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Eyecandy 2005

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A New Hamlet in Melancholia, New Jersey

There is something familiar about the hero of the wildly popular film, Garden State. Maybe it's because he resembles many of the forlorn heroes that speak for a generation? Maybe what we find familiar in him is what makes him different from other cinematic heroes? Maybe his character resembles us?

Zach Braff's Garden State is a visually unique film with lovable young characters critiquing the world around them. Like Peter Pan criticizing the adult world, Andrew Largeman (Braff) criticizes a world that doesn't seem to change for the better.

Andrew is a struggling young Hollywood actor. He returns to his hometown of New Jersey for his mother's funeral leaving behind a medicine cabinet full of prescription drugs that have left him numb. Having been medicated since the age of ten, he holds a deep resentment towards his father.

The film is a take on the deep-rooted story of William Shakespeare's Hamlet. It's almost a re-invention of the Elizabethan character that is driven insane by his stepfather, the new king. Hamlet acts on raw emotion, is affected by the sight of his father's ghost and seeks vengeance. Andrew begins emotionless; his character can't cry, represses memories of his deceased mother and seeks an apology from his father. As Hamlet progresses and becomes more inward in his thoughts, Andrew emerges from his medicated death and embraces his emotions.

Nevertheless, Andrew suffers from the condition of melancholia that Hamlet suffers from. They are both sullen from the death of a parent, frustrated by their living parent, and surrounded by those that need help from them.

However, this film is not about medication or an actor; it is about a young man who is dissatisfied with life and finds purpose in those he encounters when he comes back home. Natalie Portman plays quirky Sam and Peter Sarsgaard plays intense Mark, who has remained stagnant, working as a gravedigger in the place he has lived his whole life. Many of Andrew's old classmates remained in their hometown working odd jobs at convenience stores. To Andrew, they were left behind or did not choose to engage in life outside high school. family and jersey; yet Mark and Sam have a great effect on the film. Instead of supporting the lead actor, they are absolute in and of themselves, taking on new meaning for the viewer.

Andrew's situation relates to many of us college viewers because we may feel that our lives and minds are progressing and when we depart from an academic setting and return home, the world seems to have stalled. Many of us return expecting change, but things remain just the same as when we left. Nevertheless, we are not all overmedicated struggling actors from Jersey, but Andrew's Hollywood existence is comparatively similar to our college life. Being surrounded by other people our own age and growing year to year with our colleagues makes us expect life back home to be growing along with us. Yet, we retreat back home because it is a return to the familiar.

Andrew's character, however, has never enjoyed his home life to appreciate coming home, so the familiar is not comforting for him. Like Shakespeare's Hamlet, Andrew is melancholic about his family and feels everyone has turned away or against him. Nobody seems to understand his side and they treat him like an alien.

"...the hero of the film is not a square-jawed, broad shouldered presence with an authoritative mission. The hero is a twist on the anti-hero who is brooding, lethargic and defiant."

In time however, Andrew finds excitement in New Jersey. He begins to re-attach himself to this once unfamiliar world and finds comfort and enjoyment in the eccentric girl named Sam (Portman). Sam has every potential to be "that girl" in the picture, or the Ophelia of the story, who ends up with the hero, solely as a secondary character with little to no agency. However, she is not taken along on Andrew's ride. She takes it upon herself to stand her ground against him and his pessimism towards life, which often leads to Andrew following her. In one scene, she refuses to sit on the sidecar of Andrew's grandfather's old motorcycle and plants herself on the seat behind him. She claims, "Sidecars are for bitches. Anyone who rides in that is automatically your bitch. Thus I will ride on the back." She is a refreshing breeze in Andrew's
life where for once he is not demanded to be her friend or for a possible screen credit, as requested by many of his old classmates.

Mark (Sarsgaard) is truly melancholic, but doesn’t mind. Audiences are drawn to him, because he doesn’t feel the things in life that should disappoint him, do. He is not bothered by finances, laws or politics, yet he is an engaging character, if not the most, because he has questioned what one “should” do in life. He laughs in the face of “wasted potential.” For Andrew, Mark is someone who remains stagnant in life, but is still satisfied.

The somewhat unlikable quality of Zach Braff’s character makes him more real for us. Disagreeing with some of his choices grounds his personality. Hamlet finds validation in life when he finally murders all those who killed his father and conspired against him, but with collateral casualties along the way. Andrew finds validation by forgiving his father and asking him to accept him as someone. He gives up his medications, baring and criticizing others, and his detachment. We know that these are choices that HIS character would make and maybe what we would make, too. These decisions are finally not the product of the years of a medicated, unemotional mind but of a newly excited being. Nobody is perfect in life, so why not have a realistically imperfect movie character?

In this time of political divide and war, it is difficult to make your voice heard among the many millions who have an opinion about these subjects. The last presidential election was marketed as something that young people would have the greatest power over. Yet, no matter what political stance, the youth vote still didn’t feel affected. The arrival of Garden State allowed a sort of nationalism to form among the youth. Whether we were disappointed or happy about politics, war, college, family and life, Garden State shed light on this generation that was never represented before in cinema.

The film largely lacks outside world commentary. It is a story detached from the world. It is more about emotion and the internal affairs of a bubble dome world of Andrew’s New Jersey, as well as Hollywood. For the viewer, the world is void of consumerism, advertisements, and social issues. It’s refreshing and freeing to watch this story without the bombardment of so many of these agencies. It is in this void where reasonable communication was held between a theatrical picture and the youth audience. Just like Mark, we were finally left alone to contemplate.

Zach Braff is evidently commenting on his LA. life and what he sees as being valuable. Having written and directed the film, he is obviously a hardworking and talented individual with a sense of intelligence and humor. These attributes are not written into the character of Andrew Largeman. Though, we get the sense that with the optimistic ending Andrew, someone once unsure and apathetic, now takes the risks necessary for success. He now shares the same lust for life his creator has.

Like the detachment from outside commentary, the film is disconnected from Hollywood also, in that Garden State is an independent film. The interest in independent film is growing among the youth. They may not be blockbusters, but they are an indication of the taste in youth. Historically the youth market buys tickets for what Hollywood has targeted them as liking: the latest action movie where fights are synonymous with rapid editing, car explosions and conversation is limited to wisecracks against the bad guys. The youth market hasn’t always had the chance to experience the range of what films can offer but the growing number of studio-backed independent productions is increasing and this is a response to the youths’ apathy towards the manufactured tendencies of Hollywood movies. Indy films are appealing because of their understatement. If Garden State doesn’t speak for a culture then it speaks for what the youth really want in their films: intelligence and contemplation.

Roger Ebert wrote, “Garden State is the world’s critique of Andrew. All of the people he meets are urging him, in one way or another to wake up and smell the coffee.” Our generation is full of media messages telling us to get up and do something, trying to influence us to believe a certain political view or have an opinion. With guidance, instead of lecture, from those closest to him, he does “smell the coffee” and takes the chance with his father; Sam and Jersey. Is this self-indulgent? Is it whiny? Everyone can have an opinion, but we are grateful to finally see our generation has an emotionally contemplative hero who doesn’t have to hang from a skyscraper and blow up cars for a story to unfold.

