex or Le Tenia violates the classical approach to cinema, which grants the spectator the “ability to participate within the construct of a work and yet remain outside it” (Dixon 185). Here, if the spectator finds her/himself unable or unwilling to identify with either onscreen body, her/his identification is, through the use of the extended long take, suspended – forced to hold her/his breath until the violence has run its course.

With regard to gesture, there is an extremely significant moment at the conclusion of Alex’s rape which momentarily reverses the gaze of the camera in a way that extends beyond the diegesis, making contact with the violated spectator. While being raped, Alex, in exhaustive desperation, reaches forward, directly toward the camera. This gesture represents her complete lack of power, yet also seems to *acknowledge* the presence of the camera, and further, the spectator. Consequently, it represents a return of the spectator’s gaze – one which, in the wake of Alex’s bodily annihilation, “challenges the viewer to return the gaze of the supposed ‘object’ of the camera’s scrutiny” (Dixon 46). By being “gestured toward” by Alex, an act of violence is done to the spectator’s suspended sense of identification. For Alex to return the gaze at this point is for her to, by way of gesture, ask the spectator, “How could you have watched this? How could you not have intervened? What kind of person *are* you?” It is in such a circumstance the “‘gaze of the screen’ or ‘look back’ has the power to transform our existences, to substantially change our view of our lives, and of the world we inhabit” (Dixon 7). When Alex extends her arm, the body which the spectator has watched being violated, in turn, performs an act of violence upon the spectator’s own sense of self.

Williams divides the ‘body genres’ on several different levels, but I will focus primarily on how each operates in a temporal sense, and how that subsequently inspires the secretion of bodily fluids from the spectator. Williams temporally differentiates the ‘body genres’ by associating pornography with being ‘on time’ (situations and bodies aligning perfectly), horror with being ‘too early’ (bodies are caught ill-prepared/offguard), and melodrama with ‘too late’ (bodies in irreparable situations). The film’s reversed temporal structure aligns effectively with Williams’ approach in that, to view the film on a pornographic level (from the perspective of Le Tenia), the circumstances surrounding his encounter with Alex are timed perfectly with regard to his own intentions. The fact that Alex is unaware of her impending rape as she walks into the tunnel aligns with the Williams’ approach to horror as being ‘too early’ (not that she could



ever be prepared for that which was to happen to her). However, it is the 'too late' of melodrama which is most effectively reinterpreted through Noé's approach to structure. The first time the spectator sees Alex, she is being carried out of the tunnel on a stretcher, having been beaten into a coma. The film, in this sense, does not progress toward its own 'too late' in the classical tradition of melodrama – instead, it *begins* with it.

Williams further discusses the significance of a primary bodily fluid associated with each of the three genres (blood in horror, semen in pornography, and tears in melodrama), and all three are simultaneously present (whether onscreen

or offscreen) during Alex's rape, indicative of how all three of Williams' 'body genres' collide. Le Tenia's moans of pleasure (and ultimately, orgasm) collide with Alex's (tears) sobs of agony, and at one point, while he rapes her, he asks, "You bleeding or you wet?". During the rape, his hand is firmly clasped over her mouth – this linguistic-severing representing how "aurally, excess is marked by recourse not to the coded articulations of language but to inarticulate cries of pleasure in porn, screams of fear in horror, sobs of anguish in melodrama" (Williams 703-704). The rape is indicative of each of these three bodily discourses, with Alex's screams (horror) and sobs (melodrama) impossible, and unnecessary to differentiate. The act of violence done to the body of the spectator is, in part, due to the fact that each of the three 'body genres' are operating on different levels, both relentlessly and simultaneously. Further, it is melodrama which consistently places emphasis upon "our melancholic sense of the loss of origins – impossibly hoping to return to an earlier state which is perhaps most fundamentally represented by the body of the mother" (Williams 712). It is not until the end of the film (and therefore, the beginning of the narrative), upon Alex's realization of her pregnancy, that the film reveals the active, unspoken role of maternity as something which had been present all along. Because Alex's pregnancy is not revealed until the end, the film demands that the viewer psychologically revisit her rape and beating with the knowledge which, in hindsight (or in reverse, foresight), compounds the already-incomprehensible extent of bodily destruction.

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## The rape in the centre of the film exists as a proverbial black hole into which every event spirals with total inevitability.

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objectively because it is so deliberately hard to watch, so deliberately hard to like" (Palmer 31), as a means of the spectator's own bodily self-preservation, there is a safety in denying the actuality of the events. To experience *Irreversible* fully, one must watch the film without interruption, and not avert their gaze from even the most extreme acts of violence. To read the film as a dream is precisely that – a means of looking away – of the spectator reassuring their *own* body that what they are watching is not real.

I feel it is also important to point toward a key ideological disagreement between Williams' theory and Noé's film, which concerns how the 'body genres' relate to the larger social order. Williams' ultimate defence of the 'body genres' states that "to dismiss them as bad excess whether of explicit sex, violence, or emotion [...] is not to address their function as cultural problem-solving" (714). Because Williams' own legitimization of the 'body genres' is centered on an overarching social purpose, it is important to realize that *Irreversible* is exclusively and unambiguously about psychological and bodily destruction. Noé makes Williams' claim problematic in that, in the process of merging the 'body genres,' he aspires to an entirely nihilistic social space, and at no point suggests (directly *or* indirectly) that any other possibility is viable. The bodily excess that Noé explores is not designed to call for a societal contemplation of 'body.' The film gestures instead to the totalizing obliteration, not only of one's own body, but of every 'body' around it.

Some criticism has suggested that the film's formally disorienting characteristics invite interpretations where, "we do not know if (the violence within the film) is a dream of hers, of the narrative, or if the rape sequence ac-

approached by Marcus, it is his companion whom Marcus mistakes for him, and whom Pierre kills. It is not until Alex's encounter with Le Tenia in the tunnel that the spectator realizes that Marcus' hysteria caused him to identify the wrong man. As the swirling camera briefly settles on Le Tenia as he watches Pierre murder his companion, Le Tenia appears quietly amazed – an effect, it seems, combined by both the great fortune of his circumstances and the effect of drugs. Marcus is most clearly representative of action and Pierre, of thought. When Marcus' arm, however, is snapped by the man he misidentified as Le Tenia, he is no longer 'action' and with Pierre having committed murder, *he* is no longer 'thought.' As a result, through merely the process of elimination, Noé strands the spectator with only *one* remaining source of identification – that of Le Tenia himself, observing safely from the sidelines. However, because the spectator does not yet know that *this man* is Le Tenia, the violence of the film extends *beyond* it, directly attacking the psyche of the spectator.

Because of my central focus on 'body,' I feel that it is important to briefly acknowledge the presence of 'mind' as represented not only through Noé's cinematic techniques, but through the character of Pierre. A soft-spoken philosophy professor and former boyfriend of Alex, Pierre exemplifies 'rational' thought, to such an extent that he negates notions of 'body.' In the wake of Alex's rape, when his rational attempts to calm Marcus prove to be in vain, he states that Marcus is "not a man (but) an animal (and) even animals don't seek revenge." Although it may be argued that Alex is on the *brink* of death at the end of her ordeal (and excluding the fate of her unborn child), there is only *one* tangible, absolutely-certain murder in the film, and *that* action is performed by Pierre. When Pierre kills the man misidentified by Marcus as Le Tenia, any remaining possibility of the film's existence in a rationally-minded world is wiped out. Before her attack, Alex explains to Pierre the occasional value of 'body' over 'mind' when she says, "Everything can't be explained... sometimes you (simply) fuck," expressing how the 'rational' thought that Pierre so firmly believes in has limitations that corporeal expression is able to move beyond.

As Marcus is about to be raped by the man he mistakenly attacked, the film transgresses into a realm where justice in *any* form is made impossible and where bodily destruction, in one form or another, becomes inevitable. Here, 'rational' thought finds itself trapped. If 'rational thought' (Pierre) *acts*, it must kill the man on the verge of raping Marcus, but if it does *not act*, Marcus will be raped, and likely beaten to death. When Pierre, to save Marcus, brutally smashes in the head of Marcus' assailant with a large fire extinguisher, the 'rationality' which Pierre embodied (and will continue to as the film progresses backward) is destroyed. What is left within Pierre in the wake of his rejection of rationality is precisely that which produces the film's initial sense of what Palmer refers to as "low-art body horror" (30). Pierre kills Marcus' attacker, not simply as an act of defence, but as one of rage, bludgeoning

him a total of eleven times. It is evident that the man is dead after only a few blows, yet Pierre swings the extinguisher unrelentingly, refusing to cease until the man's head is a mound of pulp. Part of Pierre's rejection of rationality involves his unspoken (and misguided) agreement with Marcus that *this must* be the man they were searching for. This translates into a horrific bodily attack which finds its justification not in the attack itself, but in its unrelenting excess. As Pierre is led out of the club by police after the incident, a voice in offscreen space angrily taunts, "Gonna get your ass fucked in prison." Here, the film suggests that, in the act of preventing Marcus from being raped, Pierre merely transferred that same fate on to his *own* body. The obliteration of the film's representation of rationality is indicative of how *Irreversible* presents the annihilation of "mind" every bit as much as that of 'body.'

Williams' discussion of 'body' in relation to performer and spectator is taken a step further by Noé, who actually incorporates implications of bodily 'interior' and 'exterior' into the settings of the film itself. The gay sex club which Marcus and Pierre invade as they search for Le Tenia, unambiguously called 'Rectum,' is a dark underground labyrinth, populated by men in various states of undress, participating in anonymous, extreme sexual acts (bondage, fisting, and numerous other sadomasochistic acts). The underground tunnel where Alex encounters Le Tenia is similarly loaded with connotations of violence, degradation, and interiority. The anal bodily implications of the tunnel (where Alex is raped) and Rectum (where Marcus is beaten) achieve a disturbing furtherance of meaning when the battered bodies of Marcus and Alex are removed from their respective settings on stretchers at the very beginning of the first, and eighth long takes, respectively. The brutalized conditions of both bodies as they are carried out of their respective representations of the anal cavity are indicative of the rape itself – of the anal discharge of blood.

A brief cameo by Noé serves to make spectator identification even more problematic on a bodily level. In the depths of Rectum, as Marcus and Pierre race feverishly past its inhabitants, the dizzying cinematography briefly pans up Noé's *own* body, masturbating in a corner. Noé is clearly aware that within this hysteric, degraded cinematic space, pleasure is the most morally-problematic realm of spectator identification; therefore, it is that precise bodily experience upon which he bases his appearance. This cameo is not simply a self-conscious "wink" to the audience, but an indication of a filmmaker stepping into the moral void of his own film, establishing "a cinema of complete subject/object disintegration" (Brinkema 44). Because the shot contains frontal nudity of Noé, its own implications as a pornographic image merge the pleasure of orgasm with the film's own atmosphere of hysteria.

In extreme contrast to the film's dark, brutal first half, when Alex and Marcus are shown in the second half of the

film (the beginning of the day), the *mise-en-scène* is awash in vibrant high-key lighting, as though daylight were flooding their bedroom from every possible angle. Here, Noé establishes a lush, almost-utopic space – a celebration of the *exterior* of the body, before its violent, unavoidable invasion. The spectator realizes quickly however, that their points of identification are as problematic as they ever were, because, to identify with either character, even in their happiest moments together, demands identification with all that is to come. When Marcus casually complains “I can’t feel my arm”, he associates his discomfort with having slept on it awkwardly, unaware that his elbow will be snapped within twenty-four hours. The most disturbing moment of foresight however, comes when Alex, nude, rolls on to her side, exposing her buttocks to the camera. Her anal cavity is digitally censored, indicating how “that morning, she had already been raped (because) there was no time properly before the trauma –the rape initiates time... (and) is a temporal violation as much as a physical one” (Brinkema 41). In each of these cases, the body is revealed to contain an awareness of the destruction that it is careening toward, which the mind has no way of grasping.

*Irreversible* both adheres to and rejects pornographic characteristics in its exploration of bodily excess. Palmer’s statement that “flesh... is exposed to us within arresting, corporeal aesthetics” (29), confuses ‘flesh’ with ‘body.’ Bare flesh is actively present at numerous points within the film (the scene in Rectum and a brief glimpse of oral sex at a party), particularly in the morning, when Alex and Marcus engage playfully in bed. Although it may seem obvious, the affective nature of Alex’s rape makes it easy to forget that the exposure of flesh *per se* is not a factor within the film’s depiction of the rape itself. With regard to pornography, Kathleen Lubey has stated that “it is the viewer’s particular and privileged position that justifies the performance’s mechanics through which the genitals offer themselves to (the spectator’s) view” (117). Here, the ‘offering’ of the genitals to the spectator is a given in pornography, yet the only point in the film where Noé settles the camera on genitals for any extensive length of time is the scene of Alex and Marcus in the morning, which is *not* one which includes a sexual act. In this capacity, for a pornographic interpretation to be made of Alex’s rape requires that the nudity of the following scene somehow be displaced on to it as well. On the other hand, however, within pornography, “the viewer... watches two people who perform sex because they know he is watching, and the viewer watches with a complete awareness that they are having sex for the purpose of being watched” (Lubey 116). Despite the absence of visible flesh, the fact that sex and violence are merged in an excessive, performative fashion nonetheless make associations with pornography relevant.

The rape in the centre of the film exists as a proverbial black hole within the narrative into which every event (both before and after) spirals with total inevitability. Noé both begins and ends the film with overhead shots of spiralling ob-

jects. In the first scene, Noé includes a direct overhead shot of blue lights spiralling clockwise in a circular pattern from the top of a police van, and then proceeds to spiral the camera counter-clockwise, so as to create the visual impression of a swirling drain, sucking everything into its core. Similarly, in the film’s final scene, as Alex relaxes in a park, the camera moves directly overhead a group of children playing around a sprinkler, its streams of water once again spiralling clockwise. As the camera once again proceeds to violently spin in the opposite direction, Noé concludes the film as fatalistically self-enclosed. The events that the two ‘spiralling-drains’ frame are in the process of sucking the entire narrative into a void – a black hole which finds its bodily implications in the anus, indicative of how “we can no longer read rape as an intrusion of another into the body, but as the shock of ingesting the entire world” (Brinkema 50). In this capacity, *Irreversible* is essentially a film in the process of draining itself, its events having communicated to both character and spectator that there are states of body and mind so dwarfing – so completely irreconcilable – that sometimes, there is nothing left to do but surrender to the void.

If classical examples of pornography, horror, and melodrama coerce emotion from the spectator on a bodily level, *Irreversible* could be said to forcibly seize it. Williams’ breakdown of the three genres and their subsequent impact on ‘body’ serves as a stable text against which the instability of Noé’s nihilistic cinematic world may be looked at objectively. Within this film, bodies not destroyed by circumstance are in the process of destroying themselves wilfully, establishing Noé’s merging of the ‘body genres’ as one which does not look to ‘solve’ the problems of culture, but to violently erase culture altogether. It is this proposal of absolute bodily-obliviation which is visually-presented through the film’s feverish, excessive depiction of violence. Noé realizes that the most effective means of communicating the negation of body is to, while filming the destruction of a body, reject the mechanics of cinema by vanishing behind the camera, thereby negating his *own* body. By the end of the film, the body – whether it be that of the character or spectator – in the excessive grips of pleasure, agony, or grief – is nothing more than an afterthought.

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# Gorno:

## Violence, Shock and Comedy

Brenda Cromb

The past few years have seen a fairly successful new cycle of horror films, christened “torture porn” by David Edelstein of *New York* magazine, who writes: “As a horror maven who long ago made peace, for better and worse, with the genre’s inherent sadism, I’m baffled by how far this new stuff goes—and by why America seems so nuts these days about torture.” It has also been dubbed ‘gorno,’ a portmanteau of ‘gore’ and ‘porno.’ I prefer the latter, both for reasons of pith and because it is less politically charged. This cycle – which started with *Saw* (James Wan, 2004) and includes the *Hostel* (Eli Roth, 2005 and 2007) series, *Wolf Creek* (Greg McLean, 2005), *I Know Who Killed Me* (Chris Sivertson, 2007), and the controversial *Captivity* (Roland Joffe, 2007), among others – emphasizes *gore* over any other element including stories or even stars, filled as it is with unassuming, uninteresting protagonists who find themselves the victims of calculating sadists. Both the marketing and the reception of these films emphasize the affective power of the impressively gory sequences of violence. Negative reviews of the films go beyond questioning their aesthetic qualities or entertainment value to malign the morality of the films’ putative viewers. While many of these films will not even merit inclusion in the horror canon, their success and the wide media interest in them does merit some further inquiry. Ultimately, the films are not so much porn for sadists but – as a result of their postmodern flatness and construction around narrative ‘shocks’ – more akin to very dark slapstick comedy. Though laughter is not typically a viewer’s response, the ‘inappropriateness’ of the images in the films often makes it feel as though the director is playing a sick joke.

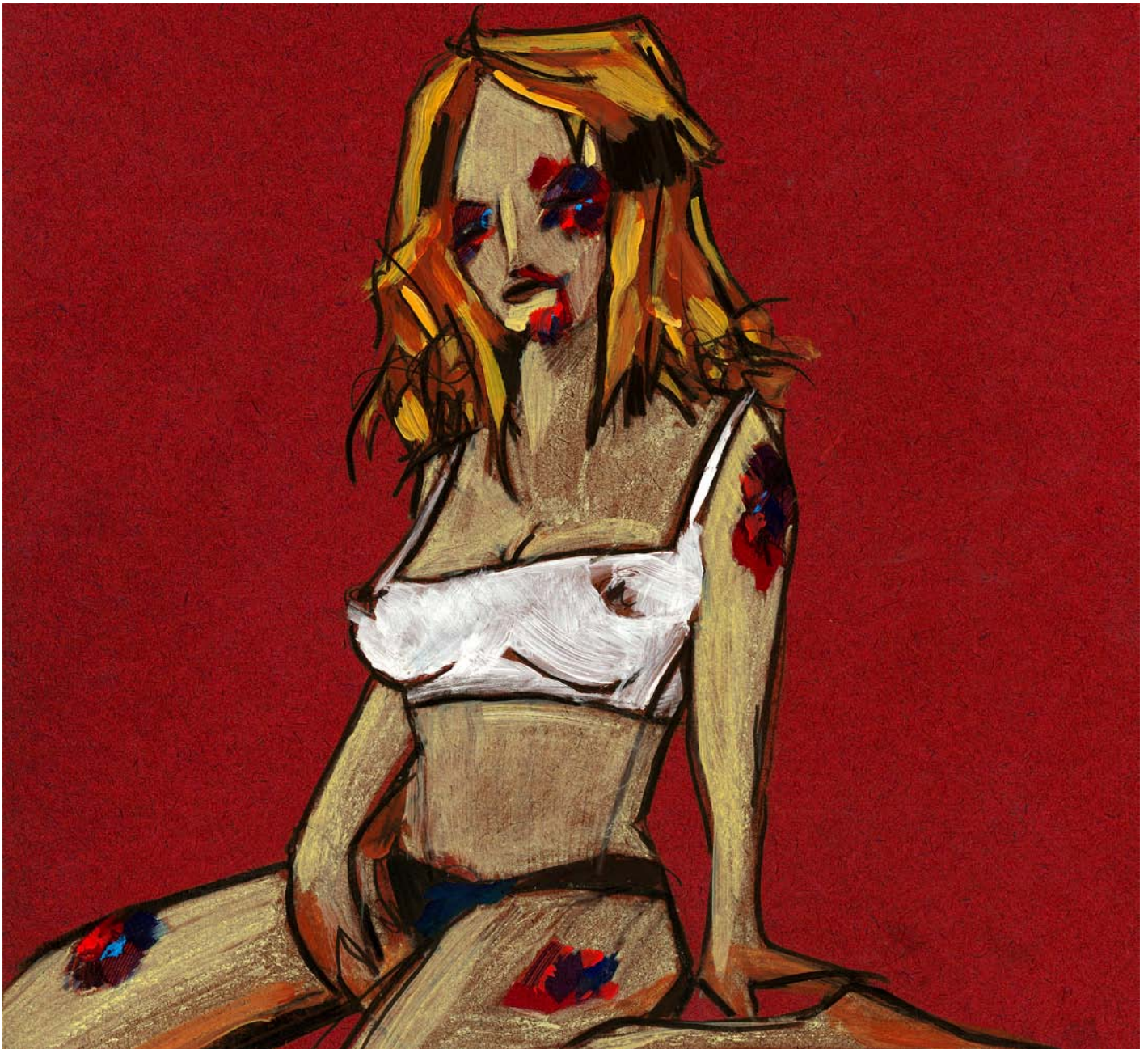
Films that depict bloody, vomitous violence are not new: *Hostel* and its ilk clearly follow in the footsteps of the exploitation films described by Mikita Brottman in *Offensive Films*, which treats films that were built to produce visceral reactions as the “unconscious” of mainstream cinema (3). Included in her book is *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974), a clear influence on gorno in many respects. Brottman draws on Linda Williams’ ‘body genres’ – ‘low’

films that produce bodily affect in the form of horror, porn, and melodrama. Williams associates each of the genres with the bodily fluid it draws from the characters and sometimes spectators: melodrama with tears, porn with ejaculate, and horror with blood (9). In this model, gorno’s assigned fluid would be vomit. “Offensive films,” Brottman writes about the extreme examples she studies, “are perhaps the most frightening example of this power, however, and are often regarded unambiguously as gratuitous sadism for entertainment’s sake” (4). The difference is that the films Brottman discussed were unabashedly marginal, produced outside the commercial system, whereas this new crop is being released by major companies, in mainstream theatres. To take a particularly successful example, Lions Gate opened *Saw* (which was produced for \$1.2 million) on 2,315 screens in North America in October 2004, grossing \$18.3 million in its opening weekend: it went on to make \$103 million worldwide. Even the sub-genre’s failures are relatively large-scale productions. The much-reviled *Captivity*, a straightforward story of the kidnapping of a beautiful blonde celebrity which generated controversy with its violent billboard, opened on over 1,000 screens its first weekend.<sup>1</sup> Films like *Saw* are a different beast and must be separated from the decidedly marginal films Brottman discussed.

Before looking more closely at the structure of the gorno films, their reception, and finally, suggesting a less morally fraught approach to their violent contents, I should take a moment to clarify the ‘pornographic’ aspects. Though much of the negative reaction to the films comes from the idea that the films are designed to make torture and gruesome violence appealing and link this violence with pornography’s objectification of women, a look at the films themselves does not seem to support such an argument. Instead of being masturbatory material for sadists, the films are meant to draw *visceral* reactions of shock and disgust from their spectators; in the films I reviewed, male characters were as likely to be victimized as

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1. All box office figures from <http://www.boxofficemojo.com>.



Bobby Mathieson

female characters. Sex is certainly an element in the violence in *some* of the gorno films I discuss here – most strikingly in *Captivity* – but the violence is the salient feature of these films, and the reaction it provokes is certainly not meant to be one of uncomplicated pleasure. The link to pornography can best be seen in the lack of emphasis on narrative, except as a way of building anticipation: no one watches a porno movie for the *story*. This is why my essay focuses so closely on gorno's drive to its 'money shots.'

#### Cinema of Repulsions: Attractions & Narrative Structure

**G**orno's predecessors are far from invisible, even in the films themselves. Takashi Miike's *Audition* (2001) is in many ways the prototypical gorno film: it features a long build-up without *any* violence and ends with a series

of increasingly graphic scenes of torture. Miike's work is an obvious influence on many of the films to come, particularly Eli Roth's. Miike even makes a cameo appearance in *Hostel* as one of the clients at the death factory (where backpackers are murdered for the pleasure of the very rich); this type of self-aware note of influence is everywhere in gorno, despite its supposed appeal only to pure sadists. The Jigsaw killer in *Saw II* tells policeman Eric to pull into the "last house on the left," a clear reference to the title of Wes Craven's 1972 film, which is itself a reworking of Bergman's *The Virgin Spring* (1960). *Wolf Creek* clearly borrows from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (and by extension *Psycho* [Alfred Hitchcock, 1960]) in its tale of a road trip gone awry, "based on a true story" but built more to scare than to inform, and in the appearance of the mysterious park the characters visit in the Australian out-back, which is littered with bones like the home of the family

in *Massacre*. (It also features a darkly comic quotation of the “That’s not a knife – *this* is a knife” joke from Peter Faiman’s 1986 film *Crocodile Dundee*). *I Know Who Killed Me* draws from more highbrow sources like David Lynch and Dario Argento. It is difficult not to recognize nods to Lynch in Sivertson’s shots of flame against a black background (recalling *Blue Velvet* [1988]) and in the film’s owl motif (recalling the ominous instruction “The owls are not what they seem” in *Twin Peaks*); Argento’s influence is clear in the film’s supernatural themes and the blue light and stained glass coffin, reminiscent of similar motifs in *Suspria* (1977). The first *Saw* is replete with references to Alfred Hitchcock: the scene in which Adam, the photographer-voyeur who is kidnapped by the killer, uses the same device of illuminating a dark room with flashbulbs by a voyeur/photographer as Jimmy Stewart does in *Rear Window* (1954). In other words, the films are relentlessly artificial. These overt references and winks to spectators in the know mean that the experience of watching a gorno film is one of constantly being aware of being a subject – not of torture by any villain, but of manipulation by the film’s ‘narrator,’ the entity that is sensed as in control of the story and that I will generally equate with the director.

It may seem counterintuitive to begin to consider the affective power of gorno’s violence by turning to a cognitivist account of spectatorship, but David Bordwell’s *Narration in the Fiction Film* provides a useful framework to understand how the films produce disgust. In the book, Bordwell conceives of spectators not as dupes, but as active viewers, constantly forming and revising hypotheses. He describes the viewer as using the narrative information provided in the *syuzhet* – the plot, essentially the information presented in the course of the film – which interacts with the film’s style, to produce the *fabula* – the story, or the series of fictional events suggested by the *syuzhet*. Bordwell also alludes to another category of film information – excess, which he describes as “materials which may stand out perceptually but which do not fit either narrative or stylistic patterns” (53). Bordwell’s model does not wholly fit gorno, as the ‘shocking’ sequences of violence are not only part of the narrative, but seem to be the *point*.

Take *Audition* for example: Miike addresses the audience *through* an almost Bordwellian narrative strategy, in which observation and hypothesis formation is paid off, not with a clear ‘solution’ to the film’s mysteries, but with horrific torture. The slow, almost inexorable pace of the film’s first half – exacerbated by static camera angles, banal conversations and nearly affectless acting – only serves to heighten the expectations of viewers who have seen the film classified as horror. Miike gives the viewer enough information to put together the ‘mystery’ of Asami (Eihi Shiina), who widower Aoyama (Ryo Ishibashi) chooses at the titular audition. Mentions of a missing music executive and a quick shot of a moving burlap sack in Asami’s apartment make it easy for the careful, savvy, viewer to put together what is going on, leav-

ing them do nothing but anxiously anticipate the promised violence. When it finally does come – with jarring scenes of vomit-eating by Asami’s prisoner, an amputation, and needles inserted into Aoyama’s eyes – it is all at once and it is relentless. For the latter, Miike places the camera in Aoyama’s point of view, so the needles are being aimed directly at the viewer, placing an almost literal threat on their safe position as a spectator. The ‘punishment’ of these squeamish scenes is similar to the sort that Hitchcock dished out, but more detached from character identifications, instead with the ‘director’ implying with each new horror “Look what I can make you watch.”

The structural similarities between *Audition*, both *Hostel* films, and *Wolf Creek* are striking: all three proceed with banal plots that do not see any scenes of violence (except maybe a morbid opening sequence to throw the viewer off-balance) until around the 45-minute mark. Because the viewer is prepared for a horror film by the marketing and reviews they have read, they watch the film not identifying with the characters, but impatiently wondering where the danger will come from. In *Hostel* (which was promoted with an emphasis on the torture-for-pay aspect), danger seems to lurk everywhere as the film follows a pair of young Americans on a cliché backpacking trip through Amsterdam: from the mysterious Icelandic friend (Eythor Gudjonsson) the film’s protagonists Josh and Paxton (Derek Richardson and Jay Hernandez) meet, to the sinister children in the Slovakian village where they end up, to the strange man (Jan Vlasák) who seems sexually interested in Josh. *Hostel Part II* takes the same amount of time to get into the factory as the first film, but its suspense is premised entirely on the spectator’s knowledge of what is coming, as the film follows both the torturers and their victims. *Wolf Creek* (much like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*) takes around three-quarters of an hour to get into the gory scenes as well, as viewers try to guess whether it will be UFOs or one of the rude men at the gas station that eventually start dismembering the three travelers in the Australian outback. *I Know Who Killed Me* uses a similar time span to introduce its heroine before she is kidnapped and has her limbs cut off. Admittedly, neither the *Saw* films nor *Captivity* work this way, though they retain the drugging-kidnapping-torture pattern as well as the privileged scenes of unabashed gore. Because so little happens in the interim and the viewer is caught up in waiting for things to get going, the films’ gory scenes seem like *punishment* for wanting some action, but they are also having their limits tested. The roller coaster ride is a good metaphor for the experience (and one that I will come back to below): it is scary, but it is also fun.

However, more than punishment, what the films provoke is visceral affective reaction, not because of any special identification with the characters, but because of the power of seeing scenes this violent or this disgusting on screen at all. Perhaps these excesses are better linked to the “cinema of at-

tractions” as formulated by Tom Gunning. In his discussion of early cinema, Gunning notes that the effects of the film were all that there were. Films, he writes, were “fascinating because of their illusory power (whether the realistic illusion of motion offered to the first audiences by Lumière of the the magic illusion concocted by Méliès)” (64). This could well explain the appeal of gorno films and the emphasis on visceral horror in their reception – the power to shock with realistic portrayals of onscreen violence (and other bodily horrors like the vomit-eating scene in *Audition*) is somewhat analogous to the pleasure that early audiences are supposed to have taken in the mere sight of moving images. The stories of nauseated exits at early festival screenings of *Audition*<sup>2</sup> bear a remarkable resemblance to the apocryphal stories of early spectators leaping from their seats when they saw a train pulling toward the camera. However, if we want to apply Gunning’s terminology to *Audition* and other gorno films, it will require some modification. The crux of Gunning’s cinema of attractions is its “direct address of the audience” (66): the ‘address’ is still present in gorno more than in other contemporary genres, because of the focus on the medium itself, but it is submerged in generic narratives.

