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contact eyecandy: noahnoah@ucsc.edu

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Strange Days: Entering the Age of Spiritual Machines

By Jake Anderson

Are moviegoers and entertainment seekers bound to gradually incorporate more and more computer technology into their daily life until they are indistinguishable from a mutated piece of software? In a word, yes. The transformation has begun: digital technology is everywhere and it mediates everything, from work and leisure to telecommunications and interactive video games. Is a convergence between digital computation and human consciousness banished to the realm of science fiction? Ray Kurzweil answers in the negative. In his book The Age of Spiritual Machines, Kurzweil imagines a 21st century world in which quantum computers and nanotechnology change mankind’s proscriptions for the mind and the body. Foreseeing an age of neural implants, he says that by 2007, “haptic” interface technology will provide the human mind with alternative sources of sensory input drawn from virtual reality environments. There will be computer displays built into eyeglasses and digital “objects,” like movies, video games, and music, distributed as data files through the wireless network. The real world will gradually become fused with virtual reality, and human subjectivity will grow increasingly integrated with technology.

Surely, the moviegoer pleads, somewhere in the cinema’s vast annals of science fiction reels there are forewarnings of such a mind boggling transformation. Indeed, there are many (far more than the following list): Blade Runner, 2001, Alphaville, Tron, Johnny Mnemonic, The Fifth Element, Strange Days, Minority Report, A.I, The Matrix trilogy, and eXistenZ all confront aspects of cyborg culture, or the human-computer interface. In particular, Strange Days and eXistenZ portray near-future worlds in which religion, sexuality and recreation have been profoundly altered by the impact of new medias and technologies.

Strange Days (Kathryn Bigelow, 1995) depicts Los Angeles in the year 1999, when a technology known as SQUID (super-conducting quantum interference device), has made it possible to literally inhabit someone else’s experiences. The device, which looks like a squid and toupee combined into one, was initially created by the Feds for criminal inquiries, but eventually fell into the hands of peddlers on the black market. Also on the black market are thousands of clips, or “wire hits,” that affect the user in much the same way that drugs do, providing a real, yet distorted experience that leaves the user strung out and wanting more. The film’s protagonist, Lenny Nero (Ralph Fiennes), is a dealer of SQUID products, whose clientele ranges from wealthy businessmen to down and out info-junkies, addicted to other people’s experiences, or perhaps simply the feeling of being outside one’s self. Lenny is also a user of his own product. Early in the film, he picks from a number of tapes of him and his ex-girlfriend, Faith, roller-skating and making love. Undressing, Faith asks: “Are you going to watch or are you going to do?” Lenny does, of course, but the fact that the experience is from the past suggests that he has, to a certain extent, lost control over his present experiences. He no longer cares to make the distinction between real experience and mediated ‘playback.’

Strange Days grows progressively more violent and perverse in its depiction of the wire-tripping technology. In one scene, we watch from the point of view of an unknown assailant as he rapes a prostitute in the following fashion: he captures the assault on playback and ‘jacks’ the girl in to SQUID so that she can feel, see and hear what he feels, sees and hears, augmenting her fear and thus enhancing his excitement. The girl is literally experiencing rape from the point of view of both the victim and the aggressor. The scene, albeit profoundly disturbing, is a prime example of the convergence of subjectivity and technology displayed in the film: sexuality, entertainment and technology meld into the same experience.

Strange Days presents a distorted but all-too-familiar paradigm of the postmodern crisis: sensory overdose. The mass production of experience threatens to erode the quality of the individual’s own subjectivity by disconnecting him/her from his/her own experiences. One of the fundamental building blocks of film theory is the idea that a moviegoer frequents the cinema to absorb someone else’s experiences, to live vicariously through the protagonist. Strange Days re-inscribes this idea into a science fiction premise in which the moviegoer can actually be the protagonist, and, moreover, be a protagonist.
of the real world. This is not exactly interactive in the sense that a video game is, but it spins the idea of voyeurism in such a way that the commodification of experience appears open to innovation. For in Strange Days, our experiences are no longer solely ours; we can buy new ones and sell those we have grown tired of.

eXistenZ (1999) approaches near-future speculation from a different avenue: the video game industry. Directed by David Cronenberg, whose scripts often dabble in bio-technology, the film depicts a world in which video game and virtual reality technologies biologically converge. Jennifer Jason Leigh plays Allegra Geller, the “game pod goddess,” a VR game designer and guru for the company Antenna. The first scene introduces Allegra's latest game, eXistenZ, and situates its first test enclave, whom she will provide with twelve prototype meta-flesh game pods. The game pods—through the which she downloads eXistenZ into each player—look like rubber fetuses, fidgeting and whining. They are virtual animals, “grown from fertilized amphibian eggs stuffed with DNA,” and charged by the game player's body. Before the test enclave can begin its game, an assailant (whom we will later learn is a part of an anti-VR group called The Realists) attacks Allegra. She escapes with Ted Pikul (Jude Law), a marketing trainee, who rushes her to a car and out into the countryside. We are to assume this is part of reality. Soon, Allegra convinces Ted, who has never played one of her games before, to be fitted for a bio-port (it takes some work, for Ted has a phobia of being penetrated). Afterward, they lube up one another’s bio-ports, whichucker excitedly, and insert the umbilical cord-like firewire cables. Throughout the film, the process of downloading a game takes on an overtly sexual nature, culminating when Ted performs fellatio on Allegra’s bio-port.

By game's end, the film, having supposedly disengaged from the interwoven game sub-plot, reveals that the entire test enclave scene featured in the beginning of the film was not even grounded in reality, but was actually part of the eXistenZ game. And Allegra is not the true game designer. That was her particular game avatar. In whatever dimension of the game eXistenZ the film started off in (reality, or VR, for we are never certain), Allegra and Ted work for the Realist cause, seeking to destroy eXistenZ before it bleeds into reality. As the film draws to a close, the final question—ultimately left unanswered—is whether or not the characters are still playing the game. The characters can no longer decipher what is real and what is game-based. Cronenberg's sub-textual implication is that the film itself evolves into a version of the game, a blueprint for an interactive virtual reality game. Its gamers (film viewers) are left free to draw their own conclusions as to where fiction ends and reality begins. Of course, just as in the game, Cronenberg provides “just enough [free will] to make it interesting” (to echo one of Allegra's lines).

Besides inventing their own specialized science fiction vocabularies, Strange Days and eXistenZ share a number of thematic similarities. With Lenny in the former and Allegra in the latter, the films present harbingers of new technology as sanctified but controversial prophets (although in the case of Allegra, the prophet role turns out to be her game fantasy). Lenny and Allegra (in her game role) treat their respective products—‘electronic wire hits’ in Lenny's case, ‘biological game pods’ in Allegra’s—as the individual's only hope for transcendence in the 21st century, the only escape from the illusory sensations of the body. This overcoming of the body plays a central role in another thematic similarity shared by the films: the evolution of sexuality. Sexuality appears, in both Strange Days and eXistenZ, as being divorced from biological necessity, and is associated instead with the pleasure and entertainment values provided by technology. In Strange Days, the characters seem incapable of enjoying the act of sex without the mediation of someone else’s experience, a biological piece of software or a ‘playback’ of the past. eXistenZ imagines a game world of polymorphously altered bodies, in which the bio-port has become both an invitation to play out fictional romances, as well as a new organ, subject to arousal and penetration. Characters' recreational lives—namely their drug use—are changed by the new technologies as well. Both of the films envision worlds where drugs evolve in and share the same domain as technology. The 'upgrading' of experience and altered states of consciousness become commonplace forms of entertainment and recreation.

The 21st century convergence of digital technology and human consciousness still remains generations away from achieving reality. However, new digital medias have already installed in our brains the technological concepts needed to imagine such a future. The merger of science with science fiction films, which employ gadgets that would have been unthinkable a century ago, represents an already growing capacity on the part of machines and human brains to project and solidify a joint future. It seems only natural that mankind and technology will eventually be indistinguishable from one another. Strange Days and eXistenZ envision how such a marriage might drastically alter the human body and mind.
Paul D. Miller is a very busy man. He is a conceptual artist, writer, filmmaker and musician who calls New York City home, but spends most of his time zig-zagging across the globe to promote his work, perform and lecture. His most recent conceptual art piece, a film called *Re-Birth Of A Nation*, is a re-edited version of D.W. Griffith’s notoriously racist film *Birth Of A Nation*, which flips the script on the ideologies purported in the original film. He has published a slew of articles on topics such as media theory, art, technology and racial studies in such publications as *The Village Voice*, *The Source* and *Raygun*. He is also hard at work on his upcoming novel, *Flow My Blood The DJ Said*. Miller is certainly a qualified expert on DJ culture as well. He has released his most well known work under his “constructed persona,” DJ Spooky that Subliminal kid. As DJ Spooky, Miller has produced a slew of solo albums, EPs and mixes. He has also collaborated with a diverse range of musicians and composers such as Iannis Xenakis, Yoko Ono, Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore, Saul Williams, Killah Priest and Kool Keith. He recently formed his own record label, Synchonic Records and has been collaborating with Saul Williams, Coldcut and DJ Goo for the Not In My Name Music Project, which protests the ongoing atrocities in Iraq. His most recent releases also include his albums *Optometry*, its remix companion *Dubtometry*, and *Live Without Dead Time*, an anti-war, anti-consumerist mix for *Adbusters Magazine*, which features artists including Saul Williams, Ani Difranco, Negativland, J-Live, Fugazi and Meat Beat Manifesto. I caught up with Miller during his visit to the Digital Intermediaries Symposium at UC Santa Cruz in March, for which he was performing a live mix as the score to Guy Debord’s *The Society Of The Spectacle*, the film version of Debord’s book of the same name, a critique of western society which posits that the only form of communication between people that still exists is mediated by the economy and the images which it produces (this is a highly simplified version of only one of the book’s theories). Debord’s work, along with that of other theorists like Jean Baudrillard, has been quite inspirational to a slew of recent science fiction films which grapple with the concept of reality, namely *The Matrix*, a film which heavily utilizes electronic music, and which Miller adores. His performance at the symposium was a prime example of how electronic music can be used not for car commercials or background stimulus, but as a form of provocative conceptual art.

