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Hollywood Turns to Comic Books for Heroes

By Tom Spaulding

With the success of Spider-Man (2002) and X-Men (2000), superheroes are returning to the big screen at a furious rate. Along with sequels to Spider-Man and X-Men, The Hulk and Daredevil are on their way to a multiplex near you. Old favorites Batman and Superman are rumored to reemerge, perhaps even together. Can Wonder Woman and Captain America be far behind? Why do comic book superheroes make successful transitions to film and what is behind this current trend?

Comic book adaptations have been a staple of the Hollywood blockbuster for decades and it is easy to see why. Primarily, superhero comic-book adaptations tend to incorporate themes associated with the modern blockbuster: action, special effects and good versus evil. The films become an avenue of escape into another world, just like the comic books that inspired them. They are visual treats with easy to follow narratives, again, much like the comic books that inspired them.

As an added bonus, they also come with an existing fan base, the devoted readers. Also, many comic books have had incarnations as animated television series or videos, as with Spider-Man, Batman, Superman, The Hulk and X-Men, just to name a few. This drastically expands the fan base of a comic and the potential built-in audience of the movie. Some fans anxiously await the movie versions of their favorite comic books to see if the images on screen match their own fantasies conjured by reading the comic books. Other fans want to see justice done to the original texts and balk at any liberties or changes the filmmakers might have made to the text. Still others just want to see how the special effects rate and which Hollywood star is in which role. The important thing to the studio producing the film is that people are going to be interested in the film.

The episodic nature of comic books and multitudes of villains and stories give the studios a wealth of material to draw upon, allowing for sequels and turning the comic book into what Hollywood wants most: a successful franchise. After all, if a superhero vehicle is successful it can be a moneymaking machine for the studio, meaning multiple sequels, extensive ancillary revenue from licensing and video games, and the inevitable ride at a theme park.

Based upon their earlier work, these directors might seem to be odd choices to helm a superhero movie, but with their past critical success it gives the film a respectable author and a voice.

Marvel Comic, have been such a huge smash before September 11th? Probably, but perhaps not on such a grand scale. We can compare Spider-Man’s $400 million domestic gross post-September 11th with X-Men’s $157 million domestic performance in 2000 to make a hypothesis that perhaps Americans flocked to the theaters in search of a new hero in the wake of the terrorist attacks. Granted, Spider-Man is a bigger household name than X-Men, but even box office analysts were blown away with Spidey’s performance, which many predicted would fall in the $200 million range. Perhaps the comic book trope of good versus evil was just what America wanted to see in the wake of September 11th.

Director Sam Raimi and his team were editing Spider-Man when the events of 9-11 unfolded. The film was tweaked to remove a scene shown in early previews of a helicopter caught in a spider web between the twin towers. Obviously, Raimi decided that was not going to be appropriate and decided to add some additional scenes and turn the film into what he called a “tribute to New York.” Playing to the country’s renewed patriotism, the film closes with a triumphant shot of Spider-Man atop a New York skyscraper with a huge American flag waving behind him. There were also
scenes added of everyday New Yorkers getting behind their hero in the face of terror, the evil Green Goblin. One of the New Yorkers declares, “You mess with one of us, you mess with all of us.” Audiences flocked to Spider-Man in record numbers, breaking the opening weekend box office record with $114 million. This obviously caught the attention of Hollywood executives, who are hoping it is a start of a trend.

So now three other Marvel comic books in which Stan Lee had a hand in creating are being adapted into feature films. In 2003 The Hulk and Daredevil are going to be released and Fantastic Four is scheduled for a 2004 release. With the sequels to X-Men and Spider-Man, that will be five films inspired by Marvel comics coming to theaters in the next two years. On the official website for The Hulk, we see the exact formula Hollywood is using to bring its comic book adaptations to the big screen:

Acclaimed filmmaker Ang Lee’s concept for his film adaptation of the classic Marvel Comics series, The Hulk, combines all the elements of a blockbuster visual effects-intensive superhero movie with the brooding romance and tragedy of Universal’s classic horror films. In depicting The Hulk as both a superhero and a monster, a wish fulfillment and a nightmare, Lee and his team have stayed true to the early subversive spirit of the character created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, while completely updating The Hulk and projecting it into the dangers and aspirations of contemporary times.

In the synopsis above we see that visual effects are extremely important, as is updating the text to incorporate modern themes, much like the Spider-Man formula did. What the two films also have in common is the “acclaimed filmmaker” moniker attached to their directors, perhaps to make them more respectable as films. Lee, of Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon fame, should do just that for The Hulk. Much like everything else in Hollywood, it is a tried-and-true formula. Bryan Singer directed the critically acclaimed The Usual Suspects before the X-Men movies; Sam Raimi was fresh off the acclaimed A Simple Plan before Spider-Man; the trend goes all the way back to Tim Burton directing Batman after his distinctive style won praise in Beetlejuice. Based upon their earlier work, these directors might seem to be odd choices to helm a superhero movie, but with their past critical success it gives the film a respectable author and a voice, much like a comic book authored by Stan Lee.

How long will this current comic book hero trend last? Certainly the main superheroes will find box office success in their sequels: The Amazing Spider-Man (2004), X-Men 2 (2003) and any movie with Batman and/or Superman will find an audience. But what about that second level of superhero? The superhero stuck in the minors, so to speak. How long this phase in Hollywood lasts will likely depend on the success of The Hulk and Daredevil. Will audiences want to watch little-known Eric Bana turn into a CGI green monster whenever he gets angry? Will audiences want to see Ben Affleck play a man blinded by radioactive waste who can use his heightened senses to bring about justice? Those are pretty much the selling points of The Hulk and Daredevil, respectively. Maybe America will continue to flock to the multiplex in hopes of escaping reality to a world where a man in a costume or a man somehow altered can save the world from evil. This seems even more likely in light of the current discourse about a possible U.S. strike against Iraq. Surely these films will be met with varying degrees of success and no one is predicting a Spider-Man type performance for either of these two films, but studio executives will be watching these films to gauge how hot the superhero genre is. If The Hulk and Daredevil fare well at the box office, expect Hollywood to continue to mine the comic book store for more superhero talent.

The success of Spider-Man has renewed interest in movies based on comic books.
The Point Behind Pointless Action Movies
By Char Dennis

Digital technology explored to its fullest degree in The Matrix

My friend was rambling on one day about which upcoming movies he was most excited to see. When he mentioned The Knockaround Guys as being at the top of his list, I rolled my eyes. "Aww... come on," he said. "There'll be hella cool stuff to see in that movie." Ok. I had to give him that, and I am sure there are millions of others just as excited to see the "hella cool stuff" in that movie.

I have always wondered why a genre that only seeks to offer its audience superficial visual effects has been one of the largest moneymakers at the box office. What is it about these films that is so fascinating to the public? Are they successful because the masses are so intellectually numb that they would rather be hypnotized by flashy images than have to interpret a well-told, complex story? I hate to think so, because I have found myself enjoying those flashy images on more than a few occasions. Granted, for the most part these films are so over the top that the cheesy narrative overpowers the cool visuals in the film. However, despite my reservations at the start of one of these films, by the end, I often find that I had been thoroughly entertained the entire time. So, why is it that these action/effects films are never considered in a serious discussion about film, yet are one of the more popular genres of the mainstream?

