EYECANDY STAFF

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When it came time to write the “Letter from the Editors” that would open this edition, our first instinct was to make some grand, unifying statement that would give purpose to the works we’ve created over the course of the year. Pretty early in the process, we realized that this would be a waste of time. If there is any theme unifying the articles and interviews of this edition, it’s probably incidental, which is one of the beauties of EyeCandy.

This year’s staff comprised an assortment of individuals who came together by way of a shared passion, and who enriched the project with each of their unique experiences. The result is the work that is on these pages, not to mention on this year’s website (eyecandy.ucsc.edu) and on the DVD of student films.

This being our 20th edition, we felt inclined to make it grand—to which its unprecedented, 60-page length attests. Our feeling is that its quality matches its quantity, and we hope that EyeCandy’s readers agree. Each year’s staff is guided by an impulse to push ideas intellectually and aesthetically. What was most gratifying was to find that this impulse was shared by many within the Santa Cruz community. Without their support, EyeCandy would’ve remained but a fanciful idea.

As you look through these pages, we hope you’ll appreciate the result of our shared commitment and creative passion. Enjoy.

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Comic book movies are not, by any means, a new concept. The film industry has been making them since the 1940s, with *Batman* (Lambert Hillyer, 1943) being the first recognizable example. As both a filmmaker and a full-fledged geek—a Comic-Con-going, D20-rolling, obscure reference-slinging GEEK—I've noticed that a stronger bond has recently been forming between the comic book and film industries. In the past decade, technological advancements have turned the two into each other's supermarkets for talent, content, opportunity, and profit. Comic book films are now instant candidates for blockbuster success, and audiences have started to take them, and the comics they are based on, a little more seriously.

Our modern-day, box-office-topping comic book films descend from such a long history of bad stories, awful effects, and high levels of camp in a cape that it would seem they were intended for children. Some examples of Hollywood's poor attempts to bring caped crusaders to the big screen: nipples on the bat suit in *Batman & Robin* (Joel Schumacher, 1997), Billy Zane in a purple outfit that was far too tight in *The Phantom* (Simon Wincer, 1996), and our governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, hammering it up in both *Conan The Barbarian* (John Milius, 1982) and *Batman & Robin*. In a nutshell, never watch *Batman & Robin*.

It was at the turn of the last decade that we, geeks and cinephiles, finally started to get what we wanted—and it wasn't just superheroes. In 2000, director Bryan Singer came out with *X-Men* and shocked comic book fans and moviegoers everywhere. The film was remarkable in its fidelity to the original characters, and also in the way it targeted viewers older than the age of twelve. *X-Men* (or *Xi* if you speak geek) approached the traditional superhero story in a new way, not spelling out the origin of each character to appease the uninitiated. It also heavily played up the mutant/human relationship, creating an allegory for marginalized identities in America. The film's budget was estimated at $75 million, and it grossed a little more than $157 million in theaters. As characters like Wolverine and Magneto came to life onscreen, studios made money hand over fist and audiences were hungry for more.

In the years following *Xi*, there were a slew of comic book adaptations, such as Alan Moore's *From Hell* (Albert Hughes and Allen Hughes, 2001)—a panel of which I have tattooed—Max Allan Collins's *Road to Perdition* (Sam Mendes, 2002), as well as other character adaptations including *Spider-Man* (Sam Raimi, 2002), and *Hellboy* (Guillermo Del Toro, 2004). As each film created excitement within the geek community, it also exposed the general masses to comic books and graphic novels.
...YOU SURE DO LIKE TA BALL!
In 1999, the estimated US market for comics was $290 million; in 2008 it was $435.5 million. But while sales went up, there was still no coherent relationship between the comic book and film industries. For example, all of the aforementioned films were scripted by Hollywood writers, who often disregarded the details that made these characters and stories so special.

The first major crossover between the two industries occurred in 2003 when James Robinson, a young comic book writer famed for his original title, Starman, was tasked with adapting Alan Moore's League of Extraordinary Gentlemen. Not only would this film be taken from a graphic novel written by Alan Moore, who is considered the 'creator' of the graphic novel format, it would also be adapted by a contemporary writing genius. Sadly, the film received horrible reviews from both film critics and graphic novel fans everywhere. Ashamed, Robinson would take a hiatus from writing comics until 2008. He later told Wizard magazine that the original draft of the script was very much like the book, but that the studio thought it was inappropriate to have the protagonist addicted to opium. The film was appalling in its infidelity to Moore's novel, even adding Tom Sawyer to the cast of characters—a blatant instance of the studio favoring marketability over faith in the source material.

After this abortive crossover experiment, the two industries found their bridge: Frank Miller. Miller, after years of famed runs on titles like Daredevil, 300 and The Dark Knight Returns, found Hollywood success with the release of Sin City in 2005. Robert Rodriguez (El Mariachi, From Dusk Till Dawn) approached Miller with an offer to bring Sin City to the big screen as a panel-by-panel adaptation. Miller had sworn off any further collaboration with Hollywood after writing an early script for RoboCop 2 that he felt was butchered. But after seeing the test footage that Rodriguez had shot in his Austin studio, Miller agreed. The end result was almost a carbon copy of the source material's hard-boiled narrative and distinctive visuals. The success of Sin City and 300 (2006) made Miller's head bigger than Galactus. In 2008 he learned the hard way that he was no director after a disastrous adaptation of Will Eisner's The Spirit.

Both Hollywood and the comic book industry took note of the successes of this creative crossover, and the two started to pull from each other more frequently. Comic book writers like Jeph Loeb (Batman: Hush, Daredevil: Yellow) began writing for shows like Smallville, LOST, and Heroes. Brian K. Vaughan was brought on as head writer and a producer on LOST after his work on Y: The Last Man and Runaways. As with television, the film industry is bringing comic book authors to the scriptwriting table and inviting them to be part of the production process.
I recently sat down with my friend, J.D. Arnold, a local comic shop owner (Comicopolis), published comic book writer, and fellow geek. I wanted to get his view of the relationship between comics and film.

J.D.: We're already seeing so much right now, especially with all the Marvel properties like Captain America (2011), Hulk (2009), and the upcoming Avengers (2012), which is a fanboy's dream come true. People are seeing The Avengers as a good team film, especially the way it's being done: having all the actors playing the characters they did in the individual films coming together in one great film! Beyond that we're seeing the Green Hornet (2010) film by Michel Gondry, and of course smaller properties coming to film like Whiteout (2009), A History of Violence (2005), which came out not too long ago, and The Walking Dead TV series going to AMC, which isn't a small property but it's not a big, flashy superhero concept.

A: You're a writer about to have your first graphic novel published across the country and in some of the farther reaches of the globe. As you write new narratives and comic scripts, do you often, or ever, have film in mind?

J.D.: The short answer is yes. The long answer is you have to write a good story first. I don’t go into each story with a formula in mind. I don’t go in saying I’m going to write a situational comedy or a chick flick. You don’t put restrictions on yourself before you start writing. And I think that’s what’s great about what’s happening with comics and film. There are just a lot of really great stories being written. Certainly, film is the “brass ring” medium, which is why there are so many talented writers heading in that direction. But again, the film industry is looking to the comic industry for these writers and ideas. I do think a lot of writers, myself included, are writing stories first and thinking later, “Will this make a good Hollywood movie?” or “Will this make a good HBO series?” But I don’t necessarily think of that before I start writing.

A: But is it because you’re such a dedicated comic fan that you prefer to write within the comic medium?

J.D.: I think that is exactly it. I’ve been reading comics and have wanted to break into comics for so long that it seems more comfortable for me. And I think that is the case for a lot of other comic book writers. I mean, I’ve seriously considered writing in the screenplay format because it seems so similar, and also the novel format... But I think I might be too lazy for that.

A: For my last question: Since all of these great storytellers, many of whom are also giant geeks, are
being picked from the comic book and graphic novel medium to work in film and television, would you say that geeks and nerds make better writers?

J.D.: [Laughs.] Well, yeah!! I don't know if we're better writers, but we are part of the right generation. I mean, comics have been around long enough that the majority of these writers grew up on them and were really influenced by the medium. I think geeks are taking over the world! Not just in comics, film, and television, but in the larger popular culture. You're not just seeing comic book people working in the industry and thereby affecting mainstream media. You're seeing the culture influence the media. We're seeing a lot more geek-related references in popular media.

A: That's frakkin' right.

J.D.: [Laughs.] Yeah, frakkin' right! And it's a beautiful thing, I love it, I really do.

All in all, you don't have to be a man of steel, telepath, or time traveler to know that these changes are among the most exciting things to happen in the history of comics. But how do we predict how these media relationships will develop in the future? At the end of 2009, Disney announced the purchase of Marvel Comics. And while we won't be seeing any Spiderman and Mickey Mouse team-ups, we can expect to see more Spiderman than ever. While allowing Marvel to keep its creative infrastructure in place, Disney will enhance and broaden the company's brand and its stable of characters. Marvel has announced its plans for film projects in the coming years, which, like the company's event titles, are all about maintaining continuity. With the success of Iron Man, Marvel is developing films for its other cardinal characters, like Captain America (2011), Thor (2011), and Ant-Man (2012), all of whom will be brought together in The Avengers (2012).

Considering Marvel's upcoming slate of adaptations, it's worth looking at the other comics powerhouse, DC. Shortly after my interview with J.D. Arnold, DC announced their future plans for print, film, and other media. A corporate sibling of Warner Brothers, the company named Jim Lee (an industry-transforming artist and writer in the 1990s) and Dan DiDio (a veteran DC editor) as co-editors of all DC print. And it named Geoff Johns, a fan-favorite comic writer and super-geek, as chief creative officer of DC entertainment, responsible for guiding the company in future film and television projects. Not only do these announcements prove that comics are going to have a more prominent role in film and television, they also attest that future projects will be managed more and more by the people who pen the adventures. The first effects of this change will be seen in the development of the film Green Lantern (2011), directed by Martin Campbell and starring Ryan Reynolds. Johns has given input on everything from early screenplay drafts to costumes, digital effects, and fight scenes. DC also announced their development of lesser-known titles like Jonah Hex and The Losers, which don't involve capes, spandex, or powers.

Lastly, even smaller publishers are getting involved. The main project of IMAGE Comics in the coming year is AMC's television adaptation of Robert Kirkman's The Walking Dead, with Frank Darabont (The Shawshank Redemption, The Green Mile) writing and directing the pilot.

Geek culture is evidently more popular in this second golden age of comics. With websites and blogs dedicated to the geek cause, it has never been easier to access project leaks, spoilers, and industry updates. For me, as both a comic lover and an avid moviegoer, watching the two industries feed off of each other has been a rewarding experience. On the other hand, next year's Comic-Con is going to be so crowded that I will barely be able to walk the floor.

Artwork by J.D. Arnold

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(Left) NELL HENDERSON
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(Bottom) KRISTAL EVERSDYK
GRANDMA'S KITCHEN
IN THE THICK OF IT
BY LORENZO ESTÉBANEZ

Armando Iannucci has been on the verge of household-name-dom in his native Britain for years, but has remained largely unknown to American audiences. Despite his anonymity on this side of the Atlantic, American television viewers have been steadily growing accustomed to his sense of humor. Shows like The Office and Curb Your Enthusiasm, built on steadicam visuals and the awkward, banal details of everyday life, owe both their aesthetic and sense of humor to Iannucci's work on shows like I'm Alan Partridge and The Thick of It. As one British newspaper put it, "Without Partridge, some believe, there would have been no David Brent of The Office, or other semi-documentary comedies." 1

With his film In the Loop (2009, UK), Iannucci applies his comic sensibilities to critique the ways today's politicians abuse language to pursue their political goals. A spin-off of his show The Thick of It (Iannucci calls it its "cousin"), In the Loop takes place during the run-up to an unnamed Middle-East war. A mid-level cabinet minister, Simon Foster (Tom Hollander), remarks in a radio interview that war is "unforeseeable." His comment brings on the scrutiny of the media, which leads him to more dangerous remarks.