NELLIE KIM
The MMORPG: A New Era of Gaming

Video games are significant in this age of rapid technological innovation. Since its humble beginnings, the Atari slowly moved video game fanatics out of the arcades and into their own living rooms. The video game has become an essential part of many people's leisure time. Global sales of games totaled $17.5 billion in 2002; according to one forecast, sales of games will overtake CDs in Europe in 2005. In short, the gaming industry is now a big part of the entertainment business. The more modern video game systems include Playstation 2, XBOX, and Gamecube. These are mainstream and all include 128 bit technology, whereas the older games of the 80's and 90's had 4, 8, or 16 bits. This increasing in bit technology allows for better graphics, bigger games, and more memory. A central factor in game appeal seems to be their fantastical storylines and motifs. The world of the video game is populated by strange mythological creatures, powerful warriors, bloodthirsty villains, and beautiful princesses. Although, at first glance, the appeal of video gaming may seem to be its entertainment value and its ability to distract us from the humdrum of stress of our everyday lives, a second look reveals its actual resemblances to our experiences of reality. This is most obviously exemplified in a controversial game like Grand Theft Auto, where realistically rendered characters shoot and kill each other, but even the adorable spinning hedgehog, Sonic, is highly anthropomorphized. He takes on the characteristics of a human through actions like standing upright and running on two legs. A blue hedgehog that spins, loops and collects coins might never exist in the real world, but his appeal as a character comes from this impossibility. Video games are both fantasies and realities, always invoking social reality but also exceeding it. Successful video games blend the real with the unreal the expected with the unexpected. The world of the game is a place we recognize but do not necessarily know.

A current example of this is the recent breakthrough in online gaming, the phenomenon titled massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs). In these games thousands of players can exist in the same game world at the same time. MMORPGs provide hundreds of hours of gameplay with a nearly infinite variety of goals to achieve across a vast terrain covering miles of land and sea. These games have enjoyed an incredible amount of success because they give players an excessive amount of freedom to invent characters, travel far distances, explore, amass a fortune, and challenge other characters. The MMORPG enhances the bleakness of everyday life by utilizing fantasy storylines. A recurring theme in these stories is the use of medieval characters and environments. At the head of this new gaming phenomenon is the latest addition to the Blizzard's (gaming company) Warcraft series, "World of Warcraft" (a.k.a. WoW) released in 2004. To date, it has been the most successful MMORPG ever to be released. Selling over 240,000 copies on the first day, the game has recently been released in Europe where computer nerds everywhere camped out all night in order to get the first copies. A way to understand this game is to look at whom it is marketed to, which is undoubtedly adolescents and young adults, including college students. What is it that draws young people and students towards these kinds of games? Is it the freedom that these worlds offer? A possible escape from reality? Or is it something deeper than that an innate desire to hold power and fortune that would otherwise be impossible to attain?

Online games allow for direct use from a PC or Mac, and PlayStation 2 and Xbox have recently produced online games. Online gaming took off in the early nineties, with a game called "Earthquakes," which consisted of text-based windows through which players could navigate through the virtual world. The introduction of "Doom" in the mid nineties caused a massive demand for multiplayer first person online games. Later in 1998 the series "Tribes" dominated the medium, which led to "Tribes 2," and "Tribes Aerial Assault," which involved multiple people, connected to a network of computers. In "Tribes," the most popular game setting is the notorious deathmatch, which is usually an every man for himself killing competition where the person with the most kills at the end of the game is the winner. The epic series of "Final Fantasy," which was introduced first by Nintendo in the late eighties, signaled the demand for role playing games (RPGs), games wherein users play a number of diverse characters. Currently the popular demand for this genre has expanded, and the introduction of MMORPGs has arrived. This genre consists of the basic role-playing game components working together in an entire interactive world a world that is inhabited by many other players who interact by working together, and/or by killing one another. This new genre of online gaming has drawn a massive number of followers, mostly young adults. Many of these people are students and many of them become addicted, and sometimes even obsessed with this virtual world.

The massive popularity of "World of Warcraft" unfortunately means that not everybody can play in the
same game at the same time. If this were to happen there would be no room to explore, the screen would be constantly filled with other characters. However, approximately 2,000 people can play on a single server. And there are multiple servers available. So each player can log onto their server of choice, allowing friends to play at the same time. But when the game was initially released the servers were so busy that Blizzard had to temporarily take the game off shelves.

What makes this game so intriguing is not only its escape from reality, but also its seemingly endless amount of gameplay. Each person who begins a new game is given the freedom to choose a specific character. These characters include a set of eight specific races, which include the humans, night elves, dwarfs, and gnomes, which make up the alliance, and the orcs, tauren, undead, and trolls, which make up the horde. You might be able to guess just by the names which of these are good and which are evil. Most players are intrigued by the darker side of the game and decide to play as the horde. The fight between good and evil is portrayed time after time in all forms of media. This game once again allows for the ongoing and seemingly never-ending fight of good vs. evil to continue, where the player is the active participant.

This can be an important tool if you need a vacation but do not have the time or money. All you have to do is turn on your computer and a whole world of endless possibilities is waiting for you. However, drawbacks of the game involve the amount of time needed in order to progress, while the perks exist in the extended game play.

These online games not only permit players to travel to different worlds, immerse themselves with characters, and choose weapons to kill their enemy, but they enable people to experience a different kind of reality— one that is not confined by the boundaries of the real world. The Internet has introduced a new form of interaction between many different people simultaneously. Instead of people being restrained to their physical bodies, people can now interact through development of any character that they wish to conceive. This new environment allows for a social identity to be created that is no longer a part of the real world, but is immersed in virtual space.

This virtual emulation of an identity can never be equal to the persona of the real world person. It is now being portrayed through a series of texts and images made up of pixels that are in no way a comparison with flesh and blood. While looking at the creation of a new identity, a rational person can now take on the form of schizophrenic, who has multiple personalities. These personalities contain an immersive freedom that sanctions a variety of social relations. These social relations are based on a foundation of facades and therefore lack the quality of reality. However, virtual reality has provided a means of complex social relations that permits companionship and communication to travel from the real world to the virtual world and visa versa.

The real world does not offer the many fantasies and adventures that are attainable in the MMORPG. For some students, everyday life can become redundant and boring. This problem is dealt with in many ways depending on the person. Some college students indulge in excessive use of drugs and alcohol in order to escape normality. This can lead to dependency and damage to the human body. An alternative to this harmful abuse is immersion in the world of MMORPGs. This offers a temporary escape from the body and mind; including an escape from all of the habits, obsessions, and stresses that are involved in everyday life. These games offer something a bit out of the ordinary that results in the stimulation of the creative side of the mind, giving room for development of social relations and the positive outcome of progress and success.