Cinema is the art of moving pictures. It has always been popular because people are fascinated with being able to see both the images that resemble life and how they can be manipulated through the properties of film. There have been many periods in the history of American cinema where narratives, for the most part, were much less creative than the camera work. Visual storytelling has evolved over the decades to what we have come to know nowadays as the "digital age." Modern films, framed around special effects, are playing into the public's fascination with visual imagery in the same way that silent films did with the public when moving pictures were first born.

Cinema emerged as an offshoot of still photography. The fact that it was a new visual medium inspired artists who were interested in experimenting with film just to see what kind of images they could capture. The very first Lumiere films were long shots of moving people and objects, like a crowd of workers leaving a factory or a train pulling into a train station. Neither audiences nor filmmakers were concerned with any kind of narrative. At the very beginning, it was simply the thrill of seeing moving images on the screen that was fascinating to people. Even when filmmakers did start to incorporate narrative into their films, the lack of technology for incorporating sound meant that they had to convey their stories solely through images. This new territory led to the invention of so many camera and editing techniques that are still used today to convey meanings through visual imagery. The silent era was the most important time in cinema for that reason, and there have been many film theorists who have said that the advent of sound ruined cinema as a pure art form. Indeed, American cinema eventually fell victim to a standardized system of narration that relied heavily on dialogue and character development. From that point on, any innovative experimentation with film as a purely visual medium occurred primarily on the outskirts of popular cinema in the avant-garde.

As a film student, I am trained to watch for how the visual composition of a film compliments the content. However, action films tend to use the content simply to give meaning to the action. For this reason, the genre (for the most part) uses the basic plotline of the hero (usually male) who saves the world and gets the girl. Usually, the main character must overcome some kind of personal struggle in order to achieve his goals. The "struggle" serves the purpose of supplying insight into the psychology of the main character. However, action films rarely delve any deeper, suggesting that this narrative portion is simply thrown in because it is such an important aspect of conventional filmmaking. I have never been a huge fan of action-packed, Hollywood blockbusters because I have never been able to appreciate them for what they are: pure visual spectacle.

The Matrix, directed by Andy and Larry Wachowski, plays with the idea of visual imagery and whether or not what the spectator is seeing is real. The plot, at its basic level, is the same as most
action films: guy overcomes personal obstacles, saves the world and gets the girl. However, the premise of the film suggests that what people are experiencing as reality is actually created by computers. This sets up the opportunity for the filmmakers to experiment with digital effects. This film received a lot of recognition for using camera and computer technology in ways that had never been done before. Take, for instance, the shot of Neo (Keanu Reeves) dodging bullets by bending backward and moving his arms out of their path. The shot begins with the camera following the path of the bullets. As they slow down, (a result of Neo's new ability to control his own reality) the camera moves in a complete circle around Neo while he assumes a seemingly impossible position and holds it, as the bullets continue on their path without touching him. The amazing thing about this shot is that there are no cuts and the body of the character appears to be in stop-action mode, yet the bullets and the camera are still moving. This kind of shot presents the action (a visual spectacle in itself) from all possible angles, and slows it down without losing the momentum in the camera movement. Although the action in this sequence is obviously generated by special effects, the camera's uninterrupted movement around the action presents the event in a way that is closer to how it would be seen in reality than if the action were portrayed with cuts between different angles. Yet, freezing the character and slowing down the bullets puts the reality of the event into question. Without any foreknowledge of the technology that was used to create this film, the viewer is left to wonder, "How did they do that and make it look so real?" At this point, the spectacle in the film is not just the action, but the camera work and effects as well.

Digital effects are being used in almost every mainstream film that comes out of Hollywood; if not to bring the unimaginable to life, then simply to perfect the image as it may not have been perfectly captured on film. A door has been opened for filmmakers to create any image that comes to their minds, as there are no more boundaries to the medium of film due to the possibilities of digital technology. For this reason, the narratives in today's action movies are of secondary importance to the visual spectacle. It is as if these films are being written according to what kind of special effects the filmmaker is most interested in experimenting with. The result is often a cheesy, over-the-top narrative, full of plot-holes and unbelievable scenarios, with really amazing visuals. This may be why it is so hard for people to include action/effects films in a serious film discussion. Critical film studies tend to focus on films with strong themes or narratives and how film technology is used to aid the narrative. Action films are more or less just about showing off the technology.

The reason these films are popular is the same reason that film has always been popular: it displays the world for people to see, without having to leave their theaters or homes. Action films allow us to experience intense events and situations that are better experienced in the safety of the movie theater. However, with digital technology, it is now possible to show people worlds that look real, but do not actually exist. Digital technology has become an art form in its own right. Nowadays, films are being made that combine actual sets and characters with digital ones. For example, Star Wars: Episode I has a few main characters that are digitally created, yet fluidly interact with the live characters. Also, the majority of the scenes in the film rely heavily (or totally) on digital animation. It is becoming harder for viewers to determine whether or not what they are looking at is real or the result of crafty effects. This brings us back to the premise of The Matrix, which uses this idea for the purpose of toysing with the viewer's perception.

Action/effects films offer the opportunity to see things that look real, yet that one is not likely to see in reality. This is why the genre is so popular. Through the action genre, cinema has come full circle in the sense that it has returned to its status as more visual spectacle. The fact that people see these films in order to be hypnotized by flashy images does not mean that the masses are intellectually numb. Instead it illustrates how deeply the medium of film speaks to the curiosity inherent in all people. By placing less importance on the narrative of a film, the film becomes a sort of visual language that can be shared and understood by people of all cultures.
Gendered Power Play: Women In Starring Roles On Television Action Shows

By Terence Jensen

In the past few years there has been a noticeable proliferation of action shows situated around a central female character. We must ask ourselves if this trend is simply a means of pleasing men with sex and violence or whether there are significant sub-textual elements circulating within the genre. Considering the new construction of male and female roles within this rapidly expanding genre, compelling implications begin to take shape. The female action hero genre must negotiate issues of both femininity and masculinity, thereby causing us to reevaluate our notions of gender roles.

While we should not look at the female action genre as a progression towards some egalitarian end, it is important to recognize that shows featuring women in action roles have gone through some significant changes. Female action shows are a product of the particular moment in which they are conceived. Mission Impossible, first airing in 1966, was a standard action drama of the time and was closely linked with the consciousness of the nation on issues such as the Cold War, race relations, and gender politics. With an almost entirely male cast, the government agents of Mission Impossible were always in dangerous situations, setting up elaborate traps, and when push came to shove, going hand to hand with the agents of “enemy governments.” Yet while espionage might have been considered a man’s work, every episode found ways of giving the single female character, Cinnamon a vital role in each mission.

On the pilot episode, the IM (Impossible Mission) team is dispatched to neutralize a nuclear threat from a small South American island nation. During this re-imagined Cuban missile crisis, the G-men set up pyrotechnics and rig the area with surveillance equipment. Cinnamon, played by Barbara Bain, has the job of seducing the show’s representation of Fidel Castro. When asked if she is up to the challenge, Cinnamon simply replies, “My job is only doing what comes naturally.” As her name might suggest, Cinnamon’s job throughout the series was to beguile men with her talents, stealing keys and slipping drugs into their martinis.

Barbara Bain’s very presence on Mission Impossible, even as the token female character, was an acknowledgment of changing perceptions in America. The pressures placed on the nation because of the Civil Rights Movement and the Cold War caused a shift in practices of inclusion and representation. Mission Impossible was one of the first of its genre to include a woman in a capacity greater than that of the main character’s mother, sister, or daughter. Even so, in the end Cinnamon reproduced the prevalent mentality that measured women only in terms of what they could offer men.