In Washington, his stammering about "climbing the mountain of conflict" attracts Neoconservative State Department official Linton Berwick (David Rasche). Cut from Donald Rumsfeld's cloth, Barwick wants to use Foster to advance the goals of the American pro-war faction. Meanwhile, the Prime Minister's Communications Director is sent to ensure the uniform dissemination of the party line. Portrayed by the wiry Peter Capaldi, Tucker is an all-frothing, bulging-eyed sturm und drang. Rampaging yin to Foster's spineless yang, he wields weapons-grade obscenities to make the will of his superiors understood. In the Loop is an unflinching and hilarious depiction of the way that bullshit and spin, in the hands of mid-level functionaries, becomes a literal life-and-death matter.

In an interview with Democracy Now!, Iannucci explains the particular incident that begat his film. "Not long after the actual invasion of Iraq, our Foreign Secretary Jack Straw was on a radio interview being asked [to speculate] about invading Iran, and he said military conflict with Iran was 'inconceivable.' Then he a-
peared on the same radio show three days later and said 'when I said 'inconceivable,' I mean 'currently inconceivable.' Clearly something happened in those three days - he was hauled in by the backroom bully-boys and told he wasn't towing the government line. I want to know what happened in those three days.'

As Simon Foster finds his words and decisions being shaped for ends beyond his control, Malcolm Tucker wields his words like a club. Perpetually red-faced, he gives his orders with his finger in peoples' chests. In order to accomplish anything in a world of prevarication and formless dialogue, it helps to wield a big club. Most reviews of In The Loop praised its persistently inventive profanity, most of which comes from Tucker. "Obscenity," remarked Norman Mailer, "speaks of people beating you over the back with a club or punching you." Behind closed doors in Senates and Parliament, throughout the world, the force of will is exerted with blunt, profane clarity. Verbal clubs are swung and punches thrown out of public view, while voters and the media are presented with soaring oration and slick rhetoric to shore up support.

By contrast, Linton Barwick speaks in the circu-
titous, measured koans common to the defenders of the indefensible. Colin Powell referred to this manner of speaking as the "third-person passive once removed." A vehement practitioner of bullshit, Barwick views the world through a lens unencumbered by reality—a reality in which truth and lies are mutually exclu-
sive categories. Harry Frankfurt seeks to differentiate bullshit from standard lies or deceit in his text—fit-
tingly titled—*On Bullshit*. He explains that, as opposed to a lie, "the fact about himself that the bullshitter hides is that the truth-values of his statements are of no central interest to him; what we are not to under-
stand is that his intention is neither to report the truth nor to conceal it."

Barwick's "big horrible war committee," as Karen Clark (Mimi Kennedy), the US Assistant Secretary for Diplomacy, explains, will be hidden behind as dull a sobriquet as one can find in the Executive branch. The bullshitter of the political stripe obscures his or her nefarious ends behind a veneer of sheer banality.
"OUTSIDE OF POLITICS, WHEN WORDS START LOSING PREFIXES, THEY TURN INTO GIBBERISH. IN POLITICS, THESE WORDS BECOME NEW STATES OF BEING, WITH NUANCES TO BE EXPLOITED."

The English language's most critical ombudsman, George Orwell, argued as much in his 1946 essay "Politics and the English Language." Orwell explained that political speech is largely "the defense of the indefensible," and thus "political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness."

Clark: "Well, unofficially, it is called the war committee."

Barwick: "Well, Karen, unofficially we call anything whatever we want. Unofficially this is a shoe, but it is not. Karen, it is a glass of water, and this is the Future Planning Committee."

Gen. Miller: "Unofficially, this appears to be bullshit."

The notion of bullshit—what it means, precisely, and how it shapes reality—is central to In The Loop's critique of geopolitics and its middle managers. Frankfurt argues that the bullshitcher chooses to inhabit a fundamentally different reality than that in which truth and lies have any bearing. Foster's failure to understand this distinction wrenches circumstances out of his control. His spineless equivocations become a conduit for more capable politicians to do their work. "Not inevitable, but not... evitable?" he wonders out loud. Outside politics, when words start losing prefixes, they turn into gibberish. In politics, these words become new states of being, with nuances to be exploited.

As the government line becomes pro-war, Tucker is tasked with aiding Barwick and the American pro-war faction in securing a favorable UN vote. The lack of any good intelligence proves unproblematic to Barwick. "We don't need any more facts. In the land of truth, my friend, the man with one fact is the king." Barwick's disregard for the truth-and-lie modality brings to mind an unnamed Bush aide who, in 2004, disparaged the "reality-based community." The "reality-based community" is the community that derives its solutions from the facts it receives, which would ideally be any individual in power. For Barwick, as with this infamous-though-anonymous aide, this notion that ideal solutions are based in reality is merely an opposing political framework.

Barwick: "Those minutes are an aide memoir for us. They should not be a reductive record of what happened to have been said, but they should be a more full record of what was intended to have been said. I think that's the more accurate version, don't you?"
What exactly was said, and by whom, in the run-up to the Iraq War remains a matter of dispute. In Britain, as of this writing, the Chilcot Iraq inquiry is underway in an attempt, however toothless, to answer some of these questions. Given our culture’s deference to authority, it’s unlikely that any similar inquest could happen here. As we in the US have thoroughly banished Iraq from our newspapers, the natural question is what relevance does a film like In The Loop possess for a contemporary and future audience? 

Given that Iraq was sold to the public as a product, In The Loop is an unmatched accurate look at the sales techniques themselves. Frankfurt, writing in the 1960s, noted that the realms of advertising and politics are now closely related. And with all due respect to the Frankfurt of that era, he’d seen nothing yet. A promised “post-partisan” utopia turned out to be merely more wars of attrition over focus-grouped rhetorical framing devices (think “death panels” versus “the public option”). What In The Loop says isn’t correct verbatim, but it’s exactly how everything was said, by politics’ bullshit artists, its spineless middle-managers, its high-strung mercenaries, that lends it value. These characters, like the real-life figures they mirror, are the mid-level functionaries of politics—the true engine of any representative democracy. If In The Loop is not a reductive record of what happened to have been said—to take us to war, to kill healthcare or God-only-knows-what’s-to-come—then the film is a more full record of what was intended to have been said. And I think it’s the more accurate version, don’t you?


Typically, the phrase “sex and technology” accompanies dramatic reports of the activities of hedonishing, tech-savvy teenagers. The intention of these stories, of course, is to caution people against the apparently growing dangers of our digitized society. In addition to bringing forth the disreputable reality of sexually active minors, the term ‘sexting’ (a portmanteau of “sex” and “texting”) pathologizes the link between humans and their devices. While many sources would have us believe that this is a new phenomenon, the coupling of sex and technology has been a prevalent theme in film for decades.

No director in the Anglophone world explores these intersections more than David Cronenberg, a man notorious for sexualizing technology’s functions. His films have everything to do with the impact of machinery on the body—humans whose bodies merge with VCRs (as in Videodrome, 1983) or with gaming devices (as in existenz, 1999). While we haven’t yet reached such extremes, there has been a recent trend in touch technology toward sensualizing the attachment people have to their gadgets.

The iPhone, among other touch-screen devices, allows an individual to navigate with simple gestures like one would manipulate a three-dimensional object (while also giving rise to the incredibly obnoxious phrase, “They should make an app for that”). Touch technology has no practical superiority over push-button technology. It does, however, bring us that much closer to otherwise unfriendly objects. Take, for instance, the early commercials for the handheld Nintendo Dual Screen, or Nintendo DS. A robotic female voice narrates footage of the console, repeating the phrase “touch me.” In spite of the fact that this gaming system is tied to countless cutesy, kid-friendly games (like Cooking Mama, Nintendogs, and Kirby), its marketing feminizes the product and appeals to sexuality.

This coupling of sex and technology, even when it
“THIS COUPLING OF SEX AND TECHNOLOGY, EVEN WHEN IT PRESUMES TO MAKE US MORE ‘CONNECTED’ TO THE WORLD, PUSHES US FURTHER AWAY FROM FACE-TO-FACE INTERACTIONS.”

presumes to make us more “connected” to the world, pushes us further away from face-to-face interactions.

James Cameron’s Avatar (2009) exhibits this tendency with its alluring fantasy world, a distant moon called Pandora. The viewer enters this space through the character Jake Sully (Sam Worthington), a paralyzed combat veteran who, through an advanced genetic engineering program, becomes an avatar: a hybrid between human and Na’vi, Pandora’s ten-foot-tall cat people. This premise mimics the common practice of choosing an alias on the internet that is different from one’s true identity. Unlike the internet, however, neither Jake nor viewers of the film are able to maintain their alter egos for as long as they please. Pandora is only accessible when Jake’s military superiors deem it appropriate, “plugging him in” so that he can carry out a mission to secure a precious, fictional mineral called “unobtanium.”

Many have compared Avatar to Dances With Wolves (Kevin Costner, 1990) and Pocahontas (Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg, 1995), because the film tells the story of an exploited native land and its people. Really though, it’s the story of a man’s desire to exploit a hot blue alien. Hence the film’s “sex scene” has generated much interest on the web. The script, made available by several news sites, refers to sex as “the ultimate intimacy,” an act that is performed through the intertwining of tendrils located at the end of the Na’vi’s tails, or “queues.” Neytiri and Jake engage in the “ultimate intimacy” the same way the Na’vi interact with their dragons: after wrangling them into submission, they gain their trust by connecting queues.

Whether intentionally or not, this similarity in action reflects the same transgression of sexual boundaries that Donna Haraway describes in her essay, “A Cyborg Manifesto.” Haraway writes that in our time we are all cyborgs, “theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism.” She goes on to explain how the cyborg “appears in myth precisely where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed.” Cameron’s film captures the ambiguities of sexuality in a cyborg age: his Na’vi engage in the “ultimate intimacy” by using appendages that work much like USB cables. “By the late twentieth century,” Haraway writes, “United States scientific culture...has made thoroughly am-

iggsous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert.”

The enormous success of Avatar has a lot to do with its enormous budget, but more specifically with its expansion of “real life” through 3-D technology, motion-capture, and impressive visual effects. The film’s innovative use of new technology allows us to enter into a fantasy environment where there seems to be no barrier between the organic and the technological. The experience is so strong that some viewers have reported depression and a kind of separation anxiety upon leaving the theater. These viewers are likely accustomed to being “plugged in” for the majority of their day, be it to mobile phones, media players, or the Internet. Like the Internet, the world of Pandora is at once intangible and rich in depth. At the same time, unlike the Internet, it is neither omnipresent nor continually updated. Though the reports of separation anxiety suggest a disparity between the world of Pandora and our own, they also indicate that our increasingly embodied relationship to technology has produced in us a disturbing detachment from the “real world.” Like Jake Sully, we are paralyzed when left on our own.
SPIKE LEE ≠ BLACK INDEPENDENT CINEMA
For many viewers, black independent cinema begins and ends with the iconic and culturally hip Spike Lee, an entrepreneur/filmmaker known for taking risks and sparking controversy. In an interview with Ed Gordon at the 14th Annual Black Entrepreneurs Conference held last May, Lee spoke out about images of black America in the media. Lee accused playwright-turned-filmmaker Tyler Perry of contributing to the stereotyping and demeaning of black Americans. "Each artist should be allowed to pursue their artistic endeavors, but I still think a lot of stuff out today is coonery and buffoonery. And I know it's making a lot of money, breaking records, but we could do better." In a 60 Minutes interview with Byron Pitts, Perry countered Lee's statement. Perry insisted that his characters, including the mammy-like Madea, are "disarming, charming, make-you-laugh bait," which he uses to draw in his audience and then address substantive issues.

Lee and Perry are especially visible among contemporary black filmmakers trying to negotiate mainstream representations of black America, but they are hardly alone. Many others have felt the burden of representation that falls on black-produced images of black Americans in mainstream media culture shaped by racism and forced invisibility. In the 1970s, a wave of black independent filmmakers struggled to decolonize this cinematic image, rejecting Hollywood stereotyping and ideology in favor of a "first-hand" account of the black experience. No longer absent and silent, black filmmakers forged new connections among culture, politics, and identity. They employed primarily black casts and strove to recover and reconstruct histories and experiences that had been lost or disfigured over the course of U.S. history.