**Eyecandy: For your show tonight you are reworking the film version of Guy Debord’s *The Society Of The Spectacle*.**

**Paul D. Miller:** Right

**EC:** When it comes to criticizing spectacle in something like film, how do you avoid just becoming another version of the spectacle, or can you at all?

**PDM:** You don’t. Everything is spectacle at this point. We are immersed in it, we live it, we breathe it, and there’s a way that you can turn things into other versions of themselves, and that’s why I’m such a partisan of the idea of media remixing, you know?

**EC:** Do you have a basic philosophy of sample-based culture?

**PDM:** Keep it interesting and keep it diverse and dynamic. I’m always trying to figure out new ways to think about things, and that’s why I do live mixing so much and try to figure out different ways to have sound be memory.

**EC:** Obviously it’s different in each occasion, but what to you makes a good sample?

**PDM:** I tend to think of it all as being part of this notion of living words versus dead words. There are scenarios where, if something is dead words it doesn’t necessarily speak to you. If it’s a beat that has an interesting, dynamic flow, then it’s a living word. So what I try to do is create a theater of the living word. The beats and rhythms and sounds are all about creating an entirely reflexive environment, reflexive meaning you put something out and it bounces back to you and it speaks to you and it grows and changes and you grow and change. I think that a lot of mainstream music is dead, and it’s just all zombies and vampires and just kind of a haunted house of puppets.

**EC:** So basically you want to create a dialogue, an interactive experience with the listener…?

**PDM:** I want to create spaces where people can interact and do what they want and try to
check out all sorts of stuff. I think our culture is so conditioned by passivity you know, that’s why I’m remixing the Situationist [theoretical and artistic group Guy Debord was affiliated with] stuff, to kind of highlight it visually and show that you can actually look at historical precedents in a healthy way.

EC: What is your theory on DJ’s incorporating sampled MP3’s—obviously it’s not going to be a mainstream, commercial DJ, but you know, home DJ’s. Theoretically anyone could now sample almost any song at any time via the internet. Does this problematize the theory or philosophy behind DJing?

PDM: I think it’s a healthy thing, and again I’m a big partisan and fan of the notion of open source culture.

EC: Right.

PDM: So, that’s an important issue, so that people have access to all the sounds around them, but at the same you have to think about the corporate structures that people are living in, you know. They’re both based on this idea of living like a sponge and being able to always improvise and check out new…you know, memories, memories, memories…

EC: How do you think nostalgia relates to electronic music and sample based music, or even life?

PDM: Well, nostalgia is when you fear the future and you look to the past. I try to create a situation where there’s almost a nostalgia for the future, for the unknown, stuff that we haven’t heard yet or haven’t thought about. I try to just bring in new memories to keep it renewed and living and breathing. I started out Djing as a conceptual art project around how people play with found sound, so a lot of the issues I am trying to present are at the crossroads of all media. Anybody who is making art or doing anything creative is thinking about these issues right now. You know, we live in a world where there is so much information and so much stuff going on…How do you filter it? What do you do to kind of just live and breathe in this information ocean, you know?

PDM: You know, I think a lot of people specialize in something, and the notion of specialization is such an unhealthy thing. I definitely think that you need to be omnivorous…

EC: Yeah, which leads to my next question: So many media and art theorists and critics of today simply don’t do creative work in the field that they criticize, or are only known for their criticism and not their art. What are the benefits or setbacks to being both a media theorist and a media producer, and being well known for both, like you are?

EC: Yeah, definitely.

PDM: …And I think people need to be open. Our culture is in such a way that the healthier things going on are always hybrid. It’s like when you have a populous where everyone is just having kids with the same people. Intelligence goes down and immune systems crash (laughs). So you always have to have new, fresh infusions of stuff. For me, being a writer, artist and musician is much more about having a shifting terrain of focus, being able to be nomadic, between scenes and styles, and really, in a healthy way be nomadic and respectful of the fact that all information moves, nothing stays the same.

EC: Speaking of being nomadic, you obviously travel a lot. In the past few days I’ve been around you, you’re rarely not engaged with either your cell phone or your laptop. What is your relationship with them?

PDM: Well, you’re catching me at an intense time crunch. I’m here just for one day and I’m in the middle of finishing about five projects, so I’ve really been focused on trying to get it all locked down and finished. I also have to finish a lot of writing and all sorts of stuff, so it’s just been really, really, really hectic.

EC: More on what you’re working on tonight. Debord begins his book The Society Of The Spectacle with a Feuerbach quote which says, “But certainly for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, the appearance to the essence…illusion only is sacred, truth profane.” How do you think this relates to the philosophy behind sampling? Is a sample a sign which signifies the song that it’s taken from or some larger social context? How does that work for you?

PDM: Yeah, the sample is an emblem of the song and the environment that it came from, and it’s meant to be something that’s a representation or a fragment of it that then breaks off, but still can represent the whole. So again, it’s this sort of hologram style of thinking. You have to really create a notion of the part representing the whole, which is a whole historical thing with western culture. It’s against the normal notion of functionality through the production line, where you have “one equals two equals three.” This is more like “A equals D, and D becomes E, but then you have to go through J.” The whole alphabet’s scrambled.

EC: Relating that to the “whole and the sum of the parts” concept, the issues discussed at today’s symposium really drive home the point of how small the world is becoming, how interconnected, and how in the U.S., when it comes to the conflict with Iraq, we still have this sort of “Us vs. Them” mentality, when in fact we don’t really realize the kind of symbiotic relationship we have with other countries and how dependent we are upon them. Would you agree with that?

PDM: Sure. Well that’s globalization. I’ve been fascinated with how there’s this notion of the city at this point, how we live in these huge megalopolises: Paris, New York, Rio, New Deli. But at the same time there’s a new city
right now, and that's the entire planet. Instead of going from a subway train from 14th Street up to 23rd Street, you're going from New York to London. That compression of distance has already created a huge global city. At the same time our perception has lagged. I think that our social machinery, so to speak, is obsolete compared to how far technology has outstripped our culture.

EC: You have said that you are inspired by ideas in your music [In an interview conducted prior to ours, Miller was asked what inspired him and he answered “ideas.”], so obviously your music is made in part to make people think. It's active. In your description of your reworking of [D.W. Griffith's 1912 film] Birth Of A Nation, you discuss the idea of “the indexical present,” or your attempt to, as conceptual artist Adrian Piper puts it, “draw the viewer into a kind of self critical standpoint which encourages reflections on one's own responses to the work.” Is this possible in purely instrumental or electronic music? Is this desirable?

PDM: Sure. The whole notion of what I'm talking about is the sense of being able to think of culture as a dynamic system. Dynamic systems imply constant change and transformation. So, my music is part of that, and it's essentially thinking more outside of the notion of even music at this point, it's more like post-cultural industrial psychological software. The whole theme is one where I want people to be able to make their own mixes out of it, so everything I do is meant to be a tool or some sort of context for other people to check out.

EC: What's your take on strident or ugly sounds and non-harmonious mixes? Take the beginning of your track “Dumb Mutha Fucka” for example. The beginning has this strident, very repetitive string line…

PDM: Well, my whole notion is sound as a signifier, a free-floating variable. I try to create emotional contexts, and “Dumb Mutha Fucka” (laughs)… is about dealing with dumb people and dumb situations and dumb presidents…

The artwork for that album [Synthetic Fury EP] is a geo-political, global map of capital …I remember that track, it was years ago, but at the same time the conditions that inspired it have intensified. So I always use sound as an emotional palette, to create all sorts of different ways of engaging with culture. I mean if you're at a club and you hear a track that says “Put your hands up! Put your hands up!” people normally will put their hands up. It's weird.

EC: How do you see time and space as relating to one another, maybe in terms of a cause and effect relationship, or how do you approach the relationship between the two? That's kind of a very broad question…

PDM: Well, yeah… I did my senior year thesis on Ludwig Feuerbach. I was always fascinated with his critique of humanism. I'm fascinated with the idea that we live in too many frameworks of reference, and people, when looking at an object, will refer not to the object but to the frame of reference for the object… and I'm trying as much as possible to get us into this notion of thinking of everything as linked, as networked to one another, and constantly updating those links and being able to constantly evolve because of the networks you have running through you. That's a post-philosophy kind of viewpoint. Let's put it that way.