Although shows such as Wonderwoman and The Bionic Woman did feature heroines with increased physical ability, these female characters were defiantly the exception, and not the rule. The increase in female action heroes who possess greater physical strength and abilities is largely a recent phenomenon and is in stark contrast with past shows. The dramatic shift in the assertiveness and physical strength of women in action roles today presents a unique challenge. Producers must avoid over ascribing their heroines with hyper-masculine gender traits or risk the loss of femininity, and subsequently viewer identification. One common way that producers create strong female characters that retain femininity is through signifiers attached to the female body.

Women’s bodies can convey beauty, sexuality, and femininity and ultimately meaning, which audiences then use to understand the character. This is particularly applicable to Buffy the Vampire Slayer. On this wildly popular show, Buffy Summers has been mystically endowed with super strength and reflexes to combat vampires, demons, and whatever else might be lurking in the shadows. Along with her group of friends consisting of misfits and bookworms, “The Slayer,” as she is often called, keeps the streets of Sunnydale safe for ordinary citizens. Buffy, played by Sarah Michelle Gellar, appears as the quintessential blonde victim, easily identifiable in any horror film. Essentially, the most important element of this character type is looks, used to convey youth and beauty. This way, when the attractive but fatally unintelligent blond inevitably dies, we can all be shocked and realize just how evil that killer creature must be.

Part of the Buffy appeal is seeing the traditional victim turn into the hunter. Yet, with superior speed and strength, Buffy Summers must always look like the beautiful young woman or we might get confused. To this end, Buffy’s makeup and hair are always in
excellent condition, even past the point of realism. This symbol of femininity must be maintained, especially during combat when realistically, makeup would smear, perfect hair would become dirty and tangled, and the body would perspire. Here we are willing to suspend our disbelief because doing so allows us to retain our ideal image of femininity, even while that image engages in actions regarded as masculine. As far as the body is concerned, Gellar wears Summers' wardrobe flawlessly. We are allowed to see just enough skin and contours so that our socially constructed ideal of beauty is met. On Buffy, as on so many shows like it, clothes are modern and sexually appealing, but not to the point of becoming unwholesome.

Witchblade airs on TNT and features a New York policewoman, Sara Pazini, played by Yancy Butler, who seems to happen upon a magical artifact. The semi-sentient Witchblade endows its wielder with superpowers, and has chosen Sara to be the next link in the long chain of exclusively female bearers charged with combating the forces of darkness. While the show might not enjoy a budget as large as Buffy, it does not suffer from lack of gendered power play. Sexuality is a volatile but effective tool also used to construct female characters. Supporting characters may have other orientations, but for the most part the protagonist must adhere to the dominant heterosexual social norms. While central characters may be physically strong as well as willful, they are usually denied the assertiveness to initiate relations with men. Often, the desire and ability to initiate (or extreme receptiveness to) sexual contact with men is usually coupled with killing those men after sex.

On last season's finale of Witchblade, another woman warrior, Lucrecia, appeared to challenge Sara Pazini's right to wield her cosmic power. From the outset, Lucrecia was positioned as dangerous because she murders two men after having sex with them. This black widow complex is employed to establish a strong woman as evil not primarily because she is a murderer, but because she uses her supernatural abilities to potentially dominate men in the bedroom. The black widow exists in stark contrast to Sara and most other female heroes who are consistently sexually passive and unthreatening. Through this technique of contrast, viewers can immediately perceive a new character to be evil and deviant.

Along with the problems of constructing female characters, male characters present significant challenges as well. Primarily, the strong female leads must not overshadow these male characters. Although the male characters in the sub-genre cannot match the powers of the female lead, they are given attributes such as knowledge or authority that signify and position them as masculine. Often these are qualities that are complementary to and thus accentuated by the main female character.

One of the best examples of masculinity juxtaposed with the superhero woman is featured on Fox's Dark Angel. Max Guevera, played by Jessica Alba, has been genetically enhanced by a secret government program, and trained to be a super soldier. Now she strives to vanquish evildoers and learn more about her enigmatic past. Along with her on this crusade is the techno-savvy Logan Cale, responsible for an underground newscast called "Eyes Only," which antagonizes the oppressive government. No ordinary man could match Max's physical prowess, so Logan must be read as a masculine figure in other respects. To this end Logan is purposefully positioned so viewers focus on his other masculine qualities such as knowledge and authority. These attributes are not exercised over Max, but rather combine with her powers, allowing the characters to achieve mutual goals. What is partic-

More than just a pretty face: Sarah Michelle Gellar is Buffy the Vampire Slayer
The Dude Abides: The Big Lebowski as a Lens on Pop Culture
By Jake Anderson

It is not surprising that many people find it difficult to classify the Coen brothers’ movies into a single genre. The Big Lebowski, for instance, repeatedly fluctuates between absurdist comedy and social satire. The film provides a perspective on a curious time in American history: the Dude (Jeff Bridges) takes us on a mythical journey through Los Angeles during the Gulf War, when oil companies’ profits rose while major American power establishments warned of an impending oil crisis. During a time in which mass media perpetuates the necessity of capitalism, an analysis of The Big Lebowski’s protagonist reveals a mockery of that necessity. As America now finds itself in the midst of a new governmental intrusion into the Middle East—the War on Terror and the familial hawk call to battle Saddam Hussein—reading into a film such as Lebowski affords a closer look at America’s ethnocentric policy toward eastern nations. The Big Lebowski and the Dude provide a unique insider’s perspective on the American mass consciousness.

In the film, the Coen brothers never exactly build sympathy for the Dude. Rather, his stoned civil disobedience grows on us because of his apathy. He wanders passively through a media oligopoly, not pondering his grievances to the flag, but certainly not participating in the American Dream either. This results in one of the Dude’s most interesting characteristics: he repeats many of the phrases and terminology he hears around him. In the first major sequence of the film, as the narrator describes the Dude as “a man of his time and place,” we watch the Dude buy milk with a $67 check, while he watches a news byte on TV of President Bush Senior claiming that “[Saddam Hussein’s] aggression against Kuwait will not stand.” Later, in an unusually aggressive moment, the Dude says to a stubborn millionaire [whose goons unbuttoned the Dude’s rug], “This aggression will not stand, man!” This spongy behavior illustrates how the media seeps into our consciousness in small increments, and manifests itself in daily interactions. Of course, the Dude’s behavior is also due to his “strict drug regimen,” consisting of Thai stick and white Russians. The Dude’s only consistencies are drugs, indifference, and fanciful bouts of unconscious activity. He is the antithesis of a model citizen and distinctly unlike most film protagonists: a burnt out and bewildered nihilist, sprinkled with indulgence. At one point, the Dude paves into a mirror on which is written “Time: Man of the Year.” We ask ourselves, what would “a man of his time” experience in America in the 1990’s, during the Gulf War and perhaps more recently, the American/Israeli War on Terror? What we discover is that the Dude, like the ideal American, experiences what his government wants him to: the media’s portrayal of experience. The scene in which the Dude dreams of Saddam Hussein holding a bowling ball epitomizes the absurd representation of Arabs in American pop culture while disturbing the viewer’s perception of American leisure.