In the early 1970s, Melvin Van Peebles broke new ground with his popular and revolutionary feature, Sweetback's Baadasssss Song (1971). Van Peebles wrote, directed, produced, financed, starred in, and composed original music for the film. As its opening credits indicated, Sweetback starred "the Black Community" and was dedicated to "all the Brothers and Sisters who had enough of the Man." The narrative follows a one-man revolution, Sweetback, who has been set up and falsely accused of a crime he did not commit. Focusing on images of criminal life, the film also brought attention to the effects of police brutality all too common in the ghetto. One of the hero's main means of survival is his hypersexuality, his "sweet sweetback," which helps him time and again as he tries to elude the police.

Van Peebles saw the infiltration of the Hollywood style—e.g. three-point lighting, dolly shots, professional actors, and studio financing—as the "technological colonization of the white aesthetic," and he adopted
As a Black artist and independent producer of motion pictures, I refuse to submit this film, made from Black perspectives for Blacks... I charge that your film rating body has no right to tell the Black community what it may or may not see. Should the rest of the community submit to your censorship that is its business, but White standards shall no longer be imposed on the Black community."

No surprise, his film was given an X rating—as the movie poster points out: “by an all-white jury.” Premiering in Detroit, Sweetback grossed an estimated $150,000. The unexpected success of Van Peebles’s film put independent cinema on the map as a profitable industry and jumpstarted a slew of independents, encouraging black filmmakers to proceed with their agenda of mobilizing and politicizing black perspectives in film and of rescuing black representation and identity from the grips of Hollywood perversion and media distortions.

a strictly anti-Hollywood approach to filmmaking. His do-it-yourself, vérité aesthetic—hand-held camerawork, natural lighting, and improvisation—offered a new form of black expression. The film uses jump cuts and disjunctive montage to build a chaotic atmosphere expressing the dangers of ghetto life. Though some have argued that Sweetback did nothing to propel black mobility, and that the film’s display of black sexuality was equivalent to that of the blaxploitation films that would follow in its wake, Van Peebles sought through the film to reclaim black sexuality and black masculinity. The film illustrates black struggle within a decaying urban landscape, and it challenges racial and sexual binaries from a black perspective. In his 2004 manifesto about the making of Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song, Van Peebles states, “I made the picture because I was tired of taking the Man’s crap and of having him decide who we were to us... I felt we had the right to define who we were ourselves.” Refusing to submit his picture to the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), Van Peebles denounced the ratings system of the infamous Jack Valenti, arguing that the white community had no right to dictate the ratings of films intended for the black community. In a letter addressed to Mr. Valenti, he defiantly claimed:
According to Van Peebles, the film production that would become *Shaft* (1971) was originally based on a script with a white protagonist, but "they [Hollywood studios] changed it to black. They threw in a couple of 'motherfuckers' and that became a black film."* Ironically, *Shaft* was directed by Gordon Parks Sr., a black filmmaker and one of the early pioneers of blaxploitation. Though kick-ess in their demeanor, the likes of Shaft and Foxy Brown arguably stunted black mobility and empowerment in cinema, dehumanized black sexuality, and obscured an understanding of the ghetto as a site of institutionalized racism. Smelling an opportunity to make a profit, white executives quickly capitalized on this new black cinema and produced a surge in grotesque and distorted representations of black Americans. Characterized as an extravagant parade of criminal life—complete with drugs, pimps, barely clothed women, and sex—blaxploitation represented black America as a wasteland of degenerative misfortunes. The popular archetype for black men became the criminal anti-hero—the gangster, pimp, druglord—while black women were usually represented as scantily clad femme fatales, with AK-47s at the ready and razors tucked away in their afros. Though relatively short-lived (1972-79), blaxploitation left a scar on the black community, a string of low-budget films that diverted attention from the realities of discrimination and racism in America in order to sell sex and hipness with Mayfield and Hayes grooves. That said, there are many black Americans who disagree with this assessment. In Isaac Julien's documentary *Bead Asssss Cinema: A Bold Look at 70s Blaxploitation Films* (2002), Elvis Mitchell, a film critic at the *New York Times*, emphasizes the sense of empowerment these films provided the black community during a time of social defeat. He points out that the films showcased heroes who triumphed against the odds and provoked audiences to adopt a "fight against the 'Man'" mentality.

In the late 1970s, another current of black independent cinema became visible, one that largely broke with the content and aesthetics of blaxploitation. These new films moved away from the loud rhetoric of revolution and Black Power and instead focused on the quiet deterioration and social immobility of black communities. Meshing radical leftist politics and theory with Italian Neorealist style, these films focused on the ghetto as a site of poverty and severe overcrowding. Having experienced life in inner-city communities themselves, many of the new black filmmakers made works that contextualized memories and histories of black families enduring the so-called urban renewal, which worked to segregate and marginalize black communities from white neighborhoods.

While studying film at UCLA, Charles Burnett, along with other black student filmmakers such as Julie Dash, Billy Woodberry, Larry Clark, and Haile Gerima, wrestled with the idea and experience of internal colonialism. Forging an anti-Hollywood approach to filmmaking, they rejected the degrading and objectifying representations of black Americans that were found in dominant cinema, including blaxploitation. The L.A. Rebellion (as the group has been called) also sought to disrupt the picture-perfect Sidney Poitier-esque image that inhibited politicized thought and expression. Produced in post-Watts-Riots Los Angeles, Burnett's debut film *Killer of Sheep* (1978) depicts daily life in a deteriorating ghetto and a community tormented by a violent past. The film's narrative centers on Stan, a working-class protagonist who is in a mental slump marked by frustrations of emasculation and racial inequality. Burnett's aesthetic recalls earlier works of documentary and Third Cinema, including Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (1966). "I didn't want to make one aware that there was a camera there," Burnett has said of the film's vérité-like quality and the tender candidness of its characters. *Killer of Sheep* brought a sense of authenticity to the black struggle. "We felt we had a responsibility to reflect reality, tell the truth about the black community. To help, however we can, to march the social movement forward. This was an attempt at taking part in that. It was also a reaction against the typical Hollywood depiction of the black experience. The whole idea was to present the complexity of the fight for life, how these people live."
American black independent cinema has seen other developments since the heyday of the L.A. Rebellion. Perhaps most notably, the black queer cinema of the 1990s broke new ground in its exploration of issues of identity and community. In their films of this period, filmmakers Marlon Riggs and Cheryl Dunye focused on the experience of black gay men and lesbians and also explored the problem of racism in queer communities. Dunye, who continues to make films, foregrounds black lesbian identity on screen in order to work against the invisibility and marginalization of black lesbians behind the camera. Dunye has said that she went into filmmaking because “sometimes you have to create your own history.” To do so, she forged a unique genre, the “Dunumentary,” which she describes as “[a] mixture of documentary, Dunye storytelling, and life itself.” This humorous and political approach is exemplified by her first feature, *The Watermelon Women* (1997), in which the main character, Cheryl, looks for black lesbian foremothers in the American cinema past while grappling with the challenges of interracial romance in the present. Many of the black queer filmmakers of the 1990s, like the L.A. Rebellion filmmakers before them, are still making films. And newcomers continue to build on their legacies. For instance, Tina Mabry’s film *Mississippi Damned* (2009) screened to acclaim at last year’s Toronto Film Festival. At the same time, this work has too often been limited in screenings and audience.

Despite the continued production of black independent films, one is left with the feeling that the movement has dissipated. Has the aesthetic and political agenda forged by Van Peebles and the L.A. Rebellion been extinguished by the rise of a more mainstream black-produced cinema? Has the 1970s vision of “decolonizing” Hollywood’s “white aesthetic” gotten muddled in the high-profile work of Tyler Perry and producer Oprah Winfrey? Sure, we still have Spike Lee, who has maintained relative success and continues to push buttons throughout his career. But can Lee still merit the label of “independent” when he is tied up with corporate advertising? Glancing at Lee’s filmography, a pattern is clear: make a film suitable for a Hollywood-gear ed audience (arguably something along the lines of the “white aesthetic,” such as his 2002 film *25th Hour*), make a few commercials with the possibility of movie plugs here and there (e.g. Nokia and Nike), and then make a film reminiscent of his early charismatic and thought-provoking indie hits. Sure, you can call Lee a sell-out, but he is a savvy businessman who knows and works the (Hollywood) system in order to finance more radical films like *Bamboozled* (2000) and *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006). At the same time, plenty of other black filmmakers are out there, breaking new ground and sparking new subgenres, identities, concerns, and styles, but they lack Lee’s savvy and connections. Black independent cinema should not be marginalized as something of interest only to black spectators. If America wants to live up to its “post-racial” ideals in the age of Obama, it needs to grant black independent filmmakers the same opportunities as white filmmakers and allow the films that have been made to reach a much broader audience.

5. Ibid., 209
Chip Lord graduated from Tulane University in 1968, a time when America was embroiled in an unpopular war in Vietnam and gripped by social upheaval. He entered college five years earlier, choosing New Orleans’s Tulane because he wanted to leave Florida and major in architecture, the result of a boyhood passion for exploring houses under construction. Soon after graduating, he met Doug Michels and formed the alternative architecture and art collective, Ant Farm. The group got its name from Lord’s friend, who remarked that their
project of creating “underground architecture” was “what ants do!” Eventually the two were joined by Hudson Marquez and Curtis Schreier, and from 1968 to 1978 they created works that ranged from architecture to video art, and from satirical mass-media events to eco-activism. The collective disbanded when a fire destroyed their Bay Area studio. But in their short time together they created works that still find resonance with today’s audiences: *The Eternal Frame* (1975), a re-enactment of the JFK assassination; *Media Burn* (1975), a
media event in which a space-age car is driven through a flaming wall of TV sets; and Cadillac Ranch (1974), a row of Cadillacs half-buried nose-down outside of Amarillo, TX.

In 1981, Lord began his decades-long relationship with the UC system, which is presently in its final quarter. Teaching has brought him into contact with thousands of students, myself included. Having studied experimental film and screenwriting under Lord, I am inspired by the artist and his work. With my own graduation soon to come, I’ve looked to his career trajectory to help sort out my feelings about film and post-graduate life. This February, I met with Lord in his San Francisco home to talk about Ant Farm, teaching, and artistic practice, and also to massage my graduation anxieties into a quiet submission.

PART I

Stewart Adams: So you set up your alternative practice in Sausalito in the late Sixties. How did you live? How did you make any money?

Chip Lord: We sometimes had food stamps (laughs), but we got a few commissions. You know, one thing when you go into business for yourself, or you’re an artist or filmmaker, it’s so important to network with other people. You look at all of the funding possibilities... and it’s not easy, but if you have a lot of determination and desire to do that then you can get by. So we looked for grants, and there weren’t that many grants (laughs). We were sort of this countercultural collective so we didn’t have any “real” credentials, and we were engaged in a practice that was already moving away from architecture in a sense.

SA: Right, you were making it difficult for yourself, which is fun in a way – it’s new ground...

CL: Yes, and within this collective experience one thing we shared was an interest in media, and one of the people in the collective went out and bought a portable video pack in 1970 or ’71. It was the second generation of the Sony PortaPak.

SA: Yes, people were excited!

CL: Yes, both as artists and community organizers. But at the most, let’s say “glorified,” level of the discourse, was the idea that we could change television. You know, we could “bankrupt broadcast television” and make it more democratic.

SA: Yeah, like TVTV? [Top Value Television, formerly known as Raindance Corporation, was a pioneering independent video collective. They embraced the Sony PortaPak as a tool for enacting social change.]

CL: Yes, and the guy Michael Shamburger who founded TVTV wrote a book called Guerilla Television, which played out those arguments just before TVTV. So then we had one foot in this new video area, and another in architecture. And we were making inflatable structures which – I didn’t realize it at the time— but they were completely, symbolically the opposite of what we had learned in school. Which was very formal, modernism with reinforced concrete...

SA: These were nomadic structures.