EC: Yeah, that kind of ties with the fact, in terms of fragmentation, that your life seems fragmented in the sense that you're a writer and a DJ and an artist. Do you feel fragmented…?

PDM: No.

EC: No?

PDM: Not at all (laughs). Everything I do is based on fragments. I think the human mind is multiple. We have so many versions of what's going through our brains at any given moment. That's a natural condition, so fragmentation implies that there was already something that was whole.

EC: You have said that when you are criticizing “the box” it is hard to step outside “the box,” and you just end up in another box. Is it enough to just highlight the traps that we live in, whether it be gender, sexuality, politics, ideology, any kind of trap…? You have mentioned your affinity towards The Matrix, the film and the idea, and Plato's cave myth… Is it just enough to point those things out?

PDM: No, you have to get people to move outside and figure out different ways of thinking about stuff. Everything I do is meant to evoke a disturbance of people's everyday patterns of living and to get a sense of there being other patterns, other structures that they can deal with. It's mix tools for a new psychology.

For more on Paul D. Miller AKA DJ Spooky that Subliminal kid, including music, essays, news and onstage appearances, please visit: [www.djspooky.com](http://www.djspooky.com)

For more on Paul D. Miller's record label, Synchronic Records, please visit: [www.synchronicrecords.com](http://www.synchronicrecords.com)
Monumental Science Fiction: The Presence and Destruction of National Monuments on Screen

By Jeffrey Halbleib

How many times has a science fiction film presented the powerful image of one of our national monuments in a state of duress or ruin? This storytelling cliché has become so fixed in the minds of frequent science fiction filmgoers that their presence might not have even registered as a flicker of thought…until now. In the post September 11th world, it is important to analyze the meaning and significance monuments play in the world of cinema so we can attempt to grasp their roles as staples of American culture. From the Statue of Liberty to the Washington Monument, these bastions of steel and concrete seem to take on a persona of their own in science fiction films, and it can even be argued that they themselves are powerful characters that progress the narrative and evoke a deep degree of pathos from the viewer.

Historically, monuments have been erected by groups or nations to recognize a person, a group of people, an ideal, or an important event. The normative function of a monument is to serve as a testament to social or national memory and to symbolize larger cultural, social, political, or national themes such as liberty, power, democracy, independence, justice, nationalism, and patriotism. This is precisely why monuments are such an aptly powerful choice for filmmakers to use as symbols to convey science fiction films’ greater message of terror, destruction or social change. Science fiction films have historically used monuments in three reoccurring ways: as a locator or landmark for a large U.S. city or the nation’s capital, as a relic of the past or a ruin, or as a site of mass destruction. By examining these functions one can appreciate how the science fiction film has used the normative function of monuments to inspire awe in the viewer and present larger themes that are specific to each picture.

In 1951, Klaatu and his robot Gort arrived in Washington, D.C. by flying saucer in Robert Wise’s Cold-War allegory, The Day the Earth Stood Still. They were on a mission to warn Earth’s people that if they did not live in peace, their planet would be destroyed. The usage of monuments locates the film within the realm of the real, known world and allows the unbelievable arrival of the aliens to be more believable. The audience is awestruck by the juxtaposition of familiar and unfamiliar in the same frame as Klaatu’s spaceship is parked in a baseball diamond in the heart of Washington. Secondly, these monuments serve as a visual device to remind the audience of the national ideals that are juxtaposed with those of the aliens. Although Klaatu and Gort initially visit Earth in peace, their second trip would mark the destruction of the planet for the greater good of the universe, unless the countries of the world come together in peace.

Amidst the chaos of Vietnam in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, dystopic science fiction films presented Earth in the future, where national monuments were used as reminders of a long erased past. These monuments, which have no meaning for the new civilizations, have become powerful symbols of all that has been lost, and force the audience to consider what brought the story’s actions both realistic and of national significance. The usage of monuments locates the film within the realm of the real, known world and allows the unbelievable arrival of the aliens to be more believable. The audience is awestruck by the juxtaposition of familiar and unfamiliar in the same frame as Klaatu’s spaceship is parked in a baseball diamond in the heart of Washington. Secondly, these monuments serve as a visual device to remind the audience of the national ideals that are juxtaposed with those of the aliens. Although Klaatu and Gort initially visit Earth in peace, their second trip would mark the destruction of the planet for the greater good of the universe, unless the countries of the world come together in peace.

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Pixels, Polygons and Perversion:  
A Brief History of the Video Game Controversy

By Tim Norberg

Since the early 70's, video games have been an extremely popular form of entertainment, captivating both the youth of our culture and recently more mature markets. However, even from the beginning, video games have been under constant fire from politicians, parents and other concerned citizens for supposedly corrupting America's youth. This corruption has allegedly taken many forms, from the evil influence of arcades to excessive sex and violence in video games. Recently, and especially during the days following the Columbine massacre, there has been a slew of lawsuits against game makers, as well as growing concerns about ratings systems that fail to limit access to mature content. Controversial and mature games bring up many questions, none of which are easy to answer. Is such material artistically justifiable, or is it simply a form of exploitation designed to sell more games? How do video games affect their players? Finally, what role does the government have to play in keeping mature material out of the hands of young audiences? These questions can only be answered through a look at the history of video game controversy, and it is only by examining these past issues that we will be able to figure out how to go about dealing with the video game conflict today.

In the early 70s, Pong became the first popular video game, creating a new form of commercial entertainment. Though there were concerns about arcades corrupting young minds like pool halls or movie theatres in days past, it was not until the game Death Race that video games stirred up their first controversy. Death Race was released in 1976 and featured a rather morbid premise and goal. The main objective in the game was to hit pedestrians with your car, causing a little white cross to sprout up at the spot of their demise. The game was almost immediately banned everywhere, but this did not hinder its popularity. In fact, the controversy surrounding Death Race made it even more attractive and exciting to gamers. Even at this early stage of game history, shocking material proved to be a big seller, a scenario which would be repeated countless times in the future. Even though the carnage was not overly realistic or graphic, Death Race was still considered a threat to young, impressionable minds.

Besides concerns over specific games, the atmosphere of arcades also came into question. A Time article from January 1982 notes community worries over the effect of games on children and the overall population, providing as an example the small town of Irvington, NY, which passed an ordinance limiting arcades to three machines each. However, in the article, worries about the dangers of arcades are quickly dispelled. The fears of drug-buzzed, beer drinking teen-agers hanging around video game parlors in menacing packs seem grossly exaggerated, and the article highlights the likelihood that trouble-making youngsters existed in droves long before arcades began to open.

Arcades were often seen as places of ill repute, like pool halls or early movie theatres, places where young people went to become corrupted. However, the threat that video game arcades posed to the American youth came from more than just a seedy atmosphere. There was also the danger of compulsive addiction. The aforementioned Time article tells the story of a man unable to pull himself away from the video game machine. “Two hours later, he is still battling the machine’s alien psychology—and his own,” it reads. Besides fighting the pixelated characters contained within the game, the video game player also must deal with the effect of the game on his mind, deciding between ceasing to play or putting in just one more quarter. Therefore, the true threat that arcades posed was contained within their video games, not the people playing the games or the arcades themselves. This new type of menace meant that home video games too could corrupt, even if they were free from the sleazy atmosphere found in arcades.

In his 1982 book The Mall, Jerry Jacobs notes that besides being a form of entertainment, video games “have redefined major merchandising markets, become a public health menace, altered family patterns in the home,
and, according to some authorities, threaten
normal childhood socialization and personality
formation.” By the time of *The Mall’s* publish-
ing, games had become influential enough to
cause cultural change, but according to Jacobs
this change was a negative force that further
alienated children from their parents. Since they
first became popular, several studies have been
carried out which examine video games’ effects
on children. These studies have often had con-
flicting results: One study found that video game
practice led to greater hand-eye coordination,
while another found that games put children in
an altered state of consciousness that was
addicting and possibly harmful. There is still no
overwhelming consensus about the effects of
video games on children, but the first “video
game generation” is all grown up, and what they
choose to do and create with their lives will tell
us more than any study possibly could.

In the past few years, a new trend shows
that as kids grow older, they continue to play
video games. The games have been getting con-
sistently more adult-oriented, and adult games
have been selling well, showing that players are
not outgrowing their habits, and that the indus-
try is growing along with them. This growth did
take a good deal of time, and it was not until
the early 90’s that more adult games gained true
popularity. By then, the young Nintendo-play-
ing children had matured, and two games came
along that catered to their ever changing wants
and needs.