In waking moments, though, the Dude does not really concern himself with geopolitical issues or their origins. The American machine operates: the media interprets information through the lens of government policy, multi-nationalism encodes mass culture, and anti-colonial propaganda functions on all levels of society (even Oriental seminaries in the 70’s that claimed to be objective studies of third world issues received funding from the Ford foundation, and experts automatically branded the region as fundamentally lacking in comparison to the first world). Ethnocentrism stems all the way from Homer’s Odyssey: it is a tradition in the humanities to virtually always marginalize Oriental texts and traditional histories like the Sanskrit epics of ancient India. Modern ethnocentrism has mutated into television, newspapers, radio, and the internet, which are all fueled by giant, multinational corporations.

It’s no surprise Walter Cronkite so repeatedly affirmed the Russian threat to the U.S. on national news, or that CNN cranks out daily Al Qaeda danger warnings, or that the nation’s conservatives (and liberals) are propelling us into a war based on Iraq’s perceived capability of producing weapons of mass destruction at some point in the future. Nor is it surprising that most information about the Islamic world comes not from scholarly journals but from multinational media sources. This trend began during the Cold War, when the U.S. government, in collusion with big businesses, worked to create media sources invested in the monopolization of cultural representation. The result: Western sources with corporate ties represent the Islamic world. The problem with this: our understanding of Islamic culture is limited to a socially constructed model whereby we define Arab nations according to whatever danger the media deems them as imposing on American homeland security.

Since the The Big Lebowski delivers its humor and message subtly, it does not overtly grapple with the issue of American media’s global dominance, as doing so would force the protagonist out of his neutral, apathetic stance. However, the film relates post-modern culture with the concept of a numbed American consciousness. The Dude’s “exhausting” nihilism results in his becoming a kind of ‘consciousness guppy,’ not caring at all for the upper class but feeding off of its pop
culture. The Dude is a textbook post-modern character: he does not engage with the world, the world engages with him. The film thus reveals very little about the Dude's thoughts, because there is little to reveal. His apathy overwhelms the story's progression until even the narrator loses his train of thought, while the film maintains intrigue through the Dude's various ironic connections. For example, the Dude's apathy contrasts with the exactitudes of his bowling buddy Walter, a mentally unstable Vietnam veteran perpetually rambling about the "camel-fuckers" in Iraq. This brings up the intriguing connection between the Vietnam and Gulf Wars. As the U.S. fails to rebuild third world areas of colonial devastation, the Gulf War looks more and more like an attempt to put an end to the haunting reality of the Vietnam War, and the current war-in-the-making looks like a chance to finish the job. Our current representation of the Islamic world paints it as an undifferentiated mass of extremism, which is very reminiscent of media's perceptions of the Viet Cong communist insurgency during the 60's and 70's. The Big Lebowski whimsically brings up the Vietnam/Gulf connection when the Dude, frustrated at Walter's incessant Nam references, says, "I don't see any connection with Vietnam." "Well, there isn't a literal connection;" says Walter. The Dude responds, "No, face it, Walter, there isn't any connection." While the move stops short of making a definitive argument about U.S. involvement with and foreign policy towards eastern nations, the mere inclusion of these phrases engages the viewer in an indirect dialogue with the government. The film begs the question: what connection does the Vietnam War have to contemporary America? This is a difficult question to answer, because nearly the same attitude America took toward Vietnam continues in regards to the Islamic world, and Americans are reluctant to admit to the cultural biases inherent in the attitude. For example, we assume that because corporations necessitate dominance in the global market, that resources such as oil are ours for the taking, despite the negative effects of U.S. intervention in other parts of the world. The fact that the oil market exploitation in Sudan—name just one of many such countries—that has led to years of deadly civil wars. The resulting 'you're either with us or against us' attitude is the catalyst for many of our disputes with Islamic countries, and with it we gamble, causing ostensibly pro-American Muslim nations like Iran and Saudi Arabia to harbor animosity towards us. Lebowski mocks the very idea of an 'us vs. them' mentality with its representation of American culture as a gao-politically misinformed popular nightmare.

The nightmare is that American culture infiltrates the rest of the world in a dangerously nationalistic way. All the euphemisms for America's new campaign—"Axis of Evil," "Homeland Security," or "Coalition of the Willing," etc.—smacks of the kind of linguistic doublespeak prophesied by Orwell in 1984, or the "World State" of technological prowess in the "brave new world" predicted by Aldous Huxley. American patriotism, desperate to advertise our new enemy, the elusive, mobile network of terrorists spread around the world, quickly molds into hypocrisy. Through television, radio, and most recently the internet, we impose upon technologically weaker cultures our ideas of social liberties. Enthusiasts claim that the electronic age provides a new way to link us together with distant parts of the world. It seems rather that in the conquest of the third world has merely evolved into a conquest of information through the monopolization of news corporations. The conquest of information even threatens the rights of American citizens, for in the coming years new surveillance databases will archive a frightening amount of personal information (for the sake of homeland security, of course). While the information age may hold more potential for social change than the preceding industrial age, it is likely that the cybernetic technologies of a postindustrial capitalism will continue to commodify consciousness: the internet will serve the same purpose as traditional media sources, using the myths of popular culture to coerce Americans into supporting the representatives of big business. The "global village" that widespread internet access promises to create may just be wishful thinking.

Do not count on the internet to dignify our sources of news; it will likely speed up the rate at which Americans consume lies. The Big Lebowski depicts media manufactured American pop culture as teeming with corporate logos, icons, misinformed references to nihilism, nazism, and the Middle East. The Dude does not seem to despair this incoherence, and he never openly expresses any doubts he may have towards the idea of America as a democracy. Only when the Chief of Malibu throws a coffee mug at his head does the Dude fatter in his pacifism, calling him "a fascist." Later, he bumps the clown down a notch, referring to the Chief merely as a 'reactionary.' However, the Dude's apathy reflects upon the mass production of a particular American state of mind: acceptance of, but not subservience to, its government. The "War on Terror" propagated within the last year and a half reveals a changing balance in this state of mind. Americans, at least liberals (whenever that words means now), accept their government's exploitation of non-modernized countries, and are not altogether content with it. There results a certain irony in the peoples' powerlessness in changing the policies of a nation supposedly for the people. In Lebowski, the narrator's old west inflection and the reality of there being two Lebowskis—one rich, one poor—hints at the dual nature of the Dude's apathetic post modernism: its familiarity and its decay. Halfway through the film, the Dude hears the narrator say, "Sometimes you eat the bear and sometimes the bear eats you." The Dude asks, "Is that some kind of Eastern thing?" The Narrator smiles and says, "Far from it." That the Dude would hear something that does not make sense to him and attribute it to the east is no small irony. Near the end, the Dude repeats the "bear" phrase to the bartender and looks over to see the narrator again, who says to him, "Take 'er easy, Dude. I know that you will." Returning to his bowling lane, beer in hand, he responds, "The Dude abides," a saying in which the narrator takes comfort. He fails to explain why this comforts him. Perhaps it is the Dude's comradely indifference that makes him an intransigent presence—even though he is the protagonist, and the "man of his time and place"—and thus a microcosm of America. He is a product of Western ethnocentrism, with its conception of the Orient as "other", some mystical, barbaric non-man's land forever at odds with the ambitions of modernism. The Dude's point of view is thus the ideal perspective for the ethnographer of American popular culture, for in the Dude's apathy we find an unfiltered lens on the popular culture that created him.
Is Love Such a Bitch? The Intersection of Sex and Violence in Amores Perros

By Leticia Garcia

The dog as "the revolving point of the interactions between the characters"

If love's not a bitch, then the bitch is stuck with a bad rep, fiercely fighting to get loose. In this scorching film from Mexico City, dogs are the medium, acting as interpreters for otherwise unspoken passions. Not only do dogs glue the characters together, but they also speak the inexpressible between the emotionally stunted individuals. From the bloodstained opening to the desolate ending, Alejandro González Iñárritu viciously throws the characters into a salad mix of sex, violence and disfigurement. In following the most animalistic instincts, the film is peppered with dog bites, robbery, murder and the lust for the unattainable, leaving the characters fiercely banging the walls of their confinement. In the violence that literally crashes out of the screen, the characters are thrust together into a fire fueled by the explosion of repressed passions that ultimately leaves the viewer unsatisfied.