CL: Yes, they were transportable, lightweight, etc. And you could do it yourself! There was a big DIY movement through the “Whole Earth Catalog” and Stewart Brand. We also participated in a mail art network which was a kind of movement away from the Art gallery system towards just decorating envelopes, sending images to other people on the network. So through that we met artists in Canada and we did this project with the Media Van where we started traveling with a video camera. The project was called Truckstop Network and it was both a journey and documentation of nomadic living. Our Media Van was equipped with video to record and play back, and we visited a series of college campuses in 1971. The project is being exhibited in a number of art exhibitions this year and next.
PART II

SA: So, given your history with the UC system, how important do you feel that school was for you, and how important do you think school is for an artist?

CL: I think it's important, but in someways ironic since I didn't become an architect. But I learned a methodology that was actually very applicable to being an independent filmmaker... Architecture is an art form. So the way it was taught then, and still is largely, is as an art discipline. So you would get an assignment to design a building and it would be a program or a hypothetical situation, but you weren't actually dealing with clients. So it was presentation and critique, presentation and critique... and of course there is a conceptual aspect—having a good idea and being able to put it in this three-dimensional space—but it also has to do with how that piece of architecture is used. It isn't that different from the process of a film artist. They balance the concept for a piece with the technical realization. So even though I migrated away from architecture into media, there was a discipline that came out of studying architecture that was completely applicable.

SA: Yes like you said, an artistic method.

CL: I remember in the first year of architecture school they told us, "look around at your fellow classmates," and like "one out of four of you will still be here when you graduate college" (Laughs). And even beyond that, of the people who do graduate, maybe fifty percent will become practicing architects.

But I think the lesson there is that there is a fluidity in applying principles you learn as a student to finding your own pathway... There is some truth to that. You probably won't end up with your ambition today in ten or twenty years. And it could be a series of compromises that put you in another place, but it could also be discoveries, right? An opening of doors rather than a sense of closing of doors.

SA: Right. And you don't feel compromised?

CL: I don't! I mean obviously then I worked with this Ant Farm group and this collective situation for ten years, and when it ended that's when I looked to teaching as a way of having an interactive, collaborative environment. It was more institutional, but the idea that you're thinking about ideas and concepts and applying them to different projects, was still at the center of the job.

SA: Yes. I mean, there are things that I have learned at UCSC that I couldn't imagine going the rest of my life without knowing, but then there are times when I feel like, you know... Do I need this last quarter?

CL: Yes

SA: Money is burnin' away. I guess it's all about where it leads...

CL: When I was about to graduate I was on the verge of dropping out too. But I'm certainly glad I got the degree.
Selected Works:

Inflatables—A series of inflatable structures assembled to support a nomadic lifestyle.

Media Van—1971-72—A customized Chevrolet van that was used for their Truckstop Network Tour. The van was lost in 1972 and recovered in 2008 at the NIKE Missile Site SF-88, covered in tar and dust. The van was put on display at SFMOMA as ANT FARM Media Van v.08 [time capsule] where participants could contribute mp3s and images to its digital time capsule.

Media Burn—1975—On America’s bicentennial Ant Farm staged a mock media event in the parking lot of San Francisco’s Cow Palace wherein a converted ’59 Cadillac El Dorado, known as the “Phantom Dream Car,” drove through a wall of flaming TV sets.

The Eternal Frame—1975—Ant Farm, along with T.R. Uthco, traveled to Dealey Plaza to reenact the Kennedy assassination and, more specifically, their bootlegged copy of the Zapruder film.


Motorist—1989—Feature length narrative video directed by Chip Lord that explores the iconography of the American car and landscape.

(cont’d)

On one hand the things you are learning aren’t simply about getting grades and acquiring technical, professional knowledge. They are more substantively about, like I said earlier, engaging in a creative practice and developing a productive methodology.

SA: So you find that same sense of community in your teaching?

CL: Yes! I started teaching at UC San Diego in 1981 in the art department, because they wanted to add a position in video art. It’s so strange to look back at the kind of experimentation with the medium of video. A lot of people gravitated towards it, including institutional curators and funding people, so that by the end of the Seventies there were all these institutional inroads and academic programs trying to keep up with the changes going on in the field. I mean especially in art; I think more so, in a way, than in film. It was logical to add a discipline of video within the art department.

“The things you are learning aren’t simply about [...] acquiring professional knowledge. They are more substantively about engaging in a creative practice...”

Media Van, circa 1971, ready for its Truckstop Network Tour.
SA: Right.

CL: But I came to Santa Cruz and, you know, the students were so open to exploring ideas—partly because of the tradition of not having to worry about grades, because the campus was founded as a more “experimental system.” Over the years it has migrated, and continues to migrate, towards becoming a more traditional university: adding grades, etc. But what’s interesting is students still choose Santa Cruz for that reason.

SA: Right.

CL: Which is a completely utopian idea. So I always felt like there was this lag between what the university was actually offering and what students’ expectations were. Which isn’t a bad thing, because it means it’s more interesting to work with students who are open-minded rather than just being directed towards the skills they need to get for a specific job.

SA: Yes, you know, I’ve always figured, if I want to get on a “Hollywood set” I can just pick up the skills there. (laughs) I took classes at Santa Barbara City College and over there they had a big emphasis on studio time, and specific styles of lighting, you know “kicker light, 3-point lighting” and here, when I took 170 [Fundamentals of Production Technique] you’re sort of thrown into it. So I was thankful for what I had previously learned. But again, it’s like we keep going back to, it’s a work ethic you learn that I think is more important.

CL: Yes, it was exactly the same in architecture school. The concentration was on this holistic sense of becoming a designer, and then you get out into the real world and realize that not everybody can become the architect who is “the designer.” There are many people who become specialists in. I don’t know, branch banks, or commercial buildings, or being a team player or whatever. And in that system it’s a little more institutional because architects have to be licensed by the state before they can take the exam to apprentice in an office, and that’s where you learn all the kind of reality stuff.

SA: Right.

CL: And so it’s not as clearly spelled out in the film industry but...

SA: Yes! You’re still going to have to be an intern anyways!

CL: Yes there’s still that expectation. You’re going to have to learn certain things on the job.

SA: I mean it’s like how we don’t have access to film equipment— we don’t have 16mm cameras— which sure, it could be fun...

CL: (laughs) We just got rid of them a couple years ago.

SA: I think the year I came. But yeah, I understand that it would be sort of throwing away money right off the bat, it’s expensive. I mean, it’s like last year in our experimental video workshop I was perfectly happy filming with my phone and I think that there were certain advantages to that.

Media Van, circa 2008, unearthed and displayed in SFMOMA as ANT FARM Media Van v.08 [time capsule].
CL: There is a great advantage to always having that camera in your pocket, and knowing that you’re not automatically going to be penalized because its image quality isn’t as “good” as the cameras that you can check out. It gives you access to other qualities and situations.

SA: Yes, I think if I had a normal camera I wouldn’t have gotten anything that I did. Everyone is always on their phone, it’s not a weird thing to have out anymore and you don’t feel like you’re sticking this big glass eye in someone’s face.

CL: Exactly!

SA: So, speaking of, can you see all of the changes that have occurred clearly marked by new technology? Are there certain developments in film technology that interest you?

CL: Well actually, one of my favorite classes to teach is the experimental video workshop. The way the technology has evolved is actually really exciting because... I think it was a few years ago that the possibility of shooting video on a point-and-shoot had just arrived, and I had always shown Sadie Benning and Pixelvision and talked about how the quality of a cheap camera can be more intimate.
But then suddenly the technology changed. So it was exciting to see how people explored with whatever camera they could get their hands on, and I tried to make an environment where that was possible... Some of the other studio classes emphasize professionalism: learning how to light and control the camera, modeling the most professional way of shooting. So the experimental film class is not the opposite of that but the opening up of a different set of criteria.

SA: Yeah, I mean, obviously it's important to learn what I learned from those classes, and I value what I have learned, but there is something in that experimental class that was really, you know...

CL: It's more representative of who you are.

SA: Yeah! There was a lot more exploration. Now that time has passed I'm sort of able to look back and digest certain things I did in that class that I feel I'll value a lot more.

CL: And for me that's really satisfying to see. Because often people have that experience in that class, and it starts to open up a whole new world, a whole new way of thinking about working with media. And I think it's interesting because the changes that have put a camera in everyone's pocket are in tune with that class. For example, in the art world, it's like I said, I was hired because I was a "video artist" right? And at some point I realized the term "video art" is out of use now! Because the division between what media an artist uses has just evaporated. And now the expectation is- this applies more to art school- you should be conversant and fluid in different forms of media.

SA: Yes, which is why it's great to have that class. Because it's like we said, in that 170 class the people you are emulating are the masters and it's frustrating, you know, we're not Bergman or you know...

CL: Yes, Orson Welles...

SA: (Laughs) Yeah! So when someone is introduced to this whole other world of artists working in film and video, I think it's great for college students who feel frustrated about not having that grand, wide-screen vision of knowing everything that is going into a film as you are making it. You can't really learn that way, you can only sort of...exist in the shadow of earlier great directors in a certain way.

CL: Yes. And there are a number of programs that do teach in that way- that are modeled after the industry- and I think that's what makes our program, different: we don't ever want to do that. And to me it's more logical to keep it all open and at least keep the possibility there. You know, you're an artist, and you're going to be an auteur, the director/writer of your own work...

SA: Yes, and if there is something specific you need to know, go back to school.

CL: Yes, exactly.

"At the time it was a kind of revolutionary call against the monopoly of the medium. That was the simplest idea possible, that you could smash it! Just smash the thing!"

PART III

SA: Back to Ant Farm and your work together. I do see that idea of exploration. Obviously, there were things you wanted to say about the media, and mediated events, like in The Eternal Frame and Media Burn. I get the sense that you are completely open about where it all goes.

CL: Yes, that's certainly true of both Media Burn and The Eternal Frame. You know, in some ways they were conceived instinctually. I mean, with The Eternal Frame, of course, the Kennedy assassination was still sacrosanct. Our generation grew up and came of age during those Kennedy years and experienced that kind of aura. And in some ways Obama has a similar "aura," lets say.

SA: Yeah, the superhero.

CL: So yes, there wasn't a lot of poststructuralist theory behind it. But after the fact it kind of lined up with a poststructuralist critique of the media. At the time I don't think we were theorizing. We didn't really have the kind of training to do that. But it doesn't mean that there wasn't theory implicit in the works. I mean, in a multi-leveled work like Media Burn, where you see how the six o'clock news people respond to it because we know...
SA: (Laughs) Yeah! That they don’t get it, or “don’t want to.”

CL: It doesn’t take much to understand that they have a slot for the “odd” at the end of the news, and that’s where they are going to put it. It’s happy talk, so that gets built in as a commentary even though maybe we really thought the act of Media Burn would have an effect on the monopoly of broadcast television.

SA: Yes.

CL: It’s funny you know, the book Guerilla Television seems very naive now, but at the time it was a kind of revolutionary call against the monopoly of the medium. That was the simplest idea possible, that you could smash it! Just smash the thing! The monolith that was broadcast television. But you know, in some ways, that project took a year to fully realize, and in the process it became much more nuanced. And then it has the script that the Artist President delivers, the press area, the live audience, and all these kinds of rituals of America—the spectacle, the Fourth of July spectacle got added as it was produced. And these things give more ways to interpret what the work is about.

SA: Yeah, it certainly feels like there is a narrative to it similar to a six o’clock news program. Replaying the car driving through the TVs, that elaboration of time and focus on this really absurd event. And of course all the news teams show up, and let the joke get played on them...

CL: Yes. I just got a request from a band that came out of, I think, Yale Architecture School, and they wanted to use it and re-edit it as a music video. And we said, OK! As long as there are certain limits to the commerciality of it. It will be interesting to see. And it’s amazing to see that this work made 35 years ago could be of interest to these guys in their late twenties in 2010, who are musicians trained as architects. It’s interesting and very satisfying.

SA: Yeah, in my generation we’ve grown used to having video readily available, growing up watching SNL and The Daily Show lampooning the media. And it’s interesting to see that they have their roots in Media Burn and The Eternal Frame.

CL: And then there is some truth in The Eternal Frame in the people that show up, which was completely unexpected. And because we do it repeatedly they stay and the audience gets larger, and then we interview those people and see the kind of emotion they go through even though it’s a...
SA: A re-enactment.

