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A Letter from the Editors

Returning readers will find our publication has changed its name from "EyeCandy Film Journal" to "EyeCandy: The Student Voice of Film and Digital Media." And with this change comes more than an attempt to legitimize ourselves. Rather, with this change comes an acceptance of the fact that the medium of film can no longer be viewed by itself.

We are writing about the cinema at a crossroads in its history where new modes of spectatorship and consumption have emerged from technological changes. Digital projection is continuing to challenge the film medium itself, and along with new 3D processes, may play an integral role in redefining our experience at the movies.

The magazine you are holding contains an assortment of articles, essays, interviews, and polemics written by a passionate few who have lived their lives through the movies. At a time in which the source of our passion is being compromised, we want EyeCandy 19 to provide a critical but personal space for students to give voice to cinema's past, always with an eye toward its future. We hope that you enjoy reading it as much as we've enjoyed creating it.

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Fires Were Started:
British Social Realism

By Lorenzo Estébanez

“It is dreadful to be asked what a film is about. The film is what it is about. I could turn myself into a critic and try to analyze what we’ve done; but in fact one discovers what one is doing when one does it... The process of making a film, like the process of making any work of art, should be a process of discovery.”

-Lindsay Anderson

In 1956, filmmakers Lindsay Anderson, Karl Reisz, Tony Richardson, Lorenzo Mazzetti, Walter Lasally and John Fletcher signed off on a declaration of principles that would become the basis for the Free Cinema movement. The name is a reference to the desired freedom of expression and freedom from conventions that were, at the time, pervasive throughout British and world cinema. Free Cinema started out as a series of experimental shorts that gave way to many of the same directors creating films that would comprise the British New Wave. Like their French contemporaries, the six filmmakers began in criticism. Writing for both Sequence magazine (formed by Lindsay Anderson) and Sight & Sound (the publication of the British Film Institute), their origins in criticism helped them to create more critical films, which led to the banner upon which their movement was based: “No film is too personal.”

Responding to the artistic connoisseurship of French New Wave filmmakers, Lindsay Anderson felt that “even in their best work there is apt to be a terrible lack of weight, of substance and human significance... For all their scorn of artistic conventions, their films do not really disturb.” On the basis of the Free Cinema films, the filmmakers were just as interested in frustrating the viewer’s complacency as they were in restoring “human significance” to the screen. In doing both, the Free Cinema filmmakers ushered in a new brand of social realism, one that was distinctly British in character, content, and above all, attitude.

I like the French Nouvelle Vague and Italian Neorealism, the British New Wave identified itself as an insurgent art form, and this manifested itself in the choosing of location shooting and non-actors in many lead roles. Unlike in France and Italy, however, Britain had either been conquered or occupied during the Second World War; this disillusionment was of a different variety. The British New Wave’s discontent is the discontent of a decomposing empire, as the spirit of the Blitz gave way to continued rationing and industrial stagnation. The most popular British films of the 1940s and early 1950s were falling comedies, war films and period dramas, and this was the status quo against which Free Cinema, and later the British New Wave, rebelled.

“Pitting rudderless, working-class protagonists against an ailing bourgeois society, New Wave films told stories through the ‘poetry of the everyday.’” These social realist protagonists embodied aversive and rebellious characteristics that would earn them the title of “Angry Young Men.” The first of the Angry Young Men was Jimmy Porter, a college-aged man locked in a loveless relationship, in Tony Richardson’s Look Back in Anger (1958, UK). The Angry Young Man would raid against the state of his existence. In no other film does the Angry Young Man manifest himself more clearly than in Lindsay Anderson’s 1963 film, This Sporting Life. Coming at the end of the cycle, This Sporting Life encapsulates the themes and the spirit of the British New Wave with perhaps more cynicism—if that’s even possible—and beauty than any other of the cycle. Richard Harris plays Frank Machin, a coal miner whose violent nature gains him the attention of a local rugby club owner. Frank is a man motivate almost solely by instinctive aggression. Living with his widowed landlady, he harbors an infatuation for her that is firmly unreciprocated. Incapable of expressing himself through any other means than physical force, Frank is doomed to become a burden to all those around him and a commodity to the rich. The rugby field, the only site of his liberation, is also the locus of his oppression. With his face down in the mud, hundreds of pounds of men on top of him, his aspirations and connections with people remain stillborn. In
the stands, a cluster of men in coats and assorted upper-class signifiers speak in posh accents. Every time Frank stands up after a sacking, mud-died and huffing, he stares out with his deep-set eyes and craggy features, and returns to the rugby pitch to do the only thing he can.

While the Angry Young Man manifests himself most clearly in *This Sporting Life*, the taboo subject matter so germane to British New Wave films is more evident in Jack Clayton's *Room at the Top* (1959, UK) and Karel Reisz's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960, UK). Released at the beginning of the New Wave cycle, both deal with issues of extramarital affairs and abortion. Both received X ratings in Britain, and both went on to be commercial successes nationally as well as internationally, in spite (or perhaps because) of this. Stateside, an X rating was intended to keep morally objectionable content from ever being seen by audiences and was given out to those films deemed somehow dangerous to the moral wellbeing of the public. Their successes in America would become integral to the loosening of the country's censorship practices, pushing the boundaries of what could be expressed onscreen.

By 1961, British cinema was essentially in a state of totally godless thematic anarchy while America was still burning witches at the stake. Not literally, but in the way that John Schlesinger's *A Taste of Honey* (1961, UK) and Basil Dearden's *Victim* (1961, UK) both brought to American screens something that was unthinkable at the time: sympathetic portrayals of homosexual men. Both films even took the radical step of not killing their gay characters off, and just in case American censors needed anything else over which to tear their hair out, *A Taste of Honey* depicted that other unspeakable American sex taboo: an interracial relationship.

On this side of the Atlantic, *Time* magazine described the most offensive aspect of *Victim* as its “implicit approval of homosexuality as a practice,” a description which seems almost recursive in light of *New York Times* critics Pauline Kael and Bosley Crowther's respective descriptions of *Victim* and *A Taste of Honey* as films populated by “sad-eyed queen[s]” and “grubby people who swarm through [the film].” At the same time that American critics and audiences were grappling with casual depictions of such wanton deviance and libertinism, Britons were becoming accustomed to more realistic depictions of human experience.

*London Times* critic Dilyys Powell yawned that gays onscreen were commonplace enough that she felt “the time has come to stop congratulating the British cinema on its ability to mention homosexuality.” The commitment to providing a completely uncompromising depiction of human existence resulted in a greater acceptance of transgressive inclinations in people. In spite of this, Anderson asserted,

by Vince Waring

“We were not making a film about anything representative, we were making a film about something unique.... We were not, in a word, making sociology.”

It bears remembering that the focus of New Wave filmmakers was to tell stories about individuals. Sociological overtones were naturally the result of an individual placed in a milieu of “the exploiters and the exploited and the spectators who live vicariously off them.” It was because of this that “Free Cinema failed—even the National Film Theatre became nervous of the programs, fearing that their official position

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Honey depicted that other unspeakable American sex taboo: an interracial relationship.

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might be compromised by association with such red-hot socialism.” Despite Free Cinema's failure at home, its influences manifested themselves in the substance and the style of American films. No other director, perhaps, felt this influence more than Martin Scorsese, whose films Taxi Driver (1976, USA) and Raging Bull (1982, USA) share striking similarities with This Sporting Life. In his essay “The Lonely Heart,” Neil Sinyard observes, “Watching Machin admiring and shadowboxing with his image in the mirror, one cannot help thinking of Robert De Niro’s Travis Bickle in Taxi Driver.” Of the striking similarities between Raging Bull and This Sporting Life, Sinyard summarizes that Frank Machin “looks like Jake La Motta in a rugby shirt.” One can spot such common threads running throughout the course of American film history, with their sources of influence spanning beyond Free Cinema to British cinema on the whole. Moreover, this influence would not be possible if not for the efforts of the British Film Institute.

Formed by Royal Charter in 1933, the BFI was established to support the development of films and television programs throughout Britain. Additionally, the BFI was formed to facilitate access to British and world cinema that might not otherwise have been available. In September 2008, the BFI celebrated a 75th anniversary that

transpired largely unnoticed on this side of the Atlantic. In no way is this extraordinary or excusable. Whatever the reasons behind its omission from the platform of world cinema, the fact is that British films are worth celebrating.

Of all the contributors British films have made to the language of cinema, no other has presented audiences with as clear a portrait of the human condition as social realism. Richard Armstrong describes social realism as a movement “pushing the boundaries...to put the experiences of real Britons on the screen and shaping our ideas of what British cinema can be.” Armstrong goes so far as to call social realism “Britain’s richest gift to world cinema,” but perhaps this doesn’t go far enough. British social realism deserves credit for being perhaps the chief driving force behind the loosening of American film censorship, expanding what a film could be expected to deal with thematically, and pushing American audiences out of the complacency of the stifling 1950s. American moviegoers should think of all those angry young men the next time a cinematic husband is cuckolded, abortion procured or the upper classes cursed.

-Lorenzo Estébanez

Lorenzo Estébanez is a third-year transfer student from San Diego. He is a Film & Digital Media major, and this is his first year as a member of the EyeCandy staff. Lorenzo has an interest in digital arts, learning new languages, cats and is an Anglophile who hopes to do much British-film related stuff in the future.

1 Anderson, Lindsay, “This Sporting Life” (Supplementary material on DVD release of This Sporting Life), 2008 <1963>. DVD. The Criterion Collection, 2008
5 Ibid 131.
Upon hearing the phrase “pretty vacant,” people are generally taken back to the 1970s in England, when the Sex Pistols dominated the early punk scene, publicly denounced the Queen, and were banned from the BBC airwaves because of it. It goes without saying that the words don’t require any deeper analysis. I’m personally content to read them as a blatant “fuck you” to anybody who mildly represents authority, or as a direct reflection of The Sex Pistols themselves (for all their indictments of a conformist society, their performance of punk essentially conformed to one man’s conception of the word, Malcolm McLaren, who picked them up off the streets solely on the basis of their look to promote his fetish-clothing shop). No matter, I’m not so much interested in the phrase’s relation to the band as I am in its greater significance to the punk movement. Beyond that, I’m interested in how such a play on superficiality is re-appropriated and questioned by a little-known film called (you guessed it) Pretty Vacant (dir. Jim Mendiola, 1996).

A worthy attempt at reviving Chicano/a cinema, Pretty Vacant follows a fierce young woman named La Molly, an aspiring rockera and intellect from San Antonio who re-invents Chicano/a history in accordance with her personal influences. All the while escaping her father in hopes of avoiding the family’s annual visit to Mexico, La Molly works to express herself by any means necessary. She publishes and distributes a self-made fan-zine titled Ex-Voto (“The Voice”), calling attention to Chicano/as in her community. Her reasons? “Cuz no one was addressing my interests or my needs—it’s as simple as that.” In addition to that, she plays in an all-girl punk band called Aztlan-A-Go-Go. Last but certainly not least, she’s evidently in the process of making a personal documentary of sorts, an extension of Ex-Voto, providing her with a new space in which to express herself. It is this process of experimentation that director Jim Mendiola methodically calls Pretty Vacant.

What sums up The Sex Pistols’ temperament (and probably also their views toward British society) means quite a different thing to the director. By inserting brown perspectives into punk culture, Jim Mendiola applies the phrase more to a society that is bogged down, and sustained, by post-colonialist thought.

“Jim Mendiola’s homage to Chicano/a oral storytelling works to dismantle the foundations of a post-colonialist cinema.”

Mendiola films under a definitively DIY aesthetic, shooting in 16-millimeter film, with no diegetic sound, and a wall-to-wall punk soundtrack punctuated by La Molly’s voice over. This dichotomy that arises between La Molly’s voice and the punk soundtrack is essential to the director’s goal of augmenting to the Chicano/a tradition of oral storytelling.

Author Rosa Linda Fregoso writes about early Chicano/a cinema as a space for “imaginary re-discovery,” a platform from which filmmakers can “re-invent, re-cover, and re-vision a lost history for Chicanas and Chicanos”.

Fregoso also writes of the exaggerated documentary style germane to early Chicano/a cinema as a means of looking at reality through a different lens, one distinctly opposed to Hollywood cinema. Pretty Vacant takes this opposition to new heights by merging documentary with fiction, experimental forms with cinema verité, to emphasize the complexity that goes into the popular disavowal of Chicano/a oral histories.

Given the extent to which post-colonialist thought has moved the Chicano/a movement to the sidelines of history, chances are you probably know little about it. The Chicano/a movement arose in East Los Angeles in the 1960s as a locus wherein Mexican-Americans could unite to form a common identity. With its inception came a new political/cultural consciousness that helped Chicano/as organize and fight for better health care, better education, wages, voting rights, living conditions, etc. Exemplary in their efforts were student walk-outs (also called “blowouts”), a response to the refusal of high school faculty to provide Chicano/a students with equal representation and quality education. Thousands upon thousands of students urged public schools to integrate Latino/as into their curricula. For example, in East L.A., where the population consisted mostly of Latino/as, Chicano/as demanded bilingual courses to be offered to students.