Out of this desire for the unattainable, the characters are portrayed with flaming passions between these intense instances of violence. It is through this bloodstained lens that Octavio lusts after his brother's wife and Daniel runs away with a supermodel. Each of the characters expresses a desire for what they cannot or should not have, because they must comply with traditional norms. Appearing throughout the film, the dogs act as stand-ins for unspoken emotions each character feels for one another. In these stunted relationships the emotions and desires manifest in forms of violence within the dog fighting ring, where the characters' repression escapes. Separated into three segments, Octavio and Susana, Daniel and Valeria, and El Chivo and Maru, the film shows where these stories combine in one instant. Besides the image of the dogs, the repetition of the car crash structures the film around this singular moment, tying together the different romantic relationships.

As the title suggests, (Amores Perros translates to Love's a Bitch) the film utilizes the dog as the very definition of love. The roles of the dogs are essential to understanding the film, because they are the revolving point of the interactions between the characters. In centering the film around the dogs, the characters' emotions are further stifled, forcing them into a silenced role. Also, the usage of bitch in the title plays on the connotation with the word, foreshadowing the harsh reality being played out in the film. Not only is the love unsatisfying, but it also screws the characters over, leaving them as a shell of someone full of desire.

The intensity and bloodlust of the dogfights provides the film with violence and frustration, which underlies the crumbling lives of the characters. The passion of the violence is equal to the attraction of forbidden love that all the characters could not control. Because of the intensity of the lust, the characters' decisions are impaired, hence their inability to handle the situations. It is their inability to communicate that leaves them with ambivalence toward one another. They are unable to express their desires, giving their emotions nowhere to go, so they bottle them up until they are released in a final explosion.

The connection between the violence and the dogs is essential as a symbol of the angst held in all the characters' relationships. Violence within the film surrounds all the characters and their stories and the dogs are a gauge of the characters' emotions. At the first spark of violence, once Octavio begins to fight Cofi regularly with Jarocho's dogs, so begins the affair between Octavio and Susana. The dogfights are the source of so much conflict within the film, giving it its bite and blood from the beginning. The dogs use their instinct to kill one another when placed within the dogfights, and lack control over who or what they kill.

Starting off in the first segment, Octavio and Susana, two crucial sequences build up the tensions between the characters. In these edits back and forth, the close ties between sex, violence and power are established. Through these sequences, the passions between these characters are built up until the violent outcome of these hot-blooded combinations. These chemical reactions of pant up
desire, ending in explosion, are further amplified with the violent musical sequences.

The first series is paralleled between the two brothers, Ramiro and Octavio, "earning" money, one from robbery and the other from the dogfights. Here we see the first instance of illegal activities, as Octavio uses violence in the black market for gaining money and in turn power. In parallel editing their differences are exaggerated to set up the binaries between the good and bad brothers: Ramiro's cheating on his wife and holding up pharmacies, while Octavio is making money off the dogfights. As the power he gains from the dogfights grows, Octavio gets the courage to act on his lust for Susana. Not only is his attraction and lust for Susana repeated throughout the segment, but the paralleling of Cofi's success in the dogfights demonstrates Octavio's growing power.

In the same segment, the next montage makes further connections between love and violence through crosscutting between a passionate sex scene and a fight scene. Intercut with a racy sex scene, between Octavio and Susana, we see scenes of Ramiro getting beat up on Octavio's request. Octavio's growing power gives him the courage to have Ramiro beaten up for hurting Susana. With the popular love song playing, the feelings of love are amplified, giving one the impression that the characters are truly in love. The violence also reworks the power structure between the characters within the film: Octavio gains power and courage as the dog succeeds in the ring. It gives Octavio the courage he previously lacked, whereby he gains money, respect, and in turn power. It is when he cannot control his power anymore that he gets into the car crash, leaving himself severely injured and disfigured.

It is his power that gave Octavio the courage to pursue his lust for Susana; however, he was unable to truly build a relationship with her because she never responded. Although her ambivalence can be read as caring, her lack of expression led other people to push her around. Octavio is able to express himself more as the film progresses; however, it is not because of the growing love between the two, but rather the power he gains. Without the power from the dogfights, Octavio would not be able to pursue his desires. In the end, he loses everything because he builds a one-sided trust with Susana who did not express her own desires.

In the next segment, Daniel y Valeria, the characters suffer because of Valeria's physical disfigurement from the accident. Throughout this segment, Ritchie the dog being trapped under the apartment only reiterates Daniel's feeling of being stuck with a crippled supermodel. After seeking a future with the beautiful model and leaving his family, the object of his desire is injured in the car crash, leaving him confined to the situation. By fantasizing about starting a life with his mistress where they can be happy, Ritchie only further emphasizes the theme of being stuck in an unanticipated situation. Contrasting with the opening segment, where dogs are constantly at war, the entrapment of Daniel only expresses the feelings of guilt for wanting to escape.

However in the next segment, El Chivo y Maru, Cofi destroys all of El Chivo's dogs and in turn, his past, enabling him to face the future, which is desolate and empty. As an assassin he is no longer the source of violence, but rather a reformed man who walks away from it. In walking away from all this, El Chivo is able to reconcile with his daughter over the answering machine, afraid to actually confront her in person.

In the final scene he walks into the distance with the dog Cofi, who is an embodiment of violence. El Chivo is truly the only survivor of the film, because with Cofi is his possession, he is able to have control over the future, whereas before he was stuck in the past. And in walking off into the distance, El Chivo and Cofi leave with a sense of hope for the future, but without anything to hold onto. The violence has stopped and the other characters are left with only themselves, whereas El Chivo is able to move into the future. Through voicing his emotions with his daughter, he is set free, whereas the other characters remain stunted and with no reconciliation with each other.