*Mortal Kombat* and *Night Trap* were released
in 1993, and inspired a controversy similar to
stir up surrounding *Death Race*. Both pushed
the amount of gore and sexuality seen in video
games thus far to the limit. *Mortal Kombat* was
an arcade fighting game similar to *Street Fighter*,
but with much more brutal violence. It became
a huge phenomenon, appealing to teenage boys
(or pre-teenage boys) who wanted to see hyper-
violent, horror-film like material. *Mortal Kombat*
displayed violence between photo-realistic
characters, and included excessive amounts of
blood and gore. The popular game soon left
the dusty interiors of arcades and was brought
into the home, seeing release on both Sega
Genesis and Super Nintendo. By the time the
home version of the game was released, Sega
had implemented a ratings system for its games
similar to the movie ratings system, allowing for
more controversial content such as violence,
gore, sexuality and swearing. *Mortal Kombat* was
released on the Sega Genesis with most of its
violence intact, while the Nintendo version was
censored. Despite the different gaming system’s
two attempts to exhibit some control over their
audiences, a huge uproar soon spread across
America, as mom found little Johnny ripping
out his friend’s spine in a horrible scene of
digitized death.

*Night Trap* was released the same year,
and was one of the first games to feature full
motion video as part of its game play. In the
game, the player is challenged with protect-
ing a sorority from a hooded killer. If they fail,
players see graphic death scenes, but no matter
what the conclusion is, they still bear witness
to suggestive scenes of young sorority sisters in
their underwear throughout the game. Similar
to *Mortal Kombat*, *Night Trap* allowed teenagers
to experience visceral thrills at home, as they
became either the perpetrator or the victim of
violent crimes. Senator Joe Lieberman, seeing
these games, held a hearing on violence, sexual-
ity, and other prurient material in video games,
using *Night Trap* and *Mortal Kombat* as examples
of the depravity children are exposed to in the
video game universe. He said that he was
“...outraged... I really wish we could ban them
constitutionally.” While Lieberman did not man-
age to ban video games, he did cause the gaming
industry to implement a mandatory ratings sys-
tem, labeling every game that was released. This
allowed more controversial games to be distrib-
uted, while at the same time appeased worries
about children accessing mature titles.

After the Columbine massacre, many dif-
ferent pundits provided differing opinions on
why Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris killed their
classmates. One of the leading theories was that
besides social alienation, violent video games,
movies and music caused their outburst. In fact,
shortly after the massacre, parents of the vic-
tims filed a lawsuit against movie studios, video
game manufacturers and music companies for
influencing their children’s deaths. Then Senator
John Ashcroft also declared violent games to be
one of the main causes of school shootings, say-
ing that video games “sometimes literally teach
shooting.” Games were once again seen as a
harmful influence on children instead of as an
art form.

But why do controversial and more adult
games see distribution in the first place? One of
the main reasons why games provide controver-
sial content is that it sells, as evidenced by the
successes of both *Mortal Kombat* and *Night Trap*,
and the more recent hit *Grand Theft Auto 3*. This
type of material appeals to the predominantly
teenage male market, appealing their desire
to see things their parents do not want them
to. These games can also provide an outlet for
acting on aggressions, but it still is not clear
whether this is beneficial or harmful. Some
games need to have such content in order to
convey a certain feeling or atmosphere. Both
*Night Trap* and *Mortal Kombat* echo the feeling
of horror films, while *Grand Theft Auto 3* uses its
M rated material to follow the genre conven-
tions of crime films. However, there is a differ-
ence between truly adult games and exploitative
games, even if that difference can often be rather
small. Adult-oriented games use their content
to build and deepen their form, while exploita-
tive games use their violence, sexuality and
profanity simply to appeal to a young teenage
market. Certainly some games can be a hit with
teenagers while also conveying more grown-up
storylines, but in many cases explicit material is
used just in order to attract sales, and not as
an integral, necessary part of the game play. In
some cases, both elements are there, providing
both a compelling, adult oriented story as well
as prurient material in order to harness a larger
audience. Therefore, it is tough to judge video
games on what they set out to accomplish, but in
many cases the more supposedly adult-oriented
material is not really very mature at all.

Overall, there are no easy answers to the
problem of how to handle more mature content
in video games. On one hand, the growing adult
audience for these games demands and deserves
content geared towards a more mature demo-
graphic, but the problem lies in who has access
to this content, and how much control is
involved in the limiting of that access. Both the
government and game manufacturers themselves
have attempted to solve this problem, but it still
remains. As long as video games continue to be
popular, they will also remain controversial, and
the debate will go on.
Daniel Clowes is the creator of *Eightball*, one of the titles that re-defined the alternative comics world in the eighties and nineties.

Clowes, along with director Terry Zwigoff (*Crumb*) co-wrote *Ghost World*, an adaptation of one of the stories from *Eightball*, into a screenplay for which the two men were nominated for an Academy Award. I spoke to Clowes on Superbowl Sunday about the cinema, the comics, and hairdos. Neither one of us watched the game.

**Eyecandy:** So what movies have you seen that you liked this year?

**Daniel Clowes:** I guess my favorite movie recently is *Adaptation*. That was something I’ve always wanted to do, something that started out as one kind of story and ended up completely different, and I could never figure out a way to do it that wasn’t contrived or forced, and he [Charlie Kaufman, screenwriter and main character] figured out a way to do it. I liked *Adaptation* and *Being John Malkovich*. I think they don’t take themselves so seriously, as “serious films vying for the Oscar,” and yet they’re a lot more interesting and in their own way serious than a lot of the stuff that does get taken seriously. It clearly developed organically. He really did start off trying to do that adaptation and then it turned into what it was. As someone who’s gone through that process I found that it was just very interesting. I was very connected to that film. I’ve had a lot of the same experiences of being on movie sets and trying to say hello to the actors and having them just walk right past me. I could relate to it.

**EC:** That’s so weird. It’s funny how screenwriters are just left out of the whole fame thing.

**DC:** It is a strange thing and I can’t quite figure out how it happened. It clearly wasn’t that way in the early days, I mean, you look at old movie posters and the writer has bigger billing than the director—more like theater—and then it slowly turned into something else. Certainly in a lot of films, I can see, it’s all the director. Like Hitchcock, he had the entire film figured out in his head visually and then he would hire some guy to write the dialogue. That’s not exactly the same as someone who comes up with an original script and has all the scenes figured out.

**EC:** And at any point in that process did you come to a Kaufman-esque moment where you were like, “Hey, the three-act structure, there’s really something to that?”

**DC:** I still don’t know what the three acts are. All that stuff is baffling to me. I purposely never read any of those “how-to” books. I just thought I would disbelieve every word of it and it would influence me in a really bad way. I just figure I know all of that stuff anyway. I have friends who have note cards with that stuff on their bulletin boards and have all those rules, and I just think, boy...

**EC:** Maybe it’s more something to help you when you’re blocked. So was the hardest thing changing the whole organic structure of it to fit the feature film format?

**DC:** The hardest thing was to let go of what I’d already done. Ultimately once I let go of that it was just astounding.
ended up being far more work than I'd ever done. I probably made minimum wage on that movie. But it was much more rewarding... it's always been a mistake to go into something thinking "here's my easy paycheck..."

EC: Like "OK Cola," right? [OK Cola was an ill-fated project by a major soft drink company for a soda for Generation X which would have package art by underground cartoonists and which would be neither good nor bad, just "OK."]

DC: (laughs) Well, that was probably the one example of when it worked. When we were approached with that I called up a friend of mine who's also a cartoonist named Charles Burns and we said, "this is the most pathetic idea, this will never be released."

EC: Cynicism proves correct. So, the thing in Ghost World which stuck out the most to me is the fact that Seymour and Enid slept together [They don't in the comic. In fact in the comic there is no Seymour character].

DC: I find that odd, because everyone seems to think that that was some cynical thing we added for box office dollars, but it was something that really came organically. It seemed inevitable. We could have gone either way and we were kind of leaning against it because it was going to look gratuitous, but it just seemed absolutely natural.

EC: I just had to reprocess it. With the comic, one of the things that makes the world "ghost" is that there isn't any significant consummation.

DC: Right, although I always had the idea that Enid had quite a lot of experience for an eighteen year old. There are implications that she had gone through stuff when she was much younger and gotten over it.

EC: Wow. I always just assumed that that one experience was the extent of her experience.

DC: Yeah, I guess I've always had a different idea of Enid than everybody else.

EC: That's how it works. Speaking of that, it seems that with the Ghost World comic the audience was very specific—everyone knows a John Ellis, everyone knows the skinhead yuppie... but with a movie it's seen by a mainstream audience and people can respond to it in unexpected ways.

DC: The people who read the comic are kind of an elite audience—people who will seek out this kind of material, which makes them kind of the top one percent of consumers, I guess. So they do know a guy like John Ellis, whereas the mainstream audience doesn't know that kind of guy at all. My parents were like, "where did that come from? Was that guy supposed to be a good guy, or a bad guy..."

EC: He's a real guy. You can't make that stuff up.

DC: I'm kind of surprised that we didn't get more responses to stuff like that. "You have an anti-Semitic character and you don't address it." It's kind of comforting that that didn't become a big issue because that would have been so irrelevant.

EC: It's just part of the realism of the whole thing. "The ugliness of life!" Can you delve a little into your artistic relationship with the past?