What eventually sprang from the movement was an uprising of artists and protestors, such as Rodolfo Corky Gonzales (author of the epic poem “I Am Joaquín”), Dolores Huerta, and Cesar Chavez (activists who demanded higher wages for farm workers) — all of whom organized in a common belief in equality.
an entire community working together.

Jim Mendiola’s homage to Chicano/a oral storytelling works to dismantle the foundations of a post-colonialist cinema. How does the director do it? Basically, it comes down to a matter of style; and Mendiola’s got plenty of that. Just like the punk music that La Molly tries to reconcile throughout the course of the film, the pacing of the movie is erratic and swift. With Mendiola orchestrating all of his heroine’s moves—situating her as a political agent, if you will—he facilitates a political discourse that is very methodical in its commentary. One such example takes place in a scene where the viewer is given a tour of La Molly’s bedroom. Plastered on the walls are images of The Clash, The Ramones, and Bob Dylan that ease into images and statues of Virgen de Guadalupe, Dolores Huerta, Frida Kahlo, and Emiliano Zapata—prominent figures in Chicano/a culture.

This juxtaposition of images, although seemingly blatant in its purpose of establishing a relationship between punk subculture and the Chicano/a “other,” utilizes a host of cinematic techniques to further a duel commentary. Mendiola, all too aware of the image’s authority, subsumes its political potential to La Molly’s personal perspective. Effectively, we end up with a visual montage that perfectly demonstrates the extents to which the personal is political, every element playing its own role in subverting whiteness. It is precisely this merging of perspectives that allows Mendiola to extend the voice of the brown perspective, and attest to its ability to participate in counterculture and counterecinema. That is, of course, when such commentary can be heard amidst the movie’s barrage of punk music.

La Molly, who is expressed primarily through her voice-over, is frequently made secondary to her movie’s soundtrack. This signifies both the extents of her adoration for punk music and also the extents of its interference with her self-expression. Her continual struggle with patriarchal whiteness, in reference to post-colonialism, restrains her from such expression—as is demonstrated through punk subculture, where white males were prevalent.

As a woman of color, La Molly is destined to face the maltreatments of her society on several levels, ones that transcend gender relations. Such is why social praxis—the act of examining and participating—is essential to her daily life (i.e. Aztlán-A-Go-Go and Ex-Voto). Throughout the movie, La Molly attempts to reconceptualize the mass disavowal of Chicano/a involvement with punk history through varying processes of reappropriation.

As the opening credits appear, for example, the rich sounds of mariachi music are heard and the title “From deep in the heart of Tejas” queues in, recalling the native pronunciation of Texas and the connection between Chicano/a identity and Aztlán the Greater Mexico. From mariachi, the music transitions into Tejano conjunto, with a faster rhythm that is somewhat akin to a polka—our first encounter with Esteban Jordan (aka. the Jimi Hendrix of the accordion). A huge influence on The Sex Pistols, according to La Molly’s discoveries, Jordan’s hit “El Kanke” is actually written down on The Sex Pistols’ playlist as they tour throughout Texas, making out Jordan to be the missing link between Chicano and punk history. Mendiola keeps this interaction between Chicano and punk very consistent throughout the movie, reiterating his political motives to signify the Chicano/a political agenda—bringing visibility to all realms of society.

Insofar as his film is successful in doing this, such depends on one’s definition of the word “success.” If one bases its success on its range of distribution and its box-office receipts, then **Pretty Vacant** is certainly not that sort. Can you imagine a Hollywood producer willing to fund a film that challenges the make-up of the typical Hollywood narrative for the sake of extending the Chicano/a voice? Admittedly an improbable market, one whose marginalization those producers are likely responsible for, if only indirectly. This is why Jim Mendiola makes films outside the Hollywood system. Thankfully, this works to his film’s advantage.

On the other hand, **Pretty Vacant** is a pure success in its documentation of Chicano/a struggles, and in its negation of racist/sexist ideologies propagated largely by the Hollywood studio system. By employing punk aesthetics in the filmic text, La Molly is able to channel her identity as a Chicana through reflections of her experience. And Jim Mendiola, methodically orchestrating it all the while, ensures the Chicano/a space in cinema that has all-too-long been denied to them. Ending the film in irresolution, the filmmaker poetically conveys the history of a community loud, but sane, in its purposes, despite being unremittingly hushed in its ability to express the Chicano/a experience.

-Hannah Guenther

La Molly busy at work, making flyers for her band Aztlán-A-Go-Go and giving Virgen de Guadalupe a rockin’ new look.

Hannah Guenther enjoys good food, playing frisbee, loving her family, friends, dog, and bike, falling asleep in cars, and last but certainly not least, Pokemon:2.BA Master soundtrack!

Slicing Eyeballs and Exploding Infants

An Exploration of Dangerous Cinema

By Brian Nickerson

A razor blade splits an unblinking eyeball. Nightmare infants screech and explode. An empty car full of criminal cargo refuses to sink in a brooding swamp. Frogs fall from the sky. None of this needs to make sense. You shouldn’t have a good time. These are the films that will ruin your day. They spit venom and rip apart every complacent mind that lingers on them a little too long. You find films here of every genre, style, language and era. They’ve been lurking in the shadows long before the cobweb of antagonisms came to blanket every disgruntled film major’s “righteous” tirade against the ideological whorehouse that is the Hollywood film industry. But no single term you attempt to ascribe to them does justice to their collective sense of danger. I suppose my intention to classify them is somewhat fucked from the start, given that the very corner of the cinematic cosmos I’m trying to rationalize operates solely in the irrational. I’ll try to cover my own ass right now, however, by clarifying that this essay is not to be confused with a genre study. Think of it more as an attempt to come to terms with a wildly disparate, but nevertheless discernible group of filmmakers who have been lobbing Molotov cocktails of subversion at every heteronormative, shamelessly racializing, and ultimately desensitizing Hollywood convention since the dawn of the silver screen. Consider yourself warned, for in the next 3000 words of reckless self-indulgence you are going to be shipped to the frontlines of a timeless cinematic coup. Plunge into the world of Dangerous Cinema.

Pictures here are so sick of the dribbling ideological bile that Hollywood hacks up and spits in your face weekend after weekend that their only objective is to sizzle and snap with that unstoppable electricity of cinematic taboo. They hit you with scumfuck heroes that eviscerate your comfort zone, and battery acid villains that shove real-world depravity down your throat. And I say “real-world” with utmost deliberation, because, beyond all these movies’ unsettling grotesqueries, reality is certainly the destination toward which they’re hurtling. However, they don’t get there by way of direct representation. That is, Dangerous films don’t give much of a shit about holding a mirror up to nature. Instead, they manipulate, contort, and brutalize it to the point that all of its elements, from the mis-en-scene all the way down to the iconic punchlines, exist solely to shake you to your core.

But beneath all of this celebrated surrealism, there lies an indelible purpose. Invisible in its initial shock wave but alive in its haunting echo, Dangerous Cinema seeks to “confront the viewer with cruel or violent spectacles that would drain the spiritual abscesses of society” (Prince 111). These are not new ideas, folks. This is age-old subversion given a new name. Let’s hear a round of applause for Aristotle, for without his theory of catharsis, this essay would not exist. In a nutshell, catharsis theory restates one of art’s functions to invite the spectator in the vicarious experience of violence, sexual aggression, and generally antisocial behavior, all to the end of pung-

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ing the viewer of their fundamentally obscene desires. But, since Dangerous films aren’t concerned with just any old purging of pity and fear, I’m going to move right along. Dig, if you will, the following outline: I see each of these films unifying under a handful of renegade principles. I see the casual depravity of the villains and the stark amorality of the heroes celebrated. I see real-world fears of transgression—societal, psychological, sexual or otherwise—given expression through merciless violence and aberrant sexuality. And I see the ultimate result: unflinching realism cauterized into the skulls and souls of every viewer that truly surrenders to them. Dangerous Cinema must be seen as the indelible cinematic cog it is: essential to our appreciation of the art form, as well as to our comprehension of the world it attacks.

But before we shine a critical flashlight into this claustrophobic cinematic catacomb, I’d like to first clarify that I haven’t yet brought myself to stomach some of these of these unholy cinematic torture chambers, and in some cases, frankly, I don’t want to. (Fuel off, Pasolini.) That much said, I’ll begin by pointing out a few patterns I’ve already seen, and end by grabbing Hollywood by its own prejudiced horns and taking it to the ground. Why Hollywood? Because the films that it churns out serve as the most popular yardsticks of our ideological regression, and also the models for Dangerous Cinema to exploit and undermine.

The first doctrine under which Dangerous films cluster is the universal disdain of that predictably moral, stiflingly lawful universe that day-to-day life operates in. In these films, nothing is off-limits, nothing is sacred, and, if it’s doing its job, you probably won’t feel safe for very long. Consider Jeffery Beaumont from the film Blue Velvet (dir. David Lynch, 1986, USA), caught in an unusual situation that perfectly illustrates my point.

His blood is ice water as he leaps behind the closet door, shocked and silent as he hears lounge singer Dorothy Vallens fumbling with the doorknob. A dusty crisp of light slips between the cracks of the closed closet door and opens his licentious eyes to Dorothy’s private life. With mesmeric theatrics, she lights every candle in the room, shrieks at the carpet, strips nude and careers out of sight. But Jeffery doesn’t make for the door. He is intoxicated by her vulnera-

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These gloriously fucked-up films all focus on characters that wear the scars of their respective Dangerous Realities like Kevlar jackets

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The truth can be a bitch

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The kind of movie that will ruin your day

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bility, and so are we. Everyone is inebriated by the hypnotic wrong that they are doing. Suddenly the closet doors burst open and all we know is flash of cold steel and the whisper of blue velvet. Her sharp blade nicks his guilty jaw and Jeffery is stripped of his civvies and his supremacy. She is beside herself and in complete control. She can’t breathe; she says she’ll kill him. He can’t move; she asks if he likes talk like this. He can’t think; she drops to her knees and kisses everything. He can’t understand; she says she’ll kill him. Stop. Now he’s on his back. Her knife on his throat; she tells him to hit her.

Thunder at the door and he is hurled back in the closet, breathless, bleeding, and bewitched. Frank Booth swoops in, a rabid dog in the same sleek Jeffery jacket and the same slicked-back Jeffery hair. Are they the same people? Is Frank even real? He spits venom and attacks Dorothy with his fists. Jeffery watches paralyzed as she thrashes under the howling beast. Then, he’s gone. Now she’s back in Jeffery’s arms, all tender touch and broken sighs. He hits her. He is in love.

Alright, everybody still with me? Dangerous Cinema is a rough fucking place to spend a few hours, so don’t be ashamed if you need to take a break. These films aren’t interested in reconstructing the natural world; they distort reality like a funhouse mirror and play it unapologetically straight. These twisted pictures celebrate the exact shit that Hollywood movies exist to distract you from, by setting themselves in a place I like to call Dangerous Reality. By starting in utter absurdity and delving as deeply into it as they damn well please, they establish a universe big enough to accommodate each of our unspeakably aggressive desires. Film, more than any other art form, has always served as means of purging “socially unacceptable” emotions, which is why so much of its theory is grounded in psychoanalysis. This essay is going to demonstrate that right now, to make a point, of course.

The vast majority of films, Hollywood or otherwise, employ a galle of manipulative techniques (subjective camera angles, voice-over narration, melodramatic sound tracks, etc.) to evoke our sympathies, antipathies, and our general expectation to be taken through this experience by a singular, all-knowing perspective.

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This doesn’t allow for the slightest shred of ‘true’ or ‘objective’ reality, even though the concept in itself is goddamn impossible to achieve, and the sooner filmmakers come to terms with this, the sooner we can all start having a little fun with the goddamn medium (which was exactly the fucking point in the first place). It is precisely this acceptance that allows Dangerous Realities to succeed. Dangerous films can utilize all this Hollywood horseshit to indulge the viewer’s voyeuristic desires, but they absolutely must push these desires to such shocking and abhorrent extents to fill us with an honest-to-God feeling of transgression that is closer, but not equivalent, to reality.

I feel this is getting far, too philosophical; let’s get down with the scum at the ground level. These gloriously fucked-up films all focus on characters that wear the scars of their respective Dangerous Realities like Kevlar jackets. While this seems to给我 the momentum to get where they’re going, we know all to well that they’ve been raked through the coals of corruption long before we got to them. Our heroes are damaged goods hurling with gleeful abandon toward their expiration dates and loving every second of it. The more time we spend with them, the more we see them flat-out reject most forms of human decency, and operate according to their own deplorable, obscene integrity. By comparison to every other scumbag they’re stuck with, they appear morally dependable, sometimes even honorable. But, regardless of the shit they’re shifting through or how heroic they look while they’re doing it, their brutal ethics and unforgivable actions all reach points of terrifying excess. Ya’ll seen Hard Boiled (dir. John Woo, 1992, Hong Kong)? Well, my man Tequila is about make you feel exactly what I’m spitting.