CL: A CHEESY re-enactment, you know. There’s no motorcade, it’s far from authentic and yet it brings them back to the emotion of the original event.

SA: Or the original airing of the event.

CL: That’s right! Because the assassination was experienced through television and there were no advertisements for three days of live coverage.

SA: When I watched that I remember being afraid for you guys. Where in reality the audience just got emotional, patriotic.

CL: Well, we had an exhibition of Ant Farm at the Berkeley Art Museum and one of the art professors had her students go, and one of them said about *Media Burn*, “it’s more relevant today than it was then!” (laughs) I love that. It has stayed relevant.

SA: Yeah. Do we need a new *Media Burn*? I mean, what I get from it is a critique of events mediated through television and news teams—the certain narratives that are sold. I almost feel like, in some ways, that’s the internet now. Though there are certainly more avenues now, different sites to choose from, the playing field has been leveled somewhat. There is still this mass source of knowledge mediated through specific outlets, a greater hive mind.

CL: Yes, things have changed a lot since the mid-70s, and at the same time they haven’t. There is always that kind of accumulation of capital, that impulse toward monopoly in the corporate world.

SA: Yes, now with commercials on YouTube, it’s obvious they were scrambling for a while because they didn’t know how to capitalize from it. It’ll be interesting in the next few years to see how they figure out how to control information and ad space.

CL: Yes, and it’s interesting that technology and the internet have brought these changes that have kind of thrown off the whole system. Because, you know, the three networks—ABC, CBS and NBC—have a much smaller share of the market now. It doesn’t necessarily make the playing field even, but it does dilute it somewhat... During the election last year *The Daily Show*—like 40% of the people got their news from *The Daily Show*! What does that mean?
The "Phantom Dream Car" crashes into a wall of flaming television sets in Media Burn, 1975.

SA: Yeah, Youtube and Vimeo are empowering in a way but then again...I was watching Media Burn on Youtube and an ad popped up that said—I wrote it down—it was a Ford Advertisement...for safety belts.

CL: (laughs) Oh god.

SA: Yeah! "Ford Safety Commitment. Each Vehicle Comes with Improved Safety Features." It had a link to the Ford site. So that pops up as the car smashes through a wall of flaming televisions.

CL: Wow! It's so hard to control that stuff.

SA: And it's almost like, "well, the joke's on them again!" (laughs) You know?

CL: Yes

SA: It's that fundamental misunderstanding there that's perpetual.

CL: Yes, well once it's out of the barn it's hard to try and corral the right...We've had an interesting history with Cadillac Ranch—trying to control the copyright, limiting the commercials and all that. The latest was some clothing catalogue that had Cadillac Ranch on the cover and photos on the inside. And the point is, it's out there in the public, anybody can take a picture of it, but it is a copyrighted work. It took years to get that message across.

SA: Well yeah. I mean, the purpose of Cadillac Ranch wasn't to get ad money, but to be injected into popular culture. It just feels so inherently iconic.

CL: Well actually, we did think about that at the time. It was an opportunity, a proposal from an individual—Stanley Marsh III. But I think our own thinking was that it was both tribute and critique, you know? It was that moment in the 50's that we grew up in and adored, but could critique after living in the 60's—in all of its absurdity and wastefulness. Those big cars, the tail fins...So it embodies both of those things. But truthfully we didn't think about whether it would be influential or appropriated or any of that stuff, and we actually had the choice of where to put it. He [Marsh] had all of this property in Amarillo, and we chose to put it by the highway. It was sort of about the road west, about the culture of the automobile. It could have been put away from the road where no one would touch it and where it would rust gracefully. So we made that choice. But we didn't mark it with a plaque either, you know? And that was conscious too, especially on the part of the client. He really wanted it to be an anonymous work, and experienced as such.

SA: Yes, in it's natural environment. When I went we had been driving for six hours, and of course every road trip you want to stop at every "Worlds Largest...", you know, thermometer, or...
CL: Snake farm, yes.

SA: ...Yeah, which we did! (Laughs) So knowing you or not, I would have loved to go by this odd thing in the desert, you know? Little kids, toddlers with spray cans, surreal. It wasn't until I was there that it really felt like a graveyard, like tombstones.

CL: Every ten years we have a party there on summer Solstice. The last one was 2004, and on this particular occasion Stanley had found an Elvis impersonator to come and play with a three-piece band. But there was this big black cloud off in the distance that was gradually coming towards the party. The party usually starts at 5:30 and goes until dark, but on this occasion by 7:30 it started to rain, then it started to hail, and everyone just poof—

SA: Cleared out!

CL: ...'cause you're out in the middle of that field and it's gonna get muddy and it's hailing and it was kind of bizarre and spectacular.

SA: (Laughs) That's perfect.

CL: Yes! It was a perfect way for it to end.
Along Lincoln Street a few blocks from the heart of downtown Santa Cruz, glowing neon lights lure passersby to an unassuming, orange-brick building draped in foliage. The Nickelodeon, aka “the Nick,” marks the dividing line between sleepy residential neighborhoods and the energy coming off Pacific Avenue. Next door to the theater is the childhood home of Zasu Pitts, one of the few actresses of the silent era to successfully transition to talkies. Her soft-lit image hangs inside the theater on the Wall of Fame, beside close-ups of other Santa Cruz residents from the Golden Age, such as Alfred Hitchcock, John Hoyt, and John Beal.

Regulars to the Nick are in agreement about three of its best features: the outstanding selection of independent and foreign films, the friendly staff, and the concession stand. The Nick’s popcorn, made with real butter, is famous throughout Santa Cruz County. It attracts people even when they are just on their lunch break, or when they want to sneak a tastier treat into a screening at the Regal Theater a few blocks away. According to Jamie Kahn, who works at concessions, the theater’s clientele prefers to see movies at “their Nickelodeon” when given the choice. While the chance of discovering an unknown gem brings some people to the theater casually, the Nick encourages its patrons to speak up about the movies they want to see. Maurice Peel, the Nick’s publicist and advertising manager, keeps an ear out for public demand and works with top-notch distributors to bring the best films to Santa Cruz. “We try and get what might find an audience, things we think our audience will support. Some things...
don't work elsewhere but Santa Cruz loves them.”

Even before Oscar fever brought out the crowds during the weekend of the 82nd Academy Awards, the mega sci-fi blockbuster Avatar (James Cameron, 2009) lost out to Jeff Bridges's performance in Crazy Heart (Scott Cooper, 2009) for two weeks in a row throughout the county. And this happened during Avatar's global reign at the box office. As Maurice explains, “[The viewers] are voting for what will be booked for the next six months.” Not showing up counts as a vote too. Even the coveted Oscar nod couldn't help the political documentary, The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers (Judith Ehrlich and Rick Goldsmith, 2009), which flopped after a week at the Nick. On the other hand, last year's Academy Award winner for feature documentary, Man on Wire (James Marsh, 2008, UK), about Philippe Petit's unforgettable tightrope walk between the Twin Towers in 1974, won audiences over. As a result, patrons of the Nick will likely see posters for adventurous documentaries lining the patio this coming year, while political documentaries will take a back seat.

The owners of the Nick also contributed to local film culture by acquiring the historic Del Mar Theater in 2002. In contrast to the intimacy of the Nick, which can seat 237 people in its main theater and 64 in its smallest, the Del Mar is a spacious movie palace. Its previous owners, United Artists, had actually split its main auditorium into two theaters. The Nick restored it to one, in the process bringing out the splendor of the original 1936 design.

As the bar-hoppers and party animals of Pacific Avenue stream past the theater, the marquee's anachronistic display—touting faded blockbusters, cult gems, and classics of the silver screen—invites people to a cinematic experience hard to find elsewhere. One of the theater's main contributions to local film community is its midnight movie program. Scott Griffin, the manager of the Del Mar and director of its midnight screenings, says, “You don't do midnight shows for the money because, with all of the expenses involved, there's not much profit.” At the same time, the story of last year's national box-office phenomenon, Paranormal Activity (Oren Peli, 2009), speaks to the Del Mar's power to create buzz around a film. The theater was one of thirteen locations cherry-picked to premiere the found-footage-style thriller about creepy things that go bump in the night. (There was not even a screening in L.A. at the time.) According to Scott, the distributors of Paranormal Activity were looking for a college town with a strong midnight program.

On two special weekends each year, one in February and one in October, the Del Mar invites visitors to don a corset and fishnet stockings. The dress code is unisex. Though Pacific Avenue is famous for the eccentricity of its habitués (hence the slogan “Keep Santa
“Rocky Horror is like a unit of people coming together and everyone can relate to each other...Everyone's really friendly and in a good mood, and it's a very free-loving type of thing, as you can tell, which is very Santa Cruz.”

-Julia, UCSC Psychology Student

Cruz Weird"), the line for a screening of The Rocky Horror Picture Show (Jim Sharman, 1975) is always a rare treat: a pageant of half-naked men and women in lingerie. Though some first-timers dress up for the occasion, they are always easy to spot. The scarlet-lettering of lipstick V's across their faces, not to mention the phallic imagery, marks them as Rocky Horror Virgins.

Fortunately for the Virgins, UC Santa Cruz has Slugs in Fishnets, a club dedicated to bringing The Rocky Horror Picture Show to Santa Cruz as a midnight screening/live performance. Among the crowd this February, Virgin Erin, a student of Modern Literature, said that she had never seen the film in this way before, felt it was something she needed to do, and thought "Santa Cruz would be the place to do it." Virgin Lizzie, hailing from Sacramento, remarked, "We wouldn't be able to do this in my home town." The event is not only for bored, hormonally-driven UCSC students looking to escape the dorms for an evening of wicked fun. Working professionals with families also indulge. As Virgin April and Virgin Arthur, a research scientist and an engineer, respectively, stated, "We have three children and we want to get away."

As the clock strikes midnight, the show begins with a UCSC graduate student inflating a magnum-sized condom over his head until it pops. Raffle prizes are given out. The host introduces the evening's cast, who will perform the movie entirely in sync with what's on screen. Applause builds as the start of the film approaches. Finally, Julia, a UCSC Psychology student, saunters to the front of the stage in a sexy lifeguard uniform. Her striptease throughout the opening credits time warps the audience into a feeling of sexual liberation that can only be delivered by an erotic, rock-n-roll B-flick from the decade that gave us Studio 54 and the key party. Julia explained, "It's like a unit of people coming together and everyone can relate to each other...Everyone's really friendly and in a good mood, and it's a very free-loving type of thing, as you can tell, which is very Santa Cruz." Or, as the host told the audience more succinctly, "Like any good sex: if you don't participate, you can't come."

While the official goal of Slugs in Fishnets is to put on a hell of a performance that everyone can enjoy, the club's directors, Kristina and Megan, acknowledge the allure of sexual freedom that brings so many young college students to the show. Just as importantly, they point out that inside the theater everyone is part of a group environment that is both supportive and safe, and where everyone can feel comfortable. In a way, this particular cinematic experience is also therapeutic. And while midnight movies and performances of The Rocky Horror Picture Show exist outside of Santa Cruz, people are hard-pressed to find these experiences beyond big cities like Los Angeles and San Francisco. Megan explained, "Watching Rocky Horror by myself on video, I didn't get it, but I became obsessed when I experienced my first show. You can't have this
experience without going to the movie theater.”

Any multiplex offers its audience an opportunity to bond through the shared experience of laughing, crying, and cheering at the onscreen narrative, but enjoying a foreign film at the Nickelodeon or participating in a midnight screening at the Del Mar involves a richer kind of cultural investment. I have enjoyed a similar experience at the Santa Cruz Film Festival, as both a volunteer and a spectator. Each year the Festival brings the best and brightest in local, national, and international films to the Santa Cruz community. Last year’s screening of 1 Giant Leap: What About Me? (Duncan Bridgeman and Jamie Catto, 2008, UK) typified my larger experience with the festival. In the weeks before the screening, volunteers and staff spread the word about the unique event, which benefited the Home of Love, an orphanage in India. At the screening, the audience sat in folding chairs on what was normally the dance floor of the Veterans Hall. DJ Dragonfly would occupy the stage later for a post-screening dance party, but for the time being a drop-down screen took over the stage. In the film, religious leaders, philosophers, humanitarians, artists, musicians, writers, activists, and other thinkers shared their insights about the “collective insanity” that drives human beings. Accompanied by stunning cinematography from fifty locations around the globe and the most diverse soundtrack I have ever heard, the interviewee spoke about the human experience in an arc from birth to death. As one of the spiritual leaders spoke of truly living in the moment, the diegetic world of the documentary transcended the fourth wall. As we watched an image of a carousel rotating with a single rider, an offscreen voice suddenly said “stop.” The image froze and then slowly overexposed to white. The music ceased and the voice said simply, “Be here now. Be here in this moment.”