RICHARD DOUGLAS BIGHAM
Forgotten Palaces
[Lost Treasures of San Francisco]

Have you ever walked past an abandoned movie palace and wondered what it was like in its heyday? Imagine a time when going to see a film was as much about the experience of the theatre as it was for the film itself. Prior to and during World War II, the film industry was booming and theatres were popping up all over the nation. At that time, going to the movies was an event; people would dress up in anticipation of the evening's pleasures. American cities were dotted with single screen neighborhood theatres, making for one of the greatest cinema cultures on the globe. San Francisco was one of these cinema culture centers. Most neighborhoods boasted the presence of a movie palace, each one an architectural triumph, the American New World equivalent to Europe's grand cathedrals. If not a palace, each neighborhood had its own movie theatre at least. This story, however, can only be spoken in the past tense. As theatre historian Gary Parks points out, "The little neighborhood theatres, especially in the past 10-15 years are beginning to close one after the other." A lot has changed since the movie-going golden age. The organ player has played his final tune and the cinema palaces of the urban centers have been replaced by the giant super-plexes of the suburbs. A cinema architecture by regional specificity and grandness is now replaced by architecture best recognized by its uniformity and ubiquity. But a little piece of cinema's past does remain. A few precious theatres exist in one form or another and still provide a window into our cinematic and cultural past. Preservation of these remaining theatres must be made a priority in our culture. If we lose our past, tear it down and replace it with a shiny new façade, we face a strange future. A culture without evidence of its past stays stuck in a perpetual present. So we must ask ourselves: can we really demolish these cinema palaces? At what price? What gets lost in our drive to erase the past?

In San Francisco, as with many other cities across the nation, there exists a systematic trend in which neighborhood movie houses and palaces are being forced out of business. By the 1980s alone, most single screen theatres were shut down due to a variety of reasons. Since the ad vent of television in the 1950s, many feared that the projected image wasn't so special anymore. Theatres struggled to compete with television, but in the end, could no longer fill their 1000+ seats. Many were forced to vivisect their grand auditoriums, literally cutting them up and dividing the space into multiple screens. These re-designed venues changed the audience's viewing experience considerably. The large screen was replaced by smaller ones and sound bleed from one screening space to another. Additionally, American cities became more car-oriented. In densely populated urban centers, finding an un-metered parking space became nearly impossible. Theatre chains responded by building multiplexes just outside city limits where parking was not an issue. But amazingly, a few local neighborhood theatres managed to survive, and remain standing even today, though their survival is uncertain.

2004 has proved to be a bad year for SF neighborhood theatres as a number of them have been forced into closure. One great loss was the Alexandria Theatre on Geary Street. When the Alexandria first opened on November 26, 1923, it was named the "finest residential theatre in America." However, the owners were forced to close the theater after the building was sold. Like most theatre owners, the only thing left to do was stand by and watch their theatre gutted, and its contents placed on the sidewalk. As of today, seventy percent of San Francisco's single-screen theaters have
closed and thirty percent have been demolished. As the city's need for commercial and residential real estate increases, these historic theatres have become targets for demolition. Once considered objects of architectural beauty, these theatres are now seen as eyesores and liabilities. Unfortunately, the cost of retrofitting these buildings and bringing them up to present day building code far exceeds the cost of demolishing them.

Currently, the Harding Theatre in San Francisco's Alamo Square is on the verge of demolition, soon to be replaced by condominiums. Built in 1926, the 1250 seat theatre operated successfully until the 1960s when it was converted into a concert hall and then eventually converted into a church. In September of 2004 the abandoned property was sold to developers. The fate of this 79 year-old theatre is a source of controversy for residents in the Western Addition. In a neighborhood going through dramatic change, the Harding Theatre is one of the only historic buildings left. Years ago, most of the beautiful Victorian houses in the Western Addition were torn down and replaced by modern condominiums and apartment complexes. Many residents and historians consider this event one of the worst architectural losses since the 1906 earthquake leveled many of the city's unique buildings.

In a city like San Francisco where every inch of space is in demand and increasing in value, aging and abandoned theatres become easy prey. The last standing giant movie palace in San Francisco, the Coronet, is on the verge of demolition. In its place will soon stand the "Institute of the Aging; Coronet Condominium." The Coronet's screen, once described as San Francisco's church of the "Big-Budget Blockbuster" flickered one last time on March 17th 2005. It is currently being stripped and leveled, no artifact shall remain—save for its name. This is strike three for the Western Addition/Richmond districts as the Alexandria, the Harding, and the Coronet fall to the wrecker's ball.

As the number of historic theatres decreases, the social value of the remaining few has increased. In San Francisco, several groups have established themselves in an attempt to address the dwindling numbers of grand movie palaces and local movie houses. "People are beginning to value these things. People are getting into saving what little is left in the neighborhood scene," says Gary Parks. There seems to be a growing awareness that these disappearing architectural spaces are important for several reasons: the role they play in defining neighborhoods and communities and the ways in which they remind us of the social and cultural functions of cinema. As Gary Parks notes, "New generations can look at the historic movie house as something that's long gone, but its façade] is still here and gives interest to the street, the neighborhood and community." These theatres remind us that cinema is not just an ephemeral experience, some light being projected on a screen. Rather, cinema and spectatorship are a profoundly social experience. So the next time you walk down the street and see a building that looks like an old movie house, contemplate its essence and remember that the past is something worth remembering. Not simply for the sake of nostalgia, but because cinema is still a profoundly social experience. Somehow history makes this fact easier to see. And that is worth preserving. Δ

JASON JOSEFFER

Miranda July

Miranda July is a 31-year-old American artist who fluidly weaves her art and expression through different mediums: writing, performance art, multi-media installation, online collaborations, movies, and sound recordings. Her first full-length movie, "Me and You and Everyone We Know," is debuting at Sundance this January.

July's movie, "Me and You and Everyone We Know," tells the story of a shoe salesman who feels disconnected from his family and the people he surrounds himself with. He desperately attempts to feel differently and closer to the people in his life, yet is at a loss of how to do so. Connection or the lack thereof is a recurring theme in all of July's work. Each piece seems to address the lack of feeling and connection that we may experience in a society that is becoming ever more technologically driven and commodified. Miranda July's artwork probes these themes and endeavors to find connection and spiritual fulfillment amidst alienating American contemporary culture and society. What is special about July's work is how she constructs and explores the psyche of individual characters within this modern condition. The usual modes of self-discovery—self-help, political awakening, and sexual awakening—are invoked but never fully embraced. Characters exist within systems of personal fulfillment—family, work, love, but yet, never quite fully inhabit these categories of emotional legibility.

As an undergraduate, July dropped out of UCSC, before there was an established Film department, and independently began to produce videos and music CDs. Not satisfied with established channels of video distribution, in 1995 she began an interactive movie chain letter called joanie+jackie. Facilitated through her website, July solicited video work produced by female "moviemakers" and then assembled submissions into a "chain letter" for distribution. Everyone who sends in her movie receives a tape that consists of their own video plus nine others. In a 2004 interview with Camera Obscura, July said, "joanie+jackie was really built to help me create a space for myself for other women too, but most urgently for myself, that was filled with warmth, I needed that warm space in order to take massive risks in my life. But now I have that place inside of me and so it's hard to reignite that need...It really seems like I need to give the project away to someone or a group of people. People who could really use it to propel themselves as I did. I think that is what I'll happen next. I'll give the project away. It's kind of like giving away the coolest jacket you ever had and realizing it actually looks better on some other girl, and that she's going to do some amazing things in that jacket (189, Bryan-Wilson)."