Throughout the film, the characters were confined to their situations, with little control over their futures, hence their loss in the end. As El Chivo moves into a life without violence the other characters are still confined to the circumstances that they put themselves into. Their lack of a positive outcome is only reiterated with the death of all the dogs except Cofi. Whoever has Cofi not only has power, but also a symbol of the freedom sought by all the characters.
Spider-Man: Masculinity for the 21st Century

By Ken Breese

Though identified in the narrative as a "story all about a girl," Sam Raimi's 2002 film Spider-Man is quite the opposite. The narrative is more about a boy's growth into a man, specifically Peter Parker's metamorphosis from a character who lacks almost any shred of masculinity into the superhero Spider-Man, whose embodiment of masculinity is shown as being more admirable than all other didactic portrayals, in essence we ask in what way does the film portray Parker's masculinity as being superior to the stereotypical archetypes of traditional masculinity. These archetypes include the high school bully and the hyper-masculine heroes of movies like Rambo and The Terminator. These traditional conceptions can be identified by their forceful strength, possession and protection of women, and ability to use their masculinity to accomplish selfish goals. Parker portrays a new kind of masculinity, a 21st century conception, in reference to other representations. This post-millennial conception blends aspects of traditional masculinity with the ideas of ethics, chivalry and responsibility. Parker's early textual portrayal does not carry connotations of masculinity. But how the film defines "being a man," as well as how Parker negotiates all this to form his own sense of masculinity, allows us to compare the new model with all others.

At the start of the film, the representation of Parker is far from flattering. Parker is scrawny, wears glasses, and is of weak physical stature, all of which bring about malicious teasing from his peers. One of his classmates is Flash Thompson, who is bigger, more affluent, and most importantly in possession of Mary Jane Watson, the object of Parker's affection. This leads us to another trope of Parker's lack of traditional masculinity: he is inept with women. Though he is very intelligent and thoughtful, he cannot communicate with either Peter or the opposite sex, specifically Mary Jane. Parker has low self-confidence, digi-tally portrayed in his inability to stand up for himself when his peers bully him, as well as in his bumbling interactions with Mary Jane. What the narrative shows is lacking in Parker's masculinity is both an overt sense of physicality and the affection of a woman, or at least confidence enough to speak with one.

But then the genetically engineered spider bites Parker and gives him super powers, which resolves the former dilemma. After waking up from his hibernation caused by the spider bite, Parker finds he does not need his glasses anymore; he can now see fine without them. Also, and much more importantly, Parker's body has apparently completely changed. For the first time the audience sees a shirtless Parker, whose body, while not hyper-masculine in scope, is well defined and very sexually appealing by today's standards. Parker's body has become a classical representation of strength: muscular, well defined and athletic.

Believing his long sleep is due to sickness, his Aunt May questions how he feels and asks whether there has been any change in his condition. With surprise Parker replies that he is fine but that there has been a big change in his life. Leaving the house after this encounter, Parker sees Mary Jane and tries to approach her. Parker fails as usual and we see that though he may be different on the outside, he is still the same shy Parker on the inside. During the following scene, where Parker is at lunch at school, Mary Jane walks by him and slips. But thanks to his new spider reflexes, he catches her and all the food she was carrying. However Parker loses the opportunity to talk to her, and he merely grins at Mary Jane as she fails to engage him in a conversation. Parker is clearly still uncomfortable with her. Though he has grown to embody the more classical sense of masculinity possessed by those in positions of power, Parker needs a radical shift in self-esteem to fulfill his own conditions for manhood, strength, power, and popularity.

This shift occurs when Flash tries to attack Parker. Parker, as well as the audience, now faces his high school conception of what it is to be supremely masculine: an aggressive, dominant male who is physically stronger, has more status and power than all others, and uses this power unethically. Parker uses his newfound strength to defeat Flash. He has challenged the traditional conception of what it means to be masculine, by standing up to and defeating Flash. Now a paradigm shift begins in earnest, with Parker starting to believe in the power of his own masculinity. We then see Parker reveling in his power, climbing walls, and jumping from roof top to roof top. His physicality is beyond measure and so his self-esteem radically changes.

That night Parker gets yet another chance to engage with Mary Jane and is successful this time. They have a very personal conversation, and Parker thus achieves one of his final goals, being both the most physically dominant in his social world and overcoming his ineptness with Mary Jane. But this reverie is cut short by Flash appearing in the background with a new car and Mary Jane running off happily to join him. At this point, Parker once again uses Flash as his guide to what a woman wants. He then sets a new goal for himself, a way to gain Mary Jane's affection: he will acquire a car. But to own a car he needs much more money than he possesses at the time, as the montage scene featuring Parker looking through car ads with the prices prominently displayed
shows. Implementing the same strategy used to solve a previous problem, Parker intends to capitalize on his strength. He finds a chance to do just that when he sees another paper ad, which touts a prize of three thousand dollars for three minutes in the ring with a professional wrestler. Deciding to cash in on this opportunity, he successfully steps into a role he previously despised, and begins behaving like Flash, unethically using his power only for his own gain.

At this crucial point in the narrative, Parker begins to confront a new influence on his masculinity his Uncle Ben. While unwittingly driving Parker to the arena where he will fight, Uncle Ben tries to impart wisdom upon him, declaring that they have not talked for a long time and that he does not know who Parker is anymore. Ben says he knows Parker is changing but that Parker should be careful about who he is to become. Ben points to the example of Parker fighting at school, stressing that “just because you can, doesn’t mean you have to,” and that “with great power comes great responsibility.” These are arguments for the ethical use of power, but Parker, defensive and upset, leaves after shunning Ben and his advice.

Going into the fight, Parker now portrays himself as the human spider, and faces the ultimate specimen of hyper masculinity: Bonesaw, the testosterone infused, super-muscled, and disregardingly large male whose overstated physicality is outrageous. Bonesaw’s extreme masculinity also manifests itself in the group of women he has as his attendants, who demean the human spider as he walks to battle with such lines as, “Bonesaw will eat you up and spit you out little man!” and “He’s going to break you!” effectively emasculating Parker. The match begins, with Bonesaw initially giving Parker a beating, but ultimately Parker overcomes him with his super strength. This gains him the adoration of the crowd. At this point Parker has totally stepped into the unethical role of using one’s power to attain one’s own selfish goals, which in his case are money to buy a car and mass acceptance. The film punctuates this notion of using power only for personal gain when Parker lets a thief escape with the profits belonging to Parker’s promoter. The promoter asks Parker, who was in a prime position to help, why he had hesitated, to which Peter replies, “I missed the part where that was my problem.” Here, Parker has refused to use his power for the good of others, disregarding Ben’s ethical advice that “with great power comes great responsibility.” By not learning this lesson Parker inadvertently hurts himself.

Coming upon a crowd after his brush with the thief, Parker speaks to a police officer who tells him that someone was shot in a carjacking. Pushing through the crowd Peter finds Ben, dying on the ground. His death unleashes a rage in Parker, who makes the ultimate decision to become a vigilante. Parker comes face to face with the murderer and finds him to be the very thief he had let escape. Parker understands now that Ben’s death is his fault and truly hears Ben’s voice saying, “with great power comes great responsibility.” In his understanding we see that Parker has achieved, though too late, the apex of his manhood, becoming a 21st century embodiment of masculinity. Though Parker is physically powerful, he has tampered with the understanding that with his power comes great ethical responsibility. Due to this, Parker makes the decision to become Spider-Man, to risking his own life to stop crime, to prevent those who would use physical power to take advantage of others. Now that Parker has solidified his notions of ethical masculinity with the creation of Spider-Man, the triumphs over Flash, Bonesaw, and most importantly his own self-defeat, the text introduces Norman Osborne, a new obstacle to overcome. Osborne is the head of a large corporation. He is wealthy, intelligent, successful, and most importantly, ready to do anything to succeed, a prime aspect of unethical masculinity. When his newest weapon, a formula to create a super soldier, may lose funding due to insufficient testing, Osborne test the formula on himself. During this process, Osborne states “Some times you gotta do things yourself,” showing his use of power or masculinity to achieve his selfish ends. Though successful in turning himself into a super soldier, and gaining physical power to match his determination to succeed, Osborne goes mad and creates the villainous Green Goblin as an alternate personal-ity. The Green Goblin is the ultimate incarnation of the unethical masculinity Parker once could have embodied but rejected: an unstoppable physical force using its own power for selfish success and gain. Osborne uses his power to take revenge on those who would see him fail. The Green Goblin commits murder, believing that one must “remove those in your way” until he has attained what he has always wanted: power, i.e. masculinity beyond his wildest dreams.