One possibility is to adopt the suggested “new cinema of attractions” suggested by Linda Williams in “Discipline and Fun,” wherein she argues that narrative becomes secondary to “thrills” offered by postmodern films (356) – gorno can clearly be understood in this context. Williams suggests that the kinds of attractions offered by contemporary “roller-coaster ride” films began with *Psycho*, the first time that audiences were “disciplined” by being forced to wait in line, and then taken on an affective ride of shocks once the film actually started. She argues that Hitchcock’s film allowed audiences “for the first time in mainstream motion picture history, take pleasure in losing the kind of control, mastery, and forward momentum familiar to what I will now resist calling the ‘classical’ narrative” (358). Because waiting in line for a film no longer feels like “discipline” (and indeed technologies ranging from the VHS tape to internet piracy have given some control back to the spectator), I would argue that the structure of gorno films returns that element of discipline. In order to get the full experience, the spectator experiences anticipation akin to waiting in line for the roller coaster *within the film text itself*. Unlike *Psycho*, which conned viewers into thinking they were watching one film when they were actually watching quite another, gorno films do not pretend to ‘fool’ the viewer, at least in this way. These films are advertised with images that evoke horror: images of chainsaws and blood, close-ups of meat and grey fingers with broken nails.<sup>3</sup> One image for *Saw II* features two dismembered fingers and the text “We dare you again” along with the film’s tagline “Yes,

there will be blood.” The implicit deal with the spectator is that they will be tested in their ability to “stand” the gore the film promises; they are aware from the start that they are in for gore, the long set-up is just the line they have to wait in to get on the ride.

### Being “About Something”: Reception and Gorno

*It is one of those few films... that are almost as unwatchable as the newsreels – of Auschwitz, of the innocent victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and Vietnam, victims of Nazi or American dehumanization, which today, under President Bush, seem not so far apart.*

–Robin Wood on *Audition*

Critical reactions like this bear out the importance of the visceral in *Audition*. Though Bob Graham of the *San Francisco Chronicle* – who starts by noting that it is “hard to imagine a worse time to consider going to a horror movie,” a note surely associated with the September 14, 2001 date of the review – is careful to note that the film “is not schlock but actually is about something,” he asserts that the film’s gore is not for the faint of heart. “This movie can be recommended only to dyed-in-the-wool fans of the genre,” he writes. “Anyone who goes into one of Miike’s films must be prepared to be put through the wringer.” This fairly accurately sums up the typical critical reaction to the film – praise for the film’s skillful production – the “about something” implying that the film is in fact “art”, not schlock – but with an “if you like that sort of thing” caveat to warn away viewers who do not enjoy films that make them wince sympathetically. Other reviews have different takes on the film, but virtually all of them use language that implies a ‘gut-level’ visceral reaction to the film. Elvis Mitchell of the *New York Times* calls the film “a great, sick rush” and notes in positive language that “[t]he most telling and unforgettable horror is performed with a straight face, no winks or smirks to let us off the hook.” *The Village Voice*’s Dennis Lim describes *Audition* as a “lethally poised Venus flytrap of a movie” and warning readers not read the rest of the review if they wish to “preserve the purity of the trauma.” And so forth: the language consistently evokes the film’s power to produce an immediate, emotional, visceral reaction.

However, a look at the later gorno films, which lack *Audition*’s art film pedigree, shows many reviewers were not so impressed. Roger Ebert’s review of *Wolf Creek* notes its high rating at RottenTomatoes.com with dismay: “I went to the Rotten Tomatoes roundup of critics not for tips for my own review, but hoping that someone somewhere simply said, ‘Made me want to vomit and cry at the same time.’” Ebert goes further, calling the film misogynist, a “sadistic celebration of pain and cruelty,” and telling his reader “If anyone you know says this is the one [film] they want to see, my advice is: Don’t know that person no more.” Many of the films’

2. See Tom Mes’s discussion of *Audition* for more information (189).

3. These are some of the promotional images used for the *Saw* and *Hostel* films, viewable at imdb.com,

other negative reviews were less dismayed by its violence than disappointed by its lack of originality. The *Seattle Post-Intelligencer's* serendipitously named Sean Axmaker notes the film's debt to *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, complaining: "This may be the most genuine expression of that once shocking trend, but after 30 years the shock is gone. What's left is a grueling exercise in unrelenting brutality with a subtext no deeper than an instinctual fear of the back-country bogeyman." This last statement is particularly telling. Mainstream critics (like Ebert) are accepting of film violence when it is taken seriously, when it is "about something." Ebert himself gave a four-star review to Stephen Spielberg's notoriously violent *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), arguing that though the film will make audiences cry, "weeping is an incomplete response, letting the audience off the hook. This film embodies ideas. After the immediate experience begins to fade, the implica-

This kind of extreme reaction reflects the power of images – especially given the continued debates around the United States' use of torture in the "war on terror" are fresh in many viewers' minds. Soloway's post also featured a letter written to the MPAA by Joss Whedon, creator of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. In it, he argues that a film like *Captivity* (and its ilk) has no redeeming value:

...the advent of torture-porn and the total dehumanizing not just of women (though they always come first) but of all human beings has made horror a largely unpalatable genre. This ad campaign is part of something dangerous and repulsive, and that act of aggression has to be answered.

The Soloway letter mentions Abu Ghraib, the prison where Iraqi prisoners of war were tortured by U.S. soldiers, the photographs of which had recently been in the news: this suggests

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## The real unease produced by these films is in the desire to laugh at the clear visceral pain

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tions remain and grow." The problem is not seen to be the depiction of strong violence, but the ends to which it is used. If the film is, like *Saving Private Ryan*, "about something," then the violence is acceptable, because the spectator affect is being marshaled toward a "message" (in *Saving Private Ryan's* case, about the horrors of war). If provoking a reaction to violence is an end in itself without "deep subtext," as Axmaker notes, then it is treated as artistically worthless.

The recent scandal surrounding the posters for the film *Captivity* is a case in point: the distributors' original billboard ad featured a series of four grisly images to match the words "Abduction," "Confinement," "Torture," and "Termination." The "Torture" image is a close-up of actress Elisha Cuthbert's bandaged face with a blood-filled tube coming out of her nose. The images were pulled almost immediately, because they had not been approved by the Motion Picture Association of America, which regulates advertising material as well as the films themselves. In a blog post announcing a campaign to have the MPAA refuse the film a rating – a move which would have limited the producers' ability to promote and screen it – television writer Jill Soloway wrote the following:

That night I had a nightmare about the billboard, and by the next morning, I had a feeling in the pit of my stomach. This wasn't just horror, this wasn't just misogyny... it was a grody combo platter of the two, the torture almost a punishment for the sexiness. It had come from such a despicable inhuman hatred place that it somehow managed to recall Abu Ghraib, the Holocaust, porn and snuff films all at once.

one reason why the *Captivity* ads struck such a chord. Imprisonment and torture, even sexual torture, were on people's minds; though *Captivity*, admittedly hardly a beacon of feminism, has more to do with *Psycho* than with Abu Ghraib, the latter is what made the campaign so much more upsetting.

Despite the letter-writing campaign, the film was eventually released with an R rating. It was universally panned. But more than just a casual dismissal of a bad movie, many reviews also contained suspicion of the film's audience akin to the reviews of films like *Wolf Creek*. The *Hollywood Reporter's* Frank Scheck complained that despite the film's many horrors, "these things pale in comparison to the mostly solitary men in attendance at an early show at a 42nd Street theater, intently staring at the screen as if they were watching a motivational training film." The *New York Times's* Jeanette Catsoulis mainly excoriates the film's failures as a horror movie, but introduces the film thusly: "Though hyped as a torture movie, *Captivity* is really the extreme revenge fantasy of every (slightly damaged) guy who ever lusted after a woman far out of his league." Again, the implication is that not only is it not a very good film but that the only people who would want to see it are psychologically disturbed. This is stated outright in the Sunday *Times* review republished by the *New York Post* (because the film was not screened for critics): "If you want to see the sexy blonde from 24 [...] held captive in a dungeon by a psycho and subjected to various disgusting torments, then rush to see *Captivity*. Alternately, seek psychiatric help." What bothers critics is not so much the inclusion of graphic violence, but the fact that the films showcase graphic violence for its own sake. Though certainly in the case of *Captivity* one



could rightly argue that the film is misogynist in its treatment of its heroine, it could also be advanced that this aspect is *part* of the shock of inappropriateness that gorno provides. *Captivity* was built to shock, with its gruesome ‘body-part milkshake’ and the threat of acid being poured on its heroine’s face; it was not built to make a point, but rather to immerse the spectator in a visceral sensory experience.

### Slapstick Revised?

It is difficult to map any kind of Robin Wood-style “return of the repressed” onto gorno villains (2004 113).<sup>4</sup> In “An Introduction to the American Horror Film,” he argues that “the relationship between normality and the monster [...] constitutes the essential subject of the horror film” (118). Though various other discourses – class, sexual difference, etc. – are addressed, in gorno films the murderer’s motivation simply comes down to perversion. More importantly, it is impossible to make such an argument about gorno *as a generic cycle*. Gorno films, especially after the *Captivity* scandal, are often characterized and decried as orgies of violence against women, but *Saw* and *Hostel*, two of the cycle’s most successful films, feature primarily male victims, and while women are the central victims in *Hostel Part II*, there is also a graphic depiction of castration. Though some gorno films share some themes, that can be linked to contemporary social fears (especially around the foreign in *Hostel* and surveillance in the *Saw* films), none of these concerns can be traced across the entire cycle, which is knitted together by an attraction-like arrangement of violent content. Many of the films do bear resemblance to the serial killer film, but with a difference: if, as Newitz argues, the typical serial killer film portrays the capitalist-style mass production of dead bodies (13-53), in the gorno film what is mass produced are bodily fluids and visceral shocks. One exception to this rule might be in *Hostel II*, where the killers are followed along with the future victims, but Roth makes this a long set-up for another trick on the audience in the form of a reversal of expectations: the apparently reluctant and sympathetic customer of the murder factory turns out to be the one with an appetite for gore, while his eager friend panics at the first sight of blood. In *Saw II*, there is a great emphasis placed not on the killer’s thin motivation (to make others appreciate life), but on the ingenuity of the traps he engineers: the lock which opened will pull the trigger of a gun, the box containing a promised antidote that a character can reach into but is designed so that she cannot remove her hands without cutting them off, and the trap laid for the police in the form of a ‘live’ video feed of the characters trapped in the house that is only revealed at the end of the film to be a tape (a ‘joke’ on the spectators, who also thought the prisoners stood a chance). Wood suggests that

the presence of villains who are “simply evil” – like, presumably, Mick (John Jarratt) in *Wolf Creek* – represents a regressive text (134), but what about a film like *Saw*? The villain is actually present as a dead body in the centre of the room for the film’s entire run: it is impossible to say whether he is ‘simply’ evil or has other motivations. His speech at the end of the film is almost there out of necessity, because someone had to orchestrate all the torture.

If anything, it is the wry humour and postmodern flatness, reinforced by constant references to earlier films of which most horror fans would be aware, of these films that make them feel like such cynical exercises to the critics. It is my position – backed by suggestions in both scholarship on comedy and horror – that the real unease produced by these films is in the desire to laugh at the clear visceral pain in what remain, frankly, ridiculous situations, a desire fed by the films’ frank and unapologetic refusal of good taste. As Brotzman puts it:

It has long been testified that what causes fear and horror – and also, in a somewhat different context, what causes humour and laughter – is evidence of an absence of bodily control, witnessed most vividly by the collapse of bodily boundaries and the external appearance of things that should properly be kept inside the body (12).

The line between “body horror” and “body comedy” is very fine, though Williams argues that physical comedy is seen as less dangerously excessive than other “body genres” because “it is almost a rule that the audience’s physical reaction of laughter does not coincide with the often deadpan reactions of the clown” (1991: 2). In Alex Clayton’s *The Body in Hollywood Slapstick*, there is a suggestion that the distinction is not so easy. Clayton’s description of the humiliation of Ted (Ben Stiller) when his genitals are caught in a zipper in *There’s Something About Mary* (Bobby and Peter Farrelly, 1998) revolves more around Ted’s public embarrassment than his pain (172). (*Mary* is best known for its own “collapse of body boundaries,” when Mary uses Ted’s ejaculate as hair gel (see King 65-66).) However, what is remarkable is how similar the scene is to the castration scene at the end of *Hostel Part II*. Clayton observes that the Farrelly brothers delay showing the actual mangled genitals long enough that the spectator thinks that they will not, then finally reveals them: “the visual insert [...] is perhaps more a than a means of pushing the boundaries of gross-out humour. It relates to the conflict of desire around seeing that the sequence is built around in the first place” (171). In Roth’s film, the shears are shown poised to cut around the genitals several times, in the scene leading up to the castration; Stuart (Roger Bart) winds up thinking he has avoided it, but when it turns out that Beth (Lauren German) has to kill someone to buy her way out of the trap, she of course chooses her recent torturer. When Beth finally does cut Stuart’s penis and testicles off, it is first shown in a full shot of both figures and then emphasized in a close-up.

4. Though Wood himself has written an extensive consideration of *Audition* (*Film International*).

Roth takes the genital mangling much further than the Farrelly's do, but the sequence still ends with humiliation, as the guards laugh at Stu's emasculation. Roth frequently plays on the "conflict of desire" Clayton notes: as in *Hostel Part II* when the guard's head blocks the security monitor just as Whitney (Bijou Phillips) is killed, or in the first film when an excruciating build-up to a pair of shears clipping off a toe is ended with a graphic match to another girl *clipping her toenail* back at the hostel. Roth is also just as likely to go for pure slapstick – as in Todd's (Richard Burgi) "slip" with the chainsaw and his subsequent horror at Whitney's bleeding, or the final shot of *Hostel Part II*, in which the village's children use a decapitated villainess Axelle's (Vera Jordanova) head as a soccer ball. *Saw* is also not afraid to go for the bodily function gag (pun intended), as in the scene that has Adam (Leigh Whannell) trying not to vomit as he fishes around the feces-filled bowl of a toilet *before* thinking to look in the tank. In a way, the pure appeal of slapstick and horror are quite similar: seeing the body placed in situations that would be terrifying – if they were real.

If gorno can be closely linked to any strain of comedy, it is to "gross-out" comedy reliant on bodily functions and extreme violence in their slapstick, films like *Mary, American Pie* (Paul Weitz, 1999), and even the films spun off from the MTV series *Jackass* (*Jackass: The Movie* 2002 and 2006's excrementally titled sequel *Jackass: Number Two*, both directed by Jeff Tremaine), in which actors *really* enact the kinds of gross-out situations that are comically rendered in films like *Mary*.<sup>5</sup> "Gross-out" was first treated as an aesthetic of both comedy and horror by William Paul in his book *Laughing, Screaming*, who sees it as a historically bounded aesthetic of the 1970s and 1980s, noting that "Gross-out began in a period of oppositional movements [the 1970s], but it flourished in a period of excess [the 1980s]" (430) and ultimately arguing that gross-out is defined by cultural ambivalence around values of the individual versus those of the community (429). His work in this regard leads Geoff King to see the gross-out comedy – which has seen a resurgence since Paul's study – along the lines of Bakhtin's carnival, wherein bodily and social boundaries are transgressed and mocked (King 64). King suggests the comedy drawing from bodily functions works because they are "to a large extent repressed, or at least confined to the realms of the private and hidden" in North American culture and the pleasure in the comedy results from the rupture of 'good taste' (70-71). Clearly, that same kind of pleasure can be found in gorno, where the bounds of culturally policed good taste are, as the films' reception shows, clearly transgressed.

Of course, gorno films are not merely a subset of gross-out comedies: their 'shocks' function in a similar manner, but they ultimately contain more violence, and provoke more dis-

5. It seems to me that a clear forerunner to *Jackass* can be found in *Pink Flamingos* (John Waters, 1973), which shocked audiences with its shit-eating finale (see King 69).

gust than laughter. While the films individually can certainly be mobilized in terms of political meaning, the impact of the cycle as a whole has to be understood in terms of its visceral impact and the way this impact functions. This ability to disgust and willingness to aesthetically transgress the boundaries of good taste – without necessarily being ideologically transgressive – is both the reason for gorno's critical failure *and* its central appeal.

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# Shadows of a Doubt:

## The Fallacy of the Crisis of Masculinity

*excerpts from a work in progress*

Barry Keith Grant

This book examines issues of gender and identity, with an emphasis on the representation of masculinity, within a historically wide range of Hollywood genre movies, ultimately countering the accepted wisdom within film studies that particular periods and films represent a crisis in the American male psyche. Through a series of close readings of selected genre movies and directors, I argue that to understand the history of American cinema as a series of masculine crises is a serious distortion of both Hollywood filmmaking and its genres, and that, in fact, genre movies constitute an ongoing dialogue with their audiences about gender definition.

According to genre theorist Steve Neale, in the cinema "...there is constant work to channel and regulate identification in relation to sexual division, in relation to the orders of gender, sexuality, and social identity and authority marking patriarchal society... Every film thus tends to specify identification in accordance with the socially defined and constructed categories of male and female" (11). After Laura Mulvey's breakthrough article on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in 1975, feminist critics began to understand that masculinity, like femininity, may have been the center from which Others were defined, but it was not simply one uncontested construction. Quick to look for cracks in the previously assumed monolithic representation of masculinity, critics melodramatically identified moments of 'crisis' in its representation. For example, film noir, which flourished in the 1940s and 1950s, is understood by scholars today as being largely about the acute sense of disempowerment men felt returning home from World War II to find that during the war women had left the domestic sphere and entered the workforce in unprecedented numbers. Masculinity in film noir is often depicted as a struggle for the male protagonist to maintain his heteronormative identity. As Frank Krutnik argues, film noir offers a series of engagements with 'problematic' (that is, non-normative) aspects of masculine iden-

tity, and concludes that noir's emphasis on male characters who fail to fulfill the ideal Freudian Oedipal trajectory are "perhaps evidence of some kind of crisis of confidence within the contemporary regimentation of male-dominated culture" (xiii, 91).

Apparently this masculine crisis has spread to a global scale. For example, according to Ivana Kronja, the violence, civil unrest, poverty, and cultural isolation that has informed the countries of the former Yugoslavia has resulted in a pattern of psychologically disturbed male heroes within recent Serbian cinema that represents "society's crisis as a crisis of masculinity" (18).

It is true that genre movies have frequently offered the dominant representation of what Joan Mellen years ago called the "big bad wolf": "a male superior to women, defiant, assertive, and utterly fearless. Repeatedly through the decades," Mellen writes, "Hollywood has demanded that we admire and imitate males who dominate others, leaders whom the weak are expected to follow. The ideal man of our films is a violent one. To be sexual, he has had to be not only tall and strong but frequently brutal, promising to overwhelm a woman by physical force that was at once firm and tender" (3). Whether it was Clark Gable, John Wayne, Humphrey Bogart or Clint Eastwood, the archetype is familiar. Yet at the same time that movies have insistently presented this image, they have consistently questioned masculinity and the specific incarnations within popular culture of that masculine American psyche that D.H. Lawrence once famously called "hard, stoic, isolate, and a killer" (68).

Certainly in mainstream cinema, "masculinity, as an ideal, at least, is implicitly known" (Neale 19); but as *Shadows of a Doubt* will demonstrate by focusing on selected films, directors, and actors in a series of case studies that also speak to larger issues and trends throughout the history of American cinema, genre movies have always endorsed specific images of masculinity at the same time as they have challenged them. As

part of their mythic function within mass-mediated society, genre movies address in coded fashion definitions and ideals of masculinity, engaging, like much of popular culture, in a continuous process of negotiation with their audiences...

Where better to begin such an examination than with the work of D.W. Griffith, often referred to as 'the father' of mainstream cinema? In conventional histories of the cinema, David Wark Griffith is usually cited as a major innovator of the narrative film, having 'invented' such now standard techniques as the close-up, parallel editing, and expressive ('Rembrandt') lighting. His move from New York to Los Angeles after 1913, along with his stock company, was instrumental in establishing Hollywood as the geographical locus of what has become known as the classic narrative style, the style which he was so central in codifying. However, the accuracy of this standard description has been challenged in recent years by newer work on early cinema history questioning whether in fact Griffith was 'the first' to use any of these techniques. Yet while it may be inaccurate to say that Griffith 'invented' them, without doubt he *was* one of the first to discover the depth of their effect on spectators through their calculated use within a film's overall narrative and aesthetic context.

Still, Griffith may be said to be a cinematic 'father figure' in a more provocative sense, which is the way his films may be seen to address issues of gender representation that are central to that classic style he is sometimes said to have sired. The idea of Griffith as a visual poet was explained first and best by James Agee, for whom:

He had no remarkable power of intellect, or delicateness of soul; no subtlety; little restraint; little if any 'taste,' whether to help his work or harm it; Lord knows (and be thanked) no cleverness; no fundamental capacity, once he had achieved his first astonishing development, for change or growth. He wasn't particularly observant of people; nor do his movies suggest that he understood them at all deeply... His sense of comedy was pathetically crude and numb. He had an exorbitant appetite for violence, for cruelty, and for the Siamese twin of cruelty, a kind of obsessive tenderness which at its worst was all but nauseating. (316-17)

Nevertheless, and in spite of these 'handicaps,' Agee goes on to praise Griffith as "a great primitive poet, a man capable, as only great and primitive artists can be, of intuitively perceiving and perfecting the tremendous magical images that underlie the memory and imagination of entire peoples" (314). Agee cites some of Griffith's images – the homecoming of the defeated hero in *Birth of a Nation* (1915), the climactic chase in on the ice floe in *Way Down East*, Danton's ride in *Orphans of the Storm* (1921) – which he sees as being shaped by the director's instinctive ability to translate into visual terms feelings that reside in the collective unconscious.

What Agee is getting at becomes clear when looking, for example, at the scene in *Birth of a Nation* to which he refers. In the famous scene in which the Little Colonel (Henry B. Walthall) returns to his devastated home after the Civil War, the front door is at the edge of the frame; after a momentary, emotionally poignant delay, the door opens and the arms of Flora Cameron (Mae Marsh) reach out to embrace him. By composing the shot so that the specific detail of Marsh's face is excluded by being outside the frame, Griffith manages to articulate a more general feeling of returning home. Agee's essential point is that Griffith has managed in his visualization of the event to elevate it above and beyond a specific representation of the arrival home of this particular soldier.

Griffith's films on occasion overtly invite the audience to view his images in precisely this abstract manner. The most famous example is, of course, the repeated image in *Intolerance* (1916) of Lillian Gish rocking a cradle: the shot functions as a thematic linking device connecting the film's four distinct narratives, each set in a different time and place. A reference to the transcendental vision of Walt Whitman's poem "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," Gish's image in *Intolerance* never represents an actual, embodied character within the diegesis, like the other actors, but rather, the abstract, universal desire for nurturance and security – in Scott Simmon's words, "endlessly rocking toward some apotheosis of the maternal melodrama" (19). Agee's notion of the cinematic poet as a director whose images capture the concrete objects before the camera yet at the same time resonate with larger, cultural values and experiences coincides with Andrew Sarris' view of John Ford. This double focus is precisely what Sarris articulates as the distinguishing feature of Ford's films, another director often referred to as a 'poet of the cinema.' According to Sarris, Ford's work captures both "the twitches of life and the silhouette of legend"; thus they are poetic largely because they possess a "double vision" – "the concrete immediacy of events reaching out toward the abstraction of history" (35, 85).

In a way, a similar claim can be made for many, if not most, of Griffith's characters, even without the overt metaphorical status given to Gish in *Intolerance*. Griffith had a penchant for broad theatricalism, which was ingrained by a decade of experience on the stage, largely in melodramatic potboilers. This influence, which Agee correctly observes Griffith could never shed despite his other advances in cinematic technique (317), perhaps, ironically, here worked to the director's advantage, pushing his characters, as Sarris might say, toward the legendary as opposed to the literal. Thus Griffith tended to essentialize women in his films no less than in the apparently special case of Gish's earth mother in *Intolerance*.

Indeed, Griffith's films are on one level poetic meditations about the very business of gender construction that Neale notes is central to the ideological work of movies generally. Significantly, the primary genre within which Griffith worked was that of the 'woman's film.' Scott Simmon claims

that through approximately one quarter of the 450 one- and two-reelers that Griffith made for Biograph from 1908 to 1913, he virtually defined the genre. Griffith was producing three films a week at a time when the role of women was dramatically changing as they began to move out of the domestic sphere into public space (Simmon 9). Griffith's influence in this regard is so pronounced that Simmon redubs him, with intentional irony, 'Father of the Woman's Film.'

Certainly one of Griffith's major contributions to the history of the cinema was the image of Victorian femininity which became etched into the collective imagination of his era. This image was the product of a combination of Victorian melodrama and the code of Southern gentility which informed his genteel upbringing in Kentucky. As film historian Lewis Jacobs notes, Griffith consistently cast "mere slips of girls, fifteen or sixteen years old, blond and wide-eyed.... All his heroines – Mary Pickford, Mae Marsh, Lillian Gish, Blanche Sweet – were, at least in Griffith's eye, the pale, helpless, slim-bodied heroines of the nineteenth-century English poets" (96-97). Indeed, it has often been remarked that this unchanging image of women was largely responsible for Griffith's precipitous decline as a director in the 1920s, when it was out of tune with the Jazz Age, the era of Zelda Fitzgerald and the flapper.

Jacob's description is true of none of Griffith's actresses more than Lillian Gish. She embodied the period's idealized image of female beauty as fully as, say, the illustrations of Charles Dana Gibson did before her. In her autobiography, Gish reports Griffith's instructions to her that one of her characters be understood to represent "the essence of all girlhood, not just one girl," and that she attempt to embody "the essence of virginity" (102). For many scholars of film acting, Gish was such a great star precisely because of her ability to represent qualities, beyond her particular character in any given film, of womanhood itself. Thus Naremore, for example, describes her as "the perfect incarnation of WASP beauty" (95), while for Richard Dyer, "before she is a real person, she is an essence" (24).

Because of the looming importance of her image, many would agree with Simmon's claim that "It is evident that Griffith's woman's films – both from their numbers and their narratives – that women not men were central to his career-long project" (19). Yet Griffith's films are equally concerned with the representation of men. In fact, Griffith's representations of male characters were rather similar to his treatment of women. His films inevitably reflected and embodied the tensions created by the significant social changes taking place at the time. Inevitably, then, while they do focus emphatically on women, his films also address questions of masculinity. And just as women are essentialized in the Griffithian melodrama, so are men. Griffith's films, like the genre system itself, tend to present what James Naremore describes as "a trenchantly binary world" (83). In standard melodramatic fashion, Griffith's characters are clearly divided between good

and evil, and the narratives are built on assumptions about moral absolutes, including values of gender and sexuality which he internalized as completely as he did the racist perspective evident in *Birth of a Nation* when, in the climax, the Ku Klux Klan, like Ford's cavalry, comes to the rescue of virtuous Southern womanhood.

Thus, if women are either virtuous or fallen, madonnas or whores, males in his films are depicted in two analogous, broadly opposite ways: as lustful brutes or sensitive, if not effeminized, gentle souls. This pattern is most obvious in the appositely entitled prehistoric film *Man's Genesis* (1912), wherein the more sensitive and gentle male, named Weak-Hands, conquers the sexual threat of the villain, named Brute Force, who carries a club and wants to take women by force, thereby helping to establish civilization. For biographer Robert Henderson, "Griffith was strongly attracted to the story of primitive man and his struggles." He remade *Man's Genesis* as a follow-up to the more well-known western, *The Battle of Elderbush Gulch*; originally entitled *Wars of the Primal Tribes*, it was released as *Brute Force* in 1913 (Henderson 126). The same vision animates the racial representation in Griffith's work, as in the conflict between the swarthy Indians who threaten to rape the white women in *The Battle of Elderbush Gulch*, and the libidinous blacks in *Birth of a Nation*, who pursue white women through the forest until they plunge to their deaths from a cliff to avoid the proverbial fate worse than death.

This representational pattern is especially interesting in *Broken Blossoms* (1919), one of Griffith's most poetic films in the sense described above. As an example, consider the first image of Cheng Huan in Limehouse, hunched over and leaning against a brick wall – a very effective visual metaphor of any young idealist's dreams 'broken' against the hard realities of an unyielding, indifferent world. In first-run screenings, audiences were cued to regard the film as poetic abstraction even before the projectors started, as it was preceded by a live prologue and a one-act ballet, written by Griffith himself, entitled "The Dance of Life and Death," featuring Fate, a 'spider of destiny,' and a young girl bound 'with the chains of everyday existence.' Griffith wrote the adaptation himself, including the florid insert titles. He also had many sequences color-tinted (for instance, blue for the foggy Limehouse exteriors) to further enhance the film's dreamy, poetic atmosphere.

Adopted from Thomas Burke's story "The Chink and the Child" from his 1917 collection *Limehouse Nights*, *Broken Blossoms* tells the story of a gentle, idealistic Chinese youth, Cheng Huan (Richard Barthelmess), who decides to journey to England for the purpose of offering spiritual enlightenment to decadent, violent westerners. Reduced to being a shopkeeper in the Limehouse slum of London, he becomes enamoured of a young local girl, Lucy (Gish), who is physically abused by her stepfather, a swaggering boxer named

Battling Burrows (Donald Crisp). After one of her beatings at the strong hands of Burrows, Lucy staggers into Cheng's shop and collapses. He proceeds to nurse and care for her, but Burrows discovers her whereabouts and, assuming the 'worst,' drags Lucy back home, where in a rage he beats her to death. Inconsolable, the previously peaceful Cheng Huan kills Burrows and then commits suicide.