Joanie+Jackie makes possible and encourages low to no budget female moviemakers to share their movies with other females across the country. This mode of distribution goes directly against the prevalent system of distribution, one that is based solely on profit and the commodification of individual artists. Joanie+Jackie creates a different venue of expression and community, not based on material profit.

Miranda July herself has made five short movies, Atlanta (1996), The Amateurist (1998), Nest of Tens (2000), Getting Stronger Every Day (2001), and Haysha Royko (2003). She distributes them similarly to how "indie" musicians distribute their music—from the trunk of her car, from her website and in the lobby after her performances. July's style of self-distribution takes a class conscious and feminist approach to the production and dissemination of her art. Her videos are also available for rent and sale through the Video Data Bank, the leading resource in the
orders unfurl. Dawn's life, her desires, and feelings are visible only in reaction, never stated outright, only inferred. The daughter is alienated from herself and everything around her, as she becomes her mom's "best friend." July said in an interview with Camera Obscura, "I have a bunch of mixed feelings about children being brought into adults' worlds, but also not really being in them. The boundaries are already confused, and I'm just trying to show how it feels" (Bryan-Wilson, 1990). Miranda July portrays a child that was brought into the space of an adult world at too young of an age.

In Miranda July's movies, Atlanta, Nest of Tens, and The Amuteurist most of the characters are women and/or children. July portrays female characters and children from various perspectives that are usually not shown in the mainstream media or in Hollywood. It is important for more stories in film/video to be told from the point of view of children and women because film and video have been primarily male dominated. In Nest of Tens there are scenes of a boy interacting with a baby, a mentally disabled man giving a lecture from his book on phobia, a business woman (played by Miranda July) at an airport having an intense, personal conversation, while observing a child playing, and a woman who has a man over while baby sitting a child. The character's in these scenes do not overlap into the other scenes. She shows two roles that women fulfill in our culture and society. The businesswoman is employed professionally and the babysitter is employed domestically. Both of these women do not seem to connect with the men they talk to. The businesswoman attempts to have a serious discussion over the phone, which seems impersonal. The babysitter purposefully ignores the child she is looking after as a diversion to ignore the man sitting near her. The scene with the boy and the baby girl inside of a domestic space is disturbing. The boy sets the baby on a table and adorns her with cotton balls and other cleaning supplies. The baby wipes the baby's thigh folds with a q-tip. After the businesswoman finishes her phone call she interacts with a girl playing around the airport. The woman looks at the child with attention, fascination, and wonder. This movie shows children playing or doing their everyday activities, while adults bring them into their world. For example, the babysitter brings the child into the interactions that she has with the man. The businesswoman tries to be friendly to a child who knows that the businesswoman wants her attention.

Miranda July's artwork, particularly her collaborations that involve the public, is her way to find connection and spiritual fulfillment amidst alienating American contemporary culture and society. July said about contemporary American culture and society: "Well, we don't know how to live. We don't know how to reconcile spirituality with technological progress and growth, as a nation we don't acknowledge that this is a problem or even a topic. We don't have to because we have enough resources to obliterate any conversation. It certainly gives me a sense of urgency, I want to create room for the conversation. And I want to do this in ways that prove that the rearing systems are not the only option. I have to do this again and again, at every turn, or else the story I'm telling—the story about our desire to feel more—is not a true story; it's just a theory" (1995, Bryan-Wilson)."

Young artists, moviemakers, and students in particular can be inspired by Miranda July's artwork and her career. Not too long ago, she was a student and an aspiring artist. It is important for young people who pursue art and moviemaking to have role models and admirable examples of artists who are "making it" through doing what they love in life. The internet is a valuable tool for feminist artists as well as any other group whose work doesn't get past the gatekeepers of mainstream culture industries. It is vital for interesting, thought provoking, and socially critical female artists to come to the attention of aspiring younger artists. July is reaching out to others and finding new ways to connect.

RACHEL DUARTE
America: As Explored Through the Eyes of Kazakhstan Television

In this postmodern moment where nearly all comedy is presented by way of ironic distance, self-reflexivity in television is as abused as the voice-over narration in Scrubs. Yet, when it comes to comedy, the only shows that truly transcend the boundary between smart belly laughs and social commentary are those that have the ability to be self-reflexive, while at the same time, completely sincere. Da Ali G. Show which was conceived in England by comedian Sacha Baron Cohen, has just finished its second season on HBO and is one of the few comedy shows on television that manages to be intensely aware of the historic, economic, and political makeup of all three of its characters: Borat, Ali G., and Bruno. Although I will mainly be focusing on the character of Borat, the other two characters (Ali G. and Bruno) played by Cohen, in function of similar ways, Borat, the news correspondent for Kazakhstan Television, interviews unsuspecting Americans in hopes of understanding “American culture” more fully. Unaware of Borat’s true identity, his interviewees end up playing the part of the straight man, while also revealing their own ugly misconceptions about foreigners. The show’s Reality TV approach, allows the viewer to participate in the racial stereotypes enacted by Borat, and as a result, are made aware of the way racism itself is still a large part of America’s cultural history and present social interactions.

Using the writing of Herman Gray in his essay, The Politics of Representation in Network Television and Erving Goffman’s analysis in his essay, Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience, it can be argued that Da Ali G. Show dually expands and challenges the theories Gray and Goffman present, making for a unique hybrid of cultural critique.

Even though Da Ali G. Show is aired on HBO and not network television, I would say that the methods of the show build upon Gray’s theory of our present “multicultural” moment (299). Throughout his essay, Gray outlines three different discourses surrounding Black representation in television (although they can broadly apply to race representation). They are: “assimilationist discourse” which believes racism must be overcome by color-blindness, a “pluralist discourse” which believes people live in their separate but equal worlds, and “multicultural discourse” which takes history, economy, and political activism into account (285). The historical moment we inhabit today embraces a multicultural discourse, although Gray believes all three discourses can exist at one time. In many ways Da Ali G. Show relays a multicultural discourse because it “create[s] a discursive space in which subject positions are transgressive and contradictory, troubling and pleasurable, as are representations used to construct identity” (299). This can be demonstrated in a very telling sequence at Colonial Williamsburg where Borat obsessively asks the town blacksmith, shoemaker and dressmaker if they are slaves and if he can buy them. It makes for a hilarious scenario to the viewer not only because Borat cannot let this question go, but mostly because there is pleasure involved in watching people devoted to upholding the purity of American history, deny the slavery that built America into such a powerful nation.