This bad motherfucker is a self-proclaimed god with two guns, a Hong Kong detective who only gives a shit about pumping smoking lead justice into lawbreakers everywhere. His superiors say he doesn’t play by the rules, that he’s a loose cannon and he should clean up his act, but the only thing he’s going to clean up is the streets. We find him in an elegant teahouse, drenched in the sizzling neon of the Hong Kong high-rise. He and his partner suck on cigarettes while a shadowy table of Triad gunrunners cackle drunkenly across the floor. His orders? When these things make the move, Tequila’s gonna take ‘em in. But before we even get two seconds to figure out what that move is or why they’re making it, Tequila drags the last breath out of his butt, turns his eyes to slits and the battle begins. Our hero leaps from his table and shatters the nearest criminal skull with a scalding teapot and the sickening SPLAT signifies the start of this furious firefight. Windows pop. Bodies fly. Walls splinter. Our hero tap-dances around falling shells, plugging ammo into the brains of the ‘bad’ guys. Bystanders get Swiss-cheesed and perpetrators make for the exits. Orders? They probably didn’t involve grinding down a barrier and emptying two pistols into escaping evildoers before even touching the floor. But when the going gets tough, some bodies gotta drop.

The chaos hiccups long enough for Tequila and his partner to catch their breaths. With everyone else either dead or gone, these two have the dastardly head honcho cornered in the kitchen. The crime-fighting co-op bursts through the door, but a flash of steaming lead rips through Tequila’s partner’s body, lifting him skyward and spalying him motionless across the floor. Tequila stops dead. We stop breathing. Orders? F*ck ’em. This just got personal. Pulsing with bloodlust, this even-handed god of cops launches himself over an orchestra of muzzle flashes, somersaults over a pulverized prep table and slides in inches under the empty Uzi in the villain’s quivering fist. His piping hot pistol barrel is planted squarely between this prick’s beady eyes. He splits a smile, spits in his face and splatters that bastard’s brains all over the wall. Orders? What orders? Justice just got served.

Go ahead and take a moment to catch your breath. You’ve just inhaled the first five minutes of John Woo’s OG atom bomb of squibs and stunt work from all the way back in the day. Hard Boiled is a film that will curb stomp your adrenal glands more than every buddy-cop-Michael-Bay-murder-fest put together, but beyond all its flash and volume, there is one thing that does not compute: its hero is a bloodthirsty sociopath! But wait, he has the law on his side, and we see his world shatter after the death of his partner. Shouldn’t this be enough for us to sympathize with him? I mean, after all this noise and adrenaline, he mourns his best friend, and is broken and alone and fundamentally human. What the hell is going on here?

Folks, you gotta get with it: Tequila is a Dangerous Hero. These ideological vampires look like saviors against their twisted backdrops, but when the context is removed, they are all fundamentally deplorable scumbags. And that is exactly the point. Dangerous Realities render everybody’s moral decisions immediately impotent. Sure, Dangerous heroes experience their moments of moral dilemma. However, such moments are transient, or so cloaked in the surrounding aggression as to seem nonexistent. Rotting to the core and carved out of the unspeakable depths of human imagination, these maniacs lead us through all of these films, sifting through these flash floods of violence and gloom,
cancerous with pain, gladly succumbing to every animal urge. And so we’ve found our heroes, as snarling and cruel as the nightmares from. Can you dig it?

Now wait a minute, I don’t want to be misconstrued here. I am absolutely not implying that just because a film is shocking and weird that it qualifies as Dangerous. Sure, Splat Pack flicks are vile and repugnant, but these bastardized cinematic stillbirths are all fueled by prepubescent wet dreams wallowing in ideological masturbation. I wouldn’t call Saw (dir. James Wan, 2004, USA), for example, a Dangerous film because: 1) its absurdity and gore aren’t expressive of anything other than its creators’ morbid and voyeuristic indulgences; 2) it exploits all the voyeuristic properties of the medium for no other reason than to shock and titillate; and 3) its relentless franchising negates ALL of its danger INSTANTLY. I’d like to make that a rule right now. I hereby declare that any film down with action figures, straight-to-video sequels, or any form of jackass—Hot Topic-tee-shirt tie-ins, will never, by any stretch of my imagination, at least, be in any way affiliated with Dangerous Cinema. These aren’t films; these are goddamn business proposals. As tasty as some of them may be, you just aren’t going to learn a damn thing from them.

Perfect foil for the aforementioned torture-porn-snooze-fest, I’d like to point out that Seven (dir. David Fincher, 1995, USA) is certifiably Dangerous as fuck. My main distinction between the two can be explained by something as simple as the methodologies of their respective serial killers. That is, while the non-sequitur rhetoric of the Jigsaw killer (whose name not-so-subtly implies that he’s going to be hacking folks up) takes a back seat to the morbid spectacle of his various atrocities, the John Doe killer in Seven picks his unfortunate victims off in gruesome accordance with the Seven Deadly Sins. Where the former expounds to excuse the violence, the latter expounds to explain it. Do you see the simple difference in rhetoric?

I’m not saying a Dangerous film has to be burdened with some sort of political or religious allegory; in fact, the majority of them aren’t. But, in the case of the above comparison, the simple difference in rhetoric leads to diametrically opposed ends. While the one sets out to titillate our subconscious desires to watch sleaze bags get outrageously f*cked up, the other conducts violence as means of expressing not only its killer’s psychology, but also that of its Dangerous Heroes, who become so enwrapped in it that they inevitably take part in the savagery. Seven is quintessential Dangerous Cinema in that it communicates all the absurd leaps in disbelief specific to the category through a means of unflinching realism. It creates a unique balance between its Dangerous Reality and its Dangerous Heroes, such that its human relationships, all of which are dealt with as realistically as any other element of the film, are each understood purely in their context of unspeakable evil and suffocating paranoia.

Dangerous films are shocking in their content so as to give expression to the more visceral elements of reality, the ones that we so willingly suppress. The vast majority of ideologically-informed pictures (i.e. the ones that make money) exist primarily to entertain, but the means through which they do this completely desensitizes us from the real world. Before I get ahead of myself, I want to make sure that everyone here is clear on what an “ideology” is. An ideology basically refers to a set of social values mass-produced, popularized, and more or less justified by an institutional elite—be it the media, the church, politics, etc.—that essentially condition and dull our understandings of each other. When it comes to the Hollywood film industry, arguably the world’s most influential and well-financed manufacturer of popular ideologies, a better word for “ideology” would be “prejudice.”

The list of prejudices that The Big H-Dub shovels into the minds of our youth weekend after weekend is endless. Pick and ideology, any ideology. It’s not that hard. How about the systematic racism, homophobia, and religious bigotry that saturate virtually every major motion picture? That’s my left nut that you won’t find a successful Hollywood film that portrays an ideological “other” (homosexuals, people who aren’t white, Jews, Communists, poor people, etc.) without first recognizing their situation, rationalizing it, and reminding us of its ideological baggage every few minutes. Hollywood has gotten pretty good at making this a clandestine operation, but the sickening stereotypes and shameful
“othering” is most definitely here to stay. If anybody ever charges me $10 to shout the same bigoted beliefs in my face I promise you I will slap the ever-loving shit out of them. But thankfully, Dangerous Cinema is warming up its cinematic pimp hand to save us all the trouble.

By railing audiences into drooling ideological oblivion, and then mercilessly exploiting their manufactured complacency at every available opportunity, Hollywood has created a desperate need for cinematic mutiny. And there, feet firmly planted atop the smoldering mound of crumbled artistic expression, has always stood the renegade genius of Dangerous Cinema, ready and waiting to start the revolution. Every time a white man falls in love with a white woman, Dangerous Cinema cracks its knuckles. Every time a gay man lisp in a teen comedy, Dangerous Cinema sharpens its switchblade. Every time a second sequel grosses over $100 million, Dangerous Cinema hits the streets. You see, conventional films begat Dangerous films. This is the Hollywood Binary, the essential relationship between subversion and condition; the dependence of catharsis on complacency.

If popular films didn’t openly celebrate these perversely romanticized ideologies, there would be no evil for Dangerous Cinema to exorcise. If Hollywood hadn’t spent trillions of dollars and multiple generations trying to completely cripple our collective understanding of everything that is instinctive and irrefutable about being alive, Dangerous Cinema would not exist. Just as you cannot know light without darkness, so you cannot know Dangerous Reality without Hollywood Bullshit.

In conclusion, Dangerous Cinema is not to be fiddled with. It exists to slap us out of this cinematic coma and guide us with merciless audacity through a galvanizing experience guaranteed to be unlike anything we’ve ever had in a multiplex. It’s a hellacious jubilation of everything movie magic shouldn’t entail, and you have just been cordially invited to join in the chaos. Dive in, maybe you’ll find something that will change the way you look at movies. Who knows, maybe it’ll change something deeper than that. Whether you fall in love or lose your faith, you can’t avoid the fact that Dangerous Cinema will absolutely wake you the fuck up.

-Brian Nickerson

Brian is a Community Studies major and as such, spends his inordinate amounts of free time drowning in coffee and waxing altruistic. He also wishes he was in New Orleans, doesn’t give a damn, and gets strange, vicarious thrills watching videos of parkour and freestyle emcee battles.
Experiences with Seymour Cassel

by Daniel James Scott

I interviewed the actor Seymour Cassel more than four months ago, at this time of writing. Every day since then, I have tried to intellectualize that encounter, make sense of it, and distill it into language. Every day, I have drifted further away from its purity.

John Cassavetes, the "father of American independent film," as well as Seymour Cassel's best friend, would think me a shit. The director once said, "We need to stop intellectualizing so much and rely on what [we] feel. If you feel something, it's true."2

His films, some of them including *Faces* (1968, USA), *Minnie and Moskowitz* (1971, USA), *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974, USA), and *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* (1976, USA), were made with the conviction that they would restore emotion to the cinema. In fact, Jonas Mekas once referred to Cassavetes' body of work as "the cinema of emotion." Seymour Cassel, living and working at the center of so many of his best creations, channeled these emotions.

Prior to knowing this, however, my perception of the actor was quite different.

My first experiences of Seymour Cassel were actually derived from his performances in Wes Anderson's films. Cassel played Bert Fischer in *Rushmore* (1998, USA), Dusty the elevator operator in *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001, USA) and Esteban in *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* (2004, USA), every performance of which was as good as it needed to be, given its role in augmenting the director's vision. But it was precisely this process, by which Cassel and all the other actors had to keep down their responses in order to fit the director's singular view, that led me to surprise, and then to scorn, upon seeing his performances in John Cassavetes' films.

Cassavetes once said, "The characters in all my films express themselves as they want to, not how I want them to. Why would you put someone in your picture and tell them to be exactly like you want...

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3 ibid Fine, 159.
them to be? In a sense, they’d become you, and only you, and not exhibit any of what their personal nature is.”

Upon seeing Seymour Cassel in Faces, as Chettie, a character based on real aspects of his personality (according to John Cassavetes, who knew all too well the young actor’s proclivities for following married women home and seducing them), the true range of the actor’s abilities started to register with me. Instead of the laconic characters Wes Anderson made him out to be, I found one of the most spontaneous, hyperactive individuals I had ever seen onscreen.

Cassavetes once said of the actor, “If Seymour loves somebody, he expresses it. I find that attitude directly juxtaposed to people that I retreat. And there’s been so much retreat from people. ... Right now, there’s not enough caring for people.” Cassel certainly expressed his care for the filmmaker during our meeting, referring to him as the “older brother [he] never had,” as well as his “best friend.” And it was this simple verification, that the life I had seen in Cassavetes’ films was the result of real relationships, and great ones too, that I was looking to know heading into that interview on December 30, 2008.

* * *

We find our seats at the back of the café. Seymour orders salmon. I struggle to work my tape recorder.

Speaking of his various filming positions on Shadows, Cassavetes’ first film, he says, “I set up the camera, low focus, operate, edit...”

“So, you were pretty much doing everything,” I say, giving the tape recorder a test. Nothing. F*ck it. I plop my laptop on the table and open up Garageband. We wait as it loads.

“That was great though, you could learn.”

If he notices my disorderliness, he doesn’t show it. Then again, he’s an extraordinary actor.

“John,” he says, “talked to me for an hour in his office. He said, ‘Look, I gotta go, because I’m doing this movie.’ I said, ‘You’re shooting a movie tonight?’ He said, ‘Yeah.’ I said, ‘Can I watch?’ He said, ‘Yeah, come over.’”

He takes another bite of salmon, then chews out the rest of his story. “The set’s built for Shadows (1959). Lelia [Goldoni] and Rupert [Crosse] and Bennie [Caruthers] are in the kitchen, the dining room’s all set up. And they started to shoot. And I saw that they needed help, so I did.”

“So you were moving around lights and stuff?” I ask.

“Anything that he needed me to do.” Simple as that. “And you sort of became a regular after that,” I say, filling in the blanks. “You just started showing up on a regular basis?”

“Well, we went out to breakfast and he said, ‘What do you think?’ I said, ‘I think it’s great, I’ve never seen it done like that before.’ He said, ‘Well, that’s the way we do it.’”

“And John Cassavetes had been making films for a while up until that time, right?”

“As an actor,” he says, a light going off inside him. “And the frustration of doing it as an actor... was that you don’t...”

I watch his thought evolve and dissipate in his eyes, at once widening and gearing upward, then glazing over and turning askew.

“It always played it to the moment. I played it for real.”

Ibid Carney, 298.