An intimate drama with only three central characters and a few sets, *Broken Blossoms* was a deliberate move away from the epic sweep of the earlier *Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance* and, in a way, a dream film, not unlike the later psychodramas of Ingmar Bergman. Its intimate nature is revealed at the very beginning, in an insert title telling us that Griffith did not merely direct the film, but that it was made under his 'personal direction.' Karl Brown, a frequent cameraman for Griffith who worked on *Broken Blossoms*, has written that this film

*was a fantasy, a dream, a vision of archetypical beings out of the long inherited memory of the human race. No such people as we saw on the screen were ever alive in the workaday world of today or of any other day. They were as Griffith had explained to me in that dark projection room, misty, misty... They were the creatures of a poetic imagination that had at very long last found its outlet in its own terms. It was a parable in poetry, timeless and eternally true... (241)*

These "creatures" are clearly conceived and performed, in E.M. Forster's terms, as 'flat,' that is, as representative types rather than as psychologically 'round' individuals. Indeed, the narrative announces itself as a moral *exemplum* at the outset, as another early title informs us that "...But do we not ourselves use the whip of unkind words and deeds? So, perhaps, Battling may even carry a message of warning." In other words, we are intended to understand the male characters in the film as exaggerated, more obvious versions of aspects of real men.

*Broken Blossoms*, I would argue, is a radical film, for it works against the general tendency of mainstream cinema in which "masculinity, as an ideal, at least, is implicitly known." Griffith's film is noteworthy for calling into question the notions of gender difference that inform so much of popular cinema, including Griffith's. It holds up for examination alternative versions of masculinity, which Griffith himself offered in such earlier films as *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912), an early gangster film with another triangle, The Little Lady (Gish again), who finds herself caught between the criminal Snapper Kid (Elmer Booth) and her new husband, an unassertive, passive musician (Walter Miller). This binary view of masculinity became a convention that cut across numerous genres and periods. We can see variations of it in, for example, the gangster film's opposition of two friends from the

hood, one criminal and the other law-abiding, from Cagney's Tom Powers and childhood friend Matt Doyle in *The Public Enemy* (1931) to the brothers Darin "Doughboy" Baker (Ice Cube) and Ricky Baker (Morris Chestnut) in the gangsta film *Boyz n the Hood* (1991). At a further remove it informs the opposition between the lively Cary Grant and the stuffed shirt Ralph Bellamy in a screwball comedy like *His Girl Friday* (1940); in film noir, as in the contrast between the milquetoast clerk Chris Cross (Edward G. Robinson) and the sleazy criminal (Dan Duryea) in *Scarlet Street* (1945); and in the western's opposition between hero and gunfighter, as in, for example, Matt (Montgomery Clift) and Dunston (John Wayne) in *Red River* (1948).

Hollywood films, as Neale says, generally work to construct and reinforce patriarchal definitions of gender, although they usually do so invisibly, by naturalizing them. But *Broken Blossoms* is one of those rare films that makes these constructions visible, by foregrounding their very enactment, not unlike the later melodramas of Max Ophuls, Douglas Sirk, and Rainer Werner Fassbinder. To what extent this may have been conscious on the part of its maker, of course we cannot say; but certainly, in the end, *Broken Blossoms* is profoundly more 'poetic' than D.W. Griffith or James Agee ever intended...

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# Beyond Genre and Logos:

## A Cinema of Cruelty in *Dodes'ka-den* and *Titus*

Brent Strang

Artists seeking to expand the bounds of expression are constantly incited to explore the fringes of representation and draw inspiration from other art forms. This ambition infused the theories of Antonin Artaud (1896-1948), who envisioned a radical new theatre with a ritual function, a kind of transformational alchemy designed to disrupt the spectator from indolent passivity. Whereas Western theatre was psychology-based, lulling the viewer to sleep within the safe-zone of voyeuristic pleasure, Artaud called for a spectacle-based Theatre of Cruelty that is routed through the body. Agitating the body's senses and base organs, the Theatre of Cruelty summons the body's pre-rational awareness to the light of consciousness. Artaud believed we 'think' first with our senses, therefore we should not give the rational mind primacy by subordinating all elements of drama to what Artaud called 'the tyranny of the text'. Instead, the text should only serve as a point of departure from which all aspects of mise-en-scène and sound are re-innovated into a spectacle, seeding a multiplicity of ideas that run counter to a unified aesthetic or dominant ideology.

Because of cinema's ever increasing capacity to profoundly affect the spectator, it should come as no surprise that certain films scattered throughout film history closely align with Artaud's original vision, two such films being Akira Kurosawa's *Dodes'ka-den* (1970) and Julie Taymor's *Titus* (1999). Of the manifold ideas put forward in Artaud's 1938 book, *The Theatre and its Double*, my discussion will narrow in on these films' correspondence with two of Cruelty's core principles: anti-rationalism and non-logocentrism. By defying the rules of conventional psycho-dramaturgy and venturing outside logocentrism and genre, these two films demonstrate Cinema of Cruelty's capacity to float unanchored in uncharted waters, liberating viewers from genre-instilled prejudices and unseating their faith in rational primacy. With

the support of Eric Shouse's and Gille Deleuze's theories on affect and time-image, respectively, a methodology emerges to explicate how certain scenes generate the transformative affect Artaud demanded.

Starting out as a theatrical actor in 1921, Artaud also wrote three plays and a scenario for Germaine Dulac's film *The Seashell and The Clergyman* (1928). His only two productions – *The Burnt Belly* (1927) and *The Cenci* (1935) – were commercial failures, while his other play, *The Spurt of Blood* (1925), saw its first production years later by Peter Brook and Charles Marowitz as part of the Royal Shakespeare Company's Theatre of Cruelty season in 1963-64. Even though all these productions lacked popular appeal, there is a continued interest in them for the practical application of Artaud's radical core theories. In staging *Spurt of Blood* and other plays for the Theatre of Cruelty season, Brook both followed and deviated from Artaud's two manifestos, experimenting with them not from "the blazing centre, [but beginning] very simply on the fringes" (qtd. in Gaffield-Knight *iv*). Brook had his actors express heightened psychological states without sound or movement to see if others could understand them through nothing but the sheer force projected from the actor's interiority. Since the heart of the Theatre of Cruelty is ritualistic, to transform the spectator by rattling to consciousness dormant energies in the body and deep subconscious, artists should strive for representation on the edge of texts. Artaud once considered cinema's potential for Cruelty but by the 1940s he lost faith, believing cinema's mechanical representation of reality to be too literal to convey the "exigencies of life" transmitted as direct force in live theatre (Artaud 99). Despite this, since his death, many film scholars have argued for cinema's potential for a genuine praxis of his theories. Surely, as long as filmmakers endeavour to represent the un-representable, to assail old ways of seeing, rattle socio-cultural foundations,

and burst through comfort zones with implacable necessity, we can see a Cinema of Cruelty that resonates with the spirit of Artaud.

At the forefront, we encounter an epistemological challenge: qualifications need to be made regarding what is and is not proper to Artaud's vision, because the phrase 'cinema of cruelty' is often used indiscriminately. François Truffaut lacked due diligence in this respect by titling his book of André Bazin's essays as *The Cinema of Cruelty* (1987). The material chosen for this collection includes Bazin's various writings on von Stroheim, Dreyer, Buñuel, Sturges, Hitchcock, and Kurosawa, and coheres more to a loose conception of 'cruelty in cinema' than anything resembling Artaud's theories. In fact, neither Truffaut (who wrote the introduction) nor Bazin ever mention Artaud's name or any of his ideas in the entire book. Instead, Cruelty is conceived as a trait defining certain filmmakers who have a distinctly amoral underpinning matched with a stylistic expressivity, often confronting the viewer with sadistic and savage imagery. While it does hold that a Cinema of Cruelty proper is not confined to a moral agenda, it is certainly not limited to films that exploit violence for shock effect. Cinema of Cruelty is dubbed cruel because it severs our connection to rational dominion, it stirs up sensations in our bodies that have not yet been harnessed and assimilated under thought; it is a "submission to necessity" that unseats our very sense of control (Artaud 102). In his essay "The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation," Jacques Derrida refers to it as a *parricide*: it is "the hand lifted against the abusive wielder of logos, against the father, against the God of a stage subjugated to the power of speech and text" (47). By all means, expansion of spectators' consciousness is the cruel but essential purpose.

In his essay, "Cinemas of Cruelty?" (2000), Francis Vanoye further clarifies a working definition for our purposes here. He claims that Artaudian cruelty is synonymous with Roland Barthe's formulation of *jouissance*, meaning to "place in a state of loss to shake historical, cultural, or psychological foundations" (qtd. in Vanoye 181). It is not, Vanoye insists, the cinema of Quentin Tarantino "and his emulators, French or American, who make cruelty an object of representation and of spectatorial pleasure" (181). Therefore, the central focus is not the film text as object, but the spectator as a social-historical subject. As normalised and logocentric viewers, we bring to the cinema our ideological filters, consumptive proclivities, and habits of receiving, decoding, and interpreting narrative. What makes Artaud's theory so compelling, and at the same time so challenging in practise, is that it recognises the weight of these forces that bind and narcotise in the film/viewer inter-relationship. A radical counterforce is then required to break through and seize spectators in their utmost vulnerability, where pre-conditioning offers no refuge and rational dominion cannot compute.

For this reason, Artaud favoured drama that speaks the language of dreams. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud discovered that in dreams words lose their logocentrism – they are plasticized like 'things' that can be mixed up and re-arranged according to the dream-work. The challenge in drama, then, is to plasticize all speech, sounds, characters and mise-en-scene and give them metaphoric value, like hieroglyphs that evoke non-lingual meanings in the deep subconscious of the viewer. This brings to mind the connection between Artaud and surrealism, however, an important distinction must be made: Artaud called for cinema that is dream-like, not cinema that merely represents dreams. This distinction was at the heart of the controversy regarding *The Shell and the Clergyman*. Dulac was going to credit Artaud's script as "A Dream by Antonin Artaud." However, Artaud took issue with this, declaring, "My script is not the representation of a dream and should not be considered as such" (qtd. in Talens 80). To consider the script as the representation of a dream limits it to the level of an object, an imitation of outward forms, and does not engage the phenomenological, inter-subjective relationship Artaud was envisioning. Even though it has long been acknowledged that Bunuel's *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) and *L'Âge D'Or* (1930) share a close affinity with Artaud, if surrealism does nothing more than copy dreams through random ordering of imagery, it falls short of his vision. For Artaud, it is the laws underlying the dream-work that must be learned and consciously put to practise:

It is not a question of suppressing the spoken language, but giving words approximately the importance they have in dreams...it is evident that one can draw one's inspiration from hieroglyphic characters, not only to record these signs in a readable fashion which permits them to be reproduced at will, but in order to compose on the stage precise and immediately readable symbols. (Artaud 94)

Notwithstanding, at the heart of Bunuel's style is a matter of theory that corresponds with Artaud: conceive of the viewer as an open space that is socially articulate and discursively deconstructable, not a passive viewer waiting to be fed a pre-determined meaning.

In light of this remark, we may also note how genre can impede on the 'open space' of the viewer. William Blum argued how certain prejudices and expectations meddle with the Artaudian process in his 1971 article "Toward a Cinema of Cruelty." He put three films up to the Cruelty litmus test: Abraham Polonsky's *Tell Them Willie Boy is Here* (1969), Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), and Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969). Blum believed certain genres that share a "common fabric of violence," such as the horror, the Western, and the gangster film, lent themselves to the spirit of Artaud (26). His aim was to see if the shocking and repellent material of these genres could indeed "penetrate beyond the mind or feelings [of the viewer] straight through to the gut or



the unconscious” (26). Of the three films, he determined that the exacerbation of violence in *The Wild Bunch* best achieved this effect. Such hyper-violence, he argued, worked as an end unto itself, as a social revelation of humankind’s brutality. For example, the opening scenes that show children roasting live scorpions or the excessively bloody slow-motion gun battles have a heightened and composed quality; the gruesome and horrific are lifted to the metaphysical so they may be posited as timeless themes in the way Artaud had prescribed. However, Blum argued that the full effect of *Cruelty* was ultimately hindered by the very fact that *The Wild Bunch* is a genre film:

The response to *The Wild Bunch* has been coloured by what the Western as a genre has preconditioned audiences to expect, and by their images of themselves as peaceful and non-violent. What is needed for the experience of *Cruelty* is not the refurbishing of an old genre, but the creation of a new one for which preconditioning does not exist or is minimal, and in which an audience can be induced to drop the mask of civilized pretensions (33).

Whenever genre films such as these attempt extremism in representation, they risk going so far beyond their generic context that audiences will displace the excess force meant for the spectator’s transformation onto a discursive reaction to the genre.

At this juncture, let us briefly summarise what we are looking for in a Cinema of *Cruelty*. It is not cruel iconography as much as films that are cruel to our accustomed ways of seeing. Meanwhile, genre films might not suffice if their deployment of cruelty only serves to reverberate against the genre’s previously established conventions—these films end up being remarkable revisionist art objects. Instead, the film should act as a subject empowered with transformational agency, a relentless maelstrom whose forces of “rigor, implacable intention and decision” threaten to undo the social-historical viewing subject (Artaud 102). As all films speak a symbolic language of sorts, we are looking for films that foreground symbol over realism so as to harness the raw power of archetype and communicate a depth beyond or beneath the ambit of words. Hence, it is not films that represent dreams but films that impinge upon us like those dreams, illuminating the constellations of our unconscious with a potency that lingers long afterwards.

All of the above qualities help to explain the mysterious power of Kurosawa’s *Dodeska-den* to unhinge the spectator. The film follows the mundane events of several families who inhabit ramshackle houses beside a garbage dump. It is not shocking, sadistic, excessively violent, or imitatively dream-like, and yet, its fundamental appeal is bizarre. It entreats the viewer to embrace the insane and the ludicrous as a buffer against a wretched reality. It

pulls viewers to their threshold of ideological, cultural, and psychological foundations, forcing them to glimpse an unsettling vision of what lies beyond. The impact of Kurosawa’s own psycho-emotional state at the time should be taken into consideration on account of his attempted suicide soon after. In his book *The Warrior’s Camera*, Steven Prince describes how these external factors may have led to the peculiar narrative structure: “Unlike the way in which it functions for Brecht or Oshima, the non-linear narrative here signifies an entropic condition. The destructuring of social space in this film is doubly symptomatic: of the cultural abandonment of these slum characters and of Kurosawa’s own disengagement from the social fabric” (255). Even though he made the film in part “to prove [he] wasn’t insane,” it paradoxically emerged as the most non-linear and disconcerting films of his oeuvre (Prince 251).

Whereas Kurosawa’s earlier films typically showed the hero’s triumph through willpower, here the author’s own social disengagement informs the film with a fevered split-sensibility that deconstructs the viewing subject by way of osmosis. The characters all inhabit the same shantytown of rusted tin walls, waste and slag heaps of auto parts. It occupies no recognisable place in history; it is the exteriorised, post-apocalyptic junkyard of humankind’s bad conscience. Here, landscape has become so poisoned and devastated and the outlook so bleak and hopeless that the question of willpower to overturn circumstance is mockingly futile: only imagination, escapism, and insanity hold refuge. Each day the delusional boy, Rokkuchan (Yoshitaka Zushi), conducts his make-believe train through the village, regardless of the stones and insults hurled at him by the other, more ‘normal’ children. We know how the film must perceive Rokkuchan by the way we, too, hear the subjective train sounds that he imagines as well as the slightly off-kilter music that is part melancholy and part celebratory. Is the music cheering its hero for the strength of his solipsism? If so, the film contradicts itself when, later in the film, solipsism has a deadly cost. A beggar (Naboru Matani) inadvertently kills his son (Hiroyuki Kawase) by not heeding the warnings of others; he is so lost in his make-believe world imagining an ideal home in the hills that he feeds his son poisoned fish. The film seems to say the cost of delusion will kill you, and yet, in the final scene, Rokkuchan heroically drives his imaginary train back to the station, as though to still celebrate flight from reality as the only available means of salvation.

The film’s thoroughly depressed tone may account for such irrational conclusions, but the film’s form strategically scrambles the viewer’s habituated system of relations, as well. The narrative meanders sideways, portraying eight different character pairings as a slice of life. Each pairing has only a tangential connection to the next: they pass each other in the street but their stories bear no cause-effect relation to each other. Poverty and various forms of denial are their only common bonds. More disconcerting, there is no

social or moral project to give shape to their stories. Bereft of the will to engage or transcend class oppression and without any antagonists to wrestle or defeat, the conventional arc of Aristotelian drama is flattened and traditional catharsis and identification models are denied. This puts the viewer in an unfamiliar standstill *beside* the characters. A shared space is created in which both are immersed in the material conditions of despair and cultural inertia, given nothing but the characters' drunken reveries, delirium, and eccentric coping mechanisms to soothe their discomfort. In this entropic condition suspended outside the comforts of narrative, representational drama ceases and Artaudian cruelty begins. Instead of being carried away horizontally on the track of emotional identification, viewers are fixed in a vertical relationship with the image, assimilating its charge in episodic segments.

Julie Taymor's *Titus* takes a different route but delivers viewers to the same threshold. Formally, *Titus* also negates psychology-based narrative, albeit in a different way from *Dodes'ka-den*, as *Titus* resists any firm sense of space or time. Setting, art-direction, costume, and music blend western cultural artefacts spanning the last two thousand years, creating a spectacle that is every time and no time in particular. Thus, Taymor puts into practise Artaud's principle to explore cosmogonies and harness the power of myth and archetype: "Ideas which touch on Creation, Becoming, and Chaos, are all of a cosmic order and furnish a primary notion of a domain from which the theatre is now entirely alien" (Artaud 90). The 'domain' of *Titus* is established in the dialectical synthesis within montage and art direction that fuses together young and old, then and now, antiquated and modern technology.

Opening in a 1950s suburban kitchen, young Lucius (Osheen Jones) sits alone at a dinner table cluttered with food and toys (including, GI Joes, Roman soldiers and electric helicopters). Covered by a paper bag with holes for his eyes and mouth, a montage of various camera angles shows him dashing planes into a birthday cake, splattering figures into milk, and squirting ketchup like blood all over his war zone salmagundi. The momentum of the scene carries with it a battle-charged panic that overtakes the boy's fantasy until suddenly, an explosion blows away the wall and flames burst into the house. A Shakespearean Clown (Dario D'Ambrosi) dressed in strongman circus garb with World War One Air force goggles rescues him and carries him down the stairs, kicking open the exit door. Cutting to the next sequence, a leap in time lands Lucius, now suddenly alone, in the middle of the Coliseum. Long lines of Roman infantry and spear-men enclose upon him in rigid staccato unison. From the far entrances, the cavalry rolls in mounted on motorcycles followed by armoured vehicles that fuse motorised technology with old Roman siege engines. Last to enter is General Titus (Anthony Hopkins) bearing a scarlet-red cape and rotund breastplate; his soldiers hail him. Now, Shakespeare's

play proper begins: the boy (still dressed in modern t-shirt and jeans) slips into the cast as grandson Lucius, henceforth a silent witness to the action. In this manner, Taymor's spectacle transcends the particular and illustrates the universal. The siege engines once pulled by chariots forge ahead with the same ruthless determination as the mechanised divisions of today; young Lucius' war games pluck the same chords of inner violence as the adults whose war infiltrates his home. War and violence exist in all times, in people of all ages, and here their ahistorical rendering sweeps humankind onto the metaphysical stage.

However, this spatial and temporal transcendence in *Titus* does not mean that it is unconcerned with history. Indeed, it is concerned with history, but in the broad sense, in the history of humankind as a whole. Were it to depict a specific historic period it might run the risk of displacing humankind's foibles as products of socio-political or religious influences. Instead, the essence of the film is the legacy of humankind's inhumanity to itself. This eternal Achilles' heel is staged as spectacle and subsequently deconstructed by bold foregrounding in art direction. Consider, for example, how the persistence of ageless barbarism is elicited in the use of make-up. Throngs of Roman soldiers return from their war with the Goths caked in mud, as though all smeared with the same universal affliction. Even as the hybridisation of art direction extends the sense of time and space to the metaphysical, the grey mud is the common denominator, hearkening back to humankind's place of origin in the primordial ooze. Historic interpretation is disregarded in favour of an Artaudian interest in cosmogony. In the same vein, the costumes of the Roman soldiers are infused with exactly Artaud's vision: "age-old costumes, of ritual intent...[that] preserve a beauty and a revelational appearance from their closeness to the traditions that gave them birth" (96). When Titus files past his soldiers, the framing highlights his deep red cape and robust metal armour, signalling sacrifice and spilled blood, as well as humankind's archetypal pride. All elements in the first two scenes suspend narrative logic and psychological identification, and in their stead, channel mythic currents of birth and origin through spectacle.

So, too, does the opening set the stage for a film that speaks the language of dreams. As in dreams, time and space lose their bearing and a sense of groundlessness suspends the viewer from realism. The diegetic world looks composed, surreal, and often absurd, spreading an undercurrent of uneasy ambience that may suddenly, like a live wire, turn loose to shock the viewer. To illustrate, the scene following the rape of Lavinia is set in a swampland with burnt timber jutting from the ground – a metaphorical landscape of her desolation and charred chastity. The camera dollies in from an extreme long shot, closing the spectator in on Lavinia's pose of wretched agony. She is perched on a stump, as Taymor says, "like Degas' ballerina" (DVD Commentary). Her hands are severed and replaced with branches, while her ravagers, Chiron (Johna-



thon Rhys Meyers) and Demetrius (Matthew Rhys), revile her with squeals and mockery as they prance and trip about in the mud. An elliptic dissolve cuts to Lavinia's uncle, Marcus (Colm Feore), who happens upon her from hunting in the woods. Even as a character within the world of the play, he is confounded by the scene's surrealism: "If I do dream, would all my wealth would wake me! If I do wake, some planet strike me down, that I may slumber an eternal sleep!

Speak, gentle niece, what stern ungentle hand hath lopped and hewed and made thy body bare of her two branches? [a few beats] Why dost not speak to me?" She responds wordlessly; in a slow motion, low-angle shot, she opens her mouth to reveal a severed tongue that lets forth a stream of blood. Cut to a slow-motion reaction shot on Marcus' subtle gasp of horror: vapours seep from his gaping mouth into the frosty air. The surreal art direction, haunting sound design, and un-

fathomable imagery are nightmarish, to be sure. Yet, Taymor does more than mimic dreams' outward forms, she deploys these conventions in a conscious design that approximates the way dreams stir up affect.

To understand how this scene can have a cruel impact on the spectator, it may help to clarify some differences between emotion and affect, form and force, and the action-image and time-image. Eric Shouse makes some helpful distinctions in his article "Feeling, Emotion, Affect," designating feelings as personal and biographical sensations that have been labelled and checked against previous experience, while emotions are the projections of such feelings. Because emotions display feelings, they can either be genuine or feigned. In contrast, Shouse defines affect as "a non-conscious experience of intensity... a moment of unformed and unstructured potential [which] is the most abstract because affect cannot be fully realised in language, and because affect is always prior to and/or outside of consciousness." Hence, affect is the raw intensity that strikes us kinaesthetically. Strange and unfamiliar in itself, it corresponds to Artaud's notion of channelling forces that breach the limits of the known. When we first sense affect, it is entirely new, but, if we become accustomed to the sensation, we find a way to be comfortable with it, mould it into our subjective experience, and label it in our consciousness as a feeling. Until then, it lurks outside our subjectivity as a *force* that threatens our civilised dominion. In contrast to affect and force, emotion and form are 'representable.' For example, an actor may search his lexicon of labelled feelings and represent an emotion by acting out its form (an integral part of the process of method acting). In short, emotion is a social experience that is represented as a form, while affect is a pre-personal intensity that is transmitted as a force.

Gilles Deleuze carries these concepts further with regard to cinema's action-image and time-image. The action-image consists of narrative space-time logic and "allows itself to be determined in relation to goals and means which would unify" in a cohesive set (Deleuze 203). The time-image, on the other hand, has no teleological purpose but to simply show the palpability of the present moment; it corresponds with a cinema that speaks to the body's intelligence. As Artaud stressed, it is through our body's senses that spectators first perceive reality, and from these forces that linger in our body are they compelled to think, as opposed to the cause-effect logic of the mind. To demonstrate the distinction, the action-image is relied upon in classical narrative cinema for linear cause-effect patterns that subordinate space-time and feeling to the flow of the action. Using the action-image for feeling, we may see emotion represented in such techniques as the shot-reverse shot, in which an acted emotional reaction completes the expected response and moves the narrative along seamlessly. In this way, the drama can be watched from a safe distance – the audience will experience many feelings while identifying with the characters,

but the familiarity of the feelings to their own personal experience will not threaten to shake their civilised comportment. This is precisely the type of theatre that Artaud despised. Instead, use of the time-image can channel forces and spark off affect to shock the viewer to new awareness.

For example, in the sequence after the rape of Lavinia, Marcus' wordless reaction shot seems at first to reinforce the narrative continuity of emotional reaction, but it is more than a mere reaction. The shot is a carefully orchestrated transmission of affect through the time-image: it lingers in slow-motion long enough to capture the affective gravitas of the moment. Taymor carefully composes everything until this point to the last detail. Seeding the landscape with the kernels of bad dreams, she is like an alchemist preparing the groundwork for the spectator's transformation. After stumbling upon Lavinia's nightmare, Marcus is the locus that captures and transmits the energy of the entire scene. The actor becomes a conduit in a circuit running from spectacle to viewer – his physiognomy is the final transmitter. This type of acting recalls a distinction made by Edward Scheer in his article, "A Beginner's Guide to Cruelty." He distinguishes between representational acting that imitates life by assuming the forms of external reality – in essence 'posing' – and the type of acting that is suffused with archetypal currents that are purely responded to out of necessity (3-4).

In this case, wordlessness is key. Shakespeare's words might obstruct the path of affect, detracting the force by processing it with language. In the original Shakespeare play, Marcus replies to Lavinia's tongueless response with thirty-five lines of dialogue. It is a mounting exhortation of anger that ends with a loquacious lamentation. The melodrama inherent in the written text lends too easily to an emotional portrayal of the outward form of abhorrence. Surely, this would have displaced the power of the scene's affect into conventionalised feelings that are pre-digested for the spectator, which is how Aristotelian catharsis fences viewers in a safety zone and cheats them of transformation. Alternatively, Taymor decided to cut the dialogue and add a lone melody from a bamboo flute. As a result, affect emanates like a ghost of electric shock reverberating in our cheekbones. Taymor bypasses the realm of logos and delivers the haunting spectre of the Real – viewers are forced thus to confront a horror beyond words.

The same basic process is at work in the scenes from *Dodes'ka-den* with Hei (Hiroshi Akutagawa) and his wife Ouchu (Tomoko Naraoka), which maximise affect through silence and bodily performance. After abandoning him years ago, Ouchu has returned to find her husband's personality utterly hollowed out. In one scene, they sit together in his hut: Ouchu, in the background preparing rice, and Hei, in the foreground, weaving fabric, turned away from her. Despite her return he remains mute; he never looks at her, nor acknowledges her presence. His movements are characteristically robotic, unsubtle makeup casts a grey-white pallor upon

him, and his eyes are always the same: wide, black, and lifeless. Still, she perseveres, hoping that the spell he is under will eventually break and they can heal their rupture. With Hei lacking any signs of life, our gaze is continually turned to Ochu to read the range of subtle alterations in her expression. What she must be thinking or feeling in these moments we can hardly know, and this is the intended effect. If she were to try to speak her feelings she would bridge the spectator to the safe zone of common language. By not venting emotion or translating emotion into an identifiable feeling, the complex well of affect retains its nascent energy. We are steadily subjected to this oppressive silence for the entire three-minute scene and, in the absence of linguistic or mimetic signifiers, are forced to process a close engagement with the Real in all its inchoate obscurity. If Ochu had tried to put words to what she felt, language would reclaim the nebulous force acting upon us, crystallising it in an identifiable form, and hence, would only convey a fragment of its totality.

Hei's utter devastation signifies the outermost exposure to the Real. Whereas all the other characters are saved by their precious modes of denial, Hei has strayed so far into darkness that he cannot express his experience in the light of quotidian reality. At some point, the trauma of the Real must have completely broken his defences and led his vulnerable psyche to ruin. Towards the end of the scene, when he and Ochu sit side by side in silence, a draping cloth and candle (visible in the background) fissures the space between them. As he vacantly swallows his food and stares at nothing, her eyes begin to float away in thought. The division of the frame and Hei's ghostlike appearance form an eerie tableau, as though his presence were no more than a superimposed apparition, an unreachable entity now only hovering around Ochu as a vacuous portal into profound blackness.

Read this way, Hei's muteness is one of a handful of open-ended strains that destabilises *Dodes'ka-den's* narrative system as a unified whole. His odd status as a functional catatonic insinuates more about what has happened to him than what he knows, just as the film depicts shattered mental states but does not have the language to explain the reality that caused them. The film's form incorporates scenes like these to lay visible the spectral border region of sanity, delusion, and the unfathomable Real. The affect engendered impinges upon the spectators' senses to precipitate profound states of consciousness. So very fine is the line between imagination and madness; hope and fancy only seem light and wonderful, while they mask a desperation that refuses to let in the Real. *Dodes'ka-den* is a complicated tale that relays incompatible, paradoxical conclusions – conclusions, we find inexplicably fitting given the nature of Kurosawa's impeccably staged fever dream.

