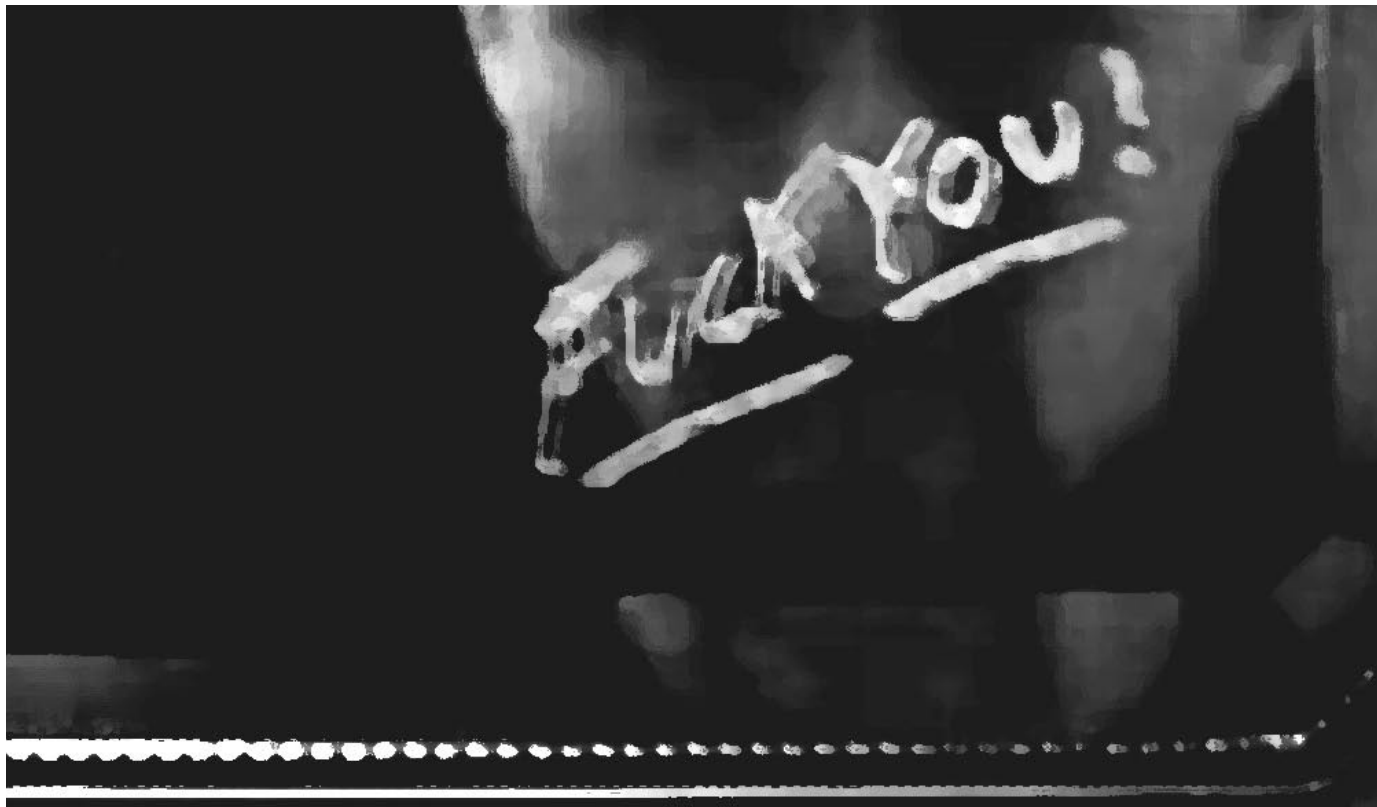


Containing Their Rage: Anger and the Liberal Cinema



Jennie Carlsten

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

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

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

— Tobin Keller (*Sean Penn*); *The Interpreter* (2005)