No one in the hall uttered a sound. We gazed together into the void of the screen and were united in a moment of deep spiritual reflection.

This year, the 9th Annual Santa Cruz Film Festival kicks off with another musical documentary event. The opening night screening of Soundtrack for a Revolution, a film that tells the story of the Civil Rights Movement through the songs of the era, will feature live performances by local singers before the show and a discussion with the directors afterwards. The festival’s managing director and director of programming, Julian Soler, points out that this year’s festival also features the largest number of locally produced works in its history. The programming includes short films by local filmmakers and a documentary featuring the Westsiders Surf Gang, and concludes with a feature-length narrative displaying cinematography from all around Santa Cruz County. Last but not least, this year the Festival will collaborate with the UCSC Film and Digital Media Department to host a student-curated program of UCSC thesis films.

Last year’s screening of 1 Giant Leap was a communal event unique to Santa Cruz. One hopes that our community will continue to support its small theaters, midnight movie scene, and local festivals, as they are sites that are vital to a culture of active spectatorship.

Websites Worth Visiting:
scffilmfest.org
thenick.com

Slugs in Fishnets has a group on Facebook

Rocky Horror photographs by Samara Muller-Peters
Del Mar marquee photograph by Justin William Kelsey
During the closing gala and world-premiere screening of Middle Men (2009), starring Luke Wilson and Giovanni Ribisi, I had to get up to use the restroom. While washing my hands I overheard a loud grunt followed by hissing noises coming from the urinals. Looking up I was confronted by none other than Academy Award-winning director and all-around loony Oliver Stone. He had a perturbed look on his face and kept making strange cackling noises while relieving himself. My guess was that the movie was so bad it must have given him an Oliver KIDNEY Stone.

2010 marks the silver anniversary of the Santa Barbara International Film Festival (SBIFF). This year the festival hosted two hundred films, among them eighteen world premieres, twenty-eight U.S. premieres, and a selection of foreign films representing forty-five countries. As a native Santa Barbaran, I have been attending the SBIFB for several years now, but this was my first year going as an illustrious member of the press. The festival was created in 1985 to boost tourism in the city, so the organizers go to great lengths to keep the attending members of the press happy. I was escorted to the front of every line, treated to free breakfasts, and given prime seating at every event. If anyone had a problem, I'd just brandish my little three-by-five laminated index card and be all like, “chuh!” My pass got me into just about everything.

The first event I attended was the screenwriter's panel, “It Starts With a Script,” at the historic Lobero Theatre. The panel consisted of Jason Reitman (Up in the Air), Pete Docter (Up), Mark Boal (The Hurt Locker), Geoffrey Fletcher (Precious), Scott Neustadter ((500) Days of Summer), Alex Kurtzman (Star Trek) and Nancy Meyers (It’s Complicated). During the Q&A, a man stepped up to the microphone—bald, disheveled, and with the complexion of a heavy drinker. He asked the panel what they thought were the advantages and disadvantages of working with major studios or independent producers, so that he would know how to get his script, which he was apparently holding in his hands, turned into a movie.

"I think you need to make your movie any way you can frankly, and you're lucky to get a movie made any way you can, is the honest answer to that," Reitman replied.
After the panel ended and the audience had adjourned outside, I saw the man running around in the rain, clutching his script, now soaked, and asking strangers if they knew where the screenwriters would be exiting from.

It was the same type of scenario at the Directors Panels later that weekend. The panel featured directors Quentin Tarantino (Inglourious Basterds), Pete Docter (Up), Kathryn Bigelow (The Hurt Locker), Todd Phillips (The Hangover), Lee Daniels (Precious) and James Cameron (Avatar), and was moderated by American journalist and film producer, Peter Bart. The discussion centered mostly around Avatar and how 3D technology can enhance the movie-going experience. Cameron expressed his hope that 3D would not be fruitlessly applied to scripts that were not originally conceived with it in mind. “The idea of 3D was there from the start as an organic part of the concept,” he said of Avatar. Lee Daniels spoke up for the first time during the panel and got a big laugh when he remarked that Precious would have been in 3D if he had had the budget.

Bart then remarked that this was the longest a panel had ever gone without Quentin Tarantino saying anything. Tarantino stated that he would have done Kill Bill differently had he seen Avatar before shooting. “When I was first imagining it so that I could write it,” he said, “I imagined something that was even more of a ride than what I finally got...In my ‘most’ vision of Kill Bill, it could have been more like what I felt when I saw Avatar in 3D, which was, ‘This is it. This is the ride I was imagining.’”

Pete Docter, the director and screenwriter of Up, was particularly expressive. When listening to the other panelists, his lips and brows moved as if they had a life of their own. Speaking of Brad Bird and Andrew Stanton, co-workers at Pixar, he said, “They’re the people I get notes from instead of executives, so don’t hate me.”

Bart remarked that the first five minutes of Up were among the most heartwarming and beautiful he’d ever seen, and asked Docter if he considered ending the film after them. “That sequence kinda landed it,” Docter said. “When we were able to pitch that and got our boss John Lasseter to cry, we knew we had something. That’s
the heart of everything we do. Even though it might be about bugs, cars, or monsters, we’re always trying to express that human condition.”

After Bart asked his questions he opened the floor for a Q&A. A smug film-school student started off by stating, “I look forward to working with you guys in the future.” He asked something along the lines of, “How do I make a movie if I don’t have Final Cut Pro?” Quentin Tarantino responded, “You’re going to a college, and you’re paying money to go to a film school, and you don’t have Final Cut? Leave that school.”

Another young filmmaker asked, “What type of advice do you have for an aspiring director like myself?” This led the audience and the panelists to moan. “It’s a cliché I know,” he added. Then why bother asking? There is no calculated way to get a start in the film industry. Each of the panelists has their own experiences that vary according to their backgrounds, their temperaments, and their connections. James Cameron responded, “Don’t waste a lot of time studying how other directors did it. You’re trying to project yourself into a process that’s ongoing with or without you. The tools are readily available these days. Make a picture, cut it, put your name on it. Now you’re a filmmaker. The rest is just negotiating your price.”

Cameron was presented the SBIFF Modern Master Award this year for his groundbreaking cinematic achievement, Avatar. The award ceremony was moderated by renowned film critic Leonard Maltin. Clips of Cameron’s work were shown, a Q&A with the director following each one. When asked to give advice to the eager filmmakers in the audience, he stated that, “Fortune favors the prepared mind. If you love what you do, then you never work a day of your life.”
California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger (and star of Cameron’s Terminator movies) mounted the stage to present the award. The governor started off with a couple of knee-slappers: “We are here to honor a great man, who is an immigrant story, someone who came to Hollywood and conquered it to become a great hero and...well, that’s enough about myself.” He handed off the award, hugged his old friend, and the Q&A resumed—but not before he was called back on stage by a crazed fan who screamed, “I’ll be back!” Schwarzenegger rushed back to the podium, fixed his face into a stoic glare, uttered the immortal line and ran off stage giggling. As it happened, the microphone was off.

On the other side of the spectrum were the lesser-known independent films, ranging from bittersweet documentaries to foreign feel-good comedies. The film that received the most attention was the visually stunning Korean film, Castaway on the Moon (Hae-jun Lee, 2009, South Korea), a comedy/drama about a businessman who, after losing his job, girlfriend, and home, tries to end his life by jumping off a bridge above Seoul’s Han River. Instead of dying, he finds himself marooned on a small island. A scarred shut-in views his activities through her apartment window overlooking the island. At first the two correspond through messages in bottles and SOS’s written in rocks. Eventually, in a highly ambiguous ending, they meet and ride off together on a bus.

The festival also celebrated films of the past with a screening of Kirk Douglas’s 1975 western, Posse. Starring Burt Reynolds, Bo Hopkins, James Stacy, and Douglas himself, the movie is a traditional western with strong references to the contemporary Watergate scandal. The festival presented the film on Quentin Tarantino’s insistence, and the screening was followed by a conversation between the directors—a Q&A!

After the film, Tarantino frumped on stage and proclaimed, “What a heckuvah movie! Am I right?!?” He then expressed his conviction that “the film won’t date. It gets more relevant as the years go on.” Douglas confessed that he barely remembered anything about it, except for the fact that it was his second directorial effort, and that he created an amputee character for the actor James Stacy, who had lost one of his arms and one of his legs in a motorcycle accident. Though it was sometimes hard to understand the 93-year-old film veteran, his wit and charm were still in tact, and he had no difficulty convincing the audience of his impressive personality.

“Actually, I don’t want to talk about Posse,” he said. “I want to talk about Inglourious Basterds.” Douglas said that Christoph Waltz “gave the best performance of anyone this season.” “When I wrote that role,” said Tarantino, “I was aware enough to know that I’d written one of the best roles I’ve ever written—if not ever will write—and unless I found the perfect actor it would’ve remained on the page; it never would’ve made it to the screen.”

“I would’ve liked to play that part,” Douglas admitted. Tarantino responded that, had the film been made during the ’70s Douglas would’ve been perfect for the part. “Don’t get old,” were Douglas’s words of advice to the audience. He then pooped his pants and was ushered away.

The final part of the Q&A hit a sentimental note when Douglas said, “I’m 93 years old. You know, it’s very lonely. All of my family is dead. They have left me with brilliant memories, but they’re all gone. So I have to make some new friends.” He extended his hand to Tarantino, who held it and kissed it. “Now you are my new best friend,” he said. “So remember me for the next picture you make.”
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When the Hungarian film director Nimród Antonio was asked in an interview if he would have any problem directing a “big Hollywood film,” he replied, “You know what? Any director who says that is full of shit.” Antal’s comment was made after the success of his debut feature, Kontroll (2003), a film about the daily lives of Budapest Metro ticket inspectors and a killer on the loose. At the time, Antal was eyeing the American film industry as his next conquest. He went on to make a number of films in the U.S., beginning with Vacancy (2007), a horror movie about a couple that becomes embroiled in a life-or-death scenario after checking in to the wrong hotel. This was followed by Amored (2009), a film about an armored car heist generated by people within the company, and soon by the upcoming Predator reboot, Predators (2010). Antal saw the Hollywood mode of production as a spur to creativity because of the surfeit of “tools and toys” it made available to him. However, generic Hollywood films like Vacancy and Amored lack the cleverness and broad stylistic strokes of Kontroll, which was made under rigid production constraints. Antal’s nine-month battle with transit officials to film in the Budapest subway system paid off in his film’s gothic atmosphere, which is intimately tied to the aesthetics of the location.

Not all émigré filmmakers arriving in Hollywood
have fallen into the tar pits. From the Golden Age through to the post-war period, many émigré filmmakers fought bravely and found ways to circumvent power-hungry producers and get their vision to the screen. In the era of B-pictures, these filmmakers cheated and smuggled their way into positions of control. The struggle of today’s émigré directors to do the same points to a change in the social and practical conditions of the American film industry.