In the wider scope of things, these two very different films demonstrate some key aspects of a genuine Cinema of Cruelty. *Dodes'ka-den* confounds the viewer's rationality

through its split-sensibility and its meandering, open-ended formal structure. *Titus*, too, follows a dissociative narrative logic, and moreover, supports Artaud's vision of breathing new life into old myths. Furthermore, with respect to William Blum's findings on the incompatibility of Cruelty with genre, these films seem to partake of a 'new genre' where pre-conditioning is minimal. Though I think it is more beneficial to think of Cinema of Cruelty as a praxis or mode of filmmaking than a genre, its conventions cannot be typed by iconography or theme (codes of which are so often used to mislabel films as 'cinema of cruelty'). Indeed, if they are defined by anything, it is primarily with regard to spectatorship. Rather than trying to identify a Cinema of Cruelty by a film's conventions, or by its innovations, or even by comparing its features with Artaud's manifestos, we might look to whether the film aims to impact the spectator in such a way that transformation is possible. As distinguished from the type of transformation intended in Brechtian cinema, however, Cruelty does not distance or alienate the spectator from emotional identification. Indeed, it works in the other direction, burrowing beneath emotion to seize upon its embryonic stages in order to convey unmitigated affect. If a Cinema of Cruelty can be considered a praxis of filmmaking that is post-genre, then we may look to the following features as some ways of identifying the Cruel impact on the spectator: the transmission of affect, the handling of force, the use of the time-image, the deprivileging of logos, formal and narrative de-structuring, and of course, little or no trace of pre-existing generic patterns.

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# Cinema from Attractions:

## Story and Synergy in Disney's Theme Park Movies

Andrew Nelson

*And now, a carriage approaches to carry you into the boundless realm of the supernatural. Take your loved ones by the hand, please, and kindly watch your step. Oh yes, and no flash pictures, please! We spirits are frightfully sensitive to bright lights.*

- The Ghost Host of the Haunted Mansion ride

This essay has two interrelated aims: one, to analyze a group of commercial movies that have a unique pedigree, and two, to argue for the enduring relevance of genre in the analysis of motion pictures. I do not contend, however, that the movies in question constitute a genre, so am therefore not arguing for the relevance of genre on the grounds of its ability to organize or categorize movies into useful groupings. Rather, through an examination of these movies in their historical context as products of the Walt Disney Studio and Company, I arrive at the idea that genre criticism is a more productive way of understanding them than (what might seem to be) a more obvious alternative.

Perhaps the most influential theoretical concept to come out of the study of early cinema is the cinema of attractions. Borrowing the term attraction from Sergei Eisenstein, Tom Gunning first proposed the concept in detail in "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde." The cinema of attractions recasts pre-classical or primitive cinema as a mode unto itself, distinguished from later cinema's emphasis on storytelling by an active solicitation of a viewer's interest by means of overt display. Writes Gunning: "[T]his is a cinema that displays its visibility, willing to rupture a self-enclosed fictional world for a chance to solicit the attention of the spectator" (57). As Charlie Keil has noted, Gunning's substitution of the term 'cinema of attractions' for 'primitive cinema' was a highly influential intervention in the analysis of the opposed features of the primitive and the classical (2001: 8). And yet the *attraction* of the

attractions model has extended far beyond the boundaries of early cinema.

Gunning dates the end of the dominance of the cinema of attractions to around 1906-1907, but he maintains that attractions do not simply vanish with the cinema's subsequent transition towards telling stories, a period he elsewhere terms the 'cinema of narrative integration.'<sup>1</sup> Instead, attractions go 'underground.' In the subsequent article "An Aesthetic of Astonishment," Gunning writes:

[E]ven with the introduction of editing and more complex narratives, the aesthetic of attractions can still be sensed in periodic doses of non-narrative spectacle given to audiences (musicals and slapstick comedy provide clear examples). The cinema of attractions persists in later cinema, even if it rarely dominates the form of a feature film as a whole. It provides an underground current flowing beneath narrative logic and diegetic realism.... (38)

Just as the area of early cinema has been appealing to certain specializations within the field of film study as a period of possibility – prior to the institutionalization of classicism – the notion that attractions persist almost subversively into the classical era (and beyond) has made the theory similarly appealing. Linda Williams, for example, has praised the concept of attractions because "in addition to being [an] apt description of early cinema it describes all aspects of cinema that have also been undervalued in the classical paradigm" (1995: 12). Indeed, questions about the nature of cinematic attractions (particularly as they attend to affect and sensation) inform, at least in part, recent debates about the role of modernity in the development of the medium.

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1. See Tom Gunning, *D. W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film: The Early Years at Biograph*, especially pp. 151–187.

A related project has sought to reclassify Hollywood classicism as delineated in David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson and Janet Staiger's influential study *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* in order to figure in a larger role for the influence of modernity. Miriam Hansen, in "The Mass Production of the Senses," argues that conceiving of Hollywood cinema of the studio era in terms of a 'vernacular' modernism will help restore historical specificity to the concept of classical Hollywood cinema. She writes:

The reflexive dimension of Hollywood films in relation to modernity may take cognitive, discursive and narrativized forms, but it is crucially anchored in sensory experience and sensational affect – in processes of mimetic identification that are more often than not partial and excessive in relation to narrative comprehension (343). Although she does not invoke the model explicitly, Hansen's de-emphasis of narrative and conceptualization of vernacular modernism as reliant on "sensory experience and sensational affect" is clearly related to the cinema of attractions.

Finally, the attractions concept has also been adopted as a model of spectatorship suitable for describing the postmodern moviegoing experience. While this move is not, as we shall see, necessarily dependent on an altered understanding of Hollywood classicism, it is nonetheless a connected development. Keil has observed how the dislodging of classicism would allow for the construction of a more direct lineage between modernity and postmodernity. He writes: "To do so would prove one of the central tenets of the modernity thesis: that modernity's influence continues unabated until the arrival of the postmodern moment" (2004: 61).

One need not invoke the cinema of attractions to arrive at the idea that contemporary cinema is more concerned with soliciting audience attention through spectacle than with telling stories (or, more specifically, that beginning with the court-mandated industry divestiture in the 1940s there has been an increasing shift away from narrative and towards attractions). Warren Buckland has summarized a standard characterization of the post-classical, post-modern Hollywood movie as follows:

Many critics argue that, in comparison with Old Hollywood, New Hollywood films are not structured in terms of psychologically motivated cause-and-effect narrative logic, but in terms of loosely-linked, self-sustaining action sequences often built around spectacular stunts, stars and special effects. Complex character traits and character development, they argue, have been replaced by one-dimensional stereotypes, and plot-lines are now devised almost solely to link one action sequence to the next. Narrative complexity is sacrificed on the altar of spectacle. Narration is geared solely to the effective presentation of expensive effects (167).

While Buckland, as evidenced by the tone of his writing, is skeptical of these claims, it cannot be denied that the position he outlines is a common one. It would seem that, regardless of where they went or how strongly they persisted throughout the classical era, attractions are back, and in a big way.<sup>2</sup>

One scholar who has directly related contemporary Hollywood film with the cinema of attractions is Linda Williams, in a short but suggestive section of her essay "Discipline and Fun: *Psycho* and Postmodern Cinema" titled "The New 'Cinema of Attractions.'" Williams begins by remarking how some scholars of early cinema have noted that the "sensational pleasures" of early cinema have affinities with the contemporary return to "sensation in special effects, extreme violence and sexual display" (356). It is this current emphasis on cinema's dual ability to show new or sensational sights and to attract viewers to this display that recalls the cinema of attractions. Yet despite pointing to the similarity between contemporary Hollywood fare and the cinema of attractions, Williams takes care to note that these are not the same attractions as those posited by Gunning. As her section heading indicates, this is a 'new' cinema of attractions. In line with Hansen's comment that sensory reflexivity exceeds narrative, Williams states that "while narrative is not abandoned in ever more sensationalized cinema, it often takes second seat to a succession of visual and auditory 'attractions'" (356).

This subordination of narrative to cinema's more visceral pleasures – Buckland's aforementioned "stunts, stars and special effects" – leads Williams to comment on the parallels between contemporary cinema and the literal attractions of fairground rides. Noting how it was the amusement park rollercoaster that Eisenstein had in mind when he coined the term attractions, Williams locates a rollercoaster-like quality in the blockbuster films that characterize the New Hollywood: "[M]any films now set out, as first order of business, to simulate the bodily thrills and visceral pleasures of attractions that not only beckon to us but take us on a continuous ride punctuated by shocks and moments of speed-up and slow-down" (357). She goes on to note how, at the same time, some contemporary hit movies have been adapted into rides at Universal Studios' theme parks. So, in Williams' assessment, traditional rollercoasters have become more like the movies, and movies have become more like rollercoasters. She writes:

In this convergence of pleasures the contemporary, postmodern cinema has reconnected in important ways with the 'attractions' of amusement parks. But these at-

2. With that said, it should be noted that the link between the characteristics of "New Hollywood" cinema and the cinema of attractions has not been made as explicitly in film scholarship as one might expect. A likely reason for this is in the necessary acknowledgment in the former, apparent in nomenclature like 'post-classical,' of the existence of a classical period from which the later stage is seen as a departure. The foreseeable difficulty, then, is how one reconciles a post-modernist project that depends on an existing historical conception of classicism with a modernist project that seeks to redefine that conception of classicism.

tractions themselves have been thematized and narrativized through their connection with the entire history of the movies (358).

While the likeness between today's blockbusters and theme park rides is not a new observation, Williams' decidedly upbeat take on these new attractions within mainstream cinema, with their sensorial shocks and affective pleasures, stands in contrast to other reactions, which are often characteristically negative. As much as a film being called a 'thrill ride' is a good thing, the apparent (and apparently increasing) reliance by contemporary Hollywood on elements like special effects sequences is often lamented – although not, it must be added, to a large enough degree that such films are no longer made, or audiences choose not to patronize them.

In the short time since Williams penned her essay there has been a subsequent development at the intersection between movies and rides – a development that has the potential to extend the cinema of attractions model in a new and interesting way. The Walt Disney Studio has in recent years adapted several of the company's well-known Disneyland theme park rides into feature films. To date, six such movies have been released: beginning in 2002 with *The Country Bears*, based on the now-defunct Country Bear Jamboree, followed in 2003 by *The Haunted Mansion*, from the ride of the same name, and, most famously, a trilogy of films based on *The Pirates of the Caribbean* ride (released in 2003, 2006 and 2007). In addition, projects based on the Jungle Cruise and Space Mountain rides are reportedly in development. Not unlike the numerous adaptations, remakes and sequels released today, these Disney films could be seen as even more evidence that Hollywood has, indeed, run out of new ideas. And to those among us who regard much of contemporary cinema as mindless spectacle, these movies could represent the inevitable evolution of the recent trend described by Williams, where 'ride the movies' has led to 'movie the ride.' This is not a cinema of attractions; this is a cinema *from* attractions.

Developing feature films from theme park rides is certainly related to the general practice at Disneyland and other movie-based parks of creating rides based on popular movies or developing them in conjunction with upcoming releases. Furthermore, the practice of adapting existing, well-known 'properties' into motion pictures has been around since the advent of the medium – even if, as noted above, the practice may seem more widespread nowadays. In fact, internet scuttlebutt holds that then-Disney studio head Jeffrey Katzenberg first began exploring the possibility of creating films based on some of Disneyland's best known rides in the early 1990s. But that it was over a decade before such projects came to fruition indicates the challenge involved in bringing a theme park ride to the big screen.

Since Williams asserts that rides are increasingly cinematic in nature, perhaps her claim requires more careful

scrutiny. How, exactly, have rides borrowed from the movies? Writes Williams:

Either they simulate a diegetic world through cinematic *mise en scène*...or they are elaborate updates of early cinema's Hales Tours, 'moving' the audience through virtual, electronically generated space...[where] the narrative information that we are out of control enhances the virtual sensation of wild careening (358).

Williams posits that movies and rides have reached a point of convergence where the distinction between the two becomes blurred. As such, we return to the notion of narrative as secondary to attractions: theme park rides draw upon cinematic devices in order to *enhance* the experience of sensation. Not all rides are like this, however, and we should question whether this position risks overlooking the diversity of rides offered by a movie-based theme park. Many rides at Disneyland offer little in the way of cinematic *mise en scène* or narrative; indeed, some of the park's most popular attractions, like the Big Thunder Mountain Railroad rollercoaster or the spinning tea cups of the Mad Tea Party, are more like the rides one might find at a traditional fairground.<sup>3</sup>

Williams' claim that certain rides aim to "simulate a diegetic world" is fundamentally true, but understates the degree to which rides like *The Haunted Mansion*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *The Country Bear Jamboree* (and even Disneyland in general) are designed to *immerse* the visitor in the story world of the attraction. This is not simply a matter of semantics or differing emphasis. More than just being 'cinematic' (because some are not), these attractions create fantasy worlds of which park patrons are made a part. Put another way, there is a difference between an amusement park and a *theme* park, where the attraction is not so much the sights, sounds and shocks, but something much larger: being made a part of the thematically-unified story world, with an unfolding line of action. This is not to say that these rides have cause-and-effect narratives in the same way that films do, but rather that the matter of *story* plays a far greater role in these attractions than has been previously allowed. And this need not occur in the form of a thrill ride.

The Country Bear Jamboree was not a ride but a concert featuring audio-animatronic singing bears. Park visitors would gather outside the closed doors of Country Bear Hall in Frontierland. Inside, as the (human) attendant would inform the waiting patrons, the Bears were "finishing their sound check." The surrounding walls were adorned with Country

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3. Also, some rides draw upon cinematic techniques in ways not considered by Williams. The Omnimover system used in *The Haunted Mansion* (and several other Disneyland attractions) is unique in its ability to rotate each passenger carriage to a predetermined orientation as the linked carriages move along the hidden track throughout the ride. By both directing and restricting the view of the passengers by means of the carriage's rotation, the Omnimover in a way approximates the motion picture experience, where our view is restricted through framing, cinematography and editing. In addition, each carriage is fitted with speakers that provide intermittent narration from an unseen 'ghost host.'



Bear memorabilia: magazine covers, platinum records, concert posters. A schedule for the band's upcoming world tour was also posted. Finally, the doors would open, the guests would take their seats in the hall, and the concert would begin. In this way, the Country Bears have a past, present and future. The attractions – in this case, singing bears – are given a kind of narrative, which formed the background for *The Country Bears* movie: the band has broken up, Country Bear Hall is about to be demolished, and only a reunion concert of epic proportions can save the day (from the evil Christopher Walken).

Unlike *The Country Bear Jamboree*, *Pirates of the Caribbean* and *The Haunted Mansion* do not feature fleshed-out characters (literally so in the case of the latter). Each is a mechanized 'dark ride' that transports visitors through an immersive, simulated environment: the pirate-infested Caribbean on the one hand, and a haunted New Orleans mansion on the other. In the case of adapting these rides into feature films, a useful parallel can be drawn with comic book adaptations, which must negotiate between remaining faithful to an established iconography and mythology – but not to the point of alienating or turning off those unfamiliar with said elements – while fashioning a new narrative. This seems to be the crux of the matter, as it is not enough simply to pack a film with references to the source material.

*The Haunted Mansion*, in particular, incorporates many of the theme park ride's best-known aspects into the movie's story. Iconic elements like the hangman from the tower, the bride with the beating heart, the ballroom dance and the disembodied gypsy Madame Leota each play a central, causal role in the film's narrative progression; in this way, elements from the ride are highly suggestive in the development of the filmic adaptation.<sup>4</sup> With that said, there still remain moments in the film where features from the ride appear but do not serve to propel the movie's story forward. A noteworthy example is a brief, transitional scene that has the main characters riding in a horse-drawn hearse through the Mansion's ghost-infested cemetery. In terms of inclusion of particular phantoms, the scene is a near-replica of a corresponding portion of the ride. Two of the ride's best-known elements – the "Grim Grinning Ghosts" singing busts and the three hitchhiking ghosts – are spotlighted, albeit in what could be called non-narrative ways as extended bits of comedy. Are these the visual and auditory attractions suggested by Williams? Or even, perhaps, the periodic doses of non-narrative spectacle of Gunning's underground attractions? While both descriptions may seem appropriate, under an expanded consideration of their theme park heredity these 'attractions' take on another, transtextual dimension.

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4. This is not to suggest, however, that turning a theme park ride into a movie is a straightforward process. Indeed, the mixed results speak otherwise, as out of the initial three cinematic offerings only *Pirates of the Caribbean* was a critical and financial success (thus spurring the creation of two sequels).

On the premier episode of the *Disneyland* television program, broadcast October 27, 1954 on ABC, Walt Disney told his viewers they would find that "Disneyland the place and Disneyland the TV show are all part of the same." In actual fact, Disney was initially hesitant to expand his animation business into television, fearing that the quality of his productions would suffer due to the quantity of programming demanded by a regularly scheduled television show. At the same time, the Disneyland theme park would not build itself, and increased revenue was required to finance the project. *Disneyland*, the television show, was the answer. The program's anthology format, as hosted by Disney himself, helped to address the problem of supplying a large enough quantity of high quality programming. Rather than producing a single continuing series, the content would vary from week to week, including both new material and cartoons from Disney's existing catalogue. This also tied the show to the very make-up of the to-be-completed theme park, as each week's broadcast would correspond to one of the lands that were to make up Disneyland: Frontierland, Tomorrowland, Adventureland and Fantasyland. In this way, the show promoted the park, and the park promoted the show. And, importantly, both made money.

The Walt Disney Company has a long history of using creative properties to link together its various business concerns. This is the famous Disney synergy. What is the point of making movies based on rides, or rides based on movies for that matter, if there is not money to be made? As crass as such an assessment may sound, the financial imperative behind these ventures must not be overlooked. As Jeff Smith has pointed out, synergy spreads financial risks. He writes: "By creating multiple profit centers for a single property, synergy spreads risk among several different commodities" (188). Disney's theme park movies promote their rides and the rides promote the movies. Yet the rides also predate the films by many decades, making this instance somewhat different than having a novelization, a line of action figures, a soundtrack and a breakfast cereal available to coincide with a movie's release.<sup>5</sup> It also raises questions about the degree to which the inclusion of seemingly non-narrative moments like those described above in *The Haunted Mansion* are, in fact, relying upon our recognizing devices from our past experiences – a chief component of how genres are understood to function.

A fairly commonplace idea about movie genres is that they involve the interplay of repetition and difference, or convention and innovation. An individual film draws on a pre-existing tradition of representations – including iconography, character types and story elements – and fashions them into a new-yet-familiar narrative. In this way, genres rely on a process by which viewers understand the appear-

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5. All of the above still were produced, of course, including a *Pirates of the Caribbean* breakfast cereal (with Johnny Depp's face on the box, no less).

ance of certain elements in a movie as motivated on *transtextual* grounds. While the contention is not, again, that these films are themselves – individually or aggregately – a genre, whether they function like genres is certainly a fair question. Are these films, for example, drawing on representational traditions that, like genres, have established conventions? Consider: *Pirates of the Caribbean* and *The Haunted Mansion* opened in Disneyland 1967 and 1969 respectively. Both also opened at The Magic Kingdom in Walt Disney World (Florida) in 1971 and 1973. Also, versions of both rides exist at Disneyland Paris and Tokyo Disney,<sup>6</sup> and installments of each are planned for the newly-opened Hong Kong Disneyland. The Country Bear Jamboree, the youngest of the three Disneyland attractions, ran for twenty-nine years before its closure in 2001, and identical versions are still in operation at Walt Disney World and Tokyo Disney. With an estimated 13 million people now visiting Disneyland annually,<sup>7</sup> and given that these rides have been in operation (and promoted across the company's various media platforms) for well over thirty years, the likelihood that a moviegoer is familiar with either ride is quite high.

With this in mind, moments like those from *The Haunted Mansion's* graveyard sequence are less “non-narrative attractions” than moments of transtextuality. In general, then, the attractions model risks misrepresenting not only the role of narrative but also understating not only the degree to which moments of seemingly non-narrative material are motivated transtextually, but also the degree to which moviegoers are aware of these operations. When Gunning first proposed the cinema of attractions his model had a high degree of specificity; while it was posited as the ‘dominant’ mode of cinema, it did not preclude the possibility of other forms of cinematic representation. Today, however, the term ‘cinema of attractions’ is largely synonymous with all pre-narrative film. But this extension of the attractions model has the unfortunate side effect of downplaying the diversity of not only early cinema but also the cinema that follows. Likewise, conceiving of contemporary Hollywood moviemaking as dependent on the plotless succession of effects-driven action sequences exaggerates the degree to which movies today are made in the ‘blockbuster’ mode. In actuality, a film company relies on a few big hits to finance the remainder of its production slate, which is largely made up of smaller films. Moreover, as Kristin Thompson has noted, many of the most successful blockbusters, like *Jurassic Park* (1993) or *Titanic* (1997), tend

to be those that are the most classical in their storytelling. As further evidence against Williams’ position that we now go to the movies “to be thrilled and moved in quite visceral ways, and without much concern for coherent characters or motives” (356), we can note how the prevailing criticisms of contemporary cinema have very much to do with narrative concerns: unbelievable characters, unmotivated actions and events, formulaic plots, and so on. That Disney would look to develop a feature film based on Space Mountain rather than Big Thunder Mountain Railroad, despite both being rollercoasters, should not surprise us; only the former, like the rides already adapted into features, creates for its patrons a self-enclosed fictional world – a futuristic spaceport, where the ‘experience’ begins long before they ‘blast off’ and continues after they have returned safely from their journey.

The importance of story is apparent both in the Disney Company’s selection of which rides it adapts into feature films and in the effort to further deploy an attraction’s featured elements into a coherent, causal narrative. Moreover, in those moments when ‘attractions’ do come to the fore, they are more akin to genre conventions than the cinema of attractions originally detected by Gunning.

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6. The version of the Haunted Mansion at Disneyland Paris, called the Phantom Manor, varies most greatly from the original Disneyland version; in particular, the ride actually does narrate a story about the Manor’s previous inhabitants (and their unfortunate demise).

7. As per company policy, The Walt Disney Company does not release official attendance figures for any of its theme parks or related attractions.

# Dramatizing Individuation: Institutions, Assemblages, and *The Wire*

Alasdair McMillan

*Whether you're a corner boy in West Baltimore, or a cop who knows his beat, or an Eastern European brought here for sex, your life is worth less. It's the triumph of capitalism over human value. This country has embraced the idea that this is a viable domestic policy. It is. It's viable for the few. But I don't live in Westwood, L.A., or on the Upper West Side of New York. I live in Baltimore.*

– David Simon (O'Rourke)

Often hailed as the 'best show on television,' and described by its creator David Simon as "a novel" (Kois), HBO's *The Wire* is a weighty drama that cries out for (and receives) a great deal of critical interpretation. Critics have justly heaped their praise upon the series, citing its realism and the sheer scope of Simon's narrative vision. It might once have been mistaken for a conventional 'police procedural' (in the vein of Simon's earlier *Homicide: Life on the Streets*), but it gradually became a sweeping critique of contemporary urban society. Over its five seasons, *The Wire* transcended any conceivable genre or narrative formula, sketching out a comprehensive portrait of life in Baltimore, a "postindustrial American tragedy" (Havrilesky<sup>1</sup>) of a minor metropolis and its decaying, dysfunctional institutions. It seems, therefore, that it may ultimately offer as much material for the social critic as for the critic of popular culture. It is not only 'the best,' but the most Foucauldian show on television, the show which reveals the most about the technologies and techniques of contemporary discipline and punishment.

1. Unless otherwise specified, all citations from interviews with David Simon are Simon's words.

We can map Foucault's theories about institutions fairly directly onto the Baltimore presented in *The Wire*, demonstrating how his ideas about power and discipline<sup>2</sup> remain vitally important for social theory. At the same time, however, the series illustrates how the forms and functions of power have diverged from those of the nineteenth-century disciplinary revolution. Disciplinary power still seeks to produce and control docile bodies, but its mechanisms as depicted here have changed a great deal since Jeremy Bentham first sketched out his Panopticon. When examining *The Wire* – and, by extension, 'postindustrial' urban society – we must move beyond a conventional 'disciplinary' and 'institutionalized' reading of Foucault. This does not, however, prevent us from reaffirming the core of Foucault's approach, described quite perceptively by Giorgio Agamben as "an unprejudiced analysis of the concrete ways in which power penetrates subjects' very bodies and forms of life" (5). Cast in these terms, the general concerns of Foucault and *The Wire* are clearly alike in spirit, regardless of how their specific strategies and conclusions may differ. It is therefore in this spirit that I present my own broadly 'Foucauldian' reading of *The Wire*,<sup>2</sup> one which is both a critical reading of *Discipline and Punish*, and of discipline and punishment in a wired, postindustrial state.

2. In this text I will be citing almost exclusively from *Discipline and Punish*, although a concern with discipline certainly animates much of Foucault's work before and after, articulated in different terms. I will in fact be making informal use of a few terms from the later work on biopolitics and governmentality, but a systematic exegesis of these concepts is impossible in the space allotted here. These concepts could, however, certainly be deployed in a more purely 'Foucauldian' analysis, substituting for the 'Deleuzian' vocabulary I adopt in the third section.

## 1. Panopticism and the wires

**T**he *Wire* shares one fundamental question with Foucault's work: what are the functions and effects of institutions in the formation of the 'individual subject?'<sup>3</sup> We might begin, however, by pausing to consider what the series is actually 'about.'<sup>4</sup> Its narrative deals (at least initially) with the 'War on Drugs,' depicting the inner workings of both an investigative unit of the Baltimore Police Department and a network of criminal organizations under surveillance. In a sense, then, it's a show 'about' the police and the criminals they pursue, one which naturally gets mistaken for a 'police procedural.' Simon claims, however, that the show was in fact pitched to HBO as "a rebellion of sorts against all the horseshit police procedurals afflicting American television" (Hornby). Such procedurals focus on seemingly-independent police departments, populated by noble detectives still cast in the mold of *Dragnet's* Joe Friday. *The Wire* calls both sides of this equation into question. It offers a much more than the pseudo-context of a show like *Law & Order*, and it avoids simply rehashing the same old 'good cop, bad

stitution woven into this web. Wiretaps allow the narrative to "dig up the ways that legal and illegal Baltimore talk to each other every day" (Kois). 'The wire' lets the show sneak past the closed doors of the city's institutions, to dramatize how they discipline, manipulate, and betray their subjects. The series is ultimately less concerned with any one institution or its procedures than with a whole institutional fabric held together by wires. The territories and powers of such state, civil, and criminal institutions are never definite or absolute; they determine each other reciprocally in a variable configuration of political, technological and economic power. *The Wire* clearly demonstrates how disciplinary power today comes to govern subjects and subjectivity with an unprecedented proliferation of panoptic techniques, penetrating the networks (whether literally 'wired' or wireless) by which individuals communicate. This is not to idealize panopticism, or to presuppose that Bentham's model has survived 'intact.' Rather, it is simply to recognize that the Panopticon – in Foucault's sense, of a "machine for dissociating the seeing/being seen dyad" (1977, 201) – remains a pillar of disciplinary power in the twenty-first century. Although not always 'optic' in its

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# The profits of delinquency tend to fill the pockets of discipline

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cop' tropes visible in any number of other procedurals. Not only are corruption and 'excessive force' ubiquitous in the BPD, such individual indiscretions seem positively insignificant in comparison to the dysfunctional status quo upheld by the institutions and administrators themselves. Even though "the spine of each season is a Baltimore police investigation, one that leads inevitably to electronic surveillance – 'the wire'" (Kois), the show is not specifically 'about' the police at all. As its title indicates, *The Wire* is 'about' electronic surveillance. Here the inevitable parallels with *Discipline and Punish* begin: 'the wire' (shorthand for 'wiretap') is a tremendously panoptic phenomenon. Invariably, the detectives of *The Wire* either *have* a wiretap on a criminal organization, or they're trying to get one. Nor does the series skimp on the methodological details: it catalogues the entire process, from obtaining probable cause to deciphering slang and determining 'pertinence,' on to the construction and prosecution of a criminal case.

*The Wire* is not, however, *just* a show about surveillance. In due course, it becomes apparent that the narrative has more to do with the wires themselves, and the individuals and in-

etymological sense, electronic surveillance in *The Wire* operates according to deeply panoptic principles. The individual citizens of Baltimore (like those of any modern city) may be electronically observed at any time by powerful institutions, without any immediate knowledge of their being observed. Caught up within a panoptic system, one in which "the gaze is alert everywhere" (Foucault 1977, 195), subjects in postindustrial society tend to surveil themselves in the absence of any direct supervision, thereby internalizing the discipline of their institutions.

While the gaze of the 'hidden watcher' in Bentham's Panopticon was contained within the prison – a space of incarceration and exclusion<sup>5</sup> – electronic surveillance in *The Wire* pans across the entire social field. It does not simply facilitate 'carceral' *punishment* within the prison walls, but works to ensure general social *discipline*, governing and producing docile subjects. We can and should repeat certain standard conclusions at this point: modern technology has made society into a panoptic assemblage, as an ever-growing stream of once-'personal' information is recorded and catalogued by a proliferating group of powerful institutions. This

5. Here we might recall Foucault's distinction between the 'leper colony' model and the quarantine of plague victims, but also how discipline operates by blending and recombining these two technical models (1977, 199).

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3. This process of subject-formation is essentially 'individuation,' although this will be made clearer below.

4. Viewers will be aware that summarizing *The Wire* is a nearly impossible task; accordingly, I will begin by outlining the general structure of its narrative rather than any specific details of plot or character.

proliferation comes coupled with a tendency for the diffusion of institutional methods into previously ‘undisciplined’ fields, corresponding with a phenomenon clearly described by Foucault. The mechanisms of discipline are ‘de-institutionalized’ as “the massive, compact disciplines are broken down into flexible methods of control, which may be transferred and adapted” (1977, 211). Techniques originally established for the management of illness, madness, or criminality are predictably adapted as general principles for any institution which seeks to discipline individuals and render them docile. Recalling Simon’s initial assertion about the ‘triumph of capitalism over human value,’ we might note that capitalist institutions have always been great contributors to the evolution and diffusion of disciplinary techniques. The production of monetary capital and the reproduction of capitalist institutions both presuppose the production of *human capital* in the form of docile bodies. As indicated by this talk of ‘capitalism’ and its institutional apparatus, this critique is not entirely distinct from a broadly ‘Marxist’ political-theoretical orientation. Foucault’s method simply implies a focus on the specific encounters of the human body with the technologies of State, capital, and ‘power’ in general. In such encounters, power is expressed as ‘biopower,’ actual power over bodies.<sup>6</sup> Nowhere is the relevance of this method more apparent than in *The Wire*, as it dramatizes (in particularly epic fashion) the contemporary infiltration of the sphere of ‘human value’ by a foreign disciplinary logic. For the Baltimore it depicts, carceral surveillance and panopticism have long since broken out of the prison, and its ostensibly ‘free’ subjects are all being progressively assimilated into regimes of civil and corporate discipline.