Although Borat may seem hopelessly naïve to the people he questions, it becomes clear to the viewer that he knows exactly which buttons to push in order to reveal facts that repeatedly get swept beneath the carpet in American history. Even though Borat enacts and upholds Gray’s “multicultural discourse,” he also challenges it at the same time by presenting his unsuspecting interviewees with an incredibly stereotypical character. Dressed in an ill-fitting grey suit, sporting a thick black mustache, Borat searches for a deeper understanding of U.S. culture. In one episode, Borat visits a gun club in Texas. During the interview, he asks the leader of the gun club, if American gun clubs can execute killers like they do in Kazakhstan. The interviewee laughs and says no; the execution of killers is left to the government. In his stereotyped naivété, Borat compares the hotly debated topic of capital punishment to Barbarism. This deeper questioning of American values takes the laughter away from Borat’s racial Otherness and places it on the people who accept Borat’s stereotyped character.

It is this complex relationship between the viewer, the actor, and the unsuspecting people he interviews that is particularly unique about Da Ali G. Show. Traveling around America (mostly in the Southern states) Borat’s various segments consist of learning Southern etiquette, taking trips to Colonial Williamsburg, and learning how to speed date. Everything from his very personal greetings, to his outlandish statements about his dead wife back in Kazakhstan, allow the audience in on the joke that he is playing into the stereotype many Americans have of foreigners. In his book, Frame Analysis Erving Goffman defines a “frame” as the viewer’s perception of the reality experienced at one moment in time (379). When “the nature of engrossment and belief suddenly changes,” the viewer has what Goffman describes as a “negative experience” (378). For instance, the interviewee’s frame of mind is that Borat is a real person from Kazakhstan who seeks enlightenment on the American way of life. As a result, anything he does that is out of the ordinary becomes not the attitude of a well-skilled comedian, but that of a foreigner who is clueless of American customs. The viewer on the other hand knows that Borat is a fictional character played by Cohen. Therefore, they are equipped with knowledge...
of Cohen’s performance and as a result become participants in that performance. In some cases, that very aspect of participation could incite a stronger awareness of race relations on the part of the viewer.

If Goffman were to analyze Da Ali G. Show, he might say that Cohen is the person in charge of the interviewee and the home-viewer’s negative experience. Goffman also identifies that one of the ways in which the performer has the ability to disorient or create a negative perception of reality on the part of the interviewee is to make apparent what is often referred to as the “disattend track.” (422). Goffman defines this term as the exchanges that take place in most human interactions that are commonly glossed over and not commented on, like issues regarding race or gender. For instance, whenever Borat greets someone, he leans over in a strange handshake-hug-kiss. The person interacting with him is visibly uncomfortable but never comments on the awkward exchange. The incredibly revolutionary aspect of Borat’s character is that almost every one of his comments are about things that people usually ignore in conversation. In one very telling episode, Borat sits with a group of white Southerners at a wine tasting. When one of the servers (who happens to be Black) gives Borat more wine, he leans over to his host and asks, very quietly, “is he a slave?” His host laughs and tells Borat that slavery has been abolished for quite some time. This question serves many different purposes because not only does it comment on the history of the South, but it also comments on the many ways in which the South still upholds a social and economic hierarchy that continues to place Black people in subordinate roles in society. Goffman theorizes that if the actor “chooses to deviate from the norms, his action will hardly be disattendable” (422). This is the way in which Cohen, as the actor playing Borat, constantly brings out issues that wish to be ignored or “disattend” to. He makes apparent the underlying prejudices and racism still wedged in the cracks of the Old South and throughout the rest of the country, which is revealed in other segments.

What truly sets Da Ali G. Show apart from other reality TV comedy shows is its ability to transcend the laughs associated with ridiculous racial types and use those types to reveal even uglier ideologies surrounding racial otherness in America. In a sense, the low-quality video used in Borat’s segments is just as muddied as America’s conceptions of people from other countries. What takes place is a pretty harsh critique of American culture that is formed by a character who is not only a stereotype, but a seemingly inarticulate stereotype at that. Borat greets his interviewees with the sincerity of a freshman college student meeting his teaching assistant for the first time. He is willing to learn and obey the rules of the classroom and always has a question for the class. It is this sincerity that allows Borat to claim his stereotyped character and use it to reflect all of the ways in which other people perceive him. Commonly dismissed as nothing more than lowbrow humor; there is more to Da Ali G. Show than a man dressed in a cheap suit, sporting a thick black mustache.

**EMILY CALDERONE**


AN OPPORTUNITY FOR INDEPENDENT PRODUCERS

What makes these new IPTV companies most exciting is not what they provide to end-users, but rather the possibilities that open up for independent producers to distribute their work and get feedback (both in the form of critique and money). Because transmission costs are so low in this distribution model, there is an opportunity to distribute your work and pay as you go. With very little start-up costs, you can become your own distribution company, serving the entire Internet-using world.

In the past, an independent filmmaker graduating out of the UC system essentially had two options for what to do next: work for a large company and climb the ladder or produce work independently for submission to film festivals. Film festivals get your movies seen, but they're essentially rolls of the dice, where buyers may or may not purchase your movie. Climbing the ladder rarely offers the opportunity for a filmmaker to actually control content and marketing, and make movies they want to make. Then along comes IPTV.

For independent media publishers, IPTV represents a new opportunity for selling low-cost and high-quality content. It's direct to end-user selling, like eBay, where the manufacturers (filmmakers and production companies) sell directly to the public without middle merchants, meaning vastly lowered costs and direct control. In the case of the film industry, the acquisitions departments for the distribution studios decide what films they will release to the worldwide theater chains, and it is they who indirectly screen and control the content.

Food for the Moon Productions, a digital production studio I co-created in 2002, has decided to use IPTV to distribute work from independent producers that would've otherwise been shelved or forgotten. By releasing others' movies alongside in-house productions, we at Food for the Moon hope to garner enough of a library of work to draw the public eye towards a quality product.

What makes these new distribution companies different from the old fat cats in Hollywood? Well it all comes back to the bottom line, so let's put it in perspective. Releasing a film worldwide costs in excess of $20 million for a theater distributor; plus or minus many millions depending on the contribution of regional distributors. Even a nationwide DVD release costs about one mil-
tion dollars. The actual transmission costs of an IPTV worldwide release number between 1 and 2 dollars per download, incurred at the point of download. This means no up-front costs apart from publicity and advertising, otherwise known to independent producers as "free distribution."

**TIME FOR A CHANGE?**

The real issue is what types of new motion picture formats may come out of this distribution medium. Anyone willing to spend the time in researching what speculation and ideas for this new format may exist would come up quite empty-handed.

"Nobody wants to watch a movie on their computer screen." is perhaps the most common response when talking about internet distribution. The purpose of IPTV is to harness the power of internet distribution but allow that content to be viewed on a television. Allowing more movies into the market allows more experimentation, and the new venue demands a shift in the successful movie model. As more content producers gain access to a worldwide audience, and the content becomes easier and more immediate for viewers, there will inevitably be a shift in what is expected from these movies.

One possibility is that movies will become much more concise and informational, similar to the shift that occurred after the industrialization of print publishing and the subsequent availability that writers had to a worldwide audience. Imagine video pamphlets that you could download for educational or instructional purposes. Topics might range from Restaurant Reviews, to Current Events in Iran, to Curing Yourself of Chronic Depression.