The first of Cassavetes’ marriage trilogy, falling between Husbands (1970) and A Woman Under the Influence (1974), Faces (1968) deals with the disintegration of a marriage and the great, horrible and indescribable events that stem from it over the course of two days.

Ibid Carney, 295.

Often cited as the first American independent film, Shadows (1959) was the product of a series of improvisations performed in John Cassavetes’ actor’s workshop. The film follows three siblings throughout New York in the 1950s Beat culture.
“He was a bright guy,” he concludes. “And he liked to write.”

“When you were working with him,” I ask, “did you have any idea of what the eventual product would be? I mean, did you know what Cassavetes was thinking?”

“Oh yeah.”

Well, there goes my impression that, because of his hands-off approach to directing, John Cassavetes’ actors never knew what he was thinking. “What was it like working so closely with the director?”

“Well,” he starts, “we would go out and drink together, in New York. We’d go to the jazz clubs. Gena [Rowlands, Cassavetes’ wife] would go to bed at nine o’clock.”

“This is what I want to hear about,” I say.

“John was like the older brother I never had.”

Amazing: the rate at which this guy shifts his temperament. I thought I was in for a young bachelor’s tale of drunken carousing, but his countenance — more serious than ever — suggests the contours of a long and enduring friendship.

“We did Faces,” he says, “all the songs that I sing, I made those up. ‘Put on the red meat mamma,’” he sings.

“Don’t want no ’tatoes no onions, I just wanna tautions I like the red meat mamma’.”

Seymour smiles as I lose control of myself. This man just made my day. Strike that, he just made my life.

“The nicest thing [John] ever said to me once... he said, ‘Seymour, when you’re funny, nobody’s better. When you’re serious, you never know what you’re thinking.’”

To someone who doesn’t love Faces, this song seems like an absurdity. But to someone who does love it — and watches it near ritualistically — this rendition of it is mythic in its reproduction. For lack of a better example, it’s like watching De Niro hurl back to his performance of Travis Bickle — “You talking to me?”

“John knew an actor: and trusted him,” Seymour says, picking his teeth. “In Minnie and Moskowitz,” did you see that?

“Many times.” Last night, as a matter of fact, though I don’t say it.

“You know me,” he launches into it. “Seymour, neighborhood, Brooklyn!”

“You know me!” I chime in. “And your face is this close to her!” (My hand is to my face.)

Sensing my familiarity with the scene, he drops the act: “That whole scene in the bar was scripted,” he says. “But, John said, ‘I’m not going to make the day of it. I’m gonna take the camera and go with you, make the stops... So, the whole thing about kissing the girls and all that...’”

And Seymour does manage to kiss girls in the scene. He gets chased out of the bar by an angry mob because of it.

— John knew that anything I did, I did it with my heart and I did it because I loved him. He loved me. The nicest thing he ever said to me once, when we were doing..." he gets that glazed over look in his eyes, “...Was it Bookie?”

He digs into the recesses of his mind to recover the title. “Love Streams,” he finalizes. “John came up and he said, ‘Seymour’... He gave me a big kiss. He said, ‘When you’re funny, nobody’s better. When you’re serious,
"I knew [John] was a liar. All actors are.

you never know what you're thinking."

A curious statement, but his contented expression reveals its significance.

He looks off to the side, tongues the inside of his cheek. His knobby fingers scratch each other. He rests in thought for a time.

A blonde waitress, mid-30s, approaches our table. "I'm just going to reach past you, if it's okay," she says to me, gesturing to the thermostat behind me. I scoot my chair in.

"Okay, but you have to touch him on your way back!" Seymour says.

The old ham.

"You have to touch his hair!" he persists.

The waitress and I exchange sympathetic looks. Seymour's gaze is fixed. She gives me a pat on the head. "Thank you," I say.

His eyes follow her. "Beautiful woman."

"Yeah," I blurt. "So, back to Minnie and Moskowitz..."

"John," he starts, "he told me on an airplane, 'Let your hair grow.'"

He leans in to tell the story: "I said, 'Why?' John said, 'I'm gonna write a movie for you and Gena.' I said, 'What kind of movie?' He said, 'A romantic comedy.' I said --"

And then he strikes me a look of such sincerity.

"Do I get to kiss her?"

I break up.

"He said, 'Of course, Sey. It's romantic...'''

Seymour smiles to himself, reclines in his chair. "So, I let my hair grow down in a ponytail, I grow a mustache, I dance with her. I dip her, I kiss her right on the mouth. I put my tongue in. I come up, John's there. He didn't give a shit."

"He didn't?" I say laughing.

He smirks. "Because I always played everything to the moment. I played it for real."

So did John Cassavetes. Writing out life as he knew it, he'd have it recreated before the camera by a crew of friends and family, every one of whom he treated as the unique individuals that they were.

"When you talk to Gena in a scene," he continues, "you can see her go." He shoots me a rigid look of anticipation.

"— I know she's just listening for when my last line comes, so she can talk... So, I would talk to her, and I'd go, 'you know what, Minnie?'

His eyes brim over with uncontrollable energy, the lines bordering his mouth deepen. He trains his eyes on me long enough to make me feel vulnerable. To have Seymour Cassel look at you in this way is to bear the weight of a 73-year life cloaked in women, spouses of delinquency, and above all, show-biz.

"And I can see her go, 'What the fuck is he gonna do?'"

I crack up. I am having the best conversation in this café, maybe in all of Los Angeles.

He continues, "I mean, I know you know when your line is, but, I wanna see you reacting. And that's what John loved."

"So, you'd deliberately work to steer her off course?"

"Yeah, it's just a matter of waiting. I do it with all actors. And, when they do it with me, I like that spontaneity... Spontaneity is important to an actor. It gives you the sense of reality that when you're doing it, because you see people react to it, it's the way they ad-lib."

He takes another bite of salmon, a remarkably slow eater.

"In rehearsals," he says, "John loved the idea that we could — " His thought negates itself, and is replaced by another. "I mean, I knew what he was thinking. And I knew that he knew that about me. We'd go to a bar in London, the White Elephant... guys would come over — a couple of producers — they'd say, 'John, what do ya got? Anything you've written? I'd be standing right here, and he'd go, 'Yeah, it's this...'

He lays it out with his hands: "He starts telling the story. And, he'd give me this look, and... I knew he was a liar. All actors are."

Priceless.

"He really was more than a best friend. I mean, his mother..." and in this pause exists a life. "When she died, [John] said, 'Sey, it's like we both lost a mother.' She was a great lady."

Katherine Cassavetes acted in a number of her son's films, playing a dominating mother to Seymour in Minnie and Moskowitz as well as to Peter Falk in A Woman Under the Influence.

"She was a pretty great actress, too," I say, doing the best I can as a toast to her. "She's incredible in A Woman Under the Influence."
We take whatever silence we can get from this busy coffee shop.

His eyes light up, and a grin forms.
“Minnie and Moskowitz, when she feels Gena’s tits, I’m thinking I’m gonna break up.”

Hilarity truly does come from the most tragic of places.

“John comes up to me. I ask him, ‘You see what your mother did?’ He said, ‘I know, she’s crazy.’”

Laughs and smiles all around.

Changing the subject, I say, “One movie we haven’t talked about is The Killing of a Chinese Bookie.”

“I love that movie.”

“I love that movie too,” Seymour, if only you knew.

“I got the girls for him.”

Of course he did.

The Killing of a Chinese Bookie stars Ben Gazzara as Cosmo Vitelli, the classier owner of the otherwise sleazy strip joint called the Crazy Horse West. In debt $20,000 to a crew of mobsters and unable to come up with the money through his meager income, Cosmo is pushed into killing a bookie who, unbeknownst to him, is “a West Coast godfather protected by bodyguards and watchdogs around the clock.”10

“This is an interesting movie,” I say, because it loosely pertains to your childhood. I mean, I understand that you were born into burlesque!”11

“I was the only kid,” he says.

“It must have been pretty wild, growing up in that atmosphere.”

“It was lonely too. Because, I'd stay up in bed in a hotel room at night. My mother would do a show at seven o’clock and nine o’clock. And she’d go out because she wasn’t married.”

He pushes around his food, then brightens his tone. “But, I loved to travel,” he says. “In trains, sleeping in cars, dining rooms, with the silver and all that…”

I nod him along.

“And all the girls would give me a present for my birthday, unless my mother cleared it. She didn’t want me to be spoiled. And I had to go to school, but I didn’t want to do that. I lived on the road, with the show, you know? I first got on the stage when I was five.”

Seymour’s been performing for the better part of his life. I can’t even fathom the number of personalities that have occupied him for a time.

“So,” I say, getting back to a point, “would you describe the conditions of the set on The Killing of a Chinese Bookie as relatively peaceful? I mean, I heard that Ben Gazzara had some trouble getting into his role, and that there were...

“Ben’s got his own ego just like Peter [Falk] does,” he says, always bringing things back to his most human denominator.

“But, John was a finesse-er... You know, Ben, just try it. If it’s good, then we won’t use it. It’s like when I jump off the roof in Faces12... I hear [Robert Forst] come in. I grab my shirt, I go out the window. John says, ‘And cut! You’re coming out the window, you run across the roof, and you jump down and run down the hill.’ He said, ‘Can you make that jump?’ I said, ‘Can you?’”

I let out a laugh.

“He said, ‘Well, I don’t have to do it.’ So I jumped. He said, ‘No! No! No!’

That run down the hill is perhaps even more terrifying than the jump off the roof. And I heard you had to do that a few times,” I say.

“Yeah,” he recalls fondly. “They got it on the first take, but I think I had to do it 10 or 11 times.”

A practical joke among friends.

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We continue our conversation out back, where Seymour can smoke his cigar. “What work would you say you’re most proud of?” I ask him.

“John’s,” he says, without hesitation. Thinking back on the question, he adds, “In The Soup, too, I’m very proud of.”

“In The Soup,” I say, the title unfamiliar to me.

“It was a magical movie, you know?”

I nod vacantly.

“Did you see In The Soup?”

“No.”

“With Jennifer Beals and Steve Buscemi?” he asks.

“No, I haven’t.”

He looks utterly devastated. “We won Sundance?”

“I’m a shit.”

He continues, “I played Joe, a gangster. Joe does the mambo, the cha-cha, the maranga, under the bridge, in Brooklyn...”

He thinks upon finishing the film’s synopsis, but decides against it.

“We won the Grand Jury Prize. And, I got the first ever Outstanding Performance award...”

11 I read once that “Seymour grew up backstage around the other dancers.” and that, “by the time he was six, he realized later, he’d seen more naked women than most men see in a lifetime” (Fine 75).
12 In an interview, Ben Gazzara admitted that he “wasn’t having any fun” during the shooting of Bookie. His main concern was that he didn’t understand his character, a matter which John Cassavetes staunchly left to his actors. This resulted in one of the most cryptic performances, which, is, fortunately, what made it worth watching.
13 Seymour makes a pretty death-defying leap in Faces to escape the clutches of an angry husband whose wife he just slept with—not to mention revived from her attempted suicide.
Then the papers say, you know, ‘The new guy in town...’ What the fuck, I’ve been there before. I was nominated for Faces.”

“Yeah, you’ve been around for a long time,” I say, content to know at least that much. We take in the day, giving his career its due weight.

“So, you were playing a gangster,” I prompt him. At this point it’s really just a matter of keeping him here. “You’ve actually played gangsters a lot throughout your career, as well as some more soft-spoken characters. I’m curious, is there any sort of role that you prefer to play? I mean, do you prefer to play characters that are more talkative, or do you...”

“I don’t care,” he says, a grin forming on his face. “I like to have girls though.”

“I know you like to have girls,” I say laughing.

“I like to have girls,” he settles.

I try to orient him in a new direction: “And, how are the...”

“Look at that,” he says, gesturing to a prototypical Venice blonde making her way into the café. My eyes follow his, and the eccentric pair of us watch her glide.

“You like living in Venice?” I blurt, trying to cut the tension.

His eyes are transfixed.

“Go on in there, Lonely!” he barks at her. “I’ll be there in a few seconds.”

She looks at him, then at me. I look at Seymour. He holds her in his eyes. Does she know who he is? Does it matter? She locks her kindness behind closed lips and carries on her way.

She may not know his name, but she definitely knows, just as I know, that Seymour Cassel has it. He has always had it. Regardless of the terms he’s been subjected to — whether by Wes Anderson or an aspiring somebody like myself — he takes to the world around him with the exhilaration of man emboldened by experience. He shapes reality, shakes it up, and relishes his place in it.

And I, driving home from the interview, entertain a notion of self-disappointment. I could have been more prepared. I could have been more assertive with my questions... But I immediately shut these inclinations down, knowing damn well of their origins in a useless self-effacement — an expectation that interactions should be something more.

Seymour Cassel expressed it best in Faces: “Nobody has the time to be vulnerable to each other. Right away, our armor comes out like a shield... and we become like mechanical men.”

Mechanical men. I was one of them going into the interview, expecting some closure between film and reality to give meaning to all those years I’ve lost to the movies. Well, Seymour Cassel assured me of the connection between real life and John Cassavetes’ films. But it wasn’t mine to hold; it was his.

My connection took place in a café in Venice on December 30, 2008, where I was, for a time, taking part in one of those gracious moments of solidarity.