Here the film shows the use of power or force as synonymous with masculine power. During one of these murder attempts, Spider-Man stops him. Osborne then becomes obsessed with Spider-Man and tries to engage him in a conversation aimed at getting him to join Osborne in his conquest and destruction. Spider-Man rejects this unethical use of power as Osborne states, “You and I are not so different,” while Spider-Man retorts, “You’re a murderer.” The Goblin asks him why he adds the weak. Spider-Man tells him he is a hero “because it’s right,” or ethical, to which the Goblin replies, “To each his own. You chose your path and I chose mine,” again reinforcing Spider-Man’s ethics and the Green Goblin’s lack thereof. The two are identical in regards to physical strength, but Parker has ethics, an uncommon trait for a contemporary cinematic masculine action hero. After this point the two engage in battle after battle, in which the Goblin does not respect any rules of conduct and uses his power to hurt those close to Parker. Spider-Man defeats the Goblin in the end and finally Parker’s new form of masculinity wins out over Osborne’s ethically flawed version.

Spider-Man is a movie about Peter Parker’s transformation from a non-masculine boy into the pinnacle of an ethically powerful embodiment of heroic manhood. This transformation is arduous and Parker loses a lot to finally find his true identity. His form of masculinity is above and beyond all others because it incorporates the best aspects of other cinematic portrayals and in so doing reinvents masculinity. This portrayal of a conscious use of power for the good of others is a positive message and a facet of a new, 21st century masculinity.
Film: It is More Than Entertainment
By Summer Marsh

I always get mad when I have to justify being a film major. I think I hit the epitome of my madness when my best friend thought being an architectural engineer was more prestigious than being a film major. She explained that the film "major [is] based around entertainment, unlike teaching or math." This assumption sent me into a conniption fit. She assumed that the study of film theory and film was just a form of entertainment, but I beg to differ. This launched us into a debate over the relevance of film, both in general and as an academic major.

Film has a rarely acknowledged influence on its audience, an unspoken power. When asked why he is a film and digital media major, second year UCSC student Chris Lum responded, "I am a film major because there is so much power in cinema. When I watched Dogma for the first time, I realized what kind of impact a film's message can have." Film has the ability to change minds and opinions. It has the power to make a child dance or make an old man cry, to take you on a thrilling adventure or pull on your heart strings. Film documents, educates, advocates, inspires, creates, shapes and entertains. It is through the combination of these elements that each film produces power.

Film has the power to document. In theorist Andre Bazin's "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" he viewed film as a method of embalming time and experience, a way to memorialize an event. Like a time capsule, film can take a slice of life and project it to the world, allowing the masses to glimpse into the thoughts and feelings of others. Documentary cinema is a genre devoted specifically to capturing these experiences and making them available for others to view. In both documentaries and fictional films, the audience is able to interact and relate to the characters and events on the screen, to experience historical moments through a vivid visual world that a history book could merely describe. Film can help exemplify history and science through stimulating visuals that help to give a well-rounded illustration of the subject as a whole. In films power to document, it also utilizes a plethora of academic disciplines in order to create the final image.

When seen as a medium, film demonstrates an innate ability to encompass the world of all academic disciplines. In a film, the dialogue, the sets, and costumes all have to complement the story. Depending on the genre, it requires research and knowledge about the particular subject on which the film is based. This can be historical, scientific, or biographical knowledge, depending on the film. Also, to write the dialogue, build the sets and make the costumes requires a whole other set of skilled craftspeople. In order to create the sets, a handful of skilled crafts persons, including electricians, carpenters, art directors, and lighting designers, all work to produce the physical space of the film. And perhaps a film might even utilize the skills of an architectural engineer.

Film majors work with many individuals from a variety of disciplines, like cinematographers, writers, technical content experts, actors and many others to carefully choreograph a complete work that will convey and utilize information covering any and all academic pervades.

Film also educates, advocates, and communicates with its audience. From educational films in the classroom to in-flight films on airplanes, each function to teach the viewer.

Even propaganda films work to educate or advocate. Film's serves as a global communicator because of its ability to be translated into multiple languages and thus experienced around the world. Film can advocate and educate people in other parts of the world, communicating suffering, war, and political developments. The broadcast news on local, national and world events helps to develop an informed audience who, through film and television, can make a more informed decision. Emily Coren, a marine biology major with a film and digital media minor, wants to utilize film's ability to educate in order to teach young people about the environment. "Children look at hundreds of video games, TV shows and movies. If just one of those shows taught them about the environment, then society would have a better chance of surviving," she said. In the College 8 Core course, students watched the documentary, Cadillac Desert. It is an educational film on the transformation of the American Southwest from a desert to an oasis. It teaches its audience about the hardships that the Southwest faced with a lack of water in the highly populated areas, and the struggle to bring in water to keep up with the growing demand. The film is enlightening, a real eye-opener for anyone who lives in the Southwest and takes the seemingly plentiful water for granted. Film can even convey practical common knowledge that is useful no matter what major someone is studying. In this way, film's use as an educational tool creates a synergistic effect among all academic disciplines of study, which again demonstrates its versatility.

Film also inspires. Film heightens emotions and can expose a viewer to their sensitivities and passions. For a filmmaker, one of the ultimate goals is to create a work of art that touches
someone. As Devlin O'Neill, a first year intended major expressed. “I like to make people feel, whether its good, bad, happy, sad, scared...if they aren't moved in some way, then the film was unsuccessful.” The ability of film to inspire and draw out emotions enhances the experience of viewing a film, demonstrating that it is not necessarily a way to escape, but rather to vicariously experience the thoughts, feeling and emotions of others. Part of the depth of the medium is to be able to see a film and derive a deeper meaning or moral from another person’s story or experience. Brandie Kimball, a second year film major explained, “I like to figure out what the meaning is. I also enjoy making films. So many people see what you created. You have the ability to touch so many people’s lives.” Film's capability to inspire is part of a major's motivation to pursue film as a career.

Art in general, but particularly film and digital media, is gifted with the talent to shape culture. Film has the power to mold and create fads, trends and ways of thinking, which is both a burden and a responsibility. Party due to its commercial marketing and its role in our society, film has become part of a cyclical pattern in its imitation of life and reality, while simultaneously shaping the culture and reality which gave birth to it. A good example of a film that shaped culture was the 1995 release, Clueless. It is a story of a stereotypical southern California high school, plush with money, material possessions and style. Although it was extremely over-dramatized it sent shockwaves through local high schools reaching as far as Maryland, where adolescents were speaking with the lingo and sporting the clothing, taking on the typical SoCal look they saw featured on the screen. This is just a recent example of what the film theorist Bela Balazs wrote fifty years ago in his essay, “In Praise of Film Theory”: “Film art has a greater influence on the minds of the general public than any other art.” It reaches millions of view-

entertainment, a type of escapism. However, making such an assumption means denying all of film’s other influences, applications and potentials. Film is more than merely a form of entertainment. It educates advocates, elucidates, reveals, shapes and documents the world in which we live. It is a gift and a pleasure to be able to use art as a way to express not only oneself but also to influence others.