A number of films produced and distributed in the U.S. during the years of the Bush administration – films which have been identified as “Liberal” by those critics and pundits inclined to assign such labels – have revolved around the crux of personal anger and public injustice. While films such as *The Constant Gardener* (Meirelles, 2005), *25th Hour* (Lee, 2003), and *The Interpreter* (Pollack, 2005) are clearly inheritors of a tradition that includes earlier Hollywood films like *On the Waterfront* (Kazan, 1954), *Twelve Angry Men* (Lumet, 1957), and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Mulligan, 1962), the formal devices and thematic contradictions of these more recent films illuminate

a phenomenon of current Liberal culture: the disavowal of anger and the discomfort with the status of anger as an inevitable, and indeed necessary, component of individual and communal recovery. Often ignored or elided, anger – specifically, the expression and containment of anger – is in fact the organizing principle of these films. The incomplete attempts to deny and defuse anger are symptomatic of a wider tendency in American, and especially Liberal American, culture, which increasingly views anger as a retrograde, undesirable force to be combated by progressively-minded individuals. Anger is a troublesome and uncomfortable concept within the Liberal camp, even as the “angry Liberal” is attacked from without by both the media and conservative spokespeople.

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

the nature of the “Liberal film” has undergone fundamental changes. For the purposes of this discussion, I am most interested in the shift that has occurred in the Bush-era, post-invasion, hybridised Hollywood-indie-international milieu. At the heart of this shift is a reorientation vis-à-vis anger. Recent Liberal filmmaking reflects an extreme discomfort with anger; *The Interpreter*, *25th Hour*, and

than this, we must consider a cultural climate that disallows liberal anger. Within this climate, a Democratic presidential candidate effectively loses the race the minute he loses his temper, as Howard Dean famously did. Activist mother Cindy Sheehan, her son killed in Iraq, is seen by many as an embarrassment for her refusal to suppress her fury and grieve quietly. And when rape victim Liz Seccuro receives

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The Constant Gardener provide just a few examples of this discomfort and of the Liberal cinema’s tensions and contradictions. How these tensions and contradictions are managed and expressed is largely a question of form, and within the recent Liberal narrative cinema, it becomes possible to identify a subset of films that together might be called a disorderly Liberal cinema.¹

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

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

Cynicism or defeatism might explain some of this. More

an emailed confession from her unprosecuted attacker, 25 years later, the public debates her right to justice on chat boards and in the media, many demanding that she ‘let it go’ and forgive her assailant.²

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

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

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

² “Rape Victim Seeks Long Path to Justice”. CBS News, February 24, 2007 <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/02/24/ap/national/mainD8NGCND00.shtml>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

anger, particularly in its inability to recognize or reconcile the contradictions in its own position. Ultimately, the film's ideological posturing disturbs, not because it is insincere, but because it is hollow and self-defeating.

The Interpreter deals with similar subject matter to the rest of the Bush-era Liberal dramas. Silvia (Nicole Kidman) is a U.N. interpreter, an idealistic woman raised in the fictional African nation of Motobo. It is gradually revealed

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audience discourse – ensures their Liberal designation.

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

Among the Liberal films named above, *The Interpreter* is perhaps the one most aptly labelled a ‘Hollywood’ film, in terms of its production, cast, and crew as well as in its adherence to classical Hollywood’s stylistic conventions. *The Interpreter*, moreover, embodies Hollywood’s unhappy relationship with Liberal anger. It is the clearest example of the accepted Liberal stance on

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

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

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

of actual justice for the Matobans goes unaddressed; clearly, what counts here is that it has brought some closure to Silvia, allowing her to exorcise her personal anger and finally heal. This closing sequence is followed by an epilogue in which Tobin names his own dead wife, and the two mourners part ways. The disagreement within the film itself reflects the very real struggle played out all over the world in the wake of genocidal and repressive regimes: what does it mean to forgive and forget; what is the difference between mourning

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

Interestingly, the film reveals an internal disquiet when it rejects another piece of the Ku tradition: the refusal to name the dead. When Tobin rightly identifies Silvia's anger over the deaths of her family, she silences him with a finger to his lips: "we don't name the dead." Naming the dead, she later explains, is seen as an obstacle to moving forwards. This, of course, is in direct opposition to Silvia's brother Simon and his compulsive list-making and naming; ultimately, Silvia obtains the notebooks in which Simon has methodically listed the names, ages, and cause of death of Zuwani's victims. Silvia adds Simon's name and, in anticipation of her meeting with Zuwani, her own. As the camera tracks down the empty halls of the U.N. and over the rooftops and skyline of New York, Silvia's disembodied voice reads out the names. Whether this act of naming brings about any sort

and wallowing; how should people commemorate their losses? The constant play in the film between the words "dead" and "gone" underscores the film's own uncertainty.