-Daniel James Scott

Daniel James Scott is a junior Film & Digital Media major from Los Angeles. This is his second year writing for EyeCandy, and his first year serving as co-editor. Until next year’s edition, he looks forward to making films.
There is a new cinema based on an aesthetic developed by a Western sequential art form — the comic book. This staple of American culture was appropriated and reinvented in post-World War II Japan, resulting in manga and its animated form, anime. As soon as the technology was available, comics in the West were made into cartoons like Popeye, Superman, and a cavalcade of similar productions. Today, due to this comic book-turned-live action movie phenomenon, the technological boundaries of cinema have been pushed far beyond the limits of graphic novels and Saturday morning cartoon shows. In this same vein, certain breakthrough anime have managed to make a cinematic leap. With all the ongoing experimental use of computer graphics in film, it seems that animation is no longer trying to catch up to film, but rather it is film that is turning into animation. Through live-action anime, foreign genres of animation will be converted into an entirely different art form, with its own unique culture, politics and history. This new form is an intercultural hybridization of visual media, or what I call cinémé.

When the United States introduced comic books to Japan and, later, Disney animation, it was an example of a victorious nation deliberately influencing the culture of a conquered country. The end of World War II was a new beginning for many countries — those that emerged victorious returned to rebuild a relatively stable economy, while those that were defeated knew only devastation, particularly Japan. That fateful August morning in 1945 left a reverberating impact on the country's visual artists; Japan would be forever remembered as the only nation devastated by a nuclear bomb. Even in modern anime, so much of the action revolves around an "imagination of disaster," images of nuclear devastation and war that allude to the horrors of World War II.

Astroboy was a postmodern spin on the Pinocchio fairy tale. It featured a boy robot who can fly and has super strength that he uses to fight a mad scientist.

Four months before the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a relatively unknown animated propaganda film, Momotaro's Divine Sea Warriors (Momotaro Umi no shinpai, 1945), was released. The 74-minute feature was a milestone in Japanese animation, clearly the most ambitious project to date, but as a result of the bombings very few saw the film. One Osaka schoolboy did manage, however: Osamu Tezuka, better known as the "godfather of modern-day anime" and the creator of Astro Boy (Tetsuwan Atom). This character, which debuted in a 1951 Captain Atom manga, featured in a 1952 manga, and its eponymous television series, which ran from 1963 to 1966, helped popularize the anime style of characters with large eyes (Tezuka drew inspiration from Max Fleischer cartoons of the 1920s and '30s).

The years directly preceding Astro Boy's 1952 manga were marked by a cultural exchange during the American military occupation of Japan, which lasted from 1945 to 1952. As American forces worked to reconstruct Japan, soldiers shared American comics that in turn inspired the creation of manga. Television was introduced shortly thereafter, in 1953, and American television shows began broadcasting in Japan, with shows like Disneyland (1954–1990) achieving enormous popularity. Disney animation became extremely popular in Japan, and its brand appeal was not lost on the Japanese. In time, and through their amazing will and creativity, their unique animation style — a fusion of Fleischer and Disney with their own cultural imprint — became a global transcultural influence and economic commodity.

The commodities of manga and anime, which are reaching their apex of popularity today, are an example of what economist Joseph Nye calls "soft power." He states, "This second aspect of power — which occurs when one country gets other countries to want what it wants — might be called co-optive or soft power in contrast with the hard command power of ordering others to do what it wants." It was clear that Japan had been militarily and politically dominated, and it might have become culturally dominated as well, had it not put its own creative stamp on American cultural influences.

Astro Boy's real impact was its legacy of technical creativity. The techniques pioneered by Astro Boy began a new style of animation with its own following, akin to Disney. For fans of early anime, this new style had become a vital art form. Anime had been born with the creation of Astro Boy, not only creating a new visual style, but an entire parallel universe of style, content, and possibility. The success of the
1964 Tokyo Olympics broadcast helped television to become Japan's primary entertainment medium, and anime was all set to take Japan by storm over the airwaves. At the time, the new Japan was experiencing huge economic growth, establishing bullet trains, and modernizing itself well beyond most countries.

Defining the characteristics of anime's soft power is not possible without discussing its fan base. Anime's earliest form of distribution in the U.S. was via fan sub' on VHS and some very limited distribution deals. When anime exploded onto DVD, many possibilities opened up. Not only could fans have both the original unaltered subtitled version of the anime in an instant, but also English-dubbed versions. What DVD did for anime was to make these varied versions more accessible to fans using its unique audio-subtitle switch. Anime, as a genre and art form, can claim that its popularity is largely due to its unique fan base. Anime's large distribution networks and emerging fan movements in America are an example of social spaces where exchange of media and ideas are directed toward increased anime consumption. Based on interviews with the founders of anime distribution outlets, anime analyst Sean Leonard concludes, "Fan distribution between 1976 and 1993 functioned economically as a prerequisite to licensed materials and that fan distribution constituted the demand formation phase necessary, but ancillary, to capitalist activity." This notion of product demand being a precursor to a consumption trend is not new to American media consumption practices. Certain men, in particular, have made the familiar brand of "man-of-action" heroes in narrative cinema like Rambo or James Bond, searching for personal compensation inside narratives, and their consumption reflects this. Compensatory consumption refers to the intense consumption, work, and men exhibit in order to rationalize their place in the socioeconomic scale. Americans' early anime consumption stemmed from the fading interests in traditional American animation, but can now be said to be unique in the fact that its fans shaped the distribution and proliferation of the genre, making the fan movement a prerequisite of its production. The result of such an appropriation of anime is reflected in the importance of anime to individual fans. Many become spiritual seekers of anime texts; because of their own religious disillusionment, some turn to anime for spiritual fulfillment. This, combined with the radical transformation of media technology and availability, created a new kind of fandom. These obsessed fans were known in Japan by the derogatory term otaku, which U.S. anime fans appropriated with pride, dropping its negative connotations.

Throughout the 1980s and early '90s anime exploded onto the American scene, creating new fan subcultures. Anime's mix of merchandizing and media is unlike any media distribution except possibly Disney's animation. Anime owes its success to technological advances in media. It branched out from television and cinema to video games. Sometimes a game is based on an anime or vice versa. There is such a broad variety of content in anime: "Often graphically violent and sexual, anime range from comic romances about high school students to pornographic tales of demons whose penises are larger than skyscrapers." Out of this diversity of content, an audience was born — the otaku of the early '80s, who were the embodiment of anime fandom to such a degree that they were constantly criticized for social awkwardness and obsession with anime narratives. Anime and its fan base in the U.S. is still a subculture, especially because otaku are seen as extremely immature, socially awkward people.

Anime ranges from television shows like Dragonball (Akira Toriyama, 1988) to mature features like Mamoru Oshii's Ghost in the Shell (Kôdaku kôdô, 1995). Dragonball is based on an ancient Chinese fairy tale "Journey to the West," and is part of shonen manga, whereas the cyberpunk thriller Ghost in the Shell is a far more mature anime set in the late 21st century, and is thematically similar to films like Blade Runner (Ridley Scott, 1982) or The Matrix (The Wachowski Brothers, 1999). Both of these animes are set to appear as live-action cinema on the silver screen, with Dragonball: Evolution due in April 2009 and Ghost in the Shell in 2011.

Diversity reflects the overall powerhouse of anime, as its consumers are caught in a sort of parallel universe unknown to many: "It is no longer the products themselves that Japanese consumers seek out, but rather the 'grand narrative' (okinah monogatari) that sustains them." Thus countless different narratives and subnarratives, merchandise, and essentially anything with an anime drawing on it have become items for cultural-economic consumption.

The demand for anime in the U.S. has largely been due to a demand for what American popular culture lacks. American popular culture cannot produce an artifact from another culture; anime is seen as a globally accepted Japanese cultural artifact. In-depth interviews with people who found spirituality in anime revealed that they also bore negative attitudes not only toward organized religion, but also toward U.S. popular culture. Thus, anime is an alternative cultural product. From the respondents' interviews, Park discovered that the spiritual nourishment from anime was roughly equivalent to any other cultural act, such as playing music. He noted, "This indistinguishability of the two realms would be a basis for the spiritual seekers to make religious meanings out of cultural consumption for their religious identity construction." The large fan involvement with anime is enough to show how powerful and lasting this postmodern art form has become. What drives these enthused fans is more than just its aesthetic; it's a whole
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spectrum of creative possibility.

Anime’s legacy finds its soul in its history and fans, but what gives it its corporeality is its unique aesthetics. Astro Boy was among the first to establish the conventions of anime as its own stylistic medium. Early cel animation techniques, though quite expensive and extremely time consuming, contributed to the amazing degree of realism in early Disney animation.

With anime, however, a technique called limited animation had to be employed in order to meet extreme time and budgetary constraints: the postwar economic and political climate in Japan was shaky at best. Instead of tediously creating movement frame by frame, animator focused on moving only the character’s eyes, or background of a shot in order to simulate motion, not the whole. It was an artistic and stylistic revelation: moving drawings instead of drawing movement. In perhaps one of the most remarkable works on animation theory, Thomas Lamarre defines the unique features of anime:

"Even when animation closely follows the models of live-action cinema, it does not merely copy or replicate. It reconstitutes, and thus decodes. Decoding goes beyond an imitation or reproduction of live-action cinema, and opens up new possibilities for expression. It reaches into so-called live action and unravels it. It thus goes to the heart of what is ‘live.’ This is a potential of animation that becomes especially important in anime. Anime cuts to the quick of the ‘live.’" 22

Anime remakes or captures that which is "live" and gets to its very essence in its creative interpretations of it. With cinema, computer animation is beginning to be used to capture what is live literally, rather than interpretively. As computer-graphics animation is increasingly used due to its availability and speed, anime loses its minimalist nature.

With cinema as the zenith of an art that spans across history, war, religion, and technology, anime has returned full circle to that which was the obsession of animation: the real. Film is becoming more like animation than ever before. Because anime is such a complex medium on its own, its mainstream cinematic translation will be that much more difficult to achieve. Cinémé has already begun in many ways, though it is only in its beginning stages. What will mainstream cinematic translation mean for anime? Some of the attributes of anime that cinema may reflect can be found in its technique. Limited animation pushes animators to search for the most economical expression of movement: "Anime is concerned with the minimal conditions for life, and with the question of how to generate life from movements." 24

2009 promises to be a landmark year in anime adaptations, as we finally get to see the CG adaptation of Astro Boy, a live adaptation (although no means a similar story) of Dragonball, and the announcement of future cinematic releases of milestone anime such as Cowboy Bebop, Ghost in the Shell and Akira, all slated for a 2011 release. Cinémé will either expand the boundaries of cinematic possibility or become just another Hollywood gimmick. Its aesthetic-hybridity makes it a very intricate visual art to record or decode; but then the question arises: If anime recorded the "live," what is cinémé meant to express if it is "live"? Cinémé will take film, anime, and its audience to uncharted realms of imagination, and may result in an entirely new aesthetic of cinematic expression.

Juan Bayardo

Juan Bayardo is a senior double major at UC Santa Cruz in Sociology and Film & Digital Media, with a concentration on production. His interests are in developing new modes of the viewing experience, experimenting with different forms of animation, and collaborating with different artists of media. Ultimately, Juan hopes to use sociology to combine his media skills to promote the social responsibility of entertainment and mass media.

*Endnotes on Website
For the past twenty-five years, one name has functioned as a kind of imprimatur for the home viewer: The Criterion Collection, "a continuing series of important classic and contemporary films," as it describes itself, is "dedicated to gathering the greatest films from around the world and publishing them in editions of the highest technical quality, with supplemental features that enhance the appreciation of the art of film." The company was founded in 1984 as a joint venture between Janus Films, the pioneering art-house distributor, and The Voyager Company, which distributed Criterion's line of laserdiscs, as well as its own line of Voyager laserdiscs and CD-ROMs containing largely educational programs.

I can remember the first time I became interested in laserdiscs. It was 1994, and I was in junior high school. I had stopped off at a local video store—the now-defunct LaserLand Home Theater—just out of curiosity, I had never been there before. I recall my astonishment at the number of large, glossy covers lining their shelves, each containing shiny silver platters in which I could see my own reflection over the rainbow-saturated encoded data. My fascination—both technological and aesthetic—was piqued, and in a few years, with the introduction of DVD, it would grow into a hobby, then an obsession. I became a videophile, a devotee of movies on disc.

The various characteristics one associates with the cinephile—an encyclopedic knowledge of film, a love for the cinema and the experience of it, an obsession with detail, a desire to revisit favorites, etc.—I suggest also apply to the videophile. Yet the videophile, like the audiophile with the LP or bibliophile with the book, values the object itself—the optical disc—as a means to an end...

"The videophile, like the audiophile with the LP or bibliophile with the book, values the object itself—the optical disc—as a means to an end..."

means to an end, a piece of a greater whole that begets more such objects ad infinitum, barring spatial and economic restraints. The medium's aesthetics are prized, sometimes above its utilitarian value.