DC: I've thought about the various reasons for that, and it all comes down to an aesthetic preference, which certainly comes out of some psychological motivation. In my case, I think I was happy as a real young kid and then the whole hippy thing came along and life sort of disintegrated for me and I always sort of resented that intrusion. Even though I have sort of a fondness for it because it was exciting, too, it was very disruptive. I found the aesthetic after that point to be sort of intentionally ugly, like insulting or something. I always felt that cultural progress moved too quickly and there were things that hadn't been done with previous styles. Everything was moving along so quickly, trying to be constantly new, that people never thought of ways of recombining already-existing styles. Each era has a specific style that has a certain tone and intonation all its own that can be used to convey something very specific.

EC: I think the most tangible example of that is noir. It's so enduring, and people have never stopped doing it...

DC: That's actually something Terry and I talked about a lot with the look of Ghost World. We talked about early directors like Billy Wilder, making Double Indemnity, you imagine they were not trying to make something that's aesthetically beautiful, although you look at it today and it has this haunting beauty, but at the time I think they were just trying to convey the squalor of an American city. To them it was this run-down, horrible looking, culturally bereft wasteland, and we tried to somehow do a modern version of that for Ghost World... an endless series of strip malls, but it also had an aesthetic quality that could transcend that if you take it out of context. I think most people that do noir films just try to recapture that beautiful look rather than trying to find the ugliness that the other guys were trying to find.

EC: Well, you seem like a pretty psychologically analytical guy. Since I'm calling from Santa Cruz I thought I'd ask what you think dreadlocks are all about?

DC: (laughs) You don't see them so much any more, but in Berkeley [where Clowes lives] they never go out of style and I'm sure Santa Cruz is the same way. I don't know—it seems somehow weirder on a guy, like its some kind of castration anxiety... like you want thirteen dicks growing out of your head (laughs). But I could be wrong.

EC: I'll get back to you on that. You gonna watch the Superbowl?

DC: No. I'm just praying my house doesn't get burned down.

To view this interview in its entirety please visit http://eyecandy.ucsc.edu
The 1991 war with Iraq has become more than an exclusively military and/or political event in history. Catalyzed by events leading up to and occurring during the second Persian Gulf War, the extent to, and means by which our relationship with Iraq has been formed and disseminated throughout our culture has become increasingly more salient. America’s understanding of and positioning in relation to Iraq is highly influenced by the ongoing conflict's representation, reproduction, and reception across media and genres. An analysis of different media forms including documentaries, newscasts, and video games enables us to view America’s cultural and ideological structures through the media landscape.

The passage of time allows us to look back on the events of the past with certain tendencies of the present and imbue what has been with elements of a selective memory. With the speed of communication, the sheer size of the news/information media, and the seemingly exponential growth of military technology, complex post-Persian Gulf War I analysis was quickly marketed for public consumption. Subsequently, the 1991 conflict was an intriguing item for the American people for several reasons. First, despite the warnings of failure, America was successfully able to lead a coalition of diverse nations against Iraq. Further, the campaign was over in a matter of months despite many predictions of more sustained fighting. Finally, overwhelming victory was achieved with surprisingly few American casualties. These factors combined with a need to overcome the malaise of Vietnam, and formed a tangible desire to exalt the spectacular U.S. victory.

One of the reasons for the overwhelming coalition victory of 1991 was the success of an extensive air campaign, which has been showcased on the Discovery Channel’s Inside the Kill Box. This technically oriented series focuses on the United States’ use of air power to achieve victory in Iraq. The majority of Inside the Kill Box is devoted to examining the planning stages and explicating the desert conflict, and includes tours of various air force bases, interviews, and general aircraft footage. However, beyond the documentary style sections, Inside the Kill Box produces a strange disjunctive effect. Rather than using actual air combat footage, engagements are often represented by computer generated images. An unlikely third person overhead view and rather elementary animation characterize these recreated battle sequences. We are placed in a virtually impossible position over the battlefield, and the “aircraft,” though resembling planes, might as well be little flashing triangles. In other words, these shapes are purely representational, with no connection to the existing object of reference other than the direct link assigned by the show. These planes cannot fully connote reality because they were generated through the logic of the screen, not captured from space and time. Viewers maintain a separation between the computer graphics and the real world because at all times we are aware of this construction. The closest we ever get to the fighting in the first person perspective is with the video captured from the nose of a laser-guided bomb. This also limits our sense of reality, as the screen we see goes snowy the second of impact, severing the natural cause and effect relationship of the real world.

In addition to Inside the Kill Box, the History Channel has also aired a series of three special presentations called Operation Desert Storm, subtitled “The Air Campaign,” “The Ground War,” and “The Final Showdown.” Unlike Inside the Kill Box, the History Channel’s series is significantly broader in scope and features more recorded action from the front. Yet even with the addition of primary footage, the History Channel manages to avoid showing dead people using the logic of the screen. For most Americans, the Iraqis were more abstract than substantial because their actions did little to affect our lives. Uncoincidentally, when we see dead Iraqi soldiers, the process of piecefication, or the breakdown of a unified whole into components, primarily provides images of hands and arms rather than full bodies. Due to the fact that the Iraqis’ were so immaterial to us, these lifeless appendages become necessary signifiers suggesting that their owners no longer have the ability...
to affect the world.

Both Inside the Kill Box and Operation Desert Storm provide us with what has been framed as a common historical account of the first Persian Gulf War. However, what is shown is not simply history from a western point of view, but a history mediated by technology. Through editing and computer graphics we are dangerously positioned to regard the sanitized world of the screen as a complete reality. The selective history within these shows invites us to subscribe to a version of the conflict that does not exist.

Television is by far the foremost provider of news to the American public. Now, over ten years after the first war in Iraq, the U.S. government and the news media turned their attentions in tandem from Al-Qaeda and the conflict in Afghanistan to the threat posed by Iraq under Saddam Hussein. Prior to the 2003 coalition victory and the subsequent reconstructive phase, there was special focuses on several major cable news networks in the form of hour-long daily programs devoted solely to the tensions between the United States and Iraq. Showdown Iraq (CNN), Countdown Iraq (MSNBC), and Target Iraq (Fox News) all employ genre devices common in American media, but which are somewhat unintuitive for the news.

The first element of multi-generic incorporation is drama. Even before the first words are spoken, or the first pictures are displayed to audiences, we are aware of what kind of programming we are about to watch from the title itself. Just as we prepare ourselves in certain ways to expect an action film as opposed to a comedy, so too do we tailor our expectations by the confrontational nature of the titles. Hosts who masterfully introduce and categorize guests into various camps further emphasize the oppositional nature of these programs. The confrontational situation between these guests enters a new dimension as they are placed within separate televisual boxes. This visual compartmentalization can be deceptive on two levels. First we may be given the impression that speakers are fundamentally opposed, creating drama out of perceived conflict within the show, eliminating any possible middle ground and disallowing for synthesis or overlap of ideas. Secondly, we are also positioned to believe that individual ideologies may be different, when they may realistically be more similar than not.

In addition to the very dramatic aspect of these shows focusing on Iraq, there is also a degree of sports spectacle involved. Much like we might expect a rundown of statistics for a starting quarterback in the Super Bowl, viewers sometimes receive statistical information on planes and land vehicles from retired military personnel. Much like their NFL counterparts, various vehicles are featured zooming around the field, displaying their prowess. Furthermore, Iraq news programs usually feature a retired military officer—much like how sports programming uses retired players—to discuss tactics and objectives to viewers. The retired officers explain the maneuvers and formations of troops and vehicles with sweeping motions and game-play style language. In this way, the boundaries of the battlefield and the playing field have noticeably begun to blur.

With the incorporation of genre conventions and visual techniques not traditionally associated with news programming, the cable news networks “Iraq” shows have taken on a multicentric identity. As we become aware of these common devices of the screen often used in dramas or sports, it becomes apparent that the news has become increasingly less interested in being informative and more concerned with entertainment value. This logic of the screen that mediates our information and situates us prior to reception is not confined to television broadcasting. In addition to its appearance on television programming, which both celebrates a neatly edited past and a sensationalized present, the 1991 conflict in the Persian Gulf has also infiltrated and proliferated within another media form: the video game. In this way America’s conflict with Iraq has moved still deeper into popular culture and our collective consciousness.

Video games have long dealt directly with historical conflicts such as WWII (Medal of Honor) and the Cold War (Soviet Strike). Similarly, more recent games have dealt explicitly with America’s 1991 military involvement in Iraq. One of these games, Conflict Desert Storm, is marketed by a focus on realism. Initially eye-catching is the manner in which the game is advertised on television. The commercial for the game begins with a fake newscast in which the anchor exclaims, “The ground offensive has begun.” In this way, the promotional campaign for Conflict Desert Storm uses the genre conventions of another familiar media form (the television newscast) in order to make the product seem more authentic, more real. Further, since Conflict Desert Storm takes the first person perspective, it allows players to occupy a very different position than when viewing the war on television. Now ordinary Americans are given the orders, and pull the trigger.

Yet despite this first person perspective, being in vivid color, sharply contrasted with the static gray of the laser-guided bomb video, the computer-generated nature of the visuals continues to have a distancing effect on us. Although constructed from the basic model of human perception, the images still lack the indexical nature found in the real world. That is, because the images we see are generated by the game itself, the objects and people represented have never existed in space and time, and therefore can at best only provide us with a simulated reality, and a sense of first person perspective. As representation however, Conflict Desert Storm situates players in another significant position. Since our mission objectives are to “seek, locate, and destroy all enemy targets,” the likeness of Saddam Hussein in the cross hairs necessarily brings our entertainment to a political level.