What, then, of the well-organized and undeterred delinquents of *The Wire*? The series’ disciplined criminals necessitate that we reaffirm the panoptic thesis, while simultaneously recognizing why panopticism has never lived up to its lofty ideals: organized criminals can always subvert, manipulate, and appropriate its techniques.<sup>7</sup> This does not imply that the basic structure of panoptic discipline has been transformed or overthrown. The subversion of the disciplinary Panopticon, the turning of panopticism against one another – ‘sousveillance’ *contra* surveillance – is simply one enduring result of panopticism, persisting as its indivisible remainder. The Panopticon certainly aims to suppress deviance and delinquency, but it indirectly ‘produces’ those delinquents which it fails to suppress. In this sense,

6. These questions of ‘biopower’ and of the docile body will be addressed more directly in the next section. It may also be noted that none of this precludes the potential value of a more orthodox Marxist critique (whatever one takes that to mean today). Foucault’s methodology just seemed like a natural choice for my analysis of this series.

7. Throughout the series, for instance, the gangs purchase leaked grand jury and pre-trial documents to learn of impending wiretaps or cooperating witnesses.

the adaptation of organized crime to police surveillance only reaffirms and reduplicates an essentially panoptic structure. Although institutional surveillance never actually ‘deters’ the organized criminal institutions of *The Wire*, such organizations are structured by the panoptic gaze in almost every respect. They operate according to procedures nearly as strict as those of the police. Dealers maintain a network of lookouts<sup>8</sup> to warn them of approaching police, hiding their drugs in the bushes and their guns on the tires of parked cars in order to avoid any serious possession charges in the inevitable raids. The more ‘administrative’ levels of the organization are insulated by design from such raids. Nevertheless, they must still avoid discussing criminal activity in their own automobiles (for fear of listening devices), and are forced to constantly adapt their communications in increasingly elaborate schemes<sup>9</sup> to avoid ‘the wire.’ The discipline of the criminal organization paradoxically works to *empower* delinquency, but is nevertheless a necessary consequence of some original surveillance. The originary decision of discipline is likewise responsible for the bloody institutional combats that ensue: in this case, the manifest body count of the ‘War on Drugs.’

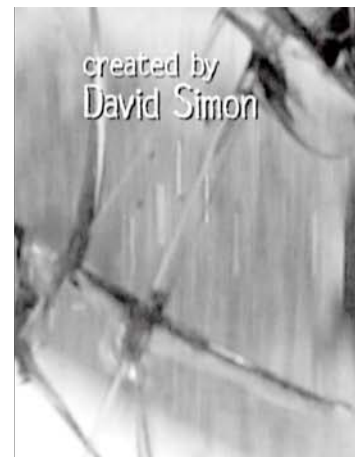
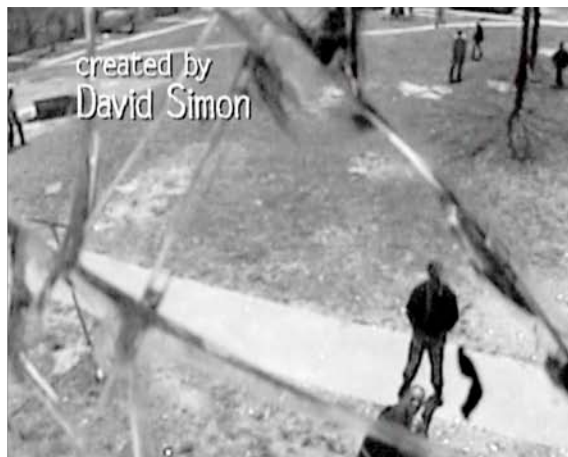
In adapting themselves to institutional surveillance, criminal organizations must themselves become counter-disciplinary institutions. This constitutes the single most significant distinction between ‘organized crime’ and simple delinquency. The actions of individuals within criminal organizations are clearly determined by their distinctive relationship with the legal institution. As Foucault states, “the delinquent is an institutional product” (1977, 301). Not only is the profitability of the criminal organization predicated upon prohibition – the drug prohibition to which Simon states he is “unalterably opposed” (Hornby) – its internal discipline is produced by institutional surveillance. Such production takes place by ‘natural selection’ in a cultural context, as undisciplined criminal institutions are rapidly eliminated by the forces of law in the ongoing War on Drugs. Simon rightly claims that “what began as a war against illicit drugs generations ago has now mutated into a war on the American underclass” (Hornby). Police surveillance in this war has produced an entire disciplined ‘underclass’ of professional delinquents, one which ultimately comes to include whole segments of society driven to silence by resentment and intimidation. Such an underclass is always “a result of the system; but it also becomes a part and an instrument of it” (Foucault 1977, 282). The wiretaps in *The Wire* carry the viewer past the façade of

8. They also use ‘touts’ and ‘runners,’ whose respective tasks (at least as far as I’ve been able to tell) are to shout the ‘brand names’ of the drugs being sold, and to shuttle either money or drugs between customer, dealer, and stash. Runners never perform both functions: this would allow police to photograph the entire transaction.

9. One gang, for example, eventually develops a code in which the images of clock faces sent over cell phones correspond with coordinates in a road atlas. Indicating the character of this ‘arms race,’ their code in turn is cracked by police in the course of an *illegal* wiretap run by two detectives.

independence presented by legitimate and illegitimate organizations to reveal a world behind the scenes of disciplined society, one in which delinquents truly are both result and instrument of the system.<sup>10</sup> Crooked police and politicians sustain themselves on a flow of drug money, while even the ‘good police’ must cultivate a stable of informants and manipulate low-level dealers in their futile attempts to disrupt the flow.

‘business model.’ The second season ends with the escape of ‘the Greeks,’ an always-mobile group of smugglers, while the third season closes with the deaths and arrests of key Barksdale figures, and the collapse of the organization. The fourth season then focuses on the subsequent assimilation of Barksdale’s organization by that of Marlo Stanfield and Stanfield’s own assimilation into a ‘cooperative’ run by a diplomatic gang leader named Proposition Joe. The fifth season offers no more



Because this kind of organized crime is both institutionalized and entrenched, these attempts are as futile in *The Wire* as they are in reality. As a necessary element of its ‘realism,’ *The Wire* discards that other genre-myth of the police procedural, according to which the legitimate institution almost always prevails over the criminal one. Not only do investigations simply fail, but criminal institutions are closely linked with powerful ‘legitimate’ ones. To cite just one prominent example, the character of Senator Clay Davis (Isiah Whitlock Jr.) was evidently corrupt since the very first season, but with his political clout managed to deter any systematic investigation of his criminal activity until the fifth season. As veteran detective Lester Freamon observes early on in the series (after his unit catches Davis’ driver accepting drug money), for police to investigate the flows of drugs and the drug dealers themselves is generally acceptable. Investigating the flows of capital generated by the drug trade, however, is just a quick way to ruin a career<sup>11</sup>: the profits of delinquency tend to fill the pockets of discipline. This is not to say that there are no raids and convictions in *The Wire*. More prominent than any raid, however, are the mechanisms by which criminal institutions adapt and restructure themselves (or simply get replaced by new ones). This is especially obvious at the end of each season. The arrests of key members of the ‘Barksdale Organization’ in the first, including its leader Avon, causes only a restructuring of the institution according to a new

by way of a decisive criminal ‘defeat,’ although Stanfield is no more satisfied with the end result than the police conducting the investigation. Unlike the apparently ‘evil’ perpetrators of the traditional crime drama, the criminals of *The Wire* aren’t symbolic bogeymen to be decisively defeated and deservedly punished. These are systemic, organized phenomena, both initially produced and continually reproduced by a panoptic configuration of disciplined institutions.

## 2. Individuating docile bodies

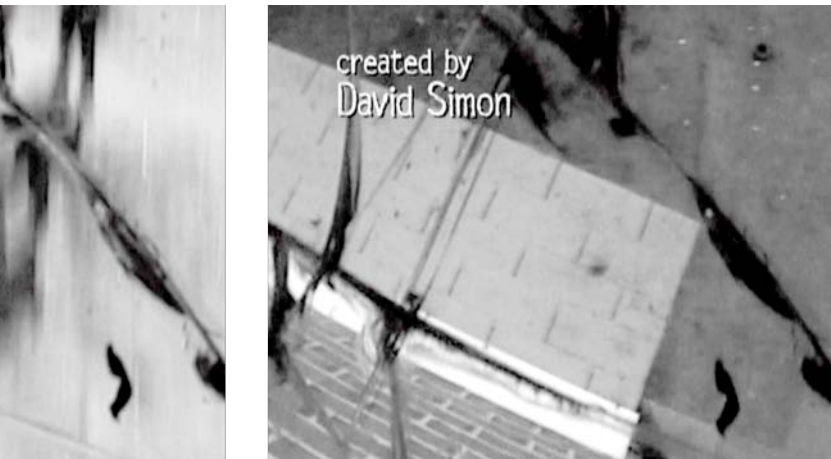
Given its subject matter, *The Wire* deals more with the failures of panoptic discipline than its successes. Criminality is the exception to the legal rule, as that which its institutions aim to exclude, suppress, or confine. The law exists in a real sense *for the sake of* such exceptions. Its institutions strictly define and circumscribe exceptionality<sup>12</sup> by incarcerating the delinquent and “individualiz[ing] the excluded” (Foucault 1977, 200) through discipline. The institution of law thereby sets out to produce law-abiding individuals and docile bodies; in the process, it invariably produces some delinquents, however ‘accidentally’ or ‘exceptionally.’ Disciplinary power is never absolute, regardless of how far electronic surveillance may extend its reach. As Foucault claims, “there are no relations of power without resistance” (1980, 142). This is affirmed even in the montage

10. This is, of course, the very same façade upheld by all those “horseshit police procedurals” Simon loathes.

11. When Freamon is first introduced, he had (apparently for this very reason) been sitting at a desk for years, processing reports in the Pawn Shop Unit and spending most of his time making dollhouse furniture.

12. We may recall in this respect Kierkegaard’s maxim that “the exception explains the universal and itself” (227). This is cited by both Carl Schmitt (15) and Agamben (16) in turn, as support for their claim that the original (sovereign) prerogative of power is the decision “over the exception” (Schmitt 5).

which runs during the opening credits of *The Wire*, which changes each season to suggest themes and foreshadow events to come. Each incarnation features the same key segment, however, in which a youth uses a rock to smash the surveillance camera which films the footage. With one casual throw, he shatters the disciplinary gaze: a gaze which is in fact our own. This scene typifies the ease with which panopticism is subverted by delinquency in *The Wire*. Surveillance alone can



never guarantee discipline. As one officer says early on in the series, policing still comes down to “knocking heads and taking bodies.” Disciplinary institutions are ultimately founded upon this power over bodies, the ‘biopower’ deployed not only as they capture and arrest *delinquent* bodies, but also in the regimes of ‘correct training’ by which they produce and govern *docile* bodies.

*The Wire* confirms another of Foucault’s maxims: the individual subject is “a reality fabricated by this specific technology of power that I have called ‘discipline’” (1977, 194). Power only occasionally functions prohibitively. This is the exceptional function of punishment, produced at the margins of power in its encounters with delinquency. Initially and for the most part, however, power *produces* and *individuates*. Disciplinary techniques work to produce a subject whose individual will and bodily forces can be channeled according to institutional needs: not a ‘free’ subject, but a *productive, docile* body that “may be subjected, used, transformed and improved” (Foucault 1977, 136). *The Wire* breaks with even the most basic conventions of the ‘character drama.’ It isn’t a dramatization of an individual character’s development, but of the character of *individuation* in postindustrial society. It demonstrates how contemporary institutions accumulate biopower, producing (and destroying) individual subjects by penetrating their ‘forms of life’ with disciplinary power. Simon claims that *The Wire* “isn’t really structured as episodic television and it instead pursues the form of the modern, multi-POV novel” (Hornby). Amidst its huge ensemble cast, there is no one strong protagonist who truly dominates the narrative (*à la* Tony Soprano), although the series certainly has its share of memorable characters. There’s Jimmy McNul-

ty (Dominic West), the determined (and frequently drunk) detective, and of course Omar (Michael K. Williams), the gay ‘stick-up man’ who robs drug dealers for revenge and for profit. There’s Bubbles (Andre Royo), the on-again/off-again heroin addict and informant, and Michael (Tristan Wilds), a teenager for whom joining a gang seems like the only way to protect his younger brother from his abusive father. By the end of the series, we’ve followed Councilman (and then Mayor) Tommy Carcetti (Aidan Gillen) through the trials and tribulations of an election, and we’ve even met the reporters that covered it. Instead of exploring the individual neuroses of one dominant protagonist, *The Wire* weaves together a multiplicity of characters, each attempting – neuroses and all – to resolve the conflicts between their own drives or principles and the imperatives of powerful institutions.

The traditional police procedural is all about the machinery of *punishment* and the conflicts *between* institutions. *The Wire*, by contrast, is only superficially about investigation or punishment: in this series, the crippling bust and the defeat of the criminal mind are false promises, occasionally even delusions. On a deeper level, it is a show about *discipline* and the processes *within* institutions by which they produce docile bodies (regardless of the ‘human cost’). As Foucault states, discipline ‘makes’ individuals and governs individuation as it “‘trains’ the moving, confused, useless multitudes of bodies and forces into a multiplicity of individual elements” (1977, 170). In *The Wire*, sometimes the ‘forces’ at work in this training are clear, and the human cost of their deployment all too evident. When ‘the Greeks’ bring Eastern European women into the country as prostitutes, for instance, their bodies are rendered docile simply by the promise of a new life (and, failing that, the threat of a quick death). The forces at work are often much less evident, however. The most docile bodies produced by the Baltimore Police Department are not to be found in the public being policed, but within the ranks of ‘the bosses’ themselves. This is most clearly depicted in the character of William Rawls (John Doman), who manages over the course of the series to ascend from the rank of Major to Acting Commissioner, assisted by both his myopic faith in statistics and some shrewd political maneuvering. Rawls, like all the other ‘bosses,’ adapts himself wholeheartedly to the criteria of institutional selection and promotion. As with any group of ‘career-minded professionals,’ their training makes them docile, malleable, *productive* workers. Having internalized the disciplinary structure of ranked progress and permanent registration, bosses like Rawls seek only to advance their careers by upholding (and occasionally manipulating) the status quo.

*The Wire* makes it painfully obvious that even as this discipline makes the hierarchical system of institutions ‘governable,’ it prevents it from fulfilling its social functions. As Major in command of the homicide unit, Rawls’ docile acceptance of institutional imperatives handed down from the mayor’s office leads him to demand a high ‘clearance rate’

from his department. This in turn compels his underbosses to demand that the unit avoid looking too hard for murders. When fourteen of the above-mentioned prostitutes are murdered in a cargo container, for instance, it nearly gets written-off as ‘accidental’; only because Detective McNulty was out to exact revenge on Rawls is ‘justice’ pursued. The human cost of docility is thereby made clear on a very personal level. The ‘good’ police officers, for their part, retain some semblance of free will and individual principles only at the cost of their careers. Of all the police in *The Wire*, only Cedric Daniels (Lance Reddick) actually manages to sustain both a principled commitment to law enforcement and a promising career, rising to the post of Commissioner by the end of the final season. His hopes of improving the quality of law enforcement and effecting some operational changes in the department are dashed, however, once the mayor’s office obtains evidence of some (unspecified) past misdeeds on his part. Mayor Carcetti uses this evidence as leverage, attempting to make Daniels play the very same ‘stats game’ as Rawls and all his other predecessors, underreporting crime and thus improving the mayor’s image in time for election season. In the final episode, Daniels is essentially forced to choose between his career and his principles, and he chooses the latter. Told of his intention to resign, his estranged wife offers a platitude: “The tree that doesn’t bend, breaks, Cedric.” His response is telling: “If you bend too far, you’re already broken.” Discipline produces docility by bending individuals until they are for all intents and purposes ‘broken,’ their principles made as flexible as the institution demands. This kind of ‘training’ produces generally obedient individuals that are easily controlled by their superiors, and so they naturally rise through the ranks of their institutions. En masse, however, such docile bodies sustain an ineffectual, Kafkaesque bureaucracy: not only dysfunctional, but systematically incapable of remedying its dysfunction.

Simon succinctly describes the general ‘message’ of *The Wire* in any number of interviews. It’s about “the effects of institutions on individuals” (or on individuation), and how “whether you’re a cop, a longshoreman, a drug dealer, a politician, a judge, or a lawyer, *you are ultimately compromised*” (Kois). Elsewhere, he is even more direct:

Whatever institution you as an individual commit to will somehow find a way to betray you on *The Wire*. Unless of course you’re willing to play the game without regard to the effect on others or society as a whole, in which case you might be a judge or the state police superintendent or governor one day. Or, for your loyalty, you still might be cannon fodder. (Havrilesky)

This institutional command to ‘play the game’ is a recurrent theme in *The Wire*; regardless of which specific ‘game’ is involved, the imperative is universal. The basic message is the same, whether it’s the mayor’s office pressuring Rawls and Daniels to play the ‘stat game,’ or it’s Snoop telling Michael that his death was ordered simply because he didn’t “carry

himself properly” and asked “why?” a bit too often. “Do what you’re told; stop asking ‘why?’” Whether you enforce the law or the dictates of a gang leader, your institution demands docile obedience. As Omar says in the last season, it’s “all in the game.” Independent, principled characters on *The Wire* inevitably find themselves betrayed by their institutions and the games they play. Panoptic surveillance remains, as always, an essential mechanism for enforcing this discipline and enacting this betrayal. The fundamental role of video surveillance is as evident in the visual form of the show as its content. As co-producer Joe Chappelle states, they tend to use long lenses when filming to provide ‘a voyeuristic view’ from the perspective “of someone observing but slightly removed from the action” (Griffin), thus emphasizing the panoptic dissociation of the ‘seeing/being seen dyad.’ Chappelle goes on, however, to say that this is actually “about limiting information to the viewer so hopefully he is trying to figure out what he’s actually seeing... it’s not all laid out in front of you” (Griffin). The panoptic gaze is eminently fallible. In this respect, the promotional slogan for its fifth season was telling: like any surveillance project, *The Wire* demands that you “read between the lines” and beyond the images. Institutional surveillance never tells the whole story: to organize and distribute docile bodies, it must operate in conjunction with a myriad of other forces and powers.

### 3. Institutions and assemblages

As a ‘postindustrial American tragedy,’ *The Wire* only occasionally deals with well-behaved institutions like the preindustrial ones analyzed by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*. More prominent are the *de-institutionalizing* forces at work, both in the form of human resistances and ‘flexible methods of control.’ As such flexible methods and technologies circulate freely, new loci of control are constantly being created and destroyed. These powers cannot always be readily assimilated into the old institutional paradigm, and may in fact demand a renewal of our interpretive paradigm. I turn in this respect to the concept of ‘assemblage,’ employed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari as an abstract description for a heterogeneous multiplicity of individual entities. This term encompasses both disciplinary institutions and informal (or delinquent) groupings without reducing the distinction between the two.<sup>13</sup> These flexible Deleuzian concepts are valuable for analyzing why some institutions in *The Wire* seem more ‘disciplined’ than others, and how discipline subverts itself by enforcing docility in an inflexible way. Criminal organizations in the series are usually two steps ahead of the police, substantially more flexible

13. Deleuze and Guattari use this term in a very general way. Manuel de Landa has developed a theory of social complexity founded on this broad concept, which treats not only social organizations but entities ranging from “atoms and molecules to biological organisms, species, and ecosystems” as assemblages (3).



and nomadic than the massive, rule-bound institutions of the State Apparatus.<sup>14</sup> By conceiving these organizations as assemblages of individual bodies, we can come to terms with the complex networks they form, and from which something like ‘postmodern society’ emerges (along with electronic surveillance, and the ‘triumph of capitalism over human value’ Simon describes).

This is not, however, to diverge from a basically Foucauldian paradigm.<sup>15</sup> Deleuze argues that the de-institutionalizing shift of postindustrial society was anticipated by Foucault, who recognized that his ‘disciplinary society’ was a transient model that

succeeded that of the societies of sovereignty, the goal and functions of which were something quite different (to tax rather than to organize production, to rule on death rather than to administer life) [...] In their turn the disciplines underwent a crisis to the benefit of new forces that were gradually instituted and which accelerated after World War II: a disciplinary society was what we already no longer were, what we had ceased to be. (Deleuze 3)

The same disciplinary institutions that once supplanted sovereign power now simply find themselves challenged by an explosion of decentralized assemblages. The techniques of traditional discipline as described by Foucault – registration, training, division, incarceration – have certainly not been ‘replaced’ as mechanisms for the production and control of docile bodies.<sup>16</sup> Instead, these techniques are proliferating at a remarkable pace, infiltrating assemblages which may once have been far less ‘disciplined.’ Capital itself takes on an increasingly active role in the production of docile bodies: market controls and consumer debt now induce docility with greater efficiency than incarceration or the threat of death. The assemblages that exercise such control on and within markets are increasingly heterogeneous. The police department is the ‘spine’ of every season, and so the central institution of *The Wire* is still constructed according to the technical model outlined in *Discipline and Punish*. But as the scope of its narrative expands well beyond the police department, it begins dealing with other, much less hierarchical or regimented assemblages. Wiretaps carry us into the marginal spaces of the ‘societies of control,’ as the series delves further and further into the “erosions of frontiers” and the “explosions within shanty towns or ghettos” (Deleuze 7). Each season adds a

new dimension of complexity to the ongoing war between the police and the drug traffickers, beginning with Baltimore dockworkers and moving through municipal politics and the elementary school system, eventually closing with the *Baltimore Sun* (the newspaper that *should* be covering all of this).

*The Wire* thereby aims to uncover the power relationships and eroding frontiers between all kinds of social assemblages: formal and informal, large and small, disciplined and delinquent. These different assemblages often articulate and distribute their individual components (bodies) in very different ways. Like any traditional disciplinary institution, the police department is a highly *territorial* assemblage, which implies both a definite jurisdiction and a fixed internal hierarchy (cf. Landa 13). Many social assemblages (particularly ‘delinquent’ ones) are of necessity profoundly *detrterritorialized*, however. The clearest example of such an institution in *The Wire* would be the criminal syndicate of ‘the Greeks.’ The leaders of this organization<sup>17</sup> operate without any definite territory. As such, they are able to evade territorial law enforcement quite easily, packing up and leaving its jurisdiction at the first sign of trouble. The hierarchical institutions of discipline are rigid and territorial, while informal and delinquent assemblages tend to be more deterritorialized and chaotic. The criminal assemblages of *The Wire*, bereft of the assurances offered by legality, must enforce their discipline with far greater violence. Nevertheless, their flexibility is what allows them to adapt to the methods of law enforcement and what makes them so incredibly profitable.

The organizations of drug traffickers depicted in *The Wire* are viciously territorial, but simultaneously deterritorialized. The ‘corner boys’ who distribute the drugs are confined to a particular territory, while the upper echelons of their organizations certainly are not.<sup>18</sup> This flexible structure actually mirrors that of the modern corporation: the bottom rungs are fixed to a territory, while the upper management is practically nomadic, manipulating and consolidating its territories of production and distribution for maximum profitability. Whether legitimate or illegitimate, businesses are profit-directed assemblages, structured according to basically similar principles. Their flexible methods of control can readily be transferred and adapted to novel situations. This is clear in *The Wire*: when gang leader Avon Barksdale (Wood Harris) is imprisoned in the second season, his second in command Stringer Bell (Idris Elba), a business school graduate, attempts to restructure the organization for increased stability.

14. See Deleuze and Guattari on smooth space and striated space; the spaces of the nomadic war machine and the sedentary State apparatus (474). In postindustrial states, royal science does its weaving and striating with the wire.

15. See the ‘core’ of Foucault’s approach as defined by Agamben and cited at the outset.

16. de Landa outlines a far more detailed argument for the interpretation of Foucauldian institutions as ontologically equivalent to assemblages (see chp. 4 of his text). It seems, however, that for clarity’s sake we ought to continue referring to well-disciplined, hierarchical institutions as such.

17. These leaders (played by Paul Ben-Victor and Bill Raymond) go by Greek aliases, but are not actually Greek. The narrative suggests an indeterminate Russian or Eastern European origin, never implying a definite territorial affiliation.

18. The corner boys are of course quick to abandon their territory when confronted by law enforcement. The mechanisms referred to in the first section, by which these dealers define a territory for drug-dealing (positioning of stash-houses, avoiding surveillance, exclusion of rival dealers, etc.) are all interesting examples of disciplined spatial organization that subsists on the margins of the dominant ‘rational-legal’ mode (cf. de Landa, 69).

He invests in housing developments and acquires a variety of legitimate businesses to launder the organization's money and account for his income. Of course, this stability more or less vanishes when Avon is released and starts a war with Marlo Stanfield. As Stanfield would be in the series finale, Bell is left disillusioned with the world of business. It seems that no matter how many bribes he offers to people like Senator Davis, his building projects never come to fruition.

In *The Wire*, politics, industry and the streets meet on the margins of the law to exchange money for favours – but the atmosphere is always one of palpable unease. By the end of the third season, Omar and his shotgun finally catch up with Stringer Bell, and he ends up dead (with two of his 'legitimate' associates) in one of his half-finished developments. The disciplines of legitimate and illegitimate organizations often prove themselves to be incommensurable. Yet a figure like Omar is produced by the disciplinary techniques of criminal assemblages, functioning just as they did in the institutions that produced them: imperfectly. Power produces its own exceptions to its own rules. Violence simply begets more violence: when Barksdale brutally murders Omar's boy-

produces just as surely as it produces compliance (*cf.* Deleuze & Guattari 224). All this simply reaffirms that the principal techniques of disciplinary power in criminal society are violent. Even though criminal assemblages police themselves according to a set of procedures simultaneously more informal and brutal, we must not mistake this unfamiliar discipline for a lack of discipline.

The transgressions and delinquencies produced by discipline are not inherently 'negative' phenomena, although they may certainly be defined as such by its institutions and administrators. Such exceptions are the positive products of discipline and the affirmations of its rule. In *The Wire*, they also often appear to be the only way for individuals to accomplish anything substantial from within their dysfunctional institutions. This seems, at least, to be the theory of Detective McNulty, presented from the beginning as an exemplary investigator and expert manipulator of power dynamics. Setting himself up in the first season against all the unprincipled bosses who want to avoid digging up real crimes, he breaks rank by complaining to a judge about the murder of a witness by Barksdale's organization. The judge then pressures the

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## In *The Wire*, politics, industry and the streets meet on the margins of the law to exchange money for favours

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friend in the first season, dumping his corpse in the projects as a display of sovereign power, he only spurs Omar to wage an extended campaign of robberies and murders against his organization. In order to sustain this fever pitch of violence, criminal institutions don't just need docile bodies: they need to train soldiers. *The Wire* dramatizes this process as well, once Michael joins Marlo Stanfield's gang in the fourth season. He becomes the protégé of enforcers Chris and Snoop, who put him through a pseudo-military program of training in firearms and urban tactics. When the 'means of correct training' give the trainee the resourcefulness to subvert the institution, however, an inherently volatile situation is produced. In a scene from the penultimate episode to which I alluded earlier, Michael's death has been ordered by Stanfield, who suspects (incorrectly) that he is an informant. While being driven to his death, Michael has already recognized the danger and pulls a gun on Snoop, after persuading her to pull into an alley. When she asks how he knew, his answer is simple: "Y'all taught me." Michael's training doesn't just enable him to recognize the betrayal of his institution in advance, though. In the finale, we see that he's already begun exacting revenge on his former organization, taking up the role of neighbourhood 'stick-up man' so recently vacated by Omar. Characters like Omar and Michael are the delinquents produced by delinquency, the 'breakaways' and 'inversions' which all discipline

Department to set up an investigative detail: when the institution is dysfunctional, a transgression of its rules might just become a small victory for justice. McNulty's investigative vigor has more to do with his own rebellious streak, however, than with some principled commitment to law and order. While almost every episode from the first season ends with him driving under the influence, in the final season he actually concocts an imaginary serial killer by mutilating already-deceased homeless men, leaving tell-tale clues and fabricating evidence of violent struggles.<sup>19</sup> Of course, his intentions are 'good': he uses the serial killer case as both cover and funding for unauthorized surveillance of Marlo Stanfield's organization. His transgression ultimately bears little fruit, however. Not only does the illegal wiretap end his career, but it permits Stanfield to avoid prosecution altogether.

Sooner or later, it becomes apparent to the viewer that McNulty is motivated more than anything by a single-minded drive to dominate the criminal underworld of Baltimore (and stick it to the 'bosses') with his own ostensibly superior intellect. Simon claims that, as an alternative to the 'good guys chasing bad guys' framework of the police procedural, he wanted to raise questions "about the very labels of good

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19. Viewers will know that this is only a *minuscule* sampling of McNulty's various transgressions in this 'case.'

and bad, and, indeed, whether such distinctly moral notions were really the point” (Hornby). We are beyond genre *and* ‘beyond good and evil’ here: McNulty is driven by nothing more than a basic will-to-power, channeled into an institutional framework which it perpetually overflows. McNulty’s driven single-mindedness makes him ‘good police.’ It also often makes him less of a ‘good person,’ and inevitably draws him into conflict with any number of assemblages and their respective demands. Not only does he actively incur the wrath of the bosses, but his insatiable drives lead him to a divorce, a drinking problem, and eventually his absurd plan to invent a fictitious murderer.