It was during my initial visit to LaserLand that I first noticed the name "The Criterion Collection" printed across the top of several laserdisc covers. I vividly recall my flabbergasted reaction upon picking up the 3-disc *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* (dir. Terry Gilliam, 1989, UK) and noticing the price tag of $124.95—how could anyone pay that much for a single movie, I wondered? Then I looked on the back at the list of features, and began to understand. I could picture myself absorbing the supplemental features like a sponge, feeding my desire to know all there is to know about a film—to gain access to a kind of specialized cinephile knowledge—simply by possessing the object (a logical fallacy, for one must use the object, not merely possess it, to gain access to its stored knowledge). Ten years later, after the laserdisc format's demise, I purchased that Criterion edition LD of *Baron Munchausen*—containing supplemental features not available on DVD—from a local collector...for $5! In a way, I had fulfilled the desire of my earlier self to possess the object, but, as a dedicated procrastinator, I have not yet given it a spin. I am, however, secure in the knowledge that such in depth understanding of the film is available to me should I ever find time to partake of it.

As Walter Benjamin observed, "The true method of making things present is to represent them in our space (not to represent ourselves in their space). The collector does just this." The videophile collects discs as the cinephile does film perennials. In this he shares a trait with the archivist, whose primary role is to collate and preserve.
In its perceived permanence, a videodisc collection "offer[s] the seductiveness of immortality...and invite[s] our complicity in the beating of Death." 

With prices on previously unaffordable laserdiscs plummeting in 2001 (after the last laserdisc titles were released in 2000), I began collecting the objects of my fascination in earnest. DVDs were cheap, but now laserdiscs, which used to be much more expensive, were even cheaper. Eventually, I managed to amass a large archive of laserdiscs, with many Criterion editions occupying a cherished place in my collection. What makes them valuable to me, aside from the films themselves? In short, it is the attention each of the releases received, from the film transfer and supplements to its aesthetic appeal (many of the covers are suitable for framing).

The Criterion Collection's very first laserdisc releases, in December 1984, pioneered the concept of using the medium to provide supplemental material to enhance the home viewer's appreciation and understanding of film. Both *Citizen Kane* (dir. Orson Welles, 1941, USA), its first release, and *King Kong* (dir. Merian C. Cooper & Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933, USA), its second, were groundbreaking. *Kane* contained a "visual essay" (a kind of narrated photo montage) by Robert Carringer, along with the theatrical trailer, a common supplement today, but innovative at the time. A jacket essay by Roger Ebert would become the first of many such essays enhancing Criterion's releases.

*Kong* was the first title to utilize a feature that was, at a time when VHS was laserdisc's chief competitor, unique to the medium: its ability to carry separate and distinct audio channels for supplementary audio. Film historian Ronald Haver became the first to record an audio essay, and commentaries were born. Yet while scholars remained an exclusive staple for Criterion during the mid-'80s, it was not until another Criterion project, the 1988 laserdisc of *Black Narcissus* (dir. Michael Powell & Emeric Pressburger, 1947, UK), that directors took advantage of laserdisc's multi-audio capabilities. Michael Powell and Martin Scorsese (who idolized Powell & Pressburger, and whose longtime editor, Thelma Schoonmaker, had recently become Powell's wife) became the first directors to record an alternate channel commentary (republished on Criterion's 2000 DVD of the film). The result of such an endeavor became clear upon Powell's death in 1990 of cancer. Over the last twenty years, numerous filmmakers have recorded their thoughts on disc, and taken as a whole, these commentaries have preserved an invaluable record of the artistic process for posterity.

The Criterion Collection's first logo, a spinning optical disc meshed with flipping pages, reflected the idea of the annotated movie, and of being able to navigate a movie as easily as a book. Viewers could use the still-frame function of CAV discs (which held approximately 30 minutes per side) to appreciate individual still frames from the film. The ability to manipulate a film by pausing, replaying, and accessing any frame has enabled films to be studied—and their frames scrutinized—more easily than ever before. This nonlinearity became a cause celebre for an emerging community of cinephiles and video-philists who relished the laserdisc's ability to provide a customized and controllable viewing experience, something that was at odds with how film is experienced in a theater—as a linear single viewing.

More significant for the art of film than Criterion's popularization of supplemental material was their belief in letterboxing widescreen films, which traditionally had been made available (and shown on television) in modified, pan-and-scan versions, compromising the original artistic compositions of the director and cinematographer, altering the "cinematic" and, hence, often, the very meaning and experience of the film. Moreover, the idea of viewing films in their original aspect ratio is a crucial precondition for fostering an environment in which the spectator can have what Christian Keatley describes as a "cineph-
plaints about “black bars” from irate VHS owners began to escalate, prompting the laserphile crowd to chuckle with a knowing satisfaction. To own laserdiscs was to robuste the VHS standard practice of artistic butchery; it was also to send a message to the studios that films should be treated with more care and respect for their artistic integrity in their transfer to home video. The result is that most films released on DVD and Blu-ray today are, more or less, in their original aspect ratio, and there is a demand for presenting them as such. In this respect, Criterion acted as pedagogue as much as innovator.

Criterion’s 1984 King Kong laserdisc contained the first audio commentary, by film historian Ronald Hayman.

In March 1998, Criterion entered the year-old DVD market. Some of the company’s early DVDs went out of print and became top collectors, with people paying as much as $600 for Salò (dir. Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1975, Italy/France) on eBay (Criterion has since reissued Salò in an improved edition, thus rendering the old significantly less valuable). Criterion, as an independent company, must license the rights to publish the films in their collection that are not owned by Janus Films (their partner) from licensors, who grant them a finite window to sell their product. Once their license expires, Criterion is obligated to withdraw their release from the market. Considering this, it is perhaps surprising that more Criterion releases are not out of print, but, happily, they are often able to renew their license.

Not all of Criterion’s several hundred laserdiscs have made it to DVD. Some that have, such as the aforementioned Citizen Kane and King Kong (both on DVD courtesy Warner Home Video, have not retained their supplements, which Criterion still owns); conversely, Criterion has issued many DVDs of films that never appeared on laserdisc.

The DVD era has seen Criterion branch out from their canonical collection to pursue other endeavors. Home Vision Entertainment, which was Criterion’s co-distributor until its purchase by Image Entertainment in 2005, released many titles that had previously been available from Voyager on laserdisc, such as Poetry in Motion (dir. Ronn Mann, 1982, Canada), in which twenty contemporary North American poets recite, sing, and perform their work. In addition, Home Vision released DVDs of some titles that Criterion issued on laserdisc, like Victim (dir. Basil Dearden, 1961, UK). Criterion’s Merchant-Ivory Collection contains most of the work of the producing-directing partnership, including Howards End (dir. James Ivory, 1992, UK). In 2007, Criterion launched a new DVD label, Eclipse, which they describe as “a selection of lost, forgotten, or overshadowed classics in simple, affordable editions. Each Eclipse series is a brief cinematheque retrospective for the adventurous home viewer.” Thus far, Eclipse has released over a dozen box sets, including early works of Bergman and Ozon along with works by lesser-known directors like Larisa Shepitko and William Klein.

The unprecedented success of the DVD format has seen Criterion’s popularity and reputation rise in a way that the less popular and more cumbersome laserdisc, catering to its niche market of videophiles, could never achieve. However, Criterion’s practice of pricing their DVDs $10 higher, on average, than their competitors has put off some consumers who see them as too expensive.

There is a reason for the higher list prices. The company is still small (there are only around 40 employees), and each release is given extra care and attention—the best elements are sought, new transfers are struck, a DVD producer scours the world’s archives to find relevant and informative supplements, and new supplements are commissioned. Profit margins are low on most Criterion releases and the company likes to reinvest most of its profits into its upcoming projects. The existence of films like Michael Bay’s Armageddon (1998, USA) and The Rock (1996, USA), Wes Anderson’s The Royal Tenenbaums (2001, USA) or David Fincher’s The Curious Case of Benjamin Button (2008, USA) in the collection can be explained by the fact that these titles outsell many of the other Criterion releases on a consistent basis, thus helping to offset the cost of producing superb, but less commercially successful releases like The Double Life of Véronique (dir. Krzysztof Kieslowski, 1991, France/Poland) or F for Fake (dir. Orson Welles, 1975, USA).

Criterion’s The Adventures of Baron Munchausen contained special features which have never been republished on DVD or Blu-ray.
The silver lining: Their recent entry into the Blu-ray marketplace sees Criterion pricing their high definition discs at the same price as their DVD editions.

Criterion’s cultural importance is hard to overstate. The company is responsible for making available to the public many of the most important works of some of the world’s great filmmakers. Kurosawa, Ozu, Bergman, and Fellini, to name only four, represent a significant part of the collection as a whole. There are seminal films and buried treasures from a diverse array of important film movements, genres, and styles: French poetic realism (Pépé le Moko, La Bête humaine); the French New Wave (Breathless, The 400 Blows); film noir (Pickup on South Street, Night and the City, The Killers); and French neo-noir (Le Doulos, Army of Shadows); New German Cinema (Berlin Alexanderplatz, The Tin Drum); Italian neorealism (Bicycle Thieves, The Flowers of St. Francis); Japanese samurai films (Harakiri, Onibaba); cult films (Shock Corridor, The Blob); and documentaries (Hearts and Minds, Harlan County, USA). The breadth and depth of the collection is astonishing, yet, as Bradley Schauer notes, “there are few silent films or foreign films that originate outside of Europe or Japan.”

While Schauer may be correct, Criterion’s superb releases of The Passion of Joan of Arc (dir. Carl Th. Dreyer, 1928, France), Hávazd (dir. Benjamin Christensen, 1922, Denmark), and The King of Kings (Cecil B. DeMille, 1927, USA) are cornerstones of any serious silent cinema collection, while its recent release of Chungking Express (Wong Kar-wai, 1994, Hong Kong) fills an important slot in its representation of Hong Kong films (which include Wong’s In the Mood for Love [2000] along with John Woo’s Hard Boiled [1992] and The Killer [1989], both out of print).

Criterion’s Collection fosters the development of the cinephile videophile, one who has at his disposal access to more material on one place about a film than ever before. Viewing films within the context in which they were produced is a rewarding, addictive process. The individual DVDs and laserdiscs themselves become cinephile objects, gateways to a kind of supremely rewarding knowledge that comes from the comprehensiveness of their creation: they are the total package, at once ephemeral and permanent. A generation of cinephiles has become videophiles and Criterion collectors. Quentin Tarantino was an admiring videophile and fan of Criterion connoisseur before he made his first film. Reservoir Dogs (1992, USA), and his Pulp Fiction (1994, USA) was subsequently released on laserdisc by Criterion—a sure sign that the video revolution has redefined our relationship between video and film. In contrast to earlier generations of filmmakers, Criterion was Tarantino’s film school.

Criterion’s most direct influence can be found in a continuing series of DVDs

A Timeline of Selects: Historically Significant Criterion Releases

Laserdiscs

1984 Citizen Kane (spine #1) and Kong Kong (spine #2) become the first films in The Criterion Collection.

The laserdiscs immediately draw media attention, praise, and introduce the concept of supplemental features to home video media. Kane has visual essay, trailer, Kong debuts scholarly commentary.

1985 Invasion of the Body Snatchers (spine #8) is the first Criterion laserdisc to be letterboxed, preserving its original theatrical widescreen ratio. The Hidden Fortress (spine #11) and Lola Montès (spine #12) follow suit.

1987 Criterion’s CAV laserdisc of The Graduate (spine #17) is their first to utilize the multi-audio capabilities of laserdisc: PCM digital sound, with the digital tracks containing the film soundtrack, and the right analog channel a commentary by Professor Howard Suber.

Blade Runner (spine #18) becomes a bestselling Criterion laserdisc after flopping theatrically in 1982, and its success helps legitimize the practice of letterboxing.

1988 Criterion’s release of Black Narcissus (spine #38) contains the first director’s commentary, by Michael Powell and Martin Scorsese.

1989 Criterion debuts popular classics The Wizard of Oz (spine #56), Casablanca (spine #73), and 2001: A Space Odyssey (spine #66), in “videoscopic” Criterion’s term for letterboxing. Each features supplements that have not to date appeared on any subsequent laserdisc, DVD, or Blu-ray release.

1990 Scorsese’s Taxi Driver (spine #109) and Raging Bull (spine #120) enter the collection.

1991 Dr. No (spine #124), From Russia with Love (spine #131), and Goldfinger (spine #132) become the first (and last) James Bond films published by Criterion. Each contains a commentary that updates Bond producers’ forcing a withdrawal from the market.

1992 Citizen Kane: 50th Anniversary Edition (spine #142) improves upon Criterion’s initial release, offering a host of new supplements.

1994 The Silence of the Lambs (spine #192) is Criterion’s first THX-certified laserdisc.

1996 Pulp Fiction (spine #271) is Criterion’s first Doby Digital (AC-3) laserdisc.

1998 Armageddon (spine #384) is Criterion’s last LD release.

DVD

1998 Criterion enters the fledgling, one-year-old DVD market with The 400 Blows (spine #5), since reissued with improvements, in the box set The Adventures of Antoine Doinel), The Killer (spine #8; still out of print), and Amarcord (spine #4, since reissued, with a new transfer and supplements).

1999 After completing their transfer of Grand Illusion (spine #1) in 1998, Criterion gains access to better quality elements, “uncovering a complete print that had been captured by the Nazis and protected by the Russians after the war.”