The 1991 Persian Gulf War has become more than politics and militarism; the war is now a part of American popular culture and a lens through which we see the world. The familiar modes and conventions by which we receive subject matter have portrayed our nation’s conflict with Iraq both then and now as similar to that of a fictional narrative, one in which we need not participate or debate, but rather only complacently view as spectacle. Through our screens we are presented with a version of the world, its content changed by the forms in which “reality” is delivered.
From One Film to the Next: A look into African American films, and the concept of type-casting

By Kahleelah M. Goodine

Have you ever purchased a movie ticket or rented a video or DVD, in hopes of originality and surprise in content, only to find that the movie focuses on similar clichés of say, sub/urban life? Have the majority of films, and/or other forms of media primarily fed you the same actors and actresses playing the ever-occurring cheating boyfriends and husbands and unfaithful girlfriends and wives? Many will undoubtedly answer “yes.” This a major result of typecasting, by which the producers and directors cleverly isolate particular roles for actors who stand out, or have the greatest impact on viewers. Although some actors attain positive types, casting them into a greater light, the actors undergo more negative experiences with the impact. In the case of African Americans, typecasting began with stereotypes, which were constructed as cinematic depictions of their presumed behavior. In contemporary cinema, stereotypes have transformed into character types, which do not initially encourage behavioral assumptions, but still retain the framework of the stereotype. Thus, many prominent African American actors find themselves absorbed into the overused realm of typecasting.

Typecasting is the coining of a particular cinematic character that an actor “fits,” which is then transferred from one film to the next. Hollywood then capitalizes on that role, identifying an actor or actress with a character type that will inevitably trail them through their entire entertainment career. According to chapter nine of Jasper Garrison’s book Smoking Gun, “Some actors get typecast on the strength of one role that must have left a big impression in somebody’s mind.” Such impressions have greatly affected African American actors, often leaving them trapped within an expectation centered around that coined personality. Any attempt to break free from that constraint almost always serves as a potential decline in their entertainment success.

Many African American actors fall prey to this stigmatizing system. Its roots stem from early silent cinema, as explored in Donald Bogle’s book Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Film, which traces the history of African American stereotypes in cinema. Bogle highlights female stereotypes such as the Jezebel (temptress), Sapphire (hot-tempered bitch) and Mammy (domestic, and loveless nurturer), and male stereotypes such as the Tom (submissive and saintly), Coon (buffoon) and Buck (violent and over-sexed, seeking white women). Although it is delightful to see so many African American actors with many more opportunities in the entertainment industry of today, it is still a strain, and often a bore, to only find them in recurring character types. Hollywood seemingly recycles these types, with either more than one person playing the same character type in different films, or one actor carrying the type from one film to the next. There is little allowance for versatility, in that the actor will probably not be considered to play a role completely different from what they are used to playing.

So who are those affected by the media’s practice of typecasting? Many actors and actresses are affected, but primary focus will be placed upon two African American actors and two African American actresses, categorized into four contemporary commercial roles stemming from the Jezebel, Sapphire, Mammy, Tom, Coon and Buck. These stock characters of an earlier era were based on racial, stereotypical behavior, but have birthed current types, which exist beyond the confines of race, but are still very limiting. Some of these character types are quite similar to the early stereotypes of silent cinema.

The “cheat” is a role often taken on by African American male actors. Actor Michael Beach serves as a prime example. Beach, who has starred in two successful films (directed by an African American
and featuring an African American cast), is depicted in both cases as the cheating husband. In Forest Whitaker’s Waiting to Exhale (1995), Beach plays a successful business owner who, after an eleven-year marriage, cheats on his wife Reba (Angelica Huston), devoted wife and mother, and leaves her for another woman. In George Tillman, Jr.’s Soul Food (1997), Beach plays Miles, a successful attorney, married to Terry (Vanessa Williams). Lack of romance leads Miles to cheat with Terry’s cousin Faith (who embodies the temptress role/type). Beach’s roles could be interpreted as a gentler Buck, in that he creates (spousal) havoc. Both films have landed Michael Beach many other roles, quite a few of them portrayals of unfaithful lovers. What could viewers be learning from this? It appears that the stereotype of the wild, “oversexed,” sexual predator, the Buck, is still at large, but in a seemingly more watered down, acceptable form.

Actor/comedian Martin Lawrence, mostly known for his work as lively and controversially comical characters in his films, could be considered the contemporary Coon. His many character forms range from a petty thief or con man destined for jail time (if time has not been previously spent), to, ironically, a deputy official stirring up ruckus. Among Lawrence’s many films, Les Mayfield’s Blue Streak (1999) features the star as a jewel thief, recently released from jail, in hot pursuit of the diamonds he had hidden before his incarceration. Raja Gosnell’s Big Momma’s House (2000) features Lawrence as an undercover cop posing as Big Momma, a southern matriarch, to catch the real Big Momma’s granddaughter’s bank-robbing ex-boyfriend. Such comical character portrayals have driven Martin Lawrence’s career to the top, but his roles tend to be either vulgar or stereotypical. Could there be a deeper force at work, where characters with negative connotations are to be the dominant drivers used to further “improve” an African American actor’s career?

Moving into the realm of African American actresses brings us to Sanaa Lathan, a recently acclaimed actress who has also had her share of roles in a variety of films. The majority of these films have been romantic comedies and dramas. Most of her roles have been centered around nostalgia and marriage, and usually label her as the childhood friend-turned-soul mate type. One example of her alleged type can be seen in Rick Famuyiwa’s The Wood (1999), in which Lathan plays Alisha, the childhood love interest of Mike (Omar Epps), soon to be reunited with him at their dear friend’s wedding. Gina Prince-Blythwood’s Love and Basketball (2000) features Lathan as Monica, childhood friend-turned college girlfriend-turned wife of Mike (Omar Epps). After a 6-year post-college separation, they rekindle their love, two weeks before Mike is to marry another woman (Tyra Banks). Both The Wood and Love and Basketball depict Lathan as the devout friend, which seemingly reflects the Mammy in that Lathan begins as a loveless girl waiting in hope of marrying the man she will eventually fall in love with years later. To add a twist, she gets the man in the end, thus justifying a woman’s undying faith as she waits patiently for her true love.

Lastly in the list of types comes the attitude-bearing shrew. Prime candidate of such a label is Gabrielle Union, also a recently renowned African American actress. Union’s primary roles have consisted of her playing a new-age mix of the Sapphire and the Mammy, who both men and women attempt to steer clear of. In Peyton Reed’s Bring It On (2000), Union stars as the stern captain of an urban, Compton, California high school cheerleading team, whose routines are being stolen and used to win championships by a suburban, predominately Caucasian high school. Union’s strict, “take no bullshit” character is apparently constructed to tame and protect her squad. Such a protective, but bitchy role is also explored in Gary Hardwick’s Deliver Us From Eva (2003), a film in which Union stars as Eva, the villainous, but protective big sister who meddles in the love lives of her sisters and their male counterparts. Because of her loveless life, the male counterparts set her up on a blind date with a man (LL Cool J), hoping that she will be content enough to leave her sisters and their love lives alone. Gabrielle Union’s character types tend to fluctuate between the shrew and the new Jezebel, or temptress. In Mark Brown’s Two Can Play That Game (2001), Union stars as a mildly aggressive, subliminally sexual executive, who takes interest in another woman’s man. It seems that she plays African American women with either an intolerable attitude or uncontrollable sexuality. However, because Union engages in more than one character type, she could seemingly become not a typecast victim, but the example of the overall stigmatized African American female.

So what do viewers gather from this? On one hand, in terms of Sanaa Lathan and Gabrielle Union’s character in Bring It On, Hollywood provides its audiences with key figures that could help to strengthen the African American community with moral and family values, whether it be through protecting the innocent, embracing life-long friendships and restoring romance in relationships, or looking after one’s younger siblings and other family members. On the other hand, as far as Martin Lawrence, Michael Beach and Gabrielle Union’s character in Two Can Play That Game are concerned, America is exposed to roles that do not fairly represent the attitudes and behaviors of African American people. It is imperative not to take such demeaning roles as accurate portrayals, but also important to address the types of roles that African Americans are typecast into, and to find ways to alter the mind frame that Hollywood has embedded into its faithful viewers. Otherwise the cycle will continue.
I first got my first dose of Marumari when I was searching for MP3's by one of my favorite electronic groups, Boards Of Canada, on Kazaa. Up popped a track that listed its artists as “Boards Of Canada and Marumari.” I gave it a whirl, found it different than most Boards Of Canada songs, but liked it nonetheless. I then found a song by another fine electronic music group, Mouse On Mars, also with Marumari, and enjoyed it as well. So, I then went on a quest to download every song this Marumari did, and found plenty of tracks that were accredited solely to Marumari, and no one else. After a week or so I became obsessed, as I often do with newly discovered music. I played the single “Baby M” at least three times a day. This was the music I had been searching for: spacey, electronic funk, with warm, inventive basslines, head bobbing beats, and poppy synth melodies. Surely this Marumari had to be some reclusive English duo named Fergus and Simon, who both wore baggy pants, dark sweaters, beanies, and about a week’s worth of stubble. But no, Marumari is 27 year old Josh Presseisen, an outgoing computer graphics artist from upstate New York, with a wife, a dog and a 10 month old son named Aven. I sent him an email about the possibility of doing an interview and he more than happily agreed. Over the course of a few weeks we talked repeatedly over AOL Instant Messenger, and hit it off quite well. He even told me that those tracks on which he collaborated with Boards Of Canada and Mouse on Mars were complete fakes. He had posted them on Napster a few years back to draw in fans. His ploy worked. “They spread like hotcakes,” he said. While Presseisen is hardly elusive, he is certainly hard to pin down for more than a few minutes, with his hectic work schedule and home life. But finally, on a late night in April, we sat down for a good half hour, and discussed music, art, computer software, the environment, genre labels, clichés and Kenny G, with the occasional interruption from the crying baby Aven.