Of course, such a plan could never have gotten off the ground without the collaboration of the media. The fifth season of *The Wire* also takes us into the newsroom and business offices of the *Baltimore Sun*, where the ‘wall’ that once ostensibly divided the two is nowhere to be found. According to Simon (a former *Sun* reporter), this season basically asked the question “why aren’t we paying attention?” (O’Rourke). The immediate blame in this regard seems to be spread fairly evenly between the editors demanding ‘Dickensian’ human-interest stories with one eye on the bottom line and the other on the Pulitzer, and the unscrupulous writers who readily fabricate stories (or simply embellish McNulty’s fabrications) to satisfy such demands. And satisfy them they do: the ‘fabulist,’ as Simon calls him, ends up winning the Pulitzer in the series finale, although as Simon admits, “that was a bit beyond the historical reality; at the historical *Baltimore Sun*, he was a mere Pulitzer finalist” (Simon). Even when fabrications like these are uncovered, the dysfunctional institutions sweep them back under the rug. To reveal one lie is far too great a risk in a system sustained by half-truths. *The Wire* concludes masterfully, demonstrating in its final chapter not only why its own stories – often only *slightly* fictionalized – simply don’t get told in the news media, but why *none* of these slowly-dying institutions are capable any longer of *assembling* the mass of docile bodies into an ‘active citizenry.’

#### 4. Conclusions

With its unprecedented breadth and depth, *The Wire* demonstrates how institutions have a borrowed life of their own, individuating and disciplining the bodies they capture. This drama enacts a useful maxim for social theory, privileging the agency of neither the individual nor the institution. Instead, it examines the material encounters and abstract mechanisms by which individuals produced by social institutions come to reproduce or subvert those institutions in turn. Living bodies, after all, are never wholly docile, constantly transgressing the limits fixed by their institutions. Such transgressions testify to those “*focuses of instability* where groupings and accumulations confront each other, but also confront breakaways and escapes, and where inversions occur” (Deleuze & Guattari 224). In the

end, *The Wire* is driven by these transgressions and focuses of instability. It shows us not just how institutions produce and consume individuals, but how the drives of individuals necessarily resist and break free of institutional discipline run amok. It is not simply a great television show, but *great art*, for reasons which extend well beyond the ones offered here and the standard critic’s glosses on production values, social commentary, or realism. *The Wire* doesn’t simply reproduce or ‘comment’ upon social reality, but sets out instead to unravel the twisted fabric of social assemblages (beginning, of course, with the wires). For the social critic, it offers a comprehensive, faithful portrait of contemporary urban life, an essential case study for any theory of social organization. For the fan, this kind of social theory might be a handy critical supplement to the bleak sociopolitical ‘message’ of the series. Either way, one must recognize that this is not a ‘police procedural,’ having almost nothing in common with the formulaic cop stories to be found in any other ‘crime drama.’ Instead, this “66-hour movie” (Simon, in O’Rourke) goes far beyond the limits of genre, becoming one of the most profound artistic statements since Kafka of the individual condition – and the conditions of individuation – in a society dominated by dysfunctional institutions.

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# The HBO-ification of Genre

R. Colin Tait

*A case like this, here, where you show who gets paid behind all the tragedy and the fraud, where you show how the money routes itself, how we're all, all of us, vested, all of us complicit? Baby, I could die happy.*

- Freamon, *The Wire*

Tony Soprano: *Sil, break it down for 'em. What two businesses have traditionally been recession-proof since time immemorial?*  
Silvio Dante: *Certain aspects of show business and our thing.*

- *The Sopranos*

*Starting tomorrow morning I am personally offering a fifty dollar bounty for every decapitated head of as many of these godless heathen cocksuckers as anyone can bring in – tomorrow – with no upper limit. That's all I say on that subject...except the next round is on the house. God rest the souls of that poor family...and pussy's half price for the next fifteen minutes.*

- Al Swearingen, *Deadwood*

Starting in 1999, television genres – and as a result, film genres – underwent a radical transformation primarily at the hands of the HBO (Home Box Office) pay television network. With the release of the groundbreaking series *The Sopranos*, *Deadwood*, and *The Wire*, the network is singlehandedly responsible for shifting the narrative, syntactical and iconographic features of genre while at the same time riding a wave of unparalleled critical and commercial success. As we reach the end of the road of what seems to be the golden era of HBO, following *Deadwood's* sudden ending after its successful third season in 2006, David Chase's jarring blackout of *The Sopranos* in 2007, and *The Wire's* fifth and final season in 2008, now is a particularly fortuitous time to analyze the overall influence of HBO's output over the past decade, not only by examining how it has shaped film genres, but how these series have transformed audience expectations, and, importantly, cultural responses to television genres as well.

## 1. Questions of Genre, Questions of HBO

At present, there is no systematized account of scholarship on HBO production yet available. While there has been a great deal of interest in individual HBO series, there is still no unified approach to the network as a whole, let alone the revision of genre it enacts. Studies like David Lavery's edited collections *This Thing of Ours: Investigating The Sopranos*, *Reading The Sopranos: Hit TV from HBO*, and *Deadwood: A Western to Swear By*, represent the higher end of the scholarship surrounding these subjects, and should be seen as timely attempts to legitimate these series as serious objects of study. Other sources, such as Maurice Yacowar's *The Sopranos on the Couch*, and Regina Barreca's *A Sitdown With The Sopranos: Watching Italian American Culture on TV's Most Talked-About Series*, serve mostly to provide synopses of episodes for fans, thus offering little in terms of critical cultural commentary. In all cases the scholarship that does exist often takes the individual series on a case-by-case basis, largely eschewing an expansive approach to the relationships between them.

From the film studies side, scholarly accounts of contemporary genre generally understand the need to incorporate the specific challenges that the HBO series raise, but have largely struggled to include the network into the latest elaborations of genre theory.<sup>1</sup> These studies tend to incorporate partial solutions to the twin problems of film and television genres. When HBO is addressed from the film studies approach, it tends to be positioned from the cinematic perspective of genre revision, rather than considering television's overall influence on this revisionist tendency. Thus,

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1. Two recent examples of this phenomenon can be found in Kirsten Moana Thompson's overview of the subject, *Crime Films: Investigating The Scene*, which only devotes three pages to Crime television shows. The same is true of Patrick McGee's *From Shane to Kill Bill: Rethinking the Western*, which treats *Deadwood* as an afterthought in his otherwise comprehensive account of the genre.

both approaches are insufficiently positioned to adequately tackle the unique set of questions that are raised by shows such as *The Sopranos*, *Deadwood* and *The Wire*. As a remedy to this problem I would like to suggest the following procedure. First, we must locate the influence of film genres – such as the Gangster film, the Western, and the Crime drama – on these respective series. Second, we should ask how the narrative serialization has transformed audience expectations for narrative forms, which speaks to the larger issue of ‘sequelization’ in Hollywood. Finally, we should ask what the ramifications of HBO’s treatment of generic ‘realism’ may have on the continuing study of film and television genres.

*Deadwood* has certainly piqued interest in revisiting the Western, a genre that has been declared dead many more times than any other. More importantly, the latest Western film resurgence, as seen in diverse works ranging from *The Proposition* (John Hillcoat, 2005), *A History of Violence* (David Cronenberg, 2005), *No Country For Old Men* (Joel and Ethan Coen, 2007), *3:10 to Yuma* (James Mangold, 2007), *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (Andrew Dominik, 2007), and *There Will Be Blood* (P.T. Anderson, 2007) feature a particular view of the West which diverges significantly from classic, and even revisionist, cinematic versions. The foul language and increased scope of violence, in addition to the subversion of earlier binaries of good and evil are the most obvious changes that take place, in addition to the easing of moral codes that the Western heroes most often possess. In each of these cases, the newer emphasis on graphic sex and violent tropes, not to mention the blurring of lines between the traditional binaries of wilderness and civilization, have been influenced by *Deadwood* as much as any other traditional, cinematic source. The same can be said for *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*, where an infusion of HBO’s house style of realistic verisimilitude has profoundly affected our contemporary view of genre. In effect, HBO has made a solid business of reviving and revising genre, while others have followed suit not only by emulating these changes, but by profiting from them as well.

## 2. Industrial Considerations: Genre as a “Recession-Proof” Business

I propose that HBO is a veritable genre factory. In this sense, the network is something akin to a classical Hollywood studio, whose implementation and radical transformation of genres functions as a well-known commodity and brand identity. Just as the golden-age Hollywood ‘dream factories’ sought to differentiate their manufacturing an intangible product such as film by way of their association with specific stars (Belton 66-70), more often they differentiated themselves by exploiting specific genres. This phenomenon can be seen with Warner Brothers’ association with the gangster film in the 1930s, MGM’s trademark musicals and comedies through the 1940s, and Universal Pictures’ famous

Horror films of the 1950s, to name but a few examples. Similarly, much of HBO’s commercial and critical success is based on its unique exploitation of generic tropes. Viewing the industrial practices of HBO as a genre factory similar to that of a Classical Hollywood studio allows us to link these genre transformations from the vantage point of film and television criticism, leading us to significant conclusions regarding what these historical and industrial changes may mean in the present tense.

Speaking about the economics of the studio era, Thomas Schatz recounts that “genre films comprised the vast majority of the most popular and profitable productions, and this trend continued until after its death” (Schatz 6-7). Genre in the studio era was directly responsible for the process of streamlining narrative; the success of the studios was based on their ability to repeat their financially-proven recipes. Tellingly, this prosperity was borne on the shoulders of genre filmmaking, where generic films (the screwball comedy, the gangster film, the Western, etc.) fed audience expectations and audience demands. This relationship to mass audiences was always reciprocal, and studios attempted to give viewers more of the popular standard tropes and accounted for the standardization of the genre system (5). Schatz’s view is similar to Rick Altman’s “Producer’s Game.” Here, genres are built on the winning formulas of other successful genres. Producers, then, are directly responsible for the repetition of this content, which ultimately explains how genres are formed, how they evolve, why they die out, and under what circumstances another cycle resurges.

Altman’s account of genre evolution relies on two basic concepts, “The Critic’s Game” and “The Producer’s Game.” In the critic’s game, a genre is formed *ex post facto*, where a critic or scholar will approach a series of films in order to put them together in a manner which suits their agenda. This exercise is often counterproductive, as it rarely takes into account the historical and industrial factors that lead into a genre’s constitution. The producer’s game, on the other hand, provides the means to measure the genre’s historical appearances and disappearances within specific coordinates. In theory, producers use the following formula:

1. From box-office information, identify a successful film.
2. Analyze the film in order to discover what made it successful.
3. Make another film stressing the assumed formula for success.
4. Check box-office information on the new film and reassess the success formula accordingly.
5. Use the revised formula as the basis for another film.
6. Continue the process indefinitely. (Altman 38)

Thus, genres are constantly in the process of mutating in order to maximize their box-office potential and satisfy audience demand. This factor ultimately accounts for the genre’s cyclical appearances and disappearances within different eras and when audience demand wanes, the genre disappears al-

together. This theory provides a rationale which explains the recurrent iconography, syntax and narrative concerns of a genre by positing that producers merely attempt to “reconfigure previous films” and “thus define genres in a manner which suits their institutional needs” (48).

Generic standardization and tinkering akin to the producer’s game is precisely what occurs to HBO’s output in the last decade, but on a larger, trans-generic stage. What occurs to the genre film in HBO’s hands is not limited to a single instance – as in the case of *The Sopranos* and the gangster genre – but to *all* of the respective genres. In what we might consider the ‘trans-generic producer’s game,’ the network’s post-*Sopranos* output provides us with the following picture: following the immense success of *The Sopranos*, the network continues to cement its industrial practices specifically in film genres. From here, we can see *Sex in the City* as firmly grounded in the ‘Women’s Film,’ or melodrama; *Band of Brothers* in the World War II Combat Film; *Carnivale* in ‘The Fantastic’ or Horror Genre; *Rome* in the Epic; *Deadwood* in the Western; *K-Street* in the Conspiracy Film; *Entourage* in the Backstage Musical; and *The Wire* in the Police Procedural. Three conclusions can be reached from this brief overview. First, it is clear that genre is the key factor to HBO’s success. Second, each series, taken in relation to each other, constitute a much larger genre system. Consequently, the individual series can all be defined in opposition to their cinematic counterparts to the degree that they transform the genre by way of their explicit treatment of syntax, narrative and iconography. Ultimately, HBO’s various generic mutations involve a longer form (and serialized) narrative, an explicit and expanded syntax and the transmutation of locale to an unprecedented degree in previous genre cycles.

A character’s narrative arc within a specific genre is the single largest transformative factor in HBO’s generic practice, profoundly affecting the way that the protagonist’s story is ultimately told. Examples lie in the first-person account of either Carrie Bradshaw’s (Sarah Jessica Parker) weekly column in *Sex in the City* or Tony Soprano’s (James Gandolfini) weekly therapy sessions in *The Sopranos*, both of which become syntactical fixtures within the respective series. The expansive treatment of Tony’s psyche, presented by way of our intrusion into Dr. Melfi’s (Lorraine Bracco) psychiatric practice and through the audience’s direct access to dream sequences throughout the series results in a radical transformation of the gangster film’s syntactical traits to the point where the viewer is subjectively tied to Tony in a manner that far exceeds any other character in the history of film. This counters the distanciation of the gangster-hero which occurred in the 1930s under the Hays code, where the gangster’s monstrously tragic dimension served to render him unrelatable and ultimately unlikable to audiences. Even the intimate portrait of the Corleones across three *Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola 1972-1990) films does not begin to

compare to the more than eighty hours we spend with the Sopranos.

The same can be said of *Deadwood*’s treatment of Western iconography. Here, it is impossible to tell the difference between good and evil based simply on the basis of costume, which is the most obvious of all classical generic tropes. Rather, everyone in the camp is equally dirty, equally squalid and equally dubious in their morality. The presence of other races is also another shift in the Western iconography, as characters largely excluded from earlier versions of the genre (and, significantly, American history) play prominent roles within the narrative. This results not only in fully-rendered characterizations of immigrants, including Wu (Keone Young) “the Chinaman” and Blazanov (Pavel Lychnikoff), the Russian wire operator, but to races and genders that rarely saw fair representation within the genre. Obviously this includes black livery owner Hostetler (Richard Gant), the “General” (Franklyn Ajaye), but also Sol Star (John Hawkes), the town’s only Jewish resident and eventual mayor.

Instead of employing the classic Western women’s roles, ‘the school marm’ and the ‘hooker with the heart of gold,’ the series significantly spreads this narrative agency from one or two character types to several other options. The show’s depiction of General Custer’s scout Calamity Jane (Robin Weigert) is one such example, as Jane is easily the most foul-mouthed character in the series, cutting through the Western’s conventions by singlehandedly subverting and revising the character types available to women. The widow Alma Garrett (Molly Parker) expands these windows further, and though she starts in the traditional position of the ‘Eastern Woman,’ she eventually problematizes the issue of female representation in a positive manner by becoming the town’s richest citizen. There are many other examples of change in this regard, including Trixie (Paula Malcomson), Joanie Stubbs (Kim Dickens) and Martha Bullock (Anna Gunn), whose characters have their own autonomy and do not merely serve as romantic foils for the Western heroes but have their own agendas, personalities and fully-formed plots.<sup>2</sup> The same is true of other HBO series, where viewers can actively attach themselves to drug dealers, gangsters and crooked cops via the expanded seriality of their narratives and the expanded representation of character types.

*The Wire* expands generic narrative practices to the point where the cop series is no longer about a single person and their narrative arc, but to several systems, and ultimately to a city itself which, in turn, stands in for America as a whole. Though *The Wire* begins with Jimmy McNulty’s (Dominic West) quest to solve one big case, the scope of the series’ ongoing investigation expands to include almost every facet of American urban reality. As each season places another layer on

2. The attribution of positive qualities to negative roles (such as that of Trixie, Al Swearingen’s favourite prostitute) is itself problematic, but we can say, at the very least, that the show expands the range of what was formerly a ‘type’ to a fully-formed character.



Bobby Mathieson

the series' ongoing trajectory, the audience's conception and expectation of a crime drama expands exponentially. Contrary to the traditional police procedural, which wraps up a single case within the confines of an hour-long episode, *The Wire* sets new standards for serial narratives as it essentially follows one single case throughout the span of its five-season arc. It moves from the micro-investigation of the infamous Baltimore drug crew, The Barksdale gang, to the macrocosm of the contemporary American city. Along the way, the series narrative expands concentrically to involve the institutions

and elements which constitute and contribute to the problems of poverty, unemployment, drugs, corruption, and politics while at the same time expanding traditional conceptions of character and type.

Additionally, each season of the *The Wire* questions the state of contemporary America by concentrating specifically on its relative features. The first season deals with the inner-city, while the second questions the state of contemporary unions. Season three depicts the minutiae of running a police district with varying drug-policing strategies, while the fourth



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contrasts the electability of a white mayoral candidate in a primarily black city against the issue of youth and education in a cash-strapped system. Finally, the fifth season synthesizes all of these elements by incorporating media culpability in all of these issues, demonstrating how a sensationalistic, prize-driven, corporately-downsized press fails to properly cover its city's key problems. The show's setting in a major crimes unit begins and ends with the larger premise that crime is everywhere, business is business and that it takes five years of dogged determination to round up and attempt to prosecute all the criminals. The ultimate dramatic consequence of all this action results in the bad guys getting away in the end, and the cycle of crime and poverty continuing; a subversion of the Crime narrative's heart to say the least. Though the investigation begins on the street, following a distinctive and storied money trail, the detectives gradually implicate members of city council, lawyers and the highest levels of government, including the show's uber-villains, Senator Clay Davis (Isiah Whitlock Jr.) and criminal defense lawyer Maurice Levy (Michael Kostroff). This diffusion has profound ramifications for the consideration of generic narrative, as the expanded nature of the series irrevocably absorbs, yet transforms the genres of the political film, lawyer drama, the cop show, the gangsta film, the police procedural, the social problem film, and the newspaper film – incorporating any and all of these narratives into its larger fabric.

### 3. “Welcome to Fucking Deadwood”: Genre Censorship, Genre Evolution

New genre cycles are always accompanied with an easing of moral codes and the institutional guidelines which reflect them. Consequently, each cycle revives critical questions of film realism in relation to the cinematic codes which accompany these changes. With this in mind, censorship, or lack thereof, may be the most important factor relating to genre evolution in general and to the HBO-ification of genre in particular. Series creators working for HBO are allowed the creative freedom to present language, nudity and violence that far exceeds the MPAA (Motion Pictures Association of America) rating of NC-17. In the context of the current movie rating system in which an NC-17 rating is the kiss of death for the release of a Hollywood film, a theatrical version of *The Sopranos*, *Deadwood*, or *The Wire* is effectively impossible. Conversely, as Mark C. Rogers, Michael Epstein, and Jimmie L. Reeves suggest, the edgy content of much of HBO's production – including full-frontal male nudity, excessive language, and graphic depictions of sex – is part of a larger corporate strategy that equates to 'brand equity.' This brand equity informs an audience's consumption of its series, resulting not only in HBO delivering a reliable type of product, but to a receiver who is already predisposed to watch it. *The Sopranos* and *Deadwood* subvert traditional film genre conventions, in which excessively violent content is excised



from the 'classical' versions of the various genres. This can most clearly be seen in the increased emphasis of gritty hand-to-hand combat sequences over mere gun violence. While Hollywood genre films are certainly violent, it is a particular form of violence that an HBO viewer witnesses, as gun battles are often replaced with extensive beatings whose duration exceeds violence codes and whose explicitness defies convention. Ralphie Cifaretto's (Joe Pantoliano) death at the hands of Tony Soprano, and subsequent decapitation, or Sheriff Seth Bullock's (Timothy Olyphant) tendency to beat men within an inch of their lives are only two major examples of HBO's unique treatment of violence, amply demonstrating how this 'violent realism' is crucial to its unique brand identity in the marketplace. Apparently, mere death is not good enough for HBO practitioners either, as dead bodies are subject to every form of indignity, including dismemberment, abandonment in empty tenements and even consumption by animals. The very first episode of *The Sopranos* features Christopher Moltisanti (Michael Imperioli) using a meat cleaver to hack up the body of the Polish gangster he has killed, and *Deadwood* includes extended sequences of Al Swearingen's (Ian McShane) henchmen feeding their victim's bodies to Wu's pigs.

As Rogers, Epstein and Reeves propose, HBO's key strategy to retaining (and expanding) viewership is to offer "edgy," and "controversial programs," since "HBO, as a premium cable service, was not subject to government and industry regulations on profanity, sexuality and violence" (51). This industrial strategy has profound ramifications for any consideration of film genre, having evolved in relation to censorship guidelines, coming first in the form of the Hays code, then later at the hands of the rating system of the MPAA. We should also recall that every phase of so-called 'genre revisionism' has always been accompanied by an easing of censorship restrictions. This is precisely what occurred in the New Hollywood Renaissance, where every genre was subject to broad redefinition in relation to the new ease with which filmmakers could depict film violence and nudity. Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969) is continually held as the chief example of this tendency, but other pivotal films which embodied genre revisionism include Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), Robert Altman's *The Long Goodbye* (1973) and *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971), and Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Godfather II* (1974).

If we accept that genre has been largely shaped in relation to censorship issues and is integral to HBO's brand equity, then we must consider HBO's profound impact on the cyclical transformation of the Western and the tragic dimension of the gangster. Quite simply, the heyday of Hays classicism restricted narrative and visual content, resulting in a movie world which did not resemble reality *per se* but rather reflected the moral codes of the era. The ultimate effect of the Hays code, along with the studios' strict adherence to it, may have served to inspire the 'mythic' approach to genre

by filling in the censored details with 'mythical' accounts of history and reality. This particular approach has lain at the root of genre theory from the earliest analyses of the Western (Andre Bazin, Jim Kitses, Will Wright) to the gangster film (Johnathan Munby) and through to the present-day criticism. Following Roland Barthes' dictum that the "very principle of myth" is that it "transforms history into nature" (Barthes 129), we can see how the critico-mythical approach to the Western results in an ideological view of the American settlement myth, and has larger, industrial ramifications as well. Barry Keith Grant describes Barthes' wide-ranging influence on genre theory, explaining that: "From this perspective, genre movies tend to be read as ritualised endorsements of a dominant ideology." The Western "is not really about a specific period in American history, but mantra of Manifest Destiny and the 'winning' of the west." Importantly, it "offers a series of mythic endorsements of American individualism, colonialism and racism" (Grant 33). If, as it has been argued, the Western is the chief realisation of the American foundation myth, we can see that the various holes in these narratives and history are filled in by the mythic details, thus presenting an abstracted view of them via the well-rehearsed binaries of traditional genre theory. The mythic approach to genre ultimately results in a bastardised form of history, and by proxy, historical representation. Further, the binary codes that contribute to the mythic reading of the Western and gangster film were all, without exception, borne in relation to censorship codes.

*Deadwood* has no codes to adhere to, resulting in new possibilities for the Western genre, particularly when it comes to rendering a historical narrative. In series creator David Milch's account, the studios' strict adherence to censorship codes directly influenced these binary structures, so that *what could not be shown* left room for a genre's interpretation as myth. Discussing the foul language of *Deadwood* (which is now famous for singlehandedly bringing 'cocksucker' back into the vernacular), Milch asserts: "I think that the reason that people took offense [to the language] had more to do with the conventions of the Western as it had developed from the thirties on rather than any realistic understanding of how people had spoken in the previous century" (Milch 2004a). Elsewhere, Milch explains that the Western's narrative codes and iconographic fixtures evolved as much out of economic necessity as it did out of the need to reinforce mythical accounts of history:

Most moral codes are elevated expressions of economic necessities. So the first principle of the Hays code is obscenity in word thought or deed is an offense against natural law, and the word of God, and therefore will not be permitted in films. And that had to do with commerce, they didn't want to piss anybody off. (Milch 2004b)

When put in relation to the conventional account of film genres, Milch's reinsertion of a historical, rather than strictly

generic, narrative of the formation of the West creates a paradoxical effect, particularly when considering his aim to bombard spectators with obscenity and violence.

Milch's generic practice, when viewed in relation to the other works of the 'HBO studio,' represents a major shift in genre as a whole. The traditional view of myth (and genre) in Roland Barthes' view performs the function of "naturalizing history." Alternatively, Milch's reinsertion of an unflinching, uncensored version of the past results in the opposite of Barthes' dictum. As such, perhaps one of the most interesting ramifications of the HBO-ification of genre is the opposite effect: the *factualization* of myth and history.

#### 4. Genre Systems: HBO and Genre Cycles

Dealing with the issue of genre revisionism ultimately means analyzing its constituent parts in relation to the issue of realism. While it is obvious enough that a film genre returns and disappears in cyclical patterns, critics have not yet agreed on what these patterns mean. Further, it is not clear whether we need to view each cycle independently of its entire historical trajectory – accounting for a genre's life as a whole, as in the premise that an entire genre only has classical, settled and mannerist phases – or whether these generic outbursts may be considered inter-cyclically. In this sense, we can test my suggestion that HBO operates similarly to a classical Hollywood studio by measuring how its industrial practices not only operate inter-generically – thus representing profound shifts in narrative, syntax and iconography – but how this relates to earlier outbursts of like cycles, such as those that occurred in the early 1970s. This question necessitates us viewing the various genres as a system and understanding what this ultimately means for the issue of genre as a whole.

While the elaboration of individual genres in Hollywood Classicism has been largely settled in critical scholarship, the application of the classical model to HBO not only informs the related questions of genre revisionism, but also clarifies the function of cinematic realism. Rather than recount the standard reading of Classicism, as rendered by Bordwell, Thompson and Staiger (1985), I will take my cue from Fredric Jameson's more theoretical approach to the issue. In Jameson's view, the various genres in Hollywood Classicism must be viewed systematically, in order that they reveal and express their relation to a proper moment of cinematic 'realism.' The project of a film genre system implies that

...the reality socially constructed by Hollywood 'realism' is a map whose coordinates are parcelled out among the specific genres, to whose distinct registers are then assigned its various dimensions or specialized segments. The 'world' is then not what is represented in the romantic comedy or the *film noir*: but it is what is somehow governed by all of them together – the musical, the gangster cycles, 'screwball comedy,' melodrama,

that 'populist' genre sometimes called social realism, the Western, romance, and the *noir* [...] are governed also, something more difficult to think, by their generic relationships to each other (Jameson 175-76).

Jameson's supposition includes the need to view genre systems as intimately related, rather than separate entities. This approach allows the critic to suggest that the genre system has always implied a particular relationship with a larger, more realistic map.

The restriction of censorship guidelines, when viewed in relation to the larger issue of genre cycles, affords the critic to view genre as inherently linked to a larger moment of cinematic realism. In other words, the genre systems of Hollywood Classicism, the 1970s Hollywood Renaissance, and their current HBO-ification provides the viewer with a larger cognitive map, allowing them greater insight into their own times. The cyclical reappearances and revision of these genres, as represented by the historical periods under which Hollywood Classicism, The Hollywood Renaissance, and the HBO-ification of genre emerged, are ultimately borne of specific sets of historical circumstances. Jameson's assertion is that genre is a 'realistic' marker, and that the systematic resurgence of genre films serves the grander purpose of informing popular audiences with the new circumstances of their era.

Genre systems, whenever they take place, 'reprogram' audiences by depicting their contemporary realities (as in the case of *The Wire* and *The Sopranos*) or by infusing historical narratives with ideology which reflects their present eras (as in *Deadwood*). We might say that the larger project of generic realism and its inverse relationship to censorship provides the following insights:

We can therefore return at this point to the realism debate, and historicize it by the hypothesis that realism and its specific narrative forms construct their new world by *programming* their readers: by training them in their new habits and practices, which amount to whole new subject positions in a new kind of space; producing new kinds of action, but by way of the production of new categories of the event and of experience, of temporality and causality, which also preside over what will now be come to be thought of as reality (Jameson 166).

This assertion effectively sidesteps the mythic argument of earlier genre theory by expanding the formerly closed narratives, with a historically specific realism, which *The Sopranos*, *Deadwood* and *The Wire* all depict. Tony Soprano is the natural extension of this kind of work, as the gangster has largely evolved in relation to a community's perception of a crime narrative. Soprano follows a trajectory of the gangster that has evolved from the early 1930s in an arc that Jameson characterizes as "a permutation of a generic convention" through which "one could write a history" of its "changing social and ideological functions" (Jameson 30). This method varies from a strictly reflectionist account, as it presents a cyclical explanation of genre, while at the same time, "suggest[ing] a global

transformation of the potential logic of its narrative content without yet specifying the ideological function of the Mafia paradigm itself” (31). What Tony Soprano, Sheriff Bullock and Detective Jimmy McNulty all have in common is their ability to stand for a whole wealth of historically-contingent issues within their respective genres, while at the same time granting us unparalleled access to their strengths, flaws and humanity by way of their newly serialized characterizations. In sum, taking Jameson’s systematic approach to genre implies the following: a) that a system of genre always corresponds to a particular moment of cinematic realism, b) that this moment has a direct relationship to the recapitulation of genre cycles, and c) that each of these cycles can be seen as an overall stage of new subjectivity, wherein the contemporary subject recognizes their own historically-contingent realities reflected in the generic content.