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The film is finally issued on DVD in November 1999. _Nanook of the North_ (spine #33) is Criterion's first DVD-exclusive title. All prior films Criterion released on DVD up to this time had been previously available from Criterion on laserdisc. _Insomnia_ is Criterion's first release to be enhanced for 16x9 TVs. Criterion's 3-DVD box set of _Brazil_ (spine #51; list price: $59.95; since reissued in a new anamorphic widescreen transfer) compiles all of Criterion's supplements from their 1996 5-LD box set (which listed for $140.65).

2000 Criterion's _Boastio Boys Anthology_ (spine #100) marks the company's first collection of music videos, utilizing the DVD format's multiple camera angles.

2003 _Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas_ (spine #175) is released and becomes a bestseller, offsetting less popular but no less eclectic titles like _By Brakhage: An Anthology_ (spine #184), a collection of 26 works by Experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage.

2004 _John Cassavetes: Five Films_ (spine #250), a comprehensive 5-DVD box set, is released.

2006 _Seven Samurai_ (spine #2), which was one of Criterion's earliest releases, gets a new transfer and bountiful extras in a new 3-DVD edition. _Eric Rohmer's Six Moral Tales_ (spine #342), a 6-DVD box set, is released.

**Blu-ray**

2008 In December, _The Man Who Fell to Earth, Chungking Express, and Bottle Rocket_ become Criterion's first forays into high definition on Blu-ray disc.

Published in the UK. In 2004, Eureka! Video, based in London, launched their Masters of Cinema Series. Like Criterion, each release receives a spine number, is presented in its original aspect ratio transferred from the best possible source, and contains comprehensive on-disc, as well as printed, supplements. There is overlap in the titles as well; _F for Fake_ and _Ugetsu_ (dir. Kenji Mizoguchi. 1953, Japan) receive different but complementary supplements to their Criterion counterparts.

Perhaps Criterion Collection's greatest gift is instantaneous access to a plethora of highly relevant film knowledge—whether one initially desires it or not. The additional supplements are there as a kind of contextual buffer. They are a pedagogical tool for enticement, exploration, excitement, and the transformation of an insular viewer into an ardent admirer of the cinematic arts—a cinephilic videophile.

The Criterion Collection has transformed how I view, appreciate, and think about film, and exposed me to films I may never have otherwise found. Criterion opened my eyes to the great works of world cinema; it expanded my cinematic worldview. I share in the elation, along with other Criterion collectors, of discovering the diverse cinematic treasures Criterion unearth and presents on a sliver platter. By including such dissimilar titles as _Synapsis: Psychotrapology_ (dir. William Greaves, 1968, USA) and _Two-Lane Blacktop_ (dir. Monte Hellman, 1971, USA) along with works from the canonical giants of world cinema, and organizing them all under the rubric of spine numbers (which additionally encourage collectors to complete their collections), the Criterion Collection encourages new connections across individual works, while at the same time connections across groups of works within the collection, and indeed, across the collection as a whole. The pedagogical, artistic, and historical value of Criterion's twenty-five-year catalog of special editions is immense, and I cannot think of a more rich, comprehensive, worldly, and eclectic collection of films over which to obsess, as "blind buys," which means I have not seen the film prior to purchasing it. I trust the imprimatur that my viewing experience will at least be interesting and worthwhile; so far, I have not been3 disappointed, and have discovered many of my favorite films through their collection.

4At first, only stereo (left and right) analog tracks were available, with the laserdisc player able to isolate the left or right channel for playback independently of the other. In the late 1980s, the addition of uncompressed PCM (pulse code modulation) stereo CD-quality digital audio tracks became commonplace. Finally, support for two competing (and incompatible) multichannel digital audio technologies was added in the mid-'90s: The addition of 5.1 channel Dolby Digital, which was modulated on the right analog channel, in 1998, and DTS, stored in place of the PCM digital stereo tracks, in 1997.

5CAV is an acronym for Constant Angular Velocity, meaning the disc would spin at a consistent rate of speed no matter where the laser focused. CAV allowed random access to perfectly still frames from video, and was preferred for elaborate special editions. The more common CLV, or Constant Linear Velocity, mode would vary the angular velocity—the disc would spin faster when the laser read closer to its center and gradually slow down as the laser moved toward the outer edge.

6For still photos or textual supplements in video, the laserdisc player would receive instructions from the disc that an individual video "frame," rather than containing a field of video, contained a still photo or supplemental text (when played back at normal speed, these still frames would rush by at 30 per second!).

8Quoted from the back of Eclipse DVD releases.


10Ibid 33.
3D CINEMA
Toward Digital Realism

By Justin William Kelsey

The cinema is a unique synthesis of commercial and artistic ventures. Big-budget movies often seem to sacrifice artistic integrity for marketing gimmicks. While there is a fluctuation between the commercial and the artistic in movies, the production of a movie is always a craft, and the experiences we have watching them are often profound and lasting. This year, with the launch of movies in the third dimension, a new aesthetic is being projected using updated 3D technology. The responses to these movies will no doubt cause the studios to carefully examine how much artistic integrity must be respected in this new technology and aesthetic when, as it so often is, big money is on the line.

As a film major, it might seem unsophisticated to admit that I enjoyed my time watching this year’s first 3D gore-fest, My Bloody Valentine 3D (dir. Patrick Lussier, 2009, USA), a remake of the 1981 slasher flick of the same name. However, unless the movie is viewed with a pair of glasses that completely enhance the experience, there is no sense to its tagline, “Nothing says ‘date movie’ like a 3D ride to hell!” In its marketing campaign, the studio, Lionsgate, not only categorizes the movie under the horror genre, but also promotes the movie using the same kind of gimmicks that amusement parks use to entice patrons to wait in line for hours. In this representation of horror and amusement through the third dimension, the movie conveys fear, gore and adrenaline with a certain aesthetic that is going to become very prevalent with this year’s movies — digital realism.

Digital realism synthesizes technological innovations with heightened perception. It is an aesthetic that strives to narrow that gap we distinguish between the movie’s world and the natural world. When viewing movies in 3D, distinctions between the traditional 2D formats are inevitable, especially when it comes to discussions of realism. But how noticeable will the aesthetic of digital realism really be this year? Would a successful year for 3D movies consummate digital realism as a true aesthetic? Or is the style resulting from 3D projection still too gimmicky to be taken seriously? And how will these films ultimately be categorized?

While the 3D images in My Bloody Valentine 3D do indeed throw out a few gimmicky in-your-face effects (the pickax literally thrown toward the camera, for example), the majority of the film’s 3D images magnify shape and detail. Beyond the gimmick, and approaching artistic stylization, the digital realism projected by 3D systems directs our attention to otherwise overlooked objects in the set design and art direction.

Consider the film’s exposition. The graphics designed to display newspaper clippings in a less conventional manner vary the spatial depth and proximities of words and phrases. The attention here is almost exclusively drawn to the 3D format itself. Now consider the murderous coal miner standing over his victim, who is made to appear helpless with a low-angle...
shot from the victim’s point of view. As the pickleax hovers in the foreground spatial plane, 3D draws more attention to the film techniques that attempt to heighten the movie’s horror. When the 3D accentuates the images in My Bloody Valentine 3D, the movie’s slasher-horror content is in fusion with the overall aesthetic of digital realism. The film’s 3D aesthetic exploits the genre through the additional perspective that 3D amplifies with a high level of clarity and depth. However, this accentuation also carries a possible (some would say inevitable) drawback of distracting our attention away from the story and onto the filmmaking process itself.

As more studios turn to 3D for future projects, there is sure to be careful consideration as to how to properly utilize 3D’s potential. There are more 3D live-action movies slated throughout 2009 that will exhibit the digital realism the new 3D processes are capable of producing. In addition to two more 3D horror movies, there is the recent Jonas Brothers: The 3D Concert Experience (dir. Bruce Hendricks, 2009, USA), and the upcoming Disney/Bruckheimer movie about government-trained guinea pigs running black-ops, G-Force (dir. Hoyt Yeatman, 2009, USA). Then, James Cameron will top off the year’s 3D offerings with his long-awaited Avatar (dir. James Cameron, 2009, USA). While 3D this year is currently relegated to only a few movie genres, a box-office hit could open the door to 3D films in other genres.

My Bloody Valentine 3D is an example of a studio taking a chance with a project that was not originally conceived of as a 3D movie. I had the opportunity to interview the film’s screenwriter, Zane Smith, who shares with us some insight about the first script he wrote for Lionsgate:

**JWK:** When did Lionsgate decide to produce this film in 3D? Did you know the script you were writing was going to be produced in 3D?

**ZS:** I was hired in May of 2007 and was the first creative person on the project. [Director] Patrick Lussier came around August/September. By October, I had already written several drafts and Lionsgate started discussing shooting the film in 3D. Patrick did a few tests with experimental cameras, they looked amazing and by about January ‘08 we got the greenlight to shoot in 3D.

**JWK:** Has My Bloody Valentine 3D met or exceeded Lionsgate’s [box office] expectations in theaters?

**ZS:** Everybody at Lionsgate is happy. So far, the film has done about $55 million in three weeks, [and] will probably do over $80 [million]. For this kind of film, that’s pretty good. By anyone’s definition, it’s a hit.

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"As a storyteller, you can use this added dimension to build tension, shock and emotion. It’s like a 3D horror lap dance."

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**JWK:** Is Lionsgate going to transition to producing more 3D features?

**ZS:** This 3D technology is amazing, and it requires a new way of looking at storytelling. I think many studios, including Lionsgate, will look to this film as a paradigm of the future. So yes, I think LGF will do more 3D.

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Taking this perspective into consideration, let us recall that image of the killer standing over his victim with the pickleax. We still analyze the same connotations within the shot on a 2D format. So what is really being accentuated? It may just very well be purely psychological. The advent of new technology in making movies, as well as improved technology, stimulating new understandings of reception. The digital aspect of movies today undoubtedly opens up gateways for both artistic and commercial possibilities. The question is: how will the artists utilize this commercial investment to stylize new movies with digital realism’s signature? Specifically for Smith, will the rise of 3D cinema impact his approach to future screenwriting projects?

**ZS:** Absolutely. ... Look, it’s one thing if there’s an indiscriminate killer lurking about in the distance on a 2D screen, it’s another if he or she pops up in the chair next to you in the theater or an ax is thrust inches from your face. As a storyteller, you can use this added dimension to build tension, shock and emotion. It’s like a 3D horror lap dance.

The “3D horror lap dance” is an analogy for our indulgence of spectacle. Thrusi violent imagery at us, and we are intrigued and uncertain at the same time. Thus, the new platform for 3D movies gets our attention. And once it does, we can really start to pick it apart.

But not just by labeling 3D as another gimmick. With attention comes analysis, and now the new wave of 3D can be integrated into the discourse of film and digital media. Some will be excited and enthralled with the new technology — others will lament 3D, believing that it will disengage active participation with the narrative by focusing too much on the 3D spectacle. For Smith, however, this is a false concern — and a false distinction, since theatrical cinema is, and will continue to be, the combination of story and image.

**ZS:** Cinema is storytelling, and there’s a collective experience in a theater that you won’t find on a PDA, webisode or even home plasma TV. No matter the emerging technology ... it’s all about a good time. Regardless of the platform, movies about interesting characters in compelling situations are here to stay.

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DreamWorks’ Bernard Mendiburu, a visual effects artist and cinema engineer,
maintains that the story is absolutely paramount: “People will not go to see a technology. They will go to the theater to see a story,” he says. However, audiences can expect to be enticed by the rising expansion of the technology (for a little while at least). DreamWorks Animation CEO Jeffrey Katzenberg adheres to this philosophy about story above all else. In an interview with Roger Ebert, Katzenberg praises 3D’s capabilities to evoke deeper emotions in a movie, while also acknowledging that 3D cannot spin straw into gold. So what does this mean for studios, like DreamWorks, that are investing in 3D? What does it mean for movie audiences?

Companies that invest a lot of money do so with the anticipation of a profitable return; losing substantial sums is always a risk. The financial hurdle that 3D systems will have to overcome will be the biggest test for the new era of digital realism. Audiences may find themselves disappointed by the fact that their local multiplex does not have one single screen that can support a digital 3D format. According to Mendiburu, the magical number that will allow 3D movies to fully transition into the cinema, without the necessity of a 2D backup for a financial safety net, is 3,000. Last year, there were about 1,000 screens in the United States. By the time this 2009 edition of EyeCandy goes public, digital 3D will be projected on over 1,700 screens in the United States (over 2,600 globally). While the cost to convert a screen to digital depends on the projector purchased, the cost runs approximately $50,000.

The next hurdle will be the artistic endeavor of allowing audiences to believe and accept a higher level of emotional experience within 3D movies. By moving past the gimmicky shock-and-awe illusions, audiences are more likely to grant the format longevity. Fortunately for 3D, Katzenberg knows that this is imperative, and Roger Ebert also attests to this as a “crucial element” for 3D’s success. After all, the ticket prices do go up with the movies that are released in 3D. Repetition — and not exploration — may bore audiences too early to continue coming back for more. And yet, audiences may still be skeptical. As Mendiburu notes, the studios are going to have to help audiences realize they are not going to be burdened with the old red and blue cardboard glasses from the 1950s, which provided unconvincing 3D and headaches. However, the uncertainty over the current and future state of 3D did not seem to hamper the success that My Bloody Valentine 3D has enjoyed in the marketplace.