In the 1930s, Austro-German directors came to the U.S. fleeing the perils of fascism and the encroaching Nazi regime. Among them were Max Ophüls, Otto Preminger, F.W. Murnau, Douglas Sirk, Edgar G. Ulmer, Billy Wilder, Robert Siodmak, and Fritz Lang. The Hollywood they faced was as fiercely competitive and business-oriented as it is now. However, when the studios decided to create double features to keep audiences during the Great Depression, the business of B-pictures flourished and so did these filmmakers’ careers. Since B-films were less restrictive in terms of oversight, the directors were able to push the envelope, transforming pedestrian material into meaningful work that showcased their unique sensibilities. They were also able to address an array of illicit topics and get away with it, from radical political ideas to unusual sexual relationships to psychological analyses of violence.
One such filmmaker was Jacques Tourneur, who had the privilege of working in the low-budget unit at RKO under producer Val Lewton, who is often remembered as a “benevolent David Selznick.” At RKO, Tourneur was left to make his own decisions with the equipment available to him. This creative empowerment enabled him to explore dark sexual themes and to create films that appealed to a mature audience. In *Cat People* (1941), a young woman lives in fear of her own sexuality. She suffers feelings of shame and compulsion when aroused by her husband. Tourneur’s films often feature protagonists who are guided by something beyond their control, something dwelling deep in their psyche. Martin Scorsese has claimed that *Cat People* was as groundbreaking and influential as *Citizen Kane* (1941). As he put it, “after Tourneur opened Pandora’s Box, things were never the same.”

Filmmakers like Lang, Siodmak, Ulmer, Wilder, and Ophuls followed with challenging films like *Scarlet Street* (1945), *Detour* (1945), and *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948), to name only a few. These directors staked out dark new territories of American cinema.

As a result of a Supreme Court decision in 1948, the studios were forced to relinquish their theater arms, putting an end to the studio-produced double feature and effectively calling to a close the age of “B-pictures.” From that point on, the term “B-movies” came to describe any film made with a low budget and evincing a cheap production quality. The A-picture re-established itself as Hollywood’s main product. This new business plan became particularly entrenched a couple of decades later with the release of *Jaws* (1975). Grossing $470 million worldwide, *Jaws* was the biggest Hollywood success since *Gone With the Wind* (1939). The studios were caught so off-guard that they didn’t know what to call such a film. With the success of *Star Wars* two years later, “blockbuster” fever was born. As William Friedkin, director of *The Exorcist* (1973), put it, “*Jaws* was devastating to making artistic, smaller films. [Hollywood] forgot how to do it. They’re no longer interested.”

The era of the blockbuster has been devastating for the more original voices of contemporary cinema. Emigré filmmakers who have made compelling and original films in their native countries often fail to execute the same magic stateside. German director Oliver Hirschbiegel first made waves with *The Experiment* (2001), a film about an elaborate social prison experiment gone awry. The film garnered numerous accolades and financial success, allowing the director to make *Downfall* (2004), a humanized look at Hitler in his final days. *Downfall* brought Hirschbiegel international attention, including an Oscar nomination, and he was inundated with offers from abroad. He segued into Hollywood with a remake of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), simply titled *The Invasion* (2007). The film was a disaster both commercially and artistically. More interesting than the film itself is the story behind it. When Hirschbiegel had finished his version, mega-producer Joel Silver, the man behind the *Matrix* and *Lethal Weapon* franchises, decided that he didn’t like the director’s cut and shelved it for a year. Hoping to salvage a film that he felt was short of blockbuster appeal, Silver hired his chums, the Wachowski Brothers, to dream up a few action sequences to spice up the blander scenes. Silver then hired James McTeigue, director of *V for Vendetta* (2005), to reshoot the scenes, and alas: we were given *The Invasion*. Hirschbiegel’s Hollywood debut was a train wreck, but an expected one. No doubt Silver and friends distorted the director’s original vision, but judging by the final product it seems unlikely there was ever a decent film to begin with. Hirschbiegel has been very quiet about the contention between him and the producers of *The Invasion*, likely because he would like to work in the states again. But regardless of how Hollywood betrayed his vision, the main crime was the banality of choosing to remake a film that had already been remade twice before.

French director Mathieu Kassovitz is much less restrained in talking about his experiences in Hollywood. Kassovitz got started early in filmmaking. He made his first feature-length film, *Métries* (1993), at the ripe age of 25, the same age at which Orson Welles made *Citizen Kane* (1941). Kassovitz followed this with his second and most successful film, *La Haine* (1995), which focuses on a trio of young men caught up in the escalating racial tensions of their Parisian banlieue. Kassovitz’s early films explore political tensions and the complexities of mixed-race relationships. However, his work changed significantly when he began...
to make films with larger budgets that valued spectacle over substance. After The Crimson Rivers (2000), a procedural crime thriller made in France, Kassovitz transitioned to American cinema with the Halle Berry vehicle, Gothika (2003). Though the film was a modest success financially, it was as forgettable as the Limp Bizkit cover of “Behind Blue Eyes” featured in the film. Having established himself as a director who can turn a profit, Kassovitz took on Babylon A.D. (2008), an adaptation of French author Maurice Georges Dan- tec’s novel, Babylon Babies. The film’s production was plagued with problems, about which Kassovitz is very open. “I never had a chance to do one scene the way it was written or the way I wanted it to be. The script wasn’t respected. Bad producers, bad partners, it was a terrible experience.” Kassovitz blames Fox for stifling his creativity. To his credit, his ideas about what the film could have been are interesting: “The author was very much into geopolitics and how the world is going to evolve. He saw that as wars evolve, it won’t be just about territories any more, but money-driven politics.” In the end though, the film is as Kassovitz describes it: “pure violence and stupidity.”

As with Kassovitz, fellow Frenchman Jean-Pierre Jeunet’s sojourn in Hollywood was a disaster, plagued by miscommunications arising from a language barrier and by daily struggles around almost every stylistic decision. Jeunet came to the U.S. to direct Alien: Resurrection (1997), a sequel to the already-wrapped Alien trilogy. By that time Jeunet had made Delicatessen (1991) and The City of Lost Children (1995), and he was revered for his unique aesthetic within the genre of fantasy. It is a shame that he was not granted more artistic freedom given the strength of his oeuvre and the long tradition of French filmmakers working in the United States. Jeunet’s description of the differences between French and American modes

“In the U.S. everything is multiplied by four. There are four times as many fantastic people and four times as many hopeless ones.”

—Jean-Pierre Jeunet
of production is illuminating. "In the U.S. everything is multiplied by four. There are four times as many fantasy people and four times as many hopeless ones."

Jeffrey S. Fox insisted that the film appeal to as wide an audience as possible, and Jeunet was reluctant to concede. But, as with The Invasion, it is difficult to determine who's to blame for the film's failures when it arguably should never have existed in the first place. The first three Alien films are a self-contained trilogy, culminating in the death of the principal character, Ellen Ripley. When you have to bring a character back through DNA replication, you know you're in trouble.

Hollywood is still the movie capital of the world, but the creative heyday of the B-picture is gone. Today movies are governed by business, not passion. Conglomerates control the studios, and the heads of these companies have little knowledge of film as an art form. Though today's emigre directors know this going in, the allure is strong. Hollywood offers huge salaries, huge budgets, and a chance at actual fame for modest, little-known directors like Antal, who has ironically stated: "If they offer me Alien 5, I'm doing it."

We can only hope that future emigre filmmakers will use their unique viewpoints to tell compelling stories without surrendering to the power structure of Hollywood. Hirschbiegel, Kassovitz, and Jeunet have recently made smaller films, in many cases returning to their homelands to do so—films that suggest a return to earlier form and content. Perhaps Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, director of The Lives of Others (2006), will survive Hollywood with his latest film, The Tourist (2011), starring Johnny Depp and Angelina Jolie. Ultimately though, the relationship between Hollywood and today's emigre directors is precarious one. The situation is best summed up by the final words of Alien: Resurrection. As Ripley is gazing at earth, Call asks her, "What happens now?" She replies, "I don't know. I'm a stranger here myself."

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Terrible Things Have Happened Here: Reflections and Retribution in Holocaust Cinema

By Rod Bastanmehr

The theater doors blast open, and Quentin Tarantino's band of Jewish soldiers bursts in with fury, guns first. Showering the audience—once their oppressors—in a rain of bullets, the gunmen stand triumphantly on a balcony that deteriorates as it is licked by flames. The viewers fall to their knees at the sight of the screen's collapse. Seats crumble and the projection booth watches over the mayhem, its handiwork. And then the moment both the soldiers and we, the viewers, have been anticipating: Adolf Hitler's face euphorically pulverized by machine-gun fire. The final tick of a bomb cues the theater's explosion. And with that, Inglourious Basterds (2009) concludes.
I don't know if I understand the film, but I'm sure it understands me.

Subversive, volatile, fascinating, even funny, Tarantino's alternative take on World War II is a feast for the senses and the self. Set roughly after D-Day, but just before the liberation of Paris, it meets our discomfort with the iron-jawed assurance that we don't just need to see what we're seeing; we want to see it.

"Holocaust movies always have Jews as victims," Tarantino has said. "We've seen that story before. I want to see something different. Let's see Germans that are scared of Jews. Let's not have everything build up to a big misery; let's actually take the fun of action-movie cinema and apply it to this situation."

The outlandish cartoon that he's created solidifies his position as a cinematic circus conductor. Yet, to reduce Tarantino's film to the shock-and-awe campaign that critics too eagerly evoke is to miss the point entirely. This film begs to be understood, yet its originality has managed to separate from its meaning. Whether intentionally or not, Basterds marks a point of cinematic reflection that has been a long time coming, a sure sign of the generational disconnect that has been slowly taking place.

I can trace an evolution in Holocaust cinema, all culminating in Tarantino's work of hyper-reality. Holocaust films offer us a collective chance to reflect on the historical moment. But the fascination and the danger of Holocaust cinema reside in the process of rewriting, when the cinematic and the historical come together and our connection with history is questioned. Recent Holocaust texts illustrate the decay of memory that occurs with every passing year and every passing survivor, and Tarantino speaks for us as the voice of the distant, for those who, in the years since the Holocaust, have watched history detach itself from the tangible.

In her 1977 collection of essays, On Photography, Susan Sontag writes that images are "a way of imprisoning reality... of making it stand still... One can't possess reality. One can possess (or be possessed by) images." Alain Resnais muses on this fact in his 1955 documentary Night and Fog (France), produced just ten years after the liberation of the concentration camps. In a mere 35 minutes, the film manages to cut to the heart of Nazi ideology and the horrors behind closed camp doors.

Using black-and-white archival footage, depicting the arrival of the exiled Jews by train, Resnais cuts through the lucid dark of the countryside with the razor tint of a switchblade. As he merges these images with color footage of the camps in their postwar fog, we are suddenly privy to the haunting stillness of an indifferent landscape, where once occurred such atrocity that we scarcely speak its name.

"I would have nightmares," Resnais recounts of his time assembling the film. "It wasn't until my time [at Auschwitz], interestingly enough, that I was freed of
the demons...there was no longer interpretation; [the images] were gone and I was faced with reality."3

Able to magnify a reality that might otherwise be ignored, film can also clarify the incomprehensible. We bear witness to a creator's subjectification of reality, and through this reach our own conclusions about the larger event. But in doing so, a potential paradox of catharsis and exploitation is realized. Resnais's film, while offering a collective release by bringing attention to the atrocity, borders on this tendency. What the film does do unquestionably is ask us to consider the temporality of reflection—namely, when we look back and why.

The ten-year gap between the liberation of the camps and the release of Night and Fog allows for a particularly self-incriminating form of retrospection. Ewout van der Knaap once boldly reflected on the film's cultural impact at the time of its release. "It was with the analysis of [Night and Fog], the process of viewing it, digesting it, that [our collective culture] was able to understand the Holocaust—that others had the ability to experience it. It created a sense of memory...it can thus be regarded as a litmus test for the state of collective memory."4 Where Sontag speaks of the fleeting essence of memory and its relation to celluloid, Knaap claims that Resnais's work granted us nothing short of reality, the ability to truly reflect on the horror of the Holocaust as an event.

Typically, film adaptations of history rely on the viewer's application of their memory for the text's progression. But Night and Fog instead works to create the memory, using its timeframe to grant a collective understanding of the event.

This was the moment the horrors of the Holocaust invaded not just Jewish history, but collective culture, where cinema transformed it into the people's atrocity, asking us to consider the role of our collective memory, and what it means to reflect back with questions of accountability.

And then, we moved on.

The farther we got from the war itself, the more our texts had to adapt. Each film wrote about the savagery of those twelve years, and the body of work gradually became more homogenous. Take for instance Steven Spielberg's Schindler's List (1993), which crafts a fictional narrative around the realities of the camps. Spielberg, who shot almost entirely on location—even going so far as to use the actual Auschwitz gates—goes a step beyond Resnais. He refuses to simply allow us to reflect on the memory, and opts instead to recreate it, depicting the atrocity "as it happened."