**FREEING THE KEYLOG**

The extent to which IPTV-type technologies are different from existing DVD distribution could possibly free up a stem of creative energies that, once released, will enrich the world to a point previously unknown. It means an opportunity to create, not only new movies, but also a new ideology for the creation of motion pictures in general.

The role of distributors has historically been to deal with the oversupply of media created. Unlike other products such as electronics or furniture, which take a large amount of craftsmanship and materials to create, pretty much everyone with access to a computer can create an image, movie, or piece of music. Distributors have taken it upon themselves, out of logistical and economic necessity, to screen the type of work that goes out into the market. Now there is an opportunity to open up the market without the obstacle of high overhead costs, meaning distributors can take more chances without fear of being burned. If you listen closely, you can hear the collective sighs of relief coming from the world's content producers.

Saturation of the market, however, is still a factor. It's the same situation that the worldwide web had in its beginning years: too much information. For the web, search engines turned out to be the big winners because of their ability to sort out all that information. But how to do something similar with movies and music? Combined with this problem is the inevitability that distribution channels (the gate-keepers) will consolidate and become fewer and fewer.

**BEING AN ARTIST TODAY**

IPTV may not become the mainstay distribution channel for video content; in fact, it's very unlikely that the market will become oversaturated very quickly. What it will do is allow an additional opportunity for first-time and independent motion pictures to get the exposure they need, similar to the way independent music showcase sites have allowed musicians to self-distribute and gain a multitude of fans without ever having to manufacture a single CD.

For filmmakers and digital artists coming to the fore, you are lucky enough to be taking part in what may prove to be one of the most formative years of motion pictures. As always, it's your responsibility to really think about what you're doing. However, more than filmmakers of recent years, you have an opportunity to really experiment and make a difference, shifting mentalities of what motion pictures can and should be. Eventually, someone will do something so amazing and new, it will change the medium, both stylistically and in the field of motion pictures as an institution. Until then, relish in the state of complete uncertainty and freedom that is coming.

RENE AMADOR
Lost in the Shuffle: Poker Culture and ESPN's Televesion for Men

The Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN) celebrated its 25th anniversary last fall. It was an occasion of self-congratulation shared by the company with its loyal consumers in the form of ESPN25, a book chronicling the network's rise. Like ESPN itself, ESPN25 was designed to appeal to the sports fanatic and the simple sports enthusiast alike. If there are any doubts as to ESPN's contribution to an increasingly accessible spectator sports landscape, the book lays them to rest. The company's role in providing coverage of sporting culture is the result of constant innovation and brand association. As ESPN expands its reach into the telecommunications industry this year, its corporate identity is that of cultural juggernaut, promoting and enhancing the phenomenon of spectator sports. However, ESPN's focus seems to have shifted in recent years, as the network no longer emphasizes elements of team strategy that usher a squad to victory. Instead, the spectacular sights and sounds of sport and superstar players are showcased. For male spectators, there's a lot to look at.

As detailed on its website, ESPN programming appeals to a largely male audience, which, ostensibly, is impervious to the perceived threat of feminine influence. But women are included in the world of ESPN, presented as the ultimate reward in the interplay of sports, fame, money and sex. The Lifetime Network may be deemed "Television for Women," but no such explicitly-gendered moniker exists for the ESPN family of networks. Even a cursory view of its programming reveals that the company — and those who advertise on it — produce sports programming for men. Overwhelmingly male personalities and journalists, some of them former athletes, occupy ESPN's talent roles. The majority of the network's live broadcasts cover men's collegiate and professional teams, along with golf and auto racing. Nearly all images of peripheral spectators (fans and coaches) are of male faces. In this way both the mythic heroes produced through exposure to the highlight machine and the white-collar broadcasters who narrate their trials and tribulations are invariably male.

On a recent broadcast of ESPN's flagship sports "update" show SportsCenter, the anchors, Scott Van Pelt and Rece Davis, introduced the day's big stories — the recent NFL Championship games and a matchup of Shaq with Allen Iverson. These and other "big stories" were reported by the hosts as well as by roving reporters, and then reappeared as conversation fodder several times throughout the broadcast. Only two stories about women's athletics were included: the basketball showdown between rivals No. 1 Duke and No. 6 North Carolina, and tennis star Serena Williams' defeat of Amelie Mauresmo at the Australian Open. These were the two biggest stories in women's sports and yet the program's producers buried them inside the second half of the show; even off-the-field goings-on in the NFL were given first-half precedence. Furthermore, in contrast with the seriousness with which they profile men's contests, Van Pelt and Davis joked with one another throughout the women's highlights. "(Duke produced more turnovers than the Pillsbury Doughboy)." Rarely showcased, women's competition is then further slighted by the nonchalant coverage. Ostensibly, women's sports draw lower ratings and revenue from advertisers than men's contests, motivating ESPN's attitude of disinterest, if not condescension. Female collegiate athletes have benefited from the legislation known as Title IX, which mandates more opportunities for women, but despite the formation of professional basketball and soccer leagues in the past decade, ESPN as a hegemonic media outlet stands to benefit more from maintaining the...
status quo than by expanding its goals to accurately portray the diversity of the American sporting scene.

The ESPN series Outside the Lines aired nightly and purports to examine the problematic aspects of fame and fortune, such as steroid abuse, groupie romances, and questionable business partnerships. Yet when it comes to the role of sports in promoting the negative aspects of male sports culture, even when “exploring” undesirable social behaviors directly related to sports — fan behavior, gambling, and derelict behavior among student-athletes — ESPN often points the finger at generalized notions of declining family values and the perils of hip-hop culture. Yet its own emphasis on entertainment over analysis signifies a new image of athletic glory, one that elevates the highlight, the sound bite, and the drama of the fight. Viewers are encouraged to revel in the sight and sounds of each individual feat rather than focus on the larger stories of teamwork and strategy. Violence and spectacle are the driving force behind ESPN’s programming. Through online pop-ups and television spots alike, advertisers keenly target consumers of domestic beer, rugged trucks, and casual clothing by mere association with ESPN’s brand of hyper-masculine culture.

Although its television, online print, and print content are marketed for men, women are not entirely ignored in ESPN’s representation of the sporting world. In fact, images of women abound, particularly in relation to material discussion of the of-the-field culture of sports. Recent editions of ESPN: The Magazine featured rising stars of the NBA (Dwyane Wade) and the MLB (Miguel Cabrera) surrounded by attractive, bubbly female admirers. Depictions of women as sportswomen’s — prizes to be won, conquests to be made — dominate ESPN’s portrayal of the male athlete’s lifestyle in shows such as TILT and Playmakers. These fictionalized series about the lives of professional gamblers and football players consistently sexualize the accessories of fame and wealth, namely automobiles, drugs, and the endless hours of women jogging for a piece of the lifestyle that the sport supposedly provides.

The saturation of ESPN’s advertisements space by Viagra and Levitra suggests the attainability of this sporty lifestyle through the viewer’s purchasing power. The inclusion of women as ornaments soothes any anxieties about the homosocial nature of this sports culture. Meanwhile, the exclusion of women athletes is evidence of ESPN’s careful and manipulated appeal to its core male (masculinist) audience. This powerful combination marks a transition for the self-anointed “Worldwide Leader in Sports,” in that it is increasingly abandoning its specialized format in favor of broader appeal as the leader in entertainment for men.