## 5. Conclusions and Questions for Further Research

The epiphenomenon that I have dubbed the HBO-ification of Genre provides us with a unique window through which we can view the genesis of a new and historically-contingent revisionist genre cycle. Analyzing HBO’s artistic, stylistic and industrial practices can lead us to important conclusions regarding the overall behaviour of genre systems, including issues of realism, censorship and the ‘mythic’ nature of historical and contemporary narrative by way of the network’s implementation of any and all genres as a commercial strategy. From this vantage point it is possible to posit several other conclusions regarding HBO’s practices, and genre in general. First, we can project forward to measure the overall influence that HBO has had on the various constituent film genres. In this vein, we might attempt a comparative analysis between the narratives of *The Wire* and *American Gangster* (Ridley Scott, 2007), or measure the syntactical shifts between *Deadwood* and *3:10 to Yuma* in order to specifically gauge the overall repercussions of HBO’s generic practices. Second, we can account for the radical (and ongoing) transformation of cable TV programming, where the influence of *The Sopranos* has led to long-form expansion to other serialized generic forms on other networks, directly leading to successful runs of prestige shows such as *The Shield*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and *Dexter* all of which are linked by their gritty and realistic emulations of the various constituent genres. Third, we can use HBO’s microcosmic ‘trans-generic producer’s game,’ to project backwards and to analyze how earlier genre cycles exhibit pattern behaviours on a larger, more substantial scale than has been recorded in current accounts of film history. Finally, the various issues inherent to the issue of genre revisionism and its subsequent HBO-ification lead us to profound conclusions regarding the cultural value of genre. Viewing the radical transformations

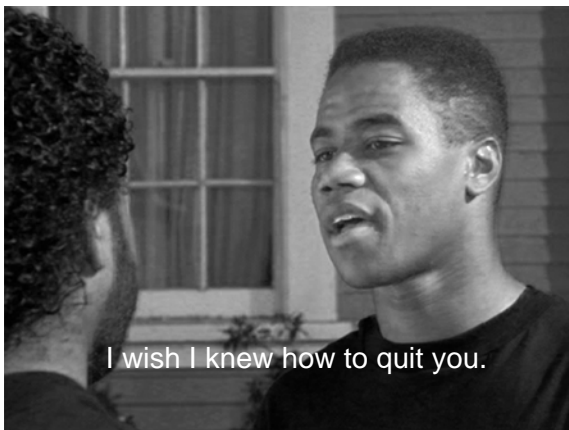
of the Mobster, Sheriff and Police Detective throughout these genre resurgences can ultimately tell us a great deal about how we view ourselves and our culture. The latest ‘realistic’ depictions of (mob) family life (*The Sopranos*), less-than-auspicious historical portraits of the Wild West (*Deadwood*), and Capitalism’s institutional indifference to human suffering (*The Wire*) produce a compelling portrait of an America where mythic optimism has largely been replaced with a great deal of introspection, and an introduction to a less than perfect version of the American dream which is entirely suitable to our contemporary era. At the same time, these various genres still produce and satisfy audiences because of their adherence to and divergence from generic norms, speaking not only to the ongoing resonance and marketability of genre as a whole but to HBO’s skillful exploitation of it as a successful commercial strategy.

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# The Geography of Melodrama, The Melodrama of Geography:

## The 'Hood Film's Spatial Pathos



## Andrew deWaard

*It ain't nothin like the shit you saw on TV.  
Palm trees and blonde bitches?  
I'd advise to you to pack your shit and get the fuck on;  
punk motherfucker!*

- Ice Cube, "How to Survive in South Central"

Recuperating the term melodrama within film studies has become quite the melodramatic project unto itself. Scorned and disdained, this suffering victim has been the object of much derision, particularly in its latest incarnation in popular American mass culture. Vulgar, naïve, sensational, feminine, sentimental, excessive, overly emotional – these are but a few of the disparaging descriptions that have robbed melodrama of its 'virtue.' However, in true melodramatic form, its virtue has been restored in recent years with heightened and sensational gestures by such 'noble heroes' as Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams.

Not content with simply defending its honour, Williams claims that "Melodrama is the fundamental mode of popular American moving pictures" (1998: 42), and "should be viewed... as what most typifies popular American narrative in literature, stage, film and television" (2001: 11). But like any good melodrama worth its weight in tear-soaked hankies, the melodrama of melodrama's recuperation does not have a clear-cut happy ending – there is still much work to be done.

Drawing heavily from Peter Brooks' seminal 1976 book, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*, the work of Gledhill and Williams opens up a new avenue for the study of cinematic melodrama. Rather than its typical – albeit contentious – configuration as a genre, melodrama can also be viewed as a mode: melodrama's "aesthetic, cultural, and ideological features [have] coalesce[d] into a modality which organizes the disparate sensory phenomena, experiences, and contra-

## The Geography of Melodrama: Pathos N the 'Hood

*Express yourself! From the heart,  
Cause if you wanna start to move up the chart,  
Then expression is a big part.*

- Dr. Dre (of N.W.A.), "Express Yourself"

dictions of a newly emerging secular and atomizing society in visceral, affective and morally explanatory terms" (Gledhill 2000: 228). If melodrama is to be understood as a continually evolving mode, "adaptable across a range of genres, across decades, and across national cultures" (229), then its progress needs to be continually charted, its latest forms constantly delineated. Unfortunately, much of the scholarship concerning melodrama is still preoccupied with either reclaiming past works, rarely moving beyond the classical Hollywood era, or focused on specific auteurs, from D.W. Griffith to Douglas Sirk to contemporary directors such as Pedro Almodóvar and Todd Haynes. As "a tremendously protean, evolving, and modernizing form that continually uncovers new realistic material for its melodramatic project" (Williams 2001: 297), only after significant scholarship that considers its various

The 'hood film demarcation refers to a series of African American films released in the early 1990s, identified by a strong connection to youth rap/hip hop culture (via soundtrack and rappers-turned-actors), contemporary urban settings (primarily black communities in Los Angeles or New York), and inner-city social and political issues such as poverty, crime, racism, drugs, and violence. The 'hood film genre's most renowned and successful films, as well as its most representative, are *Boyz N the Hood* (John Singleton 1991) and *Menace II Society* (Allen and Albert Hughes 1993). Spike Lee, while transcending the confines of the 'hood film genre, is a significant figure in the development of African American filmmaking at this time. His classic *Do the Right Thing* (1989) can be seen as the 'hood film's precursor, while *Crooklyn* (1994) and *Clockers* (1995) prominently feature his hometown of Brooklyn. Other examples of the 'hood film include *New Jack City* (Mario Van Peebles 1991), *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (Matty Rich 1991), *Juice* (Ernest Dickerson 1992), *Just Another Girl on the IRT* (Leslie Harris 1992), *Deep Cover* (Bill Duke 1992), and "over twenty similarly packaged feature-length films between 1991 and 1995" (Watkins 172).

The 'hood film quickly gained notoriety in the early 1990s as a result of the vast media attention these films garnered from their surprising financial success and headline-grabbing violence at some theatrical exhibitions. This output of 'hood films did not last long, but it marked the first major wave of African American film production since the Blaxploitation era. "Production in 1990 and 1991 alone," according to Ed Guerrero, "easily surpassed the total production of all black-focused films released since the retreat of the Blaxploitation wave in the mid-1970s" (155). Consequently, critics of African-American film were quick to explore and interpret this unique set of films, collecting them under a variety of labels other than just *the 'hood* moniker: "New Jack Cinema" (Kendall), "black action films" (Chan), "male-focused, 'ghetto-centric,' action-crime-adventure" films (Guerrero 182), "trendy 'gangsta rap' films" (Reid 457), and "the new Black realism films" (Diawara 24). In all of these considerations of genre, the word melodrama rarely appears; if it does, it is in its typical derogatory usage. This is a tremendous oversight; the 'hood film's fundamental core is the melodramatic mode.

Considered by Williams to be "perhaps the most important single work contributing to the rehabilitation of the term *melodrama* as a cultural form" (1998: 51), Brooks' *The Melodramatic Imagination* traces the historical origins of the



contemporary forms will melodrama's dominance as a fundamental mode be widely received and accepted.

As part of that project, my aim is two-fold: map the melodramatic mode onto a previously unconsidered genre – the 'hood film cycle of the early 1990s – and then analyze the impact of what amounts to be the melodrama of the map. Plotting the melodramatic mode onto such a disparate and seemingly incompatible genre such as the 'hood film should explicate the geography of the melodramatic mode, showcasing its fundamental characteristics and concerns. Witnessing its application in such a violent and 'masculine' genre as the 'hood film should also prove the versatility of the melodramatic mode. Following this structuralist task, this new melodramatic incarnation will be explored in terms of its evolution of the melodramatic mode, demonstrating melodrama's capability of constant reinvention. With the 'hood film, a key shift occurs: the home – a crucial concern in melodrama – becomes the 'hood, and it requires fleeing. Intimately connected to this disfigured sense of space is that other, often overlooked concern of melodrama: the *melos*. Music in the 'hood film is of central importance in stressing the spatial and temporal logic of the 'hood. With the 'hood film, melodrama is put in service of a much larger than normal concern: the crisis in the African American urban community.

form, applies his findings to the work of Balzac and Henry James, and establishes melodrama as a significant modern mode in the process. Situated as a response to the post-Enlightenment, post-sacred world that arose out of the French Revolution, “melodrama becomes the principal mode for uncovering, demonstrating, and making operative the essential moral universe in a post-sacred universe” (Brooks 15). With the traditional imperatives of truth and ethics thrown into question, melodrama was to express what Brooks calls the “‘moral occult,’ the domain of operative spiritual values which is both indicated within and masked by the surface of reality” (5).

Brooks’ isolated concern with the nineteenth-century realist novel, particularly Balzac and James, proves to be both an asset and a hindrance to the theory of melodrama. Brooks is able to earnestly re-evaluate the form without the trappings of ideological condescension, allowing him to highlight its core characteristics, but he fails to trace its importance in popular culture, where it has continually evolved. Considering its modern reinvention, Gledhill and Williams break with Brooks in his view of melodrama as being in opposition to realism and as a mode of ‘excess.’ In Gledhill’s consideration, contemporary forms of melodrama are firmly grounded in realism: “Taking its stand in the material world of everyday reality and lived experience, and acknowledging the limitations of the conventions of language and representation, it proceeds to force into aesthetic presence identity, value and plenitude of meaning” (1987: 33). Williams goes a step further, suggesting that the term ‘excess’ be eliminated from melodramatic discourse all together: “The supposed excess is much more often the mainstream, though it is often not acknowledged as such because melodrama consistently decks itself out in the trappings of realism and the modern (and now, the postmodern)” (1998: 58). As melodrama has developed, it has cloaked itself in ‘realism’ but remained fundamentally concerned with revealing moral legibility.

For all her rhetoric concerning melodrama being the primary mode of contemporary American mass culture, Williams’ examples do not quite do her thesis justice. “Melodrama Revised” focuses on D.W. Griffith’s *Way Down East* (1920), only briefly contemplating *Schindler’s List* (Steven Spielberg 1993) and *Philadelphia* (Jonathan Demme 1993), as well as some select Vietnam films, while *Playing the Race Card* only goes as far as the *Roots* miniseries, moving to ‘cultural event’ with the Rodney King and O.J. Simpson trials as her most contemporary consideration. The ‘hood film will prove a convincing illustration of contemporary melodrama grounded in everyday reality with an effort towards realism. We can structurally outline the melodramatic ‘hood film via Williams’ five-point systematic breakdown of the melodramatic mode:

1. “Melodrama begins, and wants to end,” according to Williams, “in a space of innocence” (1998: 65), usually represented by the iconic image of the home. Immediately, the ‘hood film puts a spin on this most central of melodramatic concerns, adhering and deviating from convention right from the start. As will be considered in more depth in the second part of this essay, the home has become the community at large – the ‘hood – and it is portrayed as an area of crisis, so it is not presented as a space of innocence. However, the use of children in this space *does* express the innocence and virtue from which melodrama typically originates. Spike Lee often celebrates his Brooklyn community with loving tributes to the way children manage to create fun out of minimal resources and confined spaces, such as the opening montage of various street activities – jump rope, hopscotch, foot races, street baseball, etc. – in *Crooklyn*, and the jubilant fire hydrant scene in *Do the Right Thing*.

Many ‘hood films take the form of coming-of-age tales, charting a path of lost innocence as the corrupting influence of the ‘hood takes its toll on the film’s young protagonists. *Juice* follows four teenagers navigating the treacheries of the ‘hood, while both *Boyz* and *Menace II Society* track children growing up across many years in the ‘hood, featuring extended introductory scenes of the trauma faced by prepubescent inhabitants of the ‘hood. In *Boyz*, the story begins with four school children walking down a dilapidated, garbage-laden street, discussing their homework in the same breath as the previous night’s shooting. Exploring a crime scene, one child is rebuked for not recognizing bullet holes; she responds by proclaiming that at least she knows her times-tables. The subsequent shot is a slow pan across a classroom wall, showcasing the children’s endearingly simplistic art depicting police cars, helicopters conducting surveillance and family members in coffins – a striking juxtaposition of innocence and affliction.

2. “Melodrama focuses on victim-heroes and the recognition of their virtue” (1998: 66). The ‘hood film’s usage of victim-heroes is comparable to Thomas Elsaesser’s position on 1950s family melodrama which “present *all* the characters convincingly as victims” (86). Characters in ‘hood films are (almost) all compelling victims because of the dire depiction of their surroundings. Poverty, crime, drugs, racism, and violence – everyone is a victim. Even disagreeable characters are viewed as victims on account of this situation. *Boyz’s* Doughboy (Ice Cube), for instance, is a violent, misogynistic drug dealer, but he attains sympathy on account of the troubled relationship he has with his mother, a single mom struggling to provide for her two sons, privileging one over the other. Doughboy is also given the film’s key piece of dialogue in its concluding scene, both incendiary critique and induction of pathos: “Either they don’t know, or don’t show, or don’t care about what’s going on in the ‘hood.” As victims of the ‘hood, suffering is felt by one and all.

Emotionalism is key in recognizing the virtue of the victim-hero, and it is highly visible in the 'hood film, despite its rough exterior of tough language and gritty violence. In *Boyz*, for instance, following an unjust encounter with the police, Tre returns to his girlfriend Brandi's (Nia Long) house and proceeds to have an emotional breakdown. Swinging his fists wildly in the air before falling into Brandi's arms, Tre acts out his frustration and demonstrates his vulnerability, "a pivotal moment" according to Michael Eric Dyson, "in the development of a politics of alternative black masculinity that prizes the strength of surrender and cherishes the embrace of a healing tenderness" (135).

In 'hood films that primarily revolve around one central character – Tre (Cuba Gooding Jr.) in *Boyz*, Caine (Tyin Turner) in *Menace*, Mookie (Spike Lee) in *Do the Right Thing* – the victim-hero is always torn between allegiances to his fellow victims in the 'hood and the opportunity for upward mobility. As "the key function of victimization is to orchestrate the moral legibility crucial to the mode," (Williams 1998: 66) the victim-hero of the 'hood film always has their virtue recognized in the conclusion of the film as testament to the conditions of the 'hood. Whether by refusing to participate in the cycle of black-on-black violence (*Boyz*), shielding a child from a drive-by shooting (*Menace*), or inciting a riot in response to a savage murder by a policeman (*Do the Right Thing*), the victim-hero makes a moral stand in opposition to the injustice perpetrated against the 'hood.

3. "Melodrama appears modern by borrowing from realism, but realism serves the melodramatic passion and action" (1998: 67). While conventional wisdom posits melodrama as a crude retrograde form out of which a more modern realism developed, upon considering contemporary melodrama it becomes clear that realism is in fact at the service of the traditional melodramatic mode, albeit in a disguised, modernized fashion. The second part of this essay will explore the way the 'hood film is rooted in a realist portrayal of a specific spatial and temporal existence, but we can briefly look at *Menace* as an example of the way realism is used in the service of melodrama in the 'hood film.

Explicitly foregrounding its story amidst a history of racial violence, *Menace* uses pixelated archival footage of the 1965 Watts riots immediately following its opening scene. This imagery would most certainly have resonated with audiences at the time, as the Los Angeles riots that occurred in response to the acquittal of Rodney King's assailants happened the previous year. Our introduction to the current state of Watts is perceived in a bird's-eye view long shot, "in an almost ethnographic manner, with an invasive camera looking down on and documenting the neighbourhood" (Massood 165). A testament to the film's tagline, "this is the truth, this is what's real," *Menace* is quick to establish its 'realistic' backdrop before delving into its otherwise typically melodramatic portrayal of a victim-hero's eventual recognition of virtue.

4. "Melodrama involves a dialectic of pathos and action – a give and take of 'too late' and 'in the nick of time'" (1998: 69). Williams makes a key insight into the melodramatic mode when she connects pathos to action, permitting the most seemingly *unmelodramatic* of films to be viewed in a new light. In its elucidation of a character's virtue in the climax, melodrama tends to end in one of two ways: "either it can consist of a paroxysm of pathos... or it can take that paroxysm and channel it into the more virile and action-centered variants of rescue, chase, and fight (as in the western and all the action genres)" (1998: 58). *Boyz* provides a tremendous example of this transition between pathos and action, complete with all the requisite ingredients. The virtuous 'good son', Ricky (Morris Chestnut) is mistakenly caught up in a turf war, and Tre's warning calls are 'too late' to save him from a drive-by shooting, as is Doughboy's rescue attempt. The chase and fight to revenge this innocent's death is triggered, while the pathos is increased by the letter indicating Ricky's successful completion of the SATs, his ticket out of the 'hood, waiting in the mail all the while.

Paradoxically, Albert and Allen Hughes claim that the impetus for creating *Menace* was being "outraged by the Hollywood sentimentality" (Taubin 17) of *Boyz*, and their desire to capture what they considered was the 'real' situation in the hood. But upon consideration of its similar use of the melodramatic mode, there is very little difference between the climax of each film. True, Caine dies in *Menace*, as opposed to Tre's escape in *Boyz*, but the recognition of virtue in a dialectic of pathos and action is equally as strong in the climax of *Menace*. Moreover, by threatening the death of a child, the Hughes Brothers are even more guilty of 'Hollywood sentimentality.'

Like Ricky's death in *Boyz*, the climax of *Menace* plays on the qualities of 'too late' and 'in the nick of time.' Cross-cutting between the final stages of Caine and Ronnie's (Jada Pinkett) packing up of their life, just about to escape the 'hood, and the oncoming evil in the form of a drive-by shooting, the scene is an example of melodramatic temporal and rhythmic relations: "we are moved in both directions at once in a contradictory hurry-up and slowdown" (Williams 1998: 73). The car approaches in slow-motion, while Caine and his friends unknowingly laugh and fraternize in real-time. The action feels fast, but the duration of the event is actually slowed down, and the outcome of whether or not the child is also killed is delayed. Evoking the melodramatic motif of tableaux, a final montage of images from Caine's life in the 'hood – violence, laughter, a police arrest, a tear in prison, a tender kiss, teaching a child – are intercut with quick fades to black, Caine's redemptive voice-over, and the sound of Caine's slowly fading heartbeat. Punctuated by a final jarring gunshot, this scene of intense action is in the service of significant pathos for its virtuous victim-hero.

5. “Melodrama presents characters who embody primary psychic roles organized in Manichaeic conflicts between good and evil” (1998: 77). The most derided characteristic of melodrama, the lack of complex psychological depth common to melodrama is an objectionable quality, but there is no denying its prevalence in mass culture. Vilifying perceived evil is frequent and widespread, often in service of a separate agenda, but the ’hood film contains an example, from a certain viewpoint, of ‘deserved’ vilification on behalf of the mistreated and oppressed. While most characters in the ’hood are seen as victims of their surroundings, there is one individual that is unanimously disdained in the ’hood film: the policeman.

From Michael Stewart to Eleanor Bumpers to Rodney King to Amadou Diallo, there is a long history of police brutality upon innocent African Americans with no justice brought upon the perpetrators. *Do the Right Thing* was released in the midst of a series of racially motivated crimes perpetrated by New York City policemen. A few of these cases are explicitly mentioned in the film, as characters yell out “Michael Stewart”, “Eleanor Bumpers”, and “Howard Beach” during the riot scene. The credit sequence also pays respect and dedicates the film to the families of six recent victims of police brutality. Michael Stewart is of particular importance to this film, as Radio Raheem’s (Bill Nunn) death is a direct mirroring of Stewart’s attack. In 1983, Michael Stewart, a 25 year-old black man, was arrested for scribbling graffiti and was subsequently choked to death by 3 officers who were eventually acquitted of any wrongdoing. The exact same scene is re-enacted in *Do the Right Thing*, an example of what is referred to as the ‘Michael Stewart Chokehold’. The police are perceived similarly in other ’hood films, but we will return to their depiction when we consider their effect on spatial logic. With the melodramatic mode of the ’hood film sufficiently mapped, we can now turn to the melodrama of the map.

### **The Melodrama of Geography: The ’Hood is Where the Heart Is**

*A fucked up childhood is why the way I am;  
It’s got me in the state where I don’t give a damn.  
Somebody help me, but nah they don’t hear me though,  
I guess I’ll be another victim of the ghetto.*

- MC Eiht, “Str8 Up Menace”

The ’hood film clearly operates on the principles of the melodramatic mode, but as a narrowly defined genre with specific concerns, it is of particular interest to note how the ’hood film uses melodrama for its own spatial problems. This entails the modification of two of the most central concerns of melodrama – the home and the melos – in a decidedly uncharacteristic manner. The home has typically been the “space of innocence” (Brooks 29) in melo-

drama, but as the home is portrayed as just one of the many afflicted and deprived spaces in the ’hood film, the central place of concern becomes the ’hood as a whole. Although there are central characters with which to follow the narrative, a multitude of characters and relationships are presented in order to attempt a full portrait of the community. Apart from *Crooklyn*, private spaces in the home are viewed very rarely; instead, much of the action takes place on the streets and throughout the neighbourhood: “It is the primacy of this spatial logic, locating black urban youth experience within an environment of continual proximate danger that largely defines the ’hood film” (Forman 258). The main focus of the ’hood film becomes the power relations inherent in space, where race determines place; this is a story of the melodrama of geography.

Paula J. Massood’s *Black City Cinema* provides a useful approach to analyzing the ’hood film, as she utilizes Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope to explore the way African American film is often preoccupied with the urban cityscape. A *topos* (place or person) that embodies or is embodied by *chronos* (time), Bakhtin’s chronotope is a model for exploring temporal and spatial categories embodied within a text. The chronotope views spatial constructs as “‘materialized history,’ where temporal relationships are literalized by the objects, spaces, or persons with which they intersect” (Massood 4). In Massood’s judgment, the chronotope is of particular relevance to African American filmmaking, as its main historical moments are often concerned with the contemporary city, from Oscar Micheaux’s connection to the Harlem Renaissance to blaxploitation’s use of the sprawling black ghetto in Los Angeles and New York City. The ’hood film would redefine black cinematic space with what Massood refers to as the ’hood chronotope.

A strong sense of ‘here and now’ pervades the ’hood chronotope. All of the narratives in the ’hood film genre take place in confined geographic coordinates – South Central Los Angeles, Watts, Brooklyn, or Harlem – and are all filmed on location. They are almost all clearly marked to be diegetically taking place at the extradiegetic time of the film’s release as well. Corresponding to the coming-of-age trope, the ’hood functions as the space where right now, young African Americans are struggling to grow up in bleak conditions. According to Massood, *Boyz* “literally mapped out the terrain of the contemporary black city for white, mainstream audiences” (153). An important impetus for the creation of this ’hood chronotope is to shed light on a mostly unseen geographic space in mainstream media.

It is fitting that *Boyz* and *Menace* are both set in Los Angeles, a city that notoriously manufactures its reality through fantasy, primarily via Hollywood’s spectacular imagery. Creating a self-image of abundance and sunny paradise, L.A. privileges its prosperous areas – Beverly Hills, Hollywood, Bel-Air, Malibu – while excluding its ‘other’ spaces from representation. *Boyz* and *Menace* construct an image of



Los Angeles overrun with poverty, violence, drugs, and racism – “a likeness that stands in contradistinction to the tropical paradise manufactured both by the city’s boosters and by the movie industry” (Massood 148). In this way, the films are self-reflexive discourses about the dynamics of power

word “STOP” while a plane flies overhead. Signaling both the desire for mobility and the institutional limits that prevent such movement, this sign is just the first in a series of “One Way” and “Do Not Enter” signs that pervade the urban environment of the film, controlling movement and preventing

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inherent in representation and image manufacture. Along with rap music and footage of the Rodney King beating and the subsequent riot, the 'hood film exposes the 'two-ness' of African-American identification, both inside and outside the 'American' experience.

On the other hand, the 'hood film is also concerned with remedying an outsider (read: white) examination of the 'hood. South Central Los Angeles had only received cursory treatment in the American social imagination up until the 'hood film, but what was represented was crude and sensationalistic. A highly publicized 1988 TV special by Tom Brokaw and Dennis Hopper's film *Colors* (1988) both concentrated solely on gang warfare, failing to provide any substantial context for the catastrophic environments presented. “Singleton's task [with *Boyz*] in part,” according to Michael Eric Dyson, “is a filmic demythologization of the reigning tropes, images, and metaphors that have expressed the experience of life in South Central Los Angeles” (125). The melodramatic mode is crucial here in presenting a diverse range of sympathetic characters and relationships that complicate the previously unsophisticated view of the 'hood. Thus, the 'hood film bears a heavy burden of representation; it must portray the ugly realities of a Los Angeles rarely seen, but not fall into the sensationalistic, one-dimensional depictions which it is attempting to correct.

One of the ways the 'hood film navigates this tenuous representation is to present the city as a bounded civic space made up of contained communities. The feelings of enclosure and entrapment become palpable in the 'hood film, and a system of signs is encoded in the terrain to make this atmosphere explicit. The first frame of *Boyz* has the camera dramatically tracking in on a stop sign, filling the screen with the

free passage. *Menace* exhibits a similar system of signs. Prior to Caine being shot and his cousin fatally wounded, a sign for Crenshaw Boulevard is shown while a streetlight turns red, again suggesting the limitations of movement within the 'hood.

On the other side of the country, entrapment and enclosure takes on a different materialization. As opposed to the horizontal 'hood of South Central Los Angeles, the 'hood in *Straight Out of Brooklyn*, *Juice*, and *Clockers* is a vertical construction, set among New York's high-rise housing projects and adjacent neighbourhoods. Constraint and restricted mobility is evidenced here by visual tightness and spatial compression, fueling the stress and tension of the narrative. Rather than street signs, buildings and brick exteriors become the visual motif of “a world of architectural height and institutional might that by contrast diminishes their own stature as black teenagers in the city” (Forman 270). Unlike the spatial expanse of South Central Los Angeles, the 'hood in New York is a maze of constricting and connecting contours, violence and death awaiting around every corner.

Common to 'hoods on both the East and West coast, however, is the ominous presence of the police. In *Boyz*, the recurring appearance of two patrolmen, the more abusive of the two being black, again indicates a strong institutional constraint on mobility. A multitude of aural and visual cues also speaks to this ubiquity of police surveillance, particularly the persistent searchlights and off-screen sounds of police helicopters. Invoking Foucault's panopticon, Massood claims that “this method of control, dispersed over the urban landscape, facilitates efforts to keep the community in its place through the internalization of surveillance and the consciousness of perceived criminality” (156). Scenes in both *Boyz* and *Men-*

ace show the boys being stopped and harassed by the police for simply driving in the wrong place at the wrong time, reinforcing this idea of perceived criminality based on geography.

Another integral element in this spatial configuration of the 'hood is the strong connection to rap and hip hop culture. In fact, it was the song "Boyz-N-the-Hood" by Easy-E in 1986 that first established "the 'hood" as an important term in the spatial discourse of young urban blacks across the country. West Coast gangster rap, particularly N.W.A.'s *Straight Outta Compton* in 1989, "vividly portrays the 'hood as a space of violence and confrontation, a zone of indiscrimi-

and clothing (think of Spike Lee's fixation with basketball sneakers and sports jerseys) complement the sound of urban experience with its look. Placing the narrative in a specific time and place, providing it with cultural currency, rap music – and its accompanying urban referents – is essential to the portrayal of the 'hood chronotope.

As indicated in its literal meaning, "drama accompanied by music," melodrama is fundamentally tied to its use of music to emphasize and underscore its pivotal moments. Rap music is used in just such a fashion, but it also incorporates another melodramatic trope: the lower classes. As its historical emergence among the poor in the French Revolution in-

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## Both intimately concerned with spatial logic, sharing narrative and visual imagery, hip hop and the 'hood film demonstrate a bond of cross-pollination and reciprocal influence.

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nate aggression where threat and danger are commonplace, even banal" (Forman 263-4). Both intimately concerned with spatial logic, sharing narrative and visual imagery, hip hop and the 'hood film demonstrate a bond of cross-pollination and reciprocal influence. The casting of Ice Cube in *Boyz*, MC Eiht and Pooh Man in *Menace*, Ice T in *New Jack City*, and Tupac Shakur in *Juice* contributes to each film's credibility and authenticity among young audiences, while at the same time providing enhanced exposure for the hip hop artists, all of whom contribute to the films' soundtracks. Dyson partially attributes this coalescence to the problems of the 'hood, whereby "young black males have responded in the last decade primarily in a rapidly flourishing independent popular culture, dominated by two genres: rap music and black film... [where they can] visualize and verbalize their perspectives on a range of social, personal, and cultural issues" (124). As a result, the use of rap music is a textual and paratextual modernization of the melodramatic mode.

Not only does the use of rap music contribute to the 'hood film's specificity of place, but also its specificity of temporality. In *Boyz*, for instance, the scenes of Tre's childhood are accompanied by nondiegetic jazz-based, ambient music, but when the narrative is propelled into the present, to the same year as the film's release, rap music signifies and solidifies this shift. In addition, the 'hood film's use of urban dialogue

indicates, "melodrama sides with the powerless" (Vicinus 130). Rap music similarly arose out of lower class conditions – the Bronx in New York City – and along with its spatial and temporal priorities, provides a perfect complement to the melodrama of the 'hood film. Public Enemy's "Fight the Power," commissioned specifically for *Do the Right Thing*, acts as a diegetic soundtrack within the film, the physical catalyst for the film's violent conflict, and a rallying call against the injustice faced in the 'hood. The 'hood film puts the melos back in melodrama.