But to whom is he speaking? Resnais's film addressed both the survivors of the war and its aggressors. It spoke to a country that, just ten years prior, had been affiliated with the Nazi regime. Spielberg crafted a film for neither the war's survivors nor its collaborators, but rather an audience that craves the kind of conclusion that Resnais couldn't give us, because the war never gave it to us either. It sacrifices its convictions for its viewer, resigning itself into a liberal-guilt film that parades its Nazi-turned-hero as not just a moment of cinematic revision, but collective redemption.

But the camera can never truly capture the history, the memory. It never went in those rooms, never witnessed those crimes. Yet we still crave the kind of simplification...
that the image provides.

Sontag once analogized this impulse to a model of consumption: “To consume means to burn, to use up—and therefore, to need to be replenished. As we make images and consume them, we need still more images; and still more.”” Claude Lanzmann, the creator of the nine-hour Holocaust documentary series Shoah (1985, France), once stated that if he were ever to find a single reel of footage documenting the gassing of a Jew, he would burn the footage immediately. I never understood why, what the reasoning would be to destroy the footage of the atrocity itself.

But I realize now, as he did then, that the collective memory of the event enforces the need for something more than a recording. In the same way that my reflection can never articulate the films I’m writing about, none of the films can convey the horrors to which they refer. Instead, it’s the memory that must be preserved. The tastelessness of recreating the events bypasses cinema’s actual power to contextualize our relationship to history.

Then on the eighth day, God gave us Tarantino.

His sixth feature, Inglourious Basterds, depicts an alternative World War II, where the cinema plays a pivotal role in the defeat of the Third Reich, both in the narrative and outside it. In just over fifty years from the time of Night and Fog, Tarantino gives us the polar opposite reflection of Jewish history, the postmodern spin on memory and its malleability. If Night and Fog depicted the ambiguities surrounding spectatorship, then Basterds represents the absolute necessity of the spectator.

Consider its controversial finale. We see Lanzmann’s vow brought to life when 350 nitrate film reels are set ablaze in a movie theatre as the Nazis and Hitler himself (played with Chaplin-like excess) watch a propaganda film of their own making, Nation’s Pride. We watch them watch a fictionalized account of their history, and here Tarantino is aligning these two sets of spectators: the aggressors of the very war he’s referencing, and those that digest the history itself.

This is Tarantino’s most blatant affirmation of the film’s position as fantasy, one that could only take place in the movie theater. Resnais’s film took our detached relationship to history as a means to reflect.

Tarantino’s film uses that detachment as a means simply to avoid the history itself.

But perhaps this is the most cinematically moral act of them all. Sontag cites the risk in remembering, stating that “heartlessness and amnesia seem to go together...to make peace is to forget. To reconcile, it is necessary that memory be faulty and limited.” Maybe this is Tarantino’s sideways attempt at Holocaust reflection in the postmodern age, crafting a way for us to truly reflect and remember: by choosing to forget.

It is now, when we have been divided from the history itself, that Tarantino is able to do what he has done. And it is in this way that Inglourious Basterds is not just unique, but necessary: a triumph of collective desire. The goal becomes simply to digest and find solace in what Tarantino himself dubbs a fantasy. And it is just that, a fantasy that only film can offer.

I watch these films—Night and Fog, Schindler’s List, and Inglourious Basterds (the reflection, the revision, and the rewrite)—and am struck by how my memory uses them. These films teach me the power of conflict, both in the past and in my relation to it. They attempt to speak on a history, on a fleeting moment in time. But they speak to us, for us, about us, granting us the bemused awareness of an unavoidable truth: terrible things did happen. Resnais knew this when he gave us the memory. Spielberg knew it when he used it against us. Tarantino knew it when he blew it up.

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4. Ibid., 8-9.
5. Sontag, 367.
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TRIALS OF PERFECTION
FREDERICK WISEMAN’S LA DANSE

BY DANIEL JAMES SCOTT

For the past forty years, documentary filmmaker Frederick Wiseman has aimed to create “as many films as possible about different aspects of American life.” Across 38 works, he has primarily studied institutions—centers of education, religion, welfare, health, security, business—spaces that mark the intersection between society and the individual. “I’m interested in how the institutions reflect the larger cultural hues,” Wiseman, now 80, has said. “[I]t’s like tracking the abominable snowman; in the sense that you’re looking for cultural spores wherever you go. You find traces of them in the institutions.”

His films eschew voice-over narration, talking heads, and other conspicuous documentary devices. His methodology has been described as simply going into a place and observing. But Wiseman has always pursued more than simple transparencies of the institutions he represents. He’s gone so far as to describe his films as “reality fictions.” Their structures are poetic, their sense of time ambiguous. His work has been said to ask more questions than it answers, a source of concern for critics and viewers looking for stable, grounded meanings.

“[I]f the film does anything at all,” Wiseman has said, “it contributes to a sharing and then a process of discussion about the issues, out of which different people will evolve different solutions.”

Wiseman’s detachment has prompted discussion about the director himself. Critics have tagged him a “cynic,” an “ironist,” an “absurdist.” To the credit of these claims, his films do provide sometimes unnerving accounts of an institution’s workings. His first documentary, Titicut Follies (1967), exposed the disorder between the inmates and the administrators at Bridgewater State Hospital, an institution for the criminally insane. At Bridgewater, Wiseman observed how people classified as insane became realigned with society’s virtues. This seemingly humane goal was often achieved through inhumane acts. Because of its searing depiction of the hospital’s malpractices, the film was targeted by the government of Massachusetts and suppressed from public view until 1991. The state claimed that the film violated the patients’ rights to privacy.
Wiseman’s films do offer unsettling access to disturbing situations. In *Hospital* (1969), an older man whimpers at a nurse’s touch, a growth on his body stirring feelings of shame and anxiety. In *Domestic Violence* (2001), a mother divulges her history of abuse to a class of women who can too easily sympathize. In *Law and Order* (1969), a police officer strangles a prostitute. Her gasps for air nearly fog the lens that is held just inches away from her. Wiseman’s use of shocking material, coupled with his refusal to explain himself inside or outside his films, has led many to question his ethics. Bill Nichols described him as “tactless,” saying “Wiseman disavows conventional notions of tact, breaking through what would otherwise be ideological constraints of politeness, respect for privacy, the impulse to accentuate the positive.”

Because a good amount of Wiseman’s films depict the failings of institutions to carry out their purposes, documentary filmmaker Errol Morris went so far as to call him “the undisputed king of misanthropic cinema.” This description seems fitting in regards to some of Wiseman’s films, especially those concerned with humanity’s encroachment on nature (*Primate, Meat, Zoo*). Yet, when applied to his films that show institutions actually capable of improving or saving lives (*Deaf, Missile, Public Housing*), misanthropy seems to miss the point. Wiseman’s films leave one inquiring into the state of being human. They explore the two-faced potential of men and women, their essential “goodness” met by their contradictory actions. His “tactlessness” is essential to his project of trying to understand people. If one must ascribe a position to the director, “humanist” is a term that doesn’t get used enough—but an embittered sort of humanist. Someone akin to James Baldwin, who once wrote, “[E] very human being is an unprecedented miracle. One tries to treat them as the miracles they are, while trying to protect oneself against the disasters they’ve become.”

If the disastrous face of humanity prevails in (*Titicut Follies*), the miraculous face of humanity prevails in Wiseman’s latest film, *La Danse* (2009). Leaving behind the United States, Wiseman observes the Paris Opera Ballet and the sum of energies it contains. From the dancers to the instructors, the art director to the costume designers, the company is an organism teeming with life. The art director, Brigitte Lefèvre, describes it as such from the outset. On the phone with one bureaucrat or another (never identified), she defends an action as essential to the “life of the Paris Opera Ballet.”
"If one must ascribe a position to the director, 'humanist' is a term that doesn't get used enough."

That life depends on people of various skill sets and positions devoted to maintaining the company's reputation. The dancers undergo steady hours of practice in order to mold their bodies into instruments of grace. Their instructors express themselves however they can to produce the desired result. What they can't express verbally, they attempt to express physically. Sometimes these translations aren't effective. A.O. Scott wrote that, "among its other observations, [La Danse] emphasizes the distance between verbal analysis and physical movement." Wiseman's films reveal that this distance between what our languages express and what our bodies imply is at the root of many institutions' failings.

Welfare (1975) demonstrates this over its four hours, as applicants for government assistance claim eligibility through the stories they tell. Each one illuminates a different problem, some attributable to the institution, some attributable to the applicants (though it's not in their best interest to admit the latter, as their eligibility is dependent upon the administrators' perceptions of just how in need they are). The authors of the book, Reality Fictions: The Films of Frederick Wiseman, remark that "Wiseman puts us in a position of watching a judgment being made." This judgment is determined by the extent to which the applicants' expressions reflect their stories. Too often, the differences between body and language are irreconcilable, in which case the people in need—seemingly everybody—remain in need.

La Danse conveys these issues poetically. In seven ballets, we see the great works of mythology, history, and drama articulated through the human form. Genus, inspired by Charles Darwin's Origin of Species, encapsulates the evolution that Wiseman touches upon in his film Primate (1974), about the interplay between the scientists and animals at the Yerkes Primate Research Center. Paquita, a ballet first performed in 1846, produces the negotiations of class seen in Wiseman's Public Housing (1997), about the daily life at the Ida B. Wells public housing development in Chicago. It's as if the tensions pervasive throughout Wiseman's work have been peacefully laid to rest in these dancers' bodies. The moments of success are undeniable. However transient—the softness of a landing or the hesitance of a duo's embrace—the dancers' small motions become definitive ends, instances where the institution achieves the perfection it seeks.

Viewed alongside Wiseman's other work, La Danse marks a sort of culmination. I thought so, anyway, after a screening of the film at Stanford University on April 6, 2010. The film was followed by a Q&A with the director. The interviewer started with the standards: How did you come to this subject matter? How do you structure your films? How do you make the camera invisible? These were met with Wiseman's standard responses: "I like the ballet." "I don't like to talk about structure." "The camera is rarely an obstacle." Intent on breaking the mold, I raised my hand.
“It’s tempting,” I started, “to read La Danse as a culmination of many themes you’ve been exploring throughout your career, particularly with regard to your films on institutions—individuals trying to meet their potential through the institutions that are meant to assist them. This film is interesting because it’s not so heavy on language; it’s more heavy on physical communication. The same could be said for your other films, such as Deaf and Blind. I was wondering, do you approach a film with the perception of what you’ve done previously?”

“Well,” he said, “I suppose I have to be aware of what I’ve done previously. And one of the reasons I made La Danse was because the film I had done before that was about the Idaho State Legislature...”

This evoked a laugh from the audience, which he rolled with.

“...I found out that politicians like to talk. And I felt that a ballet would be more oriented toward action. So I do think about that issue... but, it depends. I’ve made films that are dependent on talk and also a lot that are dependent on action. Zoo, for example, at least fifty percent of the participants didn’t talk very much.”

Funny, given that half the participants are animals.

In the sense that I wasn’t expecting much, Wiseman fulfilled my expectations. His conduct reaffirmed a passage I came upon during research. In Reality Fictions, the authors explain that “Wiseman’s refusal to commit himself may be vexing, but it is an essential part of his contribution. [...] Paradoxical though it may be, Wiseman’s films become public through his dogged privatism.”

One could equate this ‘publicness’ to the democratic ideal that so many of the institutions he explores deny us. But that would be too narrow a solution for the scope of his project. Over 38 works, Wiseman has studied an impulse specific to being human, one that, to the credit of some claims, is absurd in its nature. “[I]t is an insistence upon familiarity,” to quote Albert Camus, “an appetite for clarity” that persists even in the face of an irrational world. However great his detachment, Wiseman is not free of this paradox. Perhaps this is why he has continued to make the films that he has for as long as he has. And we should be thankful, as his films manage to behold moments of terrific clarity—in, of all places, institutions.

3. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 263.
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