Through its coverage of the 2003 World Series of Poker, ESPN helped pave the way for a new wave of enthusiasm for gambling and the casino lifestyle. Although a decidedly non-athletic sporting event, poker seems to fit seamlessly within the programming logic of ESPN. Having qualified for the tournament through his participation in online circuits, WSOP main event winner Chris Moneymaker embodies the rags-to-riches, pony-to-pimped-out narrative that defines many celebrity sports celebrities. Las Vegas as the epicenter of gambling culture is, of course, a symbol of American excess. Bright lights, overflowing buffet tables, complimentary drinks, scantily clad women; and fast cars. The poker phenomenon holds a particular appeal for ESPN programmers in that it provides them with a time-honored venue for the sacred rites of male bonding. The weekly poker game as cultural event has long been a bastion of masculinity — a designated place and time for bachelors and married men alike to recon, as they had on the playing field in their youth, beyond the reach of women. The professional card player is an icon celebrated for his competitive drives, but in large part he embodies the bachelor’s ideal of independence and personal liberty — what he earns, he keeps, and nobody gives him hell for staying out all night. Televised poker tournaments engender appreciation for both the subtleties of various poker games and the professional players themselves, who are dedicated to their mastery.

ESPN’s dramatic series TILT, yokes the newfound popularity of poker to well-established ESPN themes within the programming scope of “popular television for men”: spectacle, celebrity, and objectification of women. Summarily, the show seems obsessed with depicting the misas of Vegas materialism with chauvinist splendor. Viewers hoping to learn something about poker by watching TILT would be wasting their time, unless that education includes an unapologetic defense of male privilege. The main character, Eddie, is a good-looking, square-jawed poker player who quests for revenge against those men who have chased his ex-girlfriend. He falls in trouble with the Vegas underworld because Eddie has been robbed in what is essentially a democratic game, fate hands Eddie a consolation prize: the gorgeous daughter of his nemesis, “poker legend” Don Everest. The relationship between Eddie and Everest perfectly exposes the role of women on ESPN programming — first, as objects of exchange between men and then second, as objects used to enable and allay fears of male homosexuality. Upon learning of the affair between his daughter and Eddie, Everest confides to Eddie, “Nobody wants to think of his daughter getting pounded by some boy. If it’s somebody, I’m glad that it’s you.” The logic of this quaint piece of dialogue configures the daughter as a commodity to be exchanged between these two men, confirming their status as “heterosexual”, and then as the commodity that enables their bonding. Because Eddie does not seem to possess any natural athletic ability other than vague “street smarts” he is easier for the average ESPN viewer to identify with (than with Allen Iverson and Shaq). Eddie represents the everyman who watches TILT, and thus his exploits are legitimized are the minds of male spectators.

Like ESPN’s non-fiction programming, TILT limits women’s participation in the sporting realm to non-competitive roles. Despite her inclusion as a female lead with poker expertise, the character Miami (who is a partner in Eddie’s plan for payback) is portrayed as a tragic woman. Her attraction to high-stakes gambling is necessarily at odds with her desire for romantic relationships. In light of this, Miami’s femininity is questionable, almost unnatural given her career choice: women are punished for playing a man’s game. Quite often, a character’s relative influence is in proportion to the amount of women at his side. In this way poker is imagined as a special kind of pursuit in sporting excellence on an attainable playing field, one in which women claim to be with the male chip leader, and he deserves their attention. The rampant sensationalism of the TILT series represents a power play by ESPN to revitalize its status as the pre-eminent force in entertainment for men, as the Vegas backdrop provides a ready-made setting for the familiar relegation of women to the sidelines.

Whether or not the pokerfad endures, ESPN’s foray into fictional series production must be read as a tactic for ratings, engineered to reclaim target audiences from Bravo, Fox Sports and even Travel TV, who now feature year-round counter-programming similar to ESPN’s successful World Series of Poker footage. Wide-spread use of this template has diluted ESPN’s authority over the poker experience, and, in contrast to the observational format of TILT, entertainment that obliges the male gaze. Nonchalance in its coverage of competition among women, ESPN uses shows like TILT to reinforce its confinement, as passive accessories to the celebrity and wealth enjoyed by star male athletes. The network has steadily betrayed the care of its self-described mission — providing high-caliber sports entertainment in the freshest manner — so that viewers now expect: a spectacular showcase of eye candy, rather than the nightly broadcasts of sporting deeds whose narratives once captivated cable audiences and built an empire. As ESPN promotes a vision of an ideal sports culture bereft of female influence, it is neglecting the statutes of responsibility our society typically demands of its cherished media outlets, putting on a pedestal sexism attitudes toward women of all creeds. This reckless transgression of cultural values cannot be tempered by tape-delays or FCC penalties; no scarlet letter upon ESPN’s name will convince male sports fans to abandon their loyalty to the “Worldwide Leader in Sports.” In fact, one suspects that despite falling ratings for TILT, there is no end in sight to ESPN’s manipulation of its core viewers through appealing to their masculine urges. After all, if sports can sell cars and TV sets, and sex can sell sports, how long can it be before ESPN eliminates the middleman?

MISHA IMBERMAN BERKOWITZ
Travelling in a circle, two images at a time

The View-Master is best known as a clunky plastic toy that has delighted both children and adults with reels of three-dimensional images for over six decades. The View-Master’s basic design, which has remained the same over its sixty-six year history, relies on the fact that human beings see depth as a combination of two images, one in each eye, each from slightly different angles. The brain’s calculation of this difference results in our perception of depth. This physiological effect is called stereoscopy, and is duplicated in stereoscopic photography to produce an image that simulates three-dimensional eyesight. The resulting images have remarkable depth; backgrounds recede into the distance while objects in the foreground appear close enough to touch. View-Master reels each contain seven stereoscopic images on a circular cardboard disk, fourteen images in all, which are viewed through an eyepiece that blocks out all other vision. The images are advanced by a small lever on the side of the viewer. The unique construction of the View-Master makes it a medium that is incredibly private. Its stereoscopic images are viewed only by the individual, a fact that has caused the View-Master to become a form of popular media that is inextricably linked to memory and virtual experience.

The View-Master was an improved version of an earlier stereoscopic photograph viewer known simply as the stereoscope. The stereoscope was created by Sir Charles Wheatstone within the academy, and originally relied on a visby complex system of mirrors to combine two images into one that was stereoscopic. It only became popularized when Sir David Brewster created the lenticular stereoscope, described by Laura Burd Schiavo.

Far more convenient and less awkward than Wheatstone’s, the Brewster stereoscope refined the instrument’s market appeal...By hiding the physiological roots of the stereoscopic image, Brewster’s stereoscope omitted the productive or phenomenological nature of the device, and of vision itself, making the stereoscope nothing more than a tool for the enhancement of mimetic representation.