I would argue that the combination of narrative and spectacle offered by 3D technology promises not only a new form of emotional engagement with the cinema but also a new form of digital realism. Paradoxically, this is true even of computer-animated films — the most widely produced works in the 3D format. 3D animated movies are drawing upon digital realism to enhance their own capability to represent the real world. Just as the computer ushered in a new wave of animated features with the premiere of Toy Story (dir. John Lasseter, position at DreamWorks, Bernard Mendiburu gained extensive experience with other companies working with 3D, all of which he drew upon for his forthcoming book “3D Movie Making: Stereoscopic Digital Cinema from Script to Screen.” Mendiburu’s book provides a detailed illustration of how 3D is more than just putting on a pair of perception-altering glasses. When I spoke with him, he stressed the extensive and pervasive technological aspects of the new 3D.

“The whole production process — from on set, to post-production, to projection in the theater — is digital,” Mendiburu said. “That’s what we call the glass-to-glass digitization. Everything is digital, from the camera lens to the projector lens. And because we stay with digital from end to end, we have a pixel-accurate control of the picture.”

The process of digitization apparently goes beyond new productions. According to Mendiburu, the technology has become so precise that the studios can fix virtually any mistakes made during production. In fact, post-production crews are even transferring old movies into a 3D format — with some added visual effects to boot. With this in mind, there no longer seems to be a technological hurdle to surpass. And it was this technological aspect that studios needed to address before giving 3D that extra push. As Mendiburu put it to me:

“It was very, very easy to make a mistake. Say, for example, there is one scratch on a film, and the projectionist just as usual cut the scratched picture and glued the film back together. On a 2D movie this happened a lot of times and nobody cared. On a 3D movie, if you don’t do that to the left and the right film, you will have one frame of de-synchronization between the two eyes. And that is sure to bring you a headache within minutes. And there were many, many, many small things like this that projectionists didn’t know. That’s one of the reasons that 3D had a bad reputation in terms of headache and audience pleasing.”

But he adds that, while the technology may be improved, the reasons for its development are similar to the initial efforts in the 1950s:

“The reason why 3D was big in the ’50s is for the same reason it’s big right now.
It’s because the movie business was fighting against the newcomer. And that used to be the TV. And now the movie business is fighting against (another) newcomer, which is the Internet and home theater. If you look at the numbers in terms of attendance at the theaters, it was pretty down in the early 2000s. So that’s one of the trends.”

The significance of this year’s 3D film offerings will reflect the efforts that have been made to turn what had been considered a novelty attraction into a format with a unique aesthetic style that filmmakers can utilize to accentuate deeper emotions. At the forefront, Jeffrey Katzenberg heralds 3D as an unlimited format that can work across the entire spectrum of movies. The hope is that the 3D format will not only become synonymous with cinema itself, but also accentuate cinema with a new form of digital realism.

2 ibid, Katzenberg.

Justin William Kelsey

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The chances are good that any movie you see in 3D this year will utilize RealD’s 3D glasses. RealD is a company that provides the display technology to over 90 percent of the screens displaying digital 3D in the United States, and over 75 percent globally.

RealD has provided 3D technology for Fortune 500 companies, the military, and even NASA for piloting the Mars rover mission. The eyewear, the screen, and the software/hardware for the projector are all part of the display technology that comes with converting a single theater into their digital format. RealD’s vice president of corporate communications, Rick Heineman, shared the following data with me via telephone:

- Over 40 movies will use RealD’s 3D technology over the next two-and-a-half years.
- Over 4,000 screens are to be equipped for RealD globally in time for James Cameron’s Avatar.
- Movies in digital 3D bring in three to four times the box office revenue of their 2D counterparts (the box office performance for the 3D version of My Bloody Valentine was 6:1 over the 2D version during its opening week).

3D movies still to come in 2009:
- Up (May 29)
- Ice Age 3: Dawn of the Dinosaurs (July 1)
- G-Force (July 24)
- Piranha (July 24)
- Final Destination: Death Trip 3D (August 21)
- Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs (September 18)
- A Christmas Carol (November 6)
- Planet 51 (November 21)
- Avatar (December 18)
- The Princess and the Frog (December 25)
Between Egotism and a Wasted Life: A Critical Polemic

By William Hoschele

"A man goes to the movies. The critic must be honest enough to admit that he is that man."
-- Robert Warshow

So often in casual conversations with others, upon broaching their opinions of contemporary film critics, do I hear, "Oh, I never listen to the critics," or (to my horror), "I just read what they say and disregard it." I have always found this frankness jarring, if a little rude, considering that I have a degree in film criticism. This frustrating reoccurrence makes me wonder if film critics are still relevant.

Director (and former Cahiers du Cinéma critic) François Truffaut once wrote: "in Hollywood, everyone has two trades -- his own and reviewing movies." Truffaut continued to lament about how rarely one doubts or questions the theater or literary critic, while no one thinks twice about disagreeing with the film critic. Too often the stigma of elitist is labeled on the film critic when his or her views fall slightly outside of the mainstream. The critic is often branded as some upper-class, film school educated, white, failed film-maker. It is not an unfounded stereotype either.

It is the function of the critic to influence and guide, not to reflect, public opinion. Although his or her taste may coincide with the public's, the critic's aim is to direct the reader toward films that he or she deems worthy of attending.

Over the past several years, new types of critics have emerged, those who voice their opinions out of nothing other than their gut. These new critics do not write for a paycheck, nor do they really care about how the public regards cinema or their opinions of it. They write because the Internet has given them the opportunity to express themselves. The new critics, who call out judgments from across the blogosphere, typify what is lacking from current film criticism—namely, passion. Moreover, the majority of them tend to lack a stable foundation in film criticism, or worse yet, film history.

What differentiates the anonymous message-board opinion or blog entry from the work of the incensed critic is, in a word, experience. A good film critic is familiar with most of the classics of film history, possesses a discerning eye, and, perhaps most importantly, is able to write well to convey his or her thoughts in a personal and engaging way. It is this experience, coupled with a certain level of authority which grants critics a degree of expertise, that an ill-informed public may mistake for elitism. Yes, a good film critic is more knowledgeable about film than the majority of the public. However, this does not have to be a call to elitism. This knowledge is part of their job; they get paid to possess it, just as lawyers are paid to know the law better than their clients. This doesn't mean that the critic is the intellectual enemy of the public. Instead, good film critics can open theoretical doorways to cinema that might not have been possible without their guidance.

So, why do we need film critics? If film is a mass medium, then shouldn't anyone be able to appreciate it? In the
silent era, film was immediately recognized as something that could be enjoyed by all. Literature shut out much of the illiterate population and the theater catered to the wealthy. Film, however, provided the proletariat with a new kind of literacy based on the image. For a few pennies, a story flickered across the screen in enveloping images. However, film criticism took a while to gain a foothold because film was initially considered lowbrow and a novelty.

By now, sadly, popular film criticism has come to represent a bourgeois, safe, status quo-representing, job-protecting industry. That last one is the most important. Judging by the insouciousness, and the simplicity, of the criticism appearing in today's syndicated columns, critics are concerned with protecting their positions as critics. Such is no surprise, given the competition that new media has brought to the fore. The perceived elitism of the film critic is now being challenged. In this time where seemingly anyone can become a critic of anything, Internet bloggers tend to write from the gut, not the head. True criticism requires a little of both, and that is where both parties fail. Trained critics know the mechanisms of cinema. They know the medium's history, its subtle references, and its ideological potential all too well. Yet, often they let their scholastic education get in the way of their human perspective. When this happens, the result can be a sentence that, in the eyes of an Internet blogger, is intellectualized and stripped of passion. To make criticism endure and appeal to those who will read and hopefully remember it, critics must take from academia what they need and not lose the passion that inspired them to commit their thoughts to paper in the first place. This balance between the personal and the academic voice is most essential to good film criticism.

Good criticism should be able to stand on its own. To provide an example of this, what better place to look than to France in the 1950s? It was here that a group of film critics (who, as filmmakers, would come to redefine the cinema as we know it) first gained for themselves a notoriety comparable to that of the films they were criticizing. After World War II, when films banned during the Nazi Occupation flooded Paris theaters, Andrè Bazin and a crew of other avid film enthusiasts—Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, and Claude Chabrol among them—formed Cahiers du Cinéma, the seminal film journal that evaluated the artistic qualities of films and the artistic sensibilities (or lack thereof) of their makers.

The author theory—not so much a theory as a refined favoritism—vaunted some directors, like Howard Hawks, as auteurs, while others, like John Huston, were passed over. While having its flaws, (André Bazin expressed it succinctly enough: “Auteur yes, but what of?” ) the author theory gave way to a series of brilliant works that stood remarkably by themselves. Eric Rohmer typifies this beautifully in his 1956 essay, “Ajax or the Cid”: “It is the task of the politicians and the philosophers to show mankind horizons which are clearer than the ones it has chosen, but it is the poet’s mission to doubt that optimism, to extract from the lees of his time the precious stone, to teach us to love without forbidding us to judge, to keep always alive in us the sense of tragedy.”

Would you have guessed that this passage was written in reference to Nicholas Ray (director of Rebel Without a Cause, In a Lonely Place, Johnny Guitar)? I cite it not just because it expresses the degree of an auteur critic’s admiration, but because it attests to the greater philosophies that can stem from a personal connection. The Cahiers critics pushed the boundaries of what could be said about films—and how that could be said. Working from their cherished list of auteurs, they wrestled film from its typically commercial base and put it into the hands of the individual, as a means of creative expression. In the process, they became creatively expressive individuals themselves.

Andrew Sarris was the first critic to import the auteur theory to the American shore, which fit in nicely with the 1970s decade of director superstars such as Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg, and Francis Ford Coppola. However, the auteur theory wasn’t welcomed with open arms. As André Bazin once wrote, “People are arguing.” Paramount in this fight against the auteur theory was Pauline Kael, one of the first female film critics to write for the nationally published New Yorker magazine. Responding to the spreading of the auteur theory to England and the United States, Kael spoke of it as “an attempt by adult males to justify staying inside the small range of experience of their boyhood and adolescence.” Kael’s frank, non-academic style shined with her unique personality. Grounding her knowledge of art and politics in a tone that was true to her voice (in all of its volatility), she managed to overcome the obstacle that is built into the enterprise from the start. Nick James of Sight & Sound elaborates on this: “Criticism’s fundamental weakness is arguably the dichotomy between the claim of special expertise—an outside perspective—and the wish to speak as a legitimizing part of the community.” By subsuming academics to her personal voice, Kael developed a personality that became respected in its own right. Such personalities began to gain wide readership as the 1970s progressed. It was a time when the critic became influential in making or breaking a film.

While the readership for the printed word loses its ground to user blogs and
online editions of newspapers and magazines, film critics should be fighting to find a personal voice and the sad fact is that none of the see a reason to change their course. And let’s face it; there was only a small window in American history in the 1960s and 1970s in which film criticism began to achieve the artistic status in popular culture that its European peers held. Gone are the days in which Andrew Sarris and Pauline Kael were almost as important as some of the films they reviewed. Today, as film critics war among themselves, their criticism has become less about putting forth a notion of what the film means to the cinema, and more a matter of protecting their positions in an industry targeted at audiences who demand simplistic critiques. In a fast-paced consumer culture, too often we want the quick answer. We don’t have time to deal with anything more substantial. This is why newspapers, magazines, and television prefer watered-down, easily digestible reviews, or simply a quick answer to the question, “Should I see this movie?” But might not readers still long for more than the simple answer of “see it” or “skip it”?

Roger Ebert once wrote:

“I cringe when people say, “How could you give that movie four stars?” I reply, “What in my review did you disagree with?” Invariably, they’re stuck for an answer. One thing I try to do is provide an accurate account of what you will see, and how I feel about it. I cannot speak for you. Any worthwhile review is subjective. If we completely disagree, my words might nevertheless be useful or provocative.”

My criticism offers the basis for my reader, just as you are now reading this, wondering or already decided on, whether my words warrant your consideration. Have you already decided if or if not film criticism is necessary? If so, one must ask why have you not only begun reading this, but come this far? Because you long for more than the simple answer of a “thumbs up, thumbs down.” I may not be you, as Mr. Warshow would like, but I, and other critics, ought to be honest enough to tell you how and why a film functions in the ways that it does, and with both passion and intelligence. You may not agree—in fact, you probably won’t much of the time. Yet when honestly done, film criticism can be an accompanying art to film itself, mapping out the layers of subtlety within the work, nurturing its richness, like a gardener tending to a flower. Still, there will always be something thankless in this task. When asked if her criticism affected the movies that were being made, Pauline Kael responded, “if I say yes, I’m an egotist, and if I say no, I’ve wasted my life.” Here is the dilemma in which critics exist, and the reason why they can become just as significant as the works criticized.

-William Hoschele

William Hoschele is a UCSC Film & Digital Media graduate with a concentration in critical studies. This is his third year writing for EyeCandy, serving as one of its co-editors last year. He currently writes for free on his website: http://web.com/williamhoschele.

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