Eyecandy: So, since there is almost no information on you on the internet could you give me some background info, like where you were born and raised, anything that would be of importance in your background?

Josh Presseisen: I was born and raised in upstate New York, in farm country. I spent most of my childhood in the woods. I didn't get into computers until I was out of college.

EC: Where did you go to college?


EC: So you obviously studied fashion?

JP: Nope (smiles). I studied illustration. They have a big art program there. A lot of my friends went into toy design. I was going to do that, but I ended up getting involved with music.

EC: How did that come about?

JP: I was in a band, and we had a record contract, so I decided that school wasn’t my thing. I wanted to do music all the time. I was the guitarist/singer/songwriter. Sasha, my wife, was also in the band, as she is in Marumari now. She plays keyboards. We played this Friday at Middlebury College in Vermont, not a big show, but a lot of fun, people dancing, having a good time.

EC: How do you do the music for Marumari?

JP: The two programs that I use are Audiomulch and Cool Edit Pro. I've used them since I started pretty much. Hold on, baby crying. (Two minutes pass)

JP: Ok, I'm back

EC: Ok, so do you use synths, or do you program all of your melodies and beats?

JP: I use synths, samples, and I also program. I have an Arp Odyssey [synth], but I don't really use it. I use soft synths mostly. Hold, baby again. (Another two minutes pass)

JP: Ok. Soft synths are programs that behave exactly like a real synth. There is built in midi, which I use a lot to make melodies.

EC: So for most of your melodies, you're actually laying out stuff on a timeline most of the time?

JP: About half and half. I use the Arpeggiator built into Audiomulch a lot, and the bassline generator.

EC: Ah, yes, love those basslines. By the way I think those categories like IDM [Intelligent Dance Music, which Marumari is often called] and Shoegazing are really stupid. IDM is especially insulting

JP: Yeah, but it makes things easier to talk about. I use [IDM] a lot. To me its just another genre. It doesn't even make a difference for me, it gives me...
a basis for what it sounds like.

EC: I just think it's funny that a lot of people who get labeled a certain genre are like "Shoegazing, or trip hop, I'm not that, what are you talking about?"

JP: (laughs) Yeah, I'm pretty much lumped in with IDM. I don't care though, although I think "IDM" is certainly dead.

EC: Was it ever alive? Or why is it dead?

JP: There is nothing exciting coming out in our genre, at least I haven't heard anything exciting.

EC: Speaking of what you've heard, here's the obvious question, but it's pretty necessary I think: what are your influences or "what's been in your CD player lately (God I feel like such a cli-che) ?"

JP: Dude - don't worry about cliches -everyone has to do it sometimes. You can't be original 100% of the time, no one is, and artists always steal, me included.

EC: So who do you steal from?

JP: I steal from anything I'm influenced by: Tina Turner, Hall and Oates, Alan Parsons Project, Fleetwood Mac. I'm a big ‘lite rock” fanatic.

EC: How about Michael Jackson?

JP: Yep

EC: Yeah, that part towards the end of the first half of “Baby M,” [the single from his album Supermogadon] where the beat gets funkier, that's so Michael Jackson.

JP: Actually “Baby M” is a giant Kenny G sample.

EC: (laughs)...

JP: Download a song called “Baby G” by Kenny G.

EC: Really?

JP: I took most of the song, for what its worth

EC: NOOOOOOOO!!! (laughs)

JP: I did the usual amount of tweaking. There are not too many Kenny G fans so no one would ever notice.

EC: What kind of feel do you find yourself mostly going for in your music? Because most of your music seems pretty optimistic....

JP: Its’ definitely optimistic most of the time. My best music is created when I’m in a really good mood. I haven’t made much good music lately. Does that say anything? (smiles)...Actually I’m just too busy at work and at home with the baby.

EC: What do you do for a living?

JP: I’m an artist. I do graphics and 3D animation for a small company (www.neoscape.com) with 15 people. It’s mostly architectural rendering for architects and developers. We are actually going after some of the World Trade Center stuff right now—Liebeskind. He does amazing stuff. I’m also designing my house right now. It’s a 3 dome home. I’m building it so it can be walked around in real time on the computer as well. I’m sort of obsessed with domes right now

EC: Are you strictly into the underground thing, or if someone offered to turn you into the next Moby by putting “Baby M” on every car commercial in the land, would you do it?

JP: I would take up that offer in a second because it could help fund the Land Arts Foundation and/or become my full time job.

EC: Tell me a bit about the Land Arts Foundation.

JP: Basically it’s designed to give money toward environmental charities. I’m recruiting artists and musicians, to donate their works to be sold. I’m also setting up a few charitable events. The best thing for the foundation would be someone who has a good reputation and well known name that could donate.

EC: Do you have lawyers and all those representatives, or do you pretty much handle business on your own in terms of the music?

JP: [My record label] Carpark handles most of everything for me. I don’t worry about it, thank God...I’m too busy to worry about it! Besides, its only one fiftieth of my income anyway.

EC: Wow!

JP: Yeah, I don’t make much from music

EC: I’ve noticed that you and some other electronic artists like Boards Of Canada and Telefon Tel Aviv are really interested in images of nature (both of their websites as well as yours contain images of natural settings). How do you think electronic music (which by definition is a synthetic medium) relates to nature?

JP: To me it’s because I miss nature. I’m on the computer too much. I want to be in the woods.

EC: And your music emulates nature, or is nostalgic for it?

JP: I think more nostalgic. It’s a longing. You would ask,”How come you aren’t in the woods then?”

EC: Maybe, yes.

JP: I’ve gotten myself into suburbia. No way out dude...I was planning on being a hermit when I was in 7th grade...Oh well (smiles)...Wife and kid, job, and dog...

For more information on Josh Presseisen’s music please visit www.marumari.com
For more information on The Land Arts Foundation please visit www.landarts.org
This article is about freedom. Don’t roll your eyes at me. Peek out past the pitiful veil of oppression (you’re not that oppressed), and get hip to this concept: freedom. It used to be our national commodity. Land of the free and the free range chicken. It might seem silly now, when the thinkers keep telling us we’re slaves to the system, and the movies tell us we’re gonna be slaves to the robots, and Zack de la Rocha throws the word freedom back in our faces with a thundering, “Yeah Right!” But it still exists in theory.

How to write an article on freedom? Allow me to free-associate: The Pony Express.

I always wanted to be a rider for the Pony Express. Fuck the postal service and their schemes and the mailbag and the urgent correspondences stashed within. It’s all a beautifully orchestrated excuse to dig your spurs in and ride. Just ride. The Pony Express sounds like freedom to me. It smacks of the American Dream. Future filmmakers, there’s a movie in that piece of history. I’ll let you have that idea, free of charge. Because this article is about freedom. Feel free to read it.

Consider this: in 1914 Erwin G. "Cannonball" Baker saddles up and digs his spurs into a 61 cubic inch, V-twin Indian motorcycle, and rides it straight across the country. It takes him a mere 11 days, 12 hours, and 10 minutes. Then on April Fool’s day of 1971, a fool and his foolishly decked out Dodge van does the same thing in 44 hours. The fool works for Car & Driver. He turns it into an event. The fool is Brock Yates. The event becomes the Cannonball Baker Sea to Shining Sea Memorial Trophy Dash. Four years later, the Hollywood machine starts churning out the films. In all, six movies have been made about the Cannonball (which was only run five times), and while it’s difficult to describe any of them as good, it’s that first one that proves to be the worst.

1975’s Death Race 2000 is a spectacular waste of celluloid. Starring David Carradine and Sylvester Stallone and based only loosely on Yates’ Dash, it tells the story of a futuristic cross-country car race where causing destruction and death are just as important to winning as, well...winning. It’s badder than bad, but unfortunately develops a cult following. But director Paul Bartel gets confused and thinks the cult follows him. Sorry, Paul, they follow Sly.