All these elements that contribute to the spatial and temporal logic of the 'hood build to the central dilemma of many 'hood films: should the 'hood be abandoned? This is a twist on the typical melodramatic trajectory; whereas the home is traditionally the space of innocence to be restored in melodrama, the 'hood – in the place of the home – is seen as beyond rescue in the 'hood film. *Boyz*, *Menace*, and *Clockers* problematically advocate fleeing the 'hood as the only means of survival and advancement. Paradoxically, with the privileging of the father in *Boyz* (also problematic), Furious Styles (Laurence Fishburne) instills Tre with the ethical responsibility desperately needed in the 'hood, but it instead equips him with the mobility to leave the 'hood for college in Atlanta. Similarly, *Menace* also sug-

gests leaving the 'hood as the only means of escaping the cycle of violence and crime, although Caine does suggest Atlanta is just another ghetto where they will remain victims of institutional racism. To those who cannot escape the 'hood, or cannot escape in time, death awaits.

On the surface, we can take issue with such a seemingly contradictory resolution. If the 'hood film works so hard to communicate the problems facing this community, why would it advocate its abandonment? This false dilemma seemingly

reinforces the conservatives' one-sided picture of personal responsibility and choice, conceals the racist underpinnings of spatial containment, and deflects attention from the need of governmental and social agencies to financially and logistically support and assist black inner-city districts in urban renewal and social healing (Chan 46).

While a critique such as Chan's against the 'hood film's abandonment of its own concern is certainly valid, I think viewing the dilemma from the perspective of its melodramatic mode presents another story. This logic of "flee the hood or die" is typical of the melodramatic "logic of the excluded middle" (Brooks 15), in which dilemmas are posed in Manichaean terms. By framing the protagonist's predicament as a do-or-die scenario, the opportunity is created for the pathos-through-action climaxes discussed previously. As a result, the victim-hero earns sympathy and the moral good is revealed, inviting the viewer to be moved by the victim's dire circumstances, in this case, the detrimental conditions of the 'hood.

Furthermore, as Laura Mulvey states, "the strength of the melodramatic form lies in the amount of dust the story raises along the road, a cloud of over-determined irreconcilables which put up a resistance to being neatly settled in the last five minutes" (76). Even if the conclusion of *Boyz* was a big Hollywood wedding between Tre and Brandi, it would not erase the previous 90 minutes of turmoil. In this sense, the contention over the abandonment of the 'hood, and the difference between the endings of *Boyz* and *Menace*, is rendered moot on account of the melodramatic actualization of the 'hood. There are certainly other problematic features of the 'hood film as well – its glorification of violence, its troubled gender roles – but its overarching melodrama is of an ultimately racist spatial construction of the 'hood, where physical and psychological barriers are erected that confine an underclass to a segregated space. This overarching problem is not lost to whatever narrative or thematic inconsistencies one may find.

Williams claims that "critics and historians of moving images have often been blind to the forest of melodrama because of their attention to the trees of genre" (1998: 60). Part one of this essay aims to have remedied that mistake concerning the 'hood genre and its overlooked melodramatic foundation. Furthermore, despite whatever problems with the 'hood film we may find, we would be wise to not be distracted by the trees of its problematizations; instead, we should focus on the forest of the hood's spatial melodrama.

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# Kathryn Bigelow's Gen(d)re

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Kathryn Bigelow does not make feminist films. Or so she says. Why then, do critics and academics alike continue to search for a feminist polemic or, at least, a female perspective in all of her films? For the most part, Bigelow does choose to work within genres that have been coded as decidedly male. Her films play with concepts of the western, the horror, the road movie, the thriller, the science fiction film, and the cop film, most of which are considered to have a target demographic that is predominantly, although by no means exclusively, male. As a result, the desire to find a feminist agenda in her films is entirely understandable. To date, she has made seven features, all of which emerge out of different genres, but share a number of tropes, such as the creation of alternative family units and the glorification of outsiders. Her films manage to defy classification, never wholly belonging to one specific genre. These films are very much about blurring boundaries, especially those that surround gender and genre, as well as playing with typical portrayals of families and outsider groups. This does not necessarily make the films explicitly feminist, as they are more concerned with refusing traditional means of classification than explicitly engaging with a feminist polemic. In fact, being labeled as a feminist director is something that Bigelow actively resists, because, for her, the hope is that we will one day arrive in an era where the gender of the filmmaker is irrelevant. Perhaps it is for this reason that her films are primarily concerned with gender and genre. By blurring the boundaries of both, as well as creating alternatives to traditional representations of

family and outsiders, she emphasizes the inconsequentiality of classification. Bigelow's films and characters, like Bigelow herself, refuse to be categorized in traditional ways; perhaps in itself, this is a form a resistance.

Trying to find a female perspective in films made by women is more problematic than one might imagine. By finding something that is distinctly female and different about a woman filmmaker, she remains categorized as an outsider or, in any case, different from the norm. While there are certainly many more female directors working in Hollywood now than during the studio era, they are still often relegated to the so-called 'women's picture' and when one steps outside of the genres of the melodrama or the romantic comedy, there is always a certain amount of confusion. Even directors who have been highly praised, such as Sofia Coppola, continue to work on films that centre on the difficulties of a female protagonist. While Bigelow has made two films that center on women (*Blue Steel* and *The Weight of Water*) the majority of her films are actually concerned with male protagonists within the context of the action film. Why would a woman want to work in the horror or action genre? These are genres that have constantly been associated with a male viewpoint and a privileging of male ideals. However, the more we draw attention to her status as a woman director in a male dominated field and the more we look for something in her films that makes them explicitly different, the more she seems like an anomaly. As Pam Cook would likely argue, this desire to find the director's gender in a film's content and style is not

necessarily a productive means of reading a film (228). The more we find specific female views coming from a director, the more we draw attention to the limits, boundaries and inherent differences that gender creates. For Bigelow, there is not a “feminine eye or a feminine voice. You have two eyes, and you can look in three dimensions and in a full range of color. So can everybody” (qtd. in Jermyn 134). Bigelow strives to avoid categorization, because she does not want her gender to describe who she is as a filmmaker. She sees herself as “an author before or outside her gender, as a filmmaker for whom the category or label of female is irrelevant” (Jermyn 5).

Bigelow began her film career in the independent sector before moving into mainstream action cinema. The fact that she is well-versed in film theory is evident in her films. A graduate of film school, Bigelow would have encountered and engaged with the theoretical side of film but she chooses to work in genres that are accessible to the mainstream, where her ideas will reach the widest audience. By examining gender through genre with this strategy, she is truly changing the nature of being “an outsider on the inside” (Redmond 107). The idea of appropriate gender behavior is complicated in Bigelow’s films as it is complicated in the work of Judith Butler, where she argues that gender is, in many respects, a performance. Butler’s “concept of gender as a learned set of characteristics that has assumed an air of naturalness and her claim for the destabilizing effect of drag as gender parody opens the door for a less deterministic reading of the action heroine” (Brown 53), one who can draw attention to the performative nature of gender through her masculine traits. In this sense, the female action hero becomes a version of drag, which “in imitating gender, implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency” (Brown 55). A character like Mace in *Strange Days* certainly fits with this set of ideas, as it is she who becomes the protector and bodyguard of her male friend and her strength and physique are constantly stressed in the context of the narrative. Yet, Mace is still very much coded as feminine and the film is filled with scenes that depict her as a loving and caring mother. Bigelow reveals the arbitrary nature of gender and she plays with this in her characterization of women, as “she brings into relief the constructedness of gender in a way that frames her own status as a woman director in terms of performance (rather than innate femininity)” (Lane 1998: 61). She is inherently aware that she cannot escape her gender and is constantly struggling with how she is perceived, in the same way that many of her female characters do. Often classified by her beauty in a way that a male director never would be, Bigelow has attempted to complicate this characterization, to a certain extent, by appearing in production stills or at film premieres dressed in leather jackets and baseball caps one moment, and skirts and dresses the next. She is continually highlighting the performative nature of gender, both in the construction of her own star persona, as well as in her films.

As Pam Cook notes, there is something self-conscious in the way Bigelow presents herself publicly, and there is a “hint of masquerade about many of her publicity shots, which suggests a self-conscious play with gender roles” (230) akin to what we see in her films.

Bigelow’s first feature-length film, *The Loveless* (1982), followed a group of bikers led by Vance (Willem Dafoe) and Davis (Robert Gordon), who stop to fix their bikes in a small town. They meet Telena (Marin Kanter), a girl who is sexually abused, and Vance begins an affair with her. The film culminates in a raucous bar party where Telena shoots her father and then herself, after which the bikers ride off, continuing along the road. The film came four years after her twenty-minute short *The Set Up*, which depicted two men fighting while two other men philosophize (in voice over) about the theoretical nature of violence, in what seems to be a typical product of film school education. *The Loveless* transcends this humble student film, but it remains closer to an art-house picture than the action blockbusters that generally define Bigelow’s career. Bigelow was only just emerging from the world of art school, and it seemed as if she had yet to find her connection to fast-paced action films. In her own words, Bigelow “hadn’t embraced narrative at that point; [she] was still completely conceptual, and narrative was antithetical to anything in the art world” (qtd. in Smith 30). However, despite its art-house roots, *The Loveless* remains a quintessential Bigelow film, for it plays with the ideas of gender and genre, as well as issues of family, that are visible across all her films. The film is clearly a hybrid, drawing on conventions of the road movie and the biker movie, while evoking 1950s nostalgia that was common in 1970s America. Bigelow even goes so far as to include Robert Gordon in the cast. Himself a symbol of nostalgia, Gordon was a 1970s singer who continually paid homage to 1950s music. A film that is “neither fish nor fowl” (Bigelow qtd. in Smith 30), *The Loveless* is a unique blend of two genres and it marks the beginning of a form of generic experimentation that distinguishes all of Bigelow’s films. In terms of gender, it is obvious that Bigelow had already started to blur the boundaries. The film begins with a lingering shot of Dafoe’s bike. The machine continues to be shot in this fetishistic way throughout the film (indeed, in many of Bigelow’s films, machines become subject to a fetishistic gaze). The machine becomes powerful and beautiful in the same way that the camera does. This fetishization of the bikers and their bikes evokes Kenneth Anger’s *Scorpio Rising* (1964), a film that is famous for its latent homoeroticism and for fetishizing bike culture and 1950s nostalgia. With this not-so-subtle reference, *The Loveless* becomes overt in its demonstration of homoerotic subtext. The bikers are tough guys, throwing knives at each other for fun, but they are also highly effeminate. Both Willem Dafoe and Robert Gordon have fairly boyish features, setting them up as characters who are caught in-between two genders. Gordon’s look embod-

ies the 50s, sporting a “black pompadour, pouty mouth, big dark eyes with long eyelashes and lanky grace” (Stilwell 37), but this description also links him to the feminine, as does his relationship to Hurley (one of his fellow bikers). At one point he even says, “Hurley baby, I wouldn’t think of going nowhere without you.” Already in her debut, Bigelow is demonstrating her interest in male relationships and issues of masculinity.

Female gender is also called into question through Telena, the decidedly androgynous girl who the bikers meet at a gas station. Unlike the waitresses, who are either repulsed or attracted to Vance’s bad boy status, Telena appears noticeably underwhelmed. She has a no-nonsense approach to Vance’s gang and, while she wears a pink top, she also sports pants, cropped brown hair, a raspy voice, and generally boyish features. In this film there is little that separates Telena’s masculinity from Vance or Davis’ femininity. Vance also has a boyish face and the resemblance between the two is not to be overlooked. Vance and Telena become foils for each other, embodying both masculine and feminine, but neither wholly one nor the other. When we see a post-coital shot of the two, they are pictured one on top of the other so that their bodies appear alike. In general, the gendering of the bikers and Telena becomes hyper-stylized along with the film, so much so that one cannot help but be made aware of the performative nature of gender. The waitress who strips in the bar demonstrates this relationship overtly. She is performing and is ultimately mocked by the bikers for her obsessive attempt to feminize herself in the traditional heterosexual context of occupying the male gaze. These bikers, however, are not complicit in this gaze.

The bikers are typical Bigelow outsiders, and there is something appealing, or at least seductive, about their characters. We are both seduced and repulsed by them. One character demonstrates this by saying “they’re animals,” only to counter that he wishes he could be one of them for a day. In this respect, being on the outside is not necessarily coded as negative, which we could connect to Bigelow’s own position as a woman working in a male-dominated field; she doesn’t quite fit in. In the case of *The Loveless*, the bikers have formed a kind of surrogate family, with Davis and Vance seeming to wrestle for the role of the patriarch. Their family is non-traditional but it appears to be no less functional (perhaps even more so) than traditional family relationships. The theme of incest that surrounds Telena and her father depicts the traditional family relationship as one filled with perversion. This so-called ‘traditional family’ has been so twisted that Telena’s only means of escape involves killing her abusive father and then taking her own life, after which the bikers ride on, seemingly unaffected and wholly comfortable in their dysfunctional family unit. This idea of the alternate family unit is something that emerges in many of Bigelow’s texts; the viewer is drawn into these alternative families, and often, finds comfort within them.

The idea of dysfunctional families also plays a role in 1990’s *Blue Steel*, where the idea of a female character comfortable in a role that is coded as conventionally male finds its literal representation. This film centers on Megan (Jamie Lee Curtis), a rookie cop who is caught up in a killer’s twisted obsession with violence and authority. Megan meets Eugene (Ron Silver) after she is involved in a hold-up bust gone wrong. They begin a relationship, but it soon becomes evident that Eugene is a serial killer who has become obsessed with Megan. Megan must then team up with her partner Nick (Clancy Brown) to bring Eugene to justice. Within the film, Bigelow plays with the traditional cop drama but many of her artistic choices complicate the simplicity of this genre. Often, Bigelow evokes conventions of the horror and rape-revenge film, with Megan occupying the position of the ‘final girl,’ fitting Judith Butler’s conception of the ‘final girl’ in slasher films. These women are characterized by “a continuous contest between generic conventions which would position her as a victim and those which enable her to defend herself” (Butler 45). In light of this, the casting of Jamie Lee Curtis as the female lead becomes an interesting choice for a number of reasons. Labeled as the ‘scream queen,’ Curtis was well-established as the typical ‘final girl’ in a number of slasher films. In these films, the woman is always a victim; taking her out of this genre and turning her into the strong-willed cop makes a bold statement about female victimization. Curtis cannot escape the characters she has played in the past and, as a result, in this film she becomes both hero and victim. Curtis’s androgynous appearance, and her rumored possession of XXY chromosomes (which is widespread on the internet and has taken on a somewhat ‘mythic’ status), also allows her to be somewhat caught between the masculine and feminine worlds. This is reflective of what Megan is facing in her professional career. Once again, Bigelow has used popular culture and celebrity to influence her casting, which draws attention to ideas of gender and its construction.

Early in the film, Megan struts down the street in her uniform and is smiled at by two women. The fact that the women notice Megan seems to be evocative of her ability, according to Christine Lane, to transgress “conventional body politics” (1998 72). She is, in fact, portrayed as more masculine than the male convenience store clerk whom she also encounters while in uniform. Her uniform is, in many respects, a symbol of her identity crisis. As Yvonne Tasker observes, she has “acquired a confident control of space” (159) through dressing up in this traditionally male uniform, but she is nonetheless still ‘dressing up’; she is performing. After this opening sequence, the film cuts to Megan dressing. Her crisp, masculine police uniform is in stark contrast with her lacy bra. The film foreshadows her future struggle between masculine and feminine ideals, while also allowing viewers to enjoy the “pleasures of masculine mobility and agency without eclipsing femininity as a cognitive position” (Butler 45).



Megan's bra codes her as distinctly feminine, but her position of authority places her in a more masculine role. This oscillation between masculine hero and feminine victim once again evokes the theories that surround the 'final girl' in the slasher film.

Megan, like Vance, sits in a precariously balanced position on the border of conventional gender roles. Megan is not accepted by the police world, nor is she at ease outside of it. Characters are always questioning her desire to work in this masculine field: "you're a good looking woman, beautiful in fact; why would you want to be a cop?" Her own father is disappointed by her departure from traditional gender roles, saying, "I've got a goddamn cop for a daughter." Megan's relationship with her father becomes evocative of the perversion of the traditional family unit that we encounter in so many of Bigelow's films. Like Telenova's father, Frank is highly abusive both towards Megan and her mother. Later in the film, Megan reveals the truth about why she wanted to be a cop.

She answers this often-asked question with one word: "him." This is an ambiguous answer, as the 'him' in question could be Eugene, her father, or abusive men in general. Or, conceivably, it is reflective of her desire to obtain a position of male power. Perhaps this is representative of the way that Bigelow is questioned for her choice to direct in the male-dominated world of action cinema. Megan points the gun, as Bigelow points the camera. Even the opening depiction of the gun is easily connected to Bigelow's camera. The shot of the spinning of the chamber has the effect of a spinning movie reel, perhaps once again connecting Megan's object of power with Bigelow's. Like the camera, the gun is seen as an object of traditional male power. The shot of the bullets entering that chamber take on a particularly sexualized and phallic connotation. Yet, Megan is not immune to gender stereotypes herself. At the opening of the film, Megan participates in a police training activity where she enters the scene of a domestic dispute and must determine whose story to believe. Here,

she mistakenly assumes the woman to be the victim in a case of domestic violence, when the roles were in fact reversed. This foreshadows the revelation of Megan's own abusive family. It also serves as a message to the audience, a warning that we could connect to much of Judith Butler's work, wherein she advises "against making conventional assumptions about the gendering of violence" (44).

In Bigelow's next feature, *Point Break* (1991), she once again looks at male relationships and masculinity, this time in the context of the thriller genre. The film takes on the idea of the rookie cop that we encountered in *Blue Steel*, only this time we are aligned with Johnny (Keanu Reeves), a rookie FBI agent. Johnny teams up with a senior agent, Pappas (Gary Busey), in an attempt to determine the identities of a group of bank robbers whom Pappas suspects to be surfers. Johnny then goes undercover with the surfers to gather evidence, but ends up captivated with their world, beginning a relationship with Tyler (Lori Petty). He becomes obsessed with their leader, Bodhi (Patrick Swayze), ultimately following him to the far corners of the globe to capture him, only to let him drown himself in the final moments. Still blending genres, the film draws on the rookie cop film, the Western and the male buddy film, creating what Bigelow herself refers to as a "wet western" (qtd in Lane; 2000 118). The film opens with images of Bodhi surfing crosscut with Johnny doing a target practice test in the rain. As Redmond notes, the way that the scene is edited makes it seem as if Johnny is shooting at Bodhi, foreshadowing their conflict as two men on either side of the law (109). The opening scene also set up the issues of masculinity that will shape the film. Johnny is proving his masculinity through the test, cocking his gun and taking out the bad guys as he will continue to do throughout the film. Masculinity remains an issue in the film through Pappas and Johnny's relationships with the night-shift cops, as well as with agent Harp, to whom both Pappas and Johnny have to answer. The men in this film always seem to be jostling for a position in the pecking order, but masculine relationships are also important. Johnny's relationship with the aptly named Pappas becomes one of father-son guidance, with Pappas praising him but also putting him in his place as a rookie.

Masculinity is hyperbolized in *Point Break*, taking on an almost melodramatic role as viewers witness machismo transformed into "overblown spectacle" (Grant 380). This excessive quality calls attention to its performative value. After all, Johnny is undercover; he is performing. Johnny constantly has to prove his masculinity to the surfers in order to be initiated. Here, we have another gang of outsiders that are strangely alluring for both Johnny and the audience. There is something romantic about their lifestyle, totally free from the conventions of traditional society. It is, as Bodhi says, them "against the system." Once again, there is an alternative family unit formed. Bodhi becomes the father figure and the love he has for "his boys" is obvious in the way he cares for them

after they've been shot. Here again, a character is seduced by the lifestyle of the outsiders and, in this case, Johnny ultimately rejects the law and chooses that path. In the end, he throws away his badge, choosing instead to live by the waves as his 'father' did.

There is certainly no denying the homoerotic undertones that exist in this film, as they do in *The Loveless*. While this idea is often explored within the context of the male buddy film, I would argue that Bigelow uses it play with traditional gender roles, relegating Johnny to position of the female love interest in action films, while also evoking the seductive nature of an outsider figure. The two men develop a relationship over the course of the film, but even their first meeting has a homosexual subtext, as Johnny gazes longingly at Bodhi surfing. Ultimately, Johnny does get "too goddamn close to this surfing buddy of [his]." Johnny and Bodhi are always engaging in some sort of competition, from football to sky diving, but there is a mutual respect and admiration that seems to develop between the two. They bond through masculine activities, such as taking on the surf Nazis together. Here, Bodhi is able to save Johnny, and Johnny becomes the damsel-in-distress figure. Over the course of the film, Johnny becomes more connected to Bodhi and his lifestyle. Obviously, the plot lends itself to Johnny's concern with Bodhi, but the film seems to move beyond that, as Bodhi longs to teach Johnny the spiritual side of surfing and show him it as a "state of mind." It is certainly significant that Bodhi's name means enlightenment (Redmond 119) and he does take Johnny "to the edge, and past it," leaving behind the borders of traditional male relationships and telling him that "we're gonna ride this all the way, you and me Johnny." Even when Johnny's job requires him to capture Bodhi, he is unable to do it. After a long and fast-paced steadicam sequence of Johnny chasing Bodhi, Johnny has the opportunity to shoot him. We know from the opening sequence that Johnny is a crack shot, but he does not shoot. Instead, there are a number of lingering shots of the two characters looking into each other's eyes as Johnny recognizes that he is unable to hurt Bodhi. Even when Johnny is reunited with Tyler at the end of the film, he gazes beyond her and watches Bodhi drive away. Johnny becomes obsessed with Bodhi, tracking him to the other side of the world (significantly without Tyler), only to let him have his final wave. It is not without consequence that the final moments of the film focus on Johnny and Bodhi and that Johnny has now adopted Bodhi's long shaggy hair, having chosen to reject his traditional lifestyle.

With *Point Break*, the idea of gender and traditional heterosexual roles is being played within an extremely mainstream film that still adheres to the conventions of the action film. The hyper-masculinity that the film embodies is clearly a reaction to the 'hard-bodied' male action hero of the Reagan era. The inclusion of the Reagan mask as Bodhi's disguise seems like a conscious choice that draws attention to the ideals that were privileged in Reagan's era and satirizes



them. Coming out of the aftermath of Vietnam, America was looking for a re-affirmation of power and the 'hard-bodied' male action hero that thrived in the Reagan era was just the answer. As Jeffrey Brown states, with the "obvious emphasis on masculine ideals, action films in the 1980s seem to deny any blurring of gender boundaries: men are active, while women are present only to be rescued or to confirm the heterosexuality of the hero" (52). The typical 1980s action film woman was a "hysterical figure who needed to be rescued or protected and was often played for comedy. All that was required of an actress was an innocently sexual appeal and a ready scream" (Tasker 177). This is clearly not the case in *Point Break*, where Tyler is anything if not capable. In fact, her introduction in the film actively subverts the traditional role of the female heroine. She is introduced in a rescue, but the roles are reversed. It is Tyler that saves Johnny from the ocean, noting that he "got no business being out [there] whatsoever." While Tyler is a part of the narrative, she seems to be little more than a common connection between the two men, a catalyst that brings them together more than an object of desire. Johnny is actually never able to save Tyler, as it is Bodhi's choice to free her at the end of the film so he is never able to totally embody the role of male action hero.

Tyler rarely needs anyone. She is tough and reflective of the androgyny that we saw in Telena and Megan. She has short-cropped hair, a muscular physique, a raspy voice and an androgynous name. Just as Telena bore a physical resemblance to Vance, so too does Tyler resemble Johnny. In another echo of *The Loveless*, when Johnny and Tyler are filmed in bed their bodies are positioned so that they look surprisingly alike, again playing with the idea of gender. The shot is staged almost like a painting, shocking the viewer when it is disrupted by the sound of the doorbell. Moments later the two are filmed walking along the beach in wetsuits and their similarity is undeniable. Despite their quest for a hyper-masculinity, Johnny and Bodhi have a number of feminine traits, and Tyler even refers to Johnny as a "pretty boy." The choice to cast Lori Petty as Tyler is obviously a conscious one, as she is known for her androgynous appearance and for playing tough, misfit characters. Bigelow was also very likely aware of the star status that surrounded Swayze and Reeves and cast them accordingly. Predominately associated with boyhood roles, Reeves had already been made famous by his portrayal of Ted in *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* (Herek 1989), as well as his role as Tod in *Parenthood* (Howard 1989). In both films Reeves plays a somewhat slow character that is on the brink of manhood, but not quite there. Even the name 'Johnny' brings up images of a young boy rather than a man. He is no action hero. These external influences, combined with his delicate features, actively code him as a character that evokes aspects of femininity. Swayze's star image performs a similar function. He is most famous for *Dirty Dancing* (Ardolino 1987), where his dance background played an important role. In this film he is a strong man, but also one who is in touch

with the delicate precision that dance requires. There is ambiguity in this, an ambiguity that is reflected in the gendering of Bodhi, on the one hand a relentless adrenaline junkie and, on the other, a "surfer in tune with nature, with water (where water symbolized the feminine)" (Redmond 119). Bigelow uses these cultural influences to help her play with gender, rendering it indefinable once again.

After a brief experiment with a more art house style picture (2000's *The Weight of Water*), Bigelow returned to a big budget action picture with *K-19: The Widowmaker* (2002). The film centers on the crew of K-19, the Russian nuclear submarine that suffered a reactor malfunction that forced the crew to submit themselves to massive amounts of radiation in an attempt to repair the damage and prevent a nuclear disaster. For Bigelow the goal was to "make a film that shows the heroism, sacrifice and humanity of these men" (qtd. in Jermyn 12). The film opens with an intense scene revolving around a torpedo, which is ultimately revealed as a drill. As in previous films, Bigelow plays with the viewer's expectations by using something of a false opening. Yet again, Bigelow plays with genre, using the submarine genre and drawing on films such as Wolfgang Petersen's *Das Boot* (1981). Because it is based on true events, the film also blends the historical drama with the action thriller, as well as the melodrama. Like many of the pictures in Bigelow's oeuvre (especially *The Loveless* and *Point Break*), the film makes use of "another masculine genre where melodrama and action meet, centering on the construction of a male community set apart from the rest of society" (Jermyn 12).

By placing the characters on a submarine in the middle of the ocean, these characters automatically become outsiders. They are literally separated from any form of society and they must form their own family unit. as in many of her other films, a struggle for control between two men is at the forefront of this alternative family unit. Casting Harrison Ford as the often tyrannical Vostrikov is another example of Bigelow using an actor's star status and past roles to play with the viewer's expectations. Ford holds a strong place in the action genre, but he usually portrays the strong and adventurous all-American hero; Vostrikov is quite a departure from this persona. It seems that audiences were not comfortable with this departure, as many critics described Ford as being woefully miscast. Echoing *Point Break's* Johnny and Bodhi and *The Loveless's* Vance and Davis, Polenin and Vostrikov compete for command and power. Ultimately though, there is a mutual respect between the two men. Vostrikov becomes obsessed with control and a desire to gain party approval. He is the unrelenting father figure, while Polenin becomes almost maternal in the way he nurtures the crew and puts their needs before his own. These male power struggles continue throughout the film, with Polenin constantly urging Vostrikov to put the crew first. On one particular occasion, Vostrikov exclaims that he "took them to the edge because we

needed to know where it was,” a sentiment reminiscent of Tyler’s description of Bodhi in *Point Break*, as well as Bigelow’s own preoccupation with blurring boundaries and pushing limits in her films. The crew ultimately does bond into a coherent family and they are forced to come together to fix the reactor, despite their lack of appropriate equipment. Vostrikov eventually grows as a father figure and puts the needs of his figurative children first, despite the consequences for the party. This is the typical plot of a melodrama, but Bigelow plays with the typical association with the ‘women’s picture.’ The scenes that surround the welding of the reactor illustrate the film’s overt melodramatic aspects, and the structuring of the shots only helps to highlight this.

Music is used overtly in this sequence, to the extent that it becomes somewhat self-reflexive, echoing the fact that early melodrama – literally meaning drama of music – used music as a means of increasing emotional response. Church bells ring as the men walk into the reactor, shot in slow motion. Operatic music begins to play and there are close-ups on their faces as the two men help each other with their masks, looking longingly into each other’s eyes. The music stops and there is silence as Vostrikov clicks the timer, at which point it swells back up. The beauty of an unlikely subject is reflected in the camera’s treatment of the reactor. The torch shoots flames as the music crescendos and the idea of men helping other men is almost elevated to the level of a spiritual experience. The idea of melodrama comes up again at the end of the film. Classical music plays as Vostrikov, Polenin and the other survivors toast the men who were lost, lamenting that they were not given the title of hero. The final moments depict the young men on an ice floe having their picture taken. The frame freezes, and the image slowly fades to black and white. There is nostalgia for the happiness and innocence of the past, a traditional trope of melodrama. Once again, Bigelow plays with expectations of gender and genre, using the conventions of the melodrama and the women’s picture to tell a story that is exclusively about male experiences.

While Bigelow’s seven feature films, made over the course of twenty five years, do not make her a prolific director by any means, they do allow viewers to see trends that occur across her body of work. Over the course of her career, Bigelow has experienced critical and commercial success, as well as failure. Only time will tell how her upcoming film about the Iraq War, *The Hurt Locker* (2008), will be received. Regardless of its reception, it is sure to embody issues that continue to be of concern for Bigelow such as genre, gender, alternative families and outsider groups. Bigelow continues to actively distance herself from being read as a distinctly female voice, finding such labels to be irrelevant. This idea of distancing extends to her films, as she continues to blur the borders between masculine and feminine, while also refusing to adhere to established conventions surrounding genre and traditional family values, as well as focusing on groups who exist outside of the dominant ideology. As Deborah Jermyn

notes, “it is this difficulty in ascribing labels to her work that is, paradoxically, characteristic of a Bigelow film” (130). The definition of her work lies in its inability to be defined. In this respect, Bigelow’s films resist classification in much the same way that she attempts to as achieve with her public persona, wanting to be seen as just a director – not someone who is constantly characterized by her gender. She too is an outsider, a distinct blend of masculine and feminine that cannot be restricted to one particular style.

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