Just as the physical apparatus of the stereoscope had to be hidden for it to be accepted as a popular commodity, the apparatus of the View-Master had to be packaged. The “phenomenological nature of the device” is hidden, so that the effect of the device seems to happen intangibly. The science behind the lenticular stereoscope became hidden from the viewer within the casing distracting the viewer’s attention from the device itself to the image. For the View-Master the same effect was produced by replacing the original clamsHELL design, which exposed the inner workings of the machine when it was opened to load reels, with a solid Bakelite model with a slit to insert the reel. In this way the construction of the View-Master mimics the stereoscope, as both are designed to emphasize the viewer’s experience of the image and de-emphasize their knowledge of the apparatus. This was a key step in making the View-Master a repository of virtual experience, not just pretty pictures.

The View-Master was from its inception linked to the souvenir, a physical object that acts as a reminder of some past experience. The souvenir does not necessarily act as a symbol of one’s own experience, it can be a kind of gift of virtual memories from afar, described by Cameron Bailey in her article “Virtual Skin: Articulating Race in Cyberspace.”

My first experience of virtual community came in Rock Dundo, Barbados, 1969, when I first jacked into a smooth, plastic, khaki-colored ViewMaster. My mother, thousands of kilometers away in Canada, sent me both the machine and its software-discs that brought to life before my eyes images I had never seen before: Niagara Falls and Flowerpots Island and Toronto City Hall in stereoscopic vision. It would be two decades before I tried on a helmet, but I knew the thrill of virtual reality right then. I was transported. Every time I returned to that machine I left the postcolonial sunshine behind for the marvels of Canada. Immerged in the depth, resolution, and brightness of those images, I became a part of Canada, sharing an experience with every tourist who had paused to get a good look at new city hall, who had marveled at the falls.

Here the View-Master is used...
as a reminder of a virtual, rather than a real experience. Bailey’s comparison of the View-Master to a virtual reality helmet is particularly apt, as both are designed to give the sensation of having a certain experience, while blocking out all other experience. This desire for a medium that will act as a technological substitute for travel was not new; but rather a sophistication of ideas already present in the day of the stereoscope, as described by Judith Babbitts.

The end sought, the goal of travel, was to acquire experience in the form of feelings, and eventually, memories. Viewers would have the same feelings if they were on a stereoscopic tour or actually present in the country... The stereoscope delivered the same visual impressions in all essential respects as if there in our own bodies.

The improvement of the View-Master from the stereoscope was in its physical interface with the user, which emulated the travelogue, a series of tourist sights from a particularly attractive area of the world. This interface was much different than the stereoscope, because each picture did not have to be part of a sequential whole (The stereoscope utilized images on single cards rather than the View-Master’s circular reels). The View-Master’s interface allowed the viewer to control the pace of the image sequence, which was always coherent and set. Therefore, the interface gave control over pace, but only limited control over order, similar to a carousel slide projector, another medium associated with tourism and memory. Due to the physical construction of the View-Master, the viewer gets a tiny, private version of publicly viewed subject matter that is under their own personal control, just like a sequence of remembered images. View-Master reel content gradually changed from

the travelogue model to duplication of other media content. This had been going on since the early 1950s, when Sawyer’s acquired the rights to produce reels of Disney cartoon characters, and was solicited in 1989 when Tyco bought the rights to View-Master. Now the View-Master is solely an ancillary market for children’s media content. Nevertheless, View-Master reels have become prized collectors items, with a promotional reel for the Vincent Price horror classic House of Wax recently selling for over three hundred dollars. Indeed, a quick search on eBay results in page after page of View-Master memorabilia, from the vintage to the brand new. Reels and viewers can be easily acquired at antique shops or toy fairs, due to almost constant production through the last two-thirds of the twentieth century. The View-Master remains a popular Christmas gift for young children, although perhaps this has more to do with parental nostalgia than youthful desire for the toy. Interest in the View-Master has outlived its status as a widespread media commodity, implying that its unique construction and history ensure it will be remembered by media historians and the young at heart for many years to come: Δ

ANTHONY UNATIN

1. Schirato 130
2. I have no use for this.
The Interface Convergence

Digital interfaces are extremely pervasive within many facets of communication and exchange of commercial goods, so much so that we take them for granted. The recently instated self-checkout booths at libraries and grocery stores, telematics services through Global Positioning Systems (GPS) technologies utilized in vehicles, and various forms of electronic media involve human interaction with an interface whether graphical or text-based. Due to their rising ubiquity and the expediency it offers to both manufacturers and consumers, the digital interface is mostly acknowledged for its handiness not for its impact on how we conceive and receive information. Various scholars have explored issues relating to human experiences/interactions within virtual spaces, modes of reception, and the possibilities of incorporating technology into organic bodies. Such studies range from digital literature to nanotechnology research. However, a need still exists for more theories on the interface's influence in political and economic networks; its capabilities to realize and instate decisions to even a global extent. The digital interface appears to flow so naturally with our social discourses that we accept its existence as part of our development as an advanced world civilization, only occasionally questioning the extent of its power.

Interfaces are an effective presence in our lives through their near permanence within both physical and mental reality. While face-to-face conversation is a basic form of interactivity, human interactions do not have the same longevity as, say, writings etched in stone. The inventions of written language, symbols, and codes mark the beginnings of the interface with a dependence upon an understanding behind the meaning of what is inscribed; otherwise, interfaces hold no significant social value. Being able to record an idea and having others able to understand that idea from that recording, even in a far future, is a major insight into how interfaces are not only useful in conveying information. They are also capable of functioning as bearers and enablers of institutional ideologies. A simple illustration would be that of stop signs; their sheer existence is a repetitious reminder for us to follow the traffic laws in order to prevent potential chaos.

Immediacy in delivering information is another facet of interfaces, as proven in wars, commerce, and forecasting weather patterns. Both the telegraph and the telephone were breakthrough interfaces in being able to transport and receive information across great geographic lengths in a short amount of time. Digital interfaces also allow users to find specific data in any form of media from search engines that filter possible links, online dictionaries, finding exact pages in digitally formatted novels, to the scene selection option on DVD films. However, with nearly every emergence of a new communications technology, there rise utopian ideals of unrestricted accessibility to information and instantaneous commerce, only to name a few. In our global society that values freedom; technological progress has come to be closely associated with having more control at an individual level, or at least having more opportunities.

Although expanding individual independence and democracy via technology resonates as a good idea, interfaces still require the user to have certain skills and an adequate
amount of familiarity in order to be proficient in operating them. The term “familiarity” is used in reference to how one approaches an interface, such as a reader knowing to read an English novel from left to right. As in the historical context of illiteracy being proficient in reading is a sign of social status. Therefore, people are quick to react to technological expertise as a new form of inequality, of which the current solution is to simplify the interface for public use.

Before a message sends via telegraph can be read, a person who recognizes Morse code must translate it. However, understanding any type of technical code can take years to master. Using command-line interfaces, early computer users not only needed to learn computer language but also had to spend many hours just to write instructions into these machines. While extremely useful, these computers needed specialists to keep them functioning. It was not until