Nevertheless, a year later he puts out another. Again with Carradine, this one’s called Cannonball, and as the name implies, relates more directly to the real deal (although it’s still more of a kill-fest than a rollicking good time). But Carradine doesn’t unleash any kung fu, and Bartel seems to be getting worse with each outing. Thankfully where freedom is the American Dream, capitalism is the American Reality, and in that same year of 1976, Bartel’s film has competition. It’s stuntman extraordinaire Chuck Bail who bails the concept out after Bartel’s fumble, with The Gumball Rally. True to the nature and spirit of the actual event, this number puts the ball back in play, so to speak, and is this author’s favorite of the pack. Word has it that Yates hates it, but too bad, it’s a free country. Besides, he’ll get his chance behind the viewfinder.

But let’s pause and ponder what we have so far. Three films in two years, all with the same muse, and the audiences keep trickling back. What gives?

Consider this: in 1989’s The Hunt For Red October, one defecting Russian says to the other, “I want a pickup truck, and I want to drive it across America, from state to state.” Of course, I’m paraphrasing, but that was his dream, his American Dream. But then that actor isn’t really Russian, so it isn’t a dream “they” are buying so much as one we’re selling. It’s our redneck idea of freedom. Drive a pickup across the country, it’s the American Dream.

In the ’75 Cannonball, stock car driver Jack McCoy and his wife, Peggy, drove a ’73 Chevy pickup to a second place finish with an elapsed time of 37 hours, 50 minutes. Dream on, brother.

These films accentuate another major facet of The Dream as well; thumbing one’s nose (and occasionally one’s package) at authority figures. The police are made a mockery of in every movie on this list, without exception. The actual event was constructed during a time of massive automotive legislation, and Yates himself considered it a protest to the 55mph speed limit.

Consider this: the final Cannonball was run in the middle of the second major oil shock of the ’70s, and without apology. Gorging on gasoline while a cardiganed Carter called for conservation may just be the largest middle digit waving performance in U.S. history. The
Cannonball spirit meant grappling with those that governed, and sticking it to all the squares. This is an integral part of being an American, and what we do best. Hell, it’s how the country got started in the first place. These pictures were practically patriotic.

But back to the time line: a four year gap in the production of Cannonball movies mirrored a four year gap in the running of the race itself. In 1979 Yates threw the last highway soiree, the biggest bash yet, and then hung up his racing spurs (for the time being at least). It had become too large, too well known, there were too many entrants. The spectacle had made it less spectacular.

So naturally it was time for another flashy movie. Yates went on to pen his own version of the myth he’d created, to be handed off to director Hal Needham of Smokey and the Bandit fame. 1981’s The Cannonball Run shoved the now extinct race firmly into the spotlight, elevating it from mere trivia among motorsport minutiae to a place rooted deeply in American popular culture. My bet is that even you, dear reader, have heard of it, almost twenty-five years later.

A sequel followed in 1984, the creatively named Cannonball Run II, and an unofficial third chapter, 1989’s Speed Zone, rounds out the list of suspects. With the exception of Bartel’s bizarre first installments, these are all essentially the same movie. They tell the story of the same event and are inhabited by the same basic characters, who attempt remarkably similar stunts and hijinks in their charge for the finish line. Is all this duplication really necessary? What was the staying power of this one concept?

Turn to today’s trends in television programming for the answer to that one. The rub of reality television is that people are drawn to it despite themselves. The Cannonball really happened. That’s what people couldn’t get over. The fake ambulance that Burt Reynolds and Dom DeLuise piloted in The Cannonball Run, was a mock-up of the actual fake (real fake) ambulance Yates and Needham drove themselves in the ’79 Dash. Yates’ wife was even hooked up to an I.V.in the back, complete with a false physician to fool the fuzz. Unreal.

Consider this: the Cannonball is an equal opportunity employer. The various films include among their contestants both blue and white collars, blacks, Italians, Jews, Catholics (some fake), Chinese, a handful of women, another of hicks, and one Sammy Davis Jr., who falls into at least three of the aforementioned categories. Peruse the list of official Cannonball entrants and you’ll soon realize that such a diverse slice of the American pie wasn’t served up specifically for the movies, but was representative of the real racers who ran the thing.

Not being prohibitive kept the appeal widespread. This was not the American Experience of Rockefeller; no bootstraps required. All you needed to really experience this country was gas money. Not free, but certainly cheap, even in the post-embargo years.

And the people poured in, not to the parking lot of the Portofino Inn, the event’s finish line at Redondo Beach, but to the movie theaters and video stores. While entrant lists for the last couple events did swell considerably, most Americans chose to imagine things from the sticky comfort of a theater chair. It’s called the American Dream precisely because few actually do it. Still, the dream lived strong for a time. All told, box office receipts and movie rentals have added up to over $100 million dollars in profits to the honor of Cannonball Baker.

The fact is, these are all bad movies. The appeal lies much deeper than in what’s visible on the screen. The Cannonball is a living fantasy of true freedom, and it’s attainable. It’s filmic representations certainly aren’t art, but they’re not a lie either. Fact is, truth is stranger than fiction. Fact is, it’s the facts we find so appealing. Fact is, if the real race had never happened, the movies would never have mattered.

But now it’s 2003. Where did all the dreamers go? There hasn’t been a Cannonball in almost twenty-five years, hasn’t been a movie about it in fifteen, and the ones that exist are nearly impossible to find (trust me). The modern freedom myth is slipping from the American consciousness. We’ve forgotten the most important facet of being an American in the first place. We work and we study and we resentment certainly aren’t art, but they’re not a lie either. Fact is, truth is stranger than fiction. Fact is, it’s the facts we find so appealing. Fact is, if the real race had never happened, the movies would never have mattered.

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“To internal combustion, and wind in the face.”
our original civilization to its fictionalized end. Perhaps the most enduring science fiction film to come out of this era is Planet of the Apes (Franklin J. Schaffner, 1968). This film tells the story of a group of NASA astronauts who, by way of a tear in the space time continuum, arrive at a desolate planet where apes are the dominant species and mute, illiterate men are their slaves. The protagonist, Taylor, played by Charlton Heston, is the only astronaut to survive fully intact, and because he can speak, is wanted by the apes for crude experiments. Taylor escapes with a female mute, Nova, and travels to the Forbidden Zone, where Taylor believes he can escape to freedom and he and Nova can begin a new civilization. But in the film’s final sequence, and one of the most memorable in film history, Taylor stops his horse and gets down on his knees as he stares up at the half-buried, battered Statue of Liberty thrown up against the sandy beach. It is then that Taylor and the audience realize where he has been the entire time. As he raises his hands, Taylor screams out, “Oh my God. I’m back. I’m home, all the time it was… We finally really did it! You maniacs! You blew it up! Oh, dammit you! Damn you all to hell!” The impact of this final sequence is twofold, implying both that man has brought destruction upon himself and that a return to a sophisticated civilization is impossible because nature has wiped out its human mistake, leaving the apes to take over. Gazing in disillusionment at the crumbled monument in ruin before him, Taylor concedes that humans cannot start over because the destruction of the human race would ultimately be their end once again.

In contemporary films such as Roland Emmerich’s Independence Day (1996), the audience sees major U.S. cities and the nation’s monuments under attack. The images of America’s symbols of its greatest achievements effortlessly blown to rubble by alien spaceships are used to create science fiction’s lasting impressions of destruction. The special effects are absolutely awe-inspiring and the emotional effect of watching the destruction of these symbols overwhelms audiences with shock, panic, and yet, at the same time, a strange feeling of pleasure in watching the destruction. The filmmakers very carefully consider the process of using these monuments as sights of destruction. The decision to destroy monuments in a film such as Independence Day, whose “money shot” is the annihilation of the White House, is fundamentally crucial to the reading of the entire film. By themselves, monuments are of little value and act as mere concrete in the city landscape, but as part of a country’s rite of national heritage, the monuments become inscribed with a national soul. In science fiction films, this sense of a national soul inscribes in the audience an affinity towards the helpless victims, who represent a national body the viewer also belongs to.

In Independence Day, the images of spaceships stoically hovering over U.S. cities and landmarks speak to the vulnerability of the entire nation, and the ideals and values embedded within those buildings. The alien attack is not concerned with killing the President, but rather with destroying the building that houses the aura of the nation’s power. After a series of attacks on Washington, New York, and Los Angeles have taken place, the next day dawns on New York City. The Statue of Liberty lies with her face down in the New York Harbor with the water gently lapping at her face, as the World Trade Center towers lie crumbled and burning in the distance. The alien spaceship looms overhead at the center of the city. Synonymous with the ending of Planet of the Apes, the sequence featuring the fallen statue in Independence Day physically details the extent of the destruction and symbolically elicits the fear that liberty for the world and the nation has been defeated.

In both Planet Of The Apes and Independence Day, the death of the national monument constitutes the death of the national body. A similar sentiment permeated our national consciousness during the days following the September 11th attacks. The constant news footage of the two towers burning and eventually crumbling threw a dagger in the heart of America’s national soul. Yet somehow the nation could not turn its eye away from the sheer spectacle of watching the terror over and over again. Science fiction films have played off of this guilty pleasure in watching monuments annihilated by placing them in the realm of film texts where the amazing power of these images contextualize an idea in a story. Whether they are seen in films or in real life, it is important for us to recognize and not forget the subtext and the larger messages that these pillars of society carry in an ever-changing world.

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