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

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

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

of the flashback. Both heightening viewer awareness of structure and producing extreme identification by shortening the emotional distance between viewer and protagonist, a narrative relayed through flashback most frequently links discrete events in a causal pattern, endows events with an aspect of fatalism, and promotes moral didacticism. History, presented in this way, is further subjectified and “urges us to assume that the subjective reaction of a fictional individual somehow constitutes a collective subjectivity, a

relationship.

Addressing the trend of “movies...that move forward dramatically by going backward in time”, David Denby points to *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino, 1994) as the archetype, and claims that Tarantino explicitly created an impression of the “eternal present” that nevertheless links moments through their causal impact on one another (Denby, 2007). Denby goes on to contrast the use of the disordered narrative in films like *Pulp Fiction* with the use in later films, including

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shared experience” (Turim, 103). Modernist filmmaking, though, has frequently used flashback to interrogate those same effects. The new class of Liberal films owes as much to the Modernist inversion as to the models of film noir and melodrama. Clearly, flashback in the Liberal films is investigational and confessional, but it is also used ironically and self-consciously to call into question the viewer’s own relationship with and understanding of history and memory.

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

those mentioned here. He rightly points out that the effect is quite different, although his analysis of that difference is, I believe, mistaken. In *Babel*, for instance, Denby finds the disjointed nature of events to be “hostile” to the viewer; “the editing withholds information, not so much to create suspense as to uncouple the intent of an act from its result” (*ibid.*). In fact, this hostility might be seen as a deliberate effect, not the unintended and unfortunate consequence Denby identifies. More accurately, this hostility is a manifestation of anger, not (only) with the viewer, but on behalf of the viewer and expressing in form that which the narrative struggles to contain.

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

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

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

Critics have rightly objected to the film's self-righteousness, air of 'white guilt,' and its condescension towards its African subjects in particular. For the most part, critics of the film have made the tacit assumption that the purpose of the film is to educate, enlighten, or ennoble the

of Monty's downfall and to detail the complex and tense relationships between the various characters. Anger is the unifying element of the film; every character and every scene is marked by the emotion and it is this anger, rather than an unfolding narrative, that provides the momentum and relationships between scenes.

The central moment of the film occurs when Monty confronts his reflection in a bathroom mirror. Seeing the

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viewer; in short, they have read the film as being “about” Tessa. Tessa is, in fact, a paragon of the Liberal code: forgiving and able to set aside her anger for the greater good. Having just lost her own baby, Tessa nurses the child of an AIDS victim in her hospital bed; her fight against the pharmaceutical companies is motivated not by anger, but by love, and she is positioned as a willing martyr to the Liberal cause.

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

Like *The Constant Gardener*, Spike Lee's *25th Hour* operates in two registries of grief and anger; Montgomery “Monty” Brogan's personal story of loss is set amid the larger context of 9/11 and the impact on the city of New York. The film centres around Monty's last day before entering prison to serve a long sentence for drug-dealing. Monty spends his last day on the outside saying goodbye to family and friends while also learning which of his loved ones betrayed him to the Drug Enforcement Administration. The film makes extensive use of both motivated flashbacks and montage to account for the events

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

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

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

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

In their use of flashback and disordered narrative, the disorderly cinema questions our memory of events, showing the distance between reality and the figuring of events. The truth and the retelling, the imagined and the visible, are juxtaposed, as in *The Constant Gardener*, where the events of Justin's murder are intercut with the two very different (and equally incomplete) eulogies given at his memorial

that led to the fire in the first place. To pretend otherwise seems dishonest and dangerous. Ehrenreich writes, "what is truly sinister about the positivity cult is that it seems to reduce our tolerance of other people's suffering...creating an empathy deficit that pushes ever more people into a harsh insistence on positivity in others" (11). At its unrealized best, a Liberal cinema may address this empathy deficit, force us to recognize our individual and collective responsibilities, and allow the necessary and healthy expression of anger.

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

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

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

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

Yet once the fire is out, we may be right, and we are certainly human, if we feel anger with the flames for the damage they have caused. The emotion guides us to protect against the recurrence of fire, it teaches us the power of fire, and it forces us to acknowledge our own responsibility for the conditions

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