As the debate with my best friend cooled down, feeling that I had clearly stated my point, I began to ponder. Can the building she creates as an architectural engineer be as influential as my film? I figured it was a lost cause to intellectually push the issue further. It is not the debate of which major is more important, but it got me to thinking. Over its relatively short history it has already touched and influenced such a wide audience. With all of films abilities to, document, educate, advocate, inspire, create, shape and entertain, its powers are endless and leave the future full of wonderful possibilities.
XXX: 007 for the 21st Century
By Seung Eun Baik

Think PlayStation,” says Xander Cage (Vin Diesel), to persuade government agents to fire the bazooka to fight the enemy. This is the best way to approach Rob Cohen's XXX, an espionage cartoon that reworks every James Bond sequence. Using such gadgets as a bazooka in a small tunnel is not realistic, but only possible in video games where anything goes. Cohen uses this idea to create something more fun and appealing to a 21st century crowd, just like how James Bond was appealing to its audience when the movie first came out. If James Bond is for boomers and Spy Kids is for kiddies, then XXX is a secret agent for cynical in-betweeners. Diesel's performance brings to mind video games, extreme sports, and a bullish desire to shatter the tuxedo-clad spy image of James Bond as it was shown in the beginning of the movie. XXX essentially is a 007 movie retooled for the Tony Hawk crowd.

Diesel last teamed with Cohen for The Fast and the Furious, a movie about street racing filled with male-superiority and a certain respect for danger, just like XXX. The action scenes in both movies are grounded in a sense of personal risk. Since most of the scenes of chaos employ the same type of direct close-ups and intense point-of-view shots, the scenes mimic the style of a first-person shooter game. The movie constantly reminds us of a video game battle; Cage fails, the game is over. Because the stunts are nonstop and spectacular, we are constantly looking for new details in the scene in order to latch on to something that will advance us to another level just as if we were playing the character of Cage in a video game.

Exactly what does Xander Cage stand for? Cohen and Diesel both fantasize that being a spy gives Cage a chance to put his PlayStation possibilities to practical use, which makes him fearless. Xander Cage is created for “generation X,” whose members enjoy watching and playing extreme sports in order to feel like they are achieving the impossible. James Bond on the other hand is a character with traditional spy traits such as a classic tuxedo and upper class manners, which would be more appealing to an older generation. Maybe that is why James Bond was more enjoyable for audiences several years ago rather than more recently. The recent James Bond film Die Another Day showed Bond can go anywhere and people will recognize him as a highly respected British spy, and he is provided with high quality hotel room, tuxedos and everything else he desires.

Cage's fame is different from Bond's. Cage is an insolent daredevil nicknamed “XXX” because of the massive tattoo on the back of his neck. Cage spends his time making amateur videos of his insane tricks, which include jumping off a bridge in a senator's Corvette and using its trunk as a platform from which to parachute to safety. Posted on his underground website, the videos of Cage's he-man antics have earned him an international cult following. Cage's traits are very different from those of James Bond, a basic spy movie hero. Bond is a classic, well-trained spy and Cage is a criminal above the law. Cage's extraordinary character traits catch the attention of Augustus Gibbons (Samuel L. Jackson) from the National Security Agency. Since Gibbons' traditional James Bond-like spies cannot seem to penetrate the rankings of terrorist group, Anarchy 99, he is looking for 'snakes' to send into the field. For Gibbons, Cage's ability to scale a barbed-wire fence sideways on a motorbike is precisely what qualifies him for infiltrating the terrorist group, which plans to unleash bioterrorism on the great cities of Europe.

Cage agrees to participate in Gibbons' assignment in order to stay out of jail. The fact that Cage is a criminal shows another interesting character trait difference between Cage and Bond. While Bond is fundamentally British, the uncivilized and contemptuous Cage has a "made in America" tag stitched on his
Bond is a classical gentleman spy compared to Cage, who is an outrageous character who looks like he just came out of an extreme video game. Even their respective antagonists have opposing traits. Bond usually comes to America to fight the villain while Cage goes to Europe to face the evil Yorgi. This conquers the new world frontier, or at least the next generation of action movies.

I love the James Bond films, but let's face it, James Bond has not been "James Bond" for at least 20 years. Die Another Day's opening scene with dancing girls and electronic music are appealing to the younger crowd but overall, the movie was poorly made, dull and redundant. It is time for an updated super spy franchise, and Diesel and Cohen are the ones to bring it on.

XXX is definitely designed as a spy movie that will appeal to video gaming youngsters and extreme sports lovers who dislike or are tired of the James Bond movies.

The opening scene of XXX even mocks the 007 movies by giving us the statement "007 is dead." In an early scene in XXX, a Bond-like character blows his cover during his mission because of his tuxedo. The enemies are able to spot him easily since the spy is wearing his tuxedo in a rave club. With this scene, the film clearly makes the statement that all aspects of a spy movie will be revamped. The opening scene shows that XXX is going to be different from the traditional spy movies and will mock them throughout.

XXX has all the elements of a 007 film with a twist; consider the M-like boss, Q-like gadget expert, the mysterious babe, and the sophisticated Eastern European psycho who lives in a fortress with his army plotting to wipe out the world. What would a spy flick be without a nasty villain and a dangerous, beautiful girl? They are both here and Marton Csokas (as Yorgi) and Asia Argento (as Yelena) are perfectly cast to play the parts. Yorgi is a believable villain and Yelena is a bratty beauty with a refreshing look. Both characters possess interesting, textured gray areas to their personalities. And what would a spy flick be without gadgets? Comedian Michael Rosen plays the National Security Agency technology expert who is very similar to 007's gadget specialist, Q. As a young man with enthusiasm for his inventions, the tech-expert is an enjoyable character who introduces deadly weapons with laughter and excitement. All these character types also appear in 007 movies but they are clearly different from the characters in XXX. Even though the characters in XXX have the same responsibilities as those in the Bond films, their characteristics distinguish them as unique, and audiences will view them in a different light.

Again, the gadgets bring the movie back to video games. Bond always engages with every gadget that is prepared for him and always knows when and how to use them. In Die Another Day, Bond throws away the manual for the gadget car and still knows how to operate all the electronic toys. On the other hand, Cage barely uses any of the gadgets that he was provided because he does not know how to use them. Cage chooses gadgets with simple instructions over more complicated devices such as the bazooka and the transparent binoculars. With the gadget car, Cage and Yelena do not have time to read the convoluted instructions. Often times in life we struggle to play a video game because we do not know how to use the weapons or what to use them for. Cage resembles a character from a video game who possesses the targeted audience's thoughts and characteristics.

The filmmakers of XXX follow a formula similar to that which the Bond makers use. The difference is director Rob Cohen has fun with the formula that the Bond makers lately have become tired with. XXX is definitely designed as a spy movie that will appeal to video gaming youngsters and extreme sports lovers who dislike or are tired of the James Bond movies because they are redundant or their parents used to watch them. XXX's disposal of a traditional secret agent seeking refuge in a rave club clearly shows that times have changed and so should the spies. XXX breaks the mold of the traditional spy movie formula and restructures it for a 21st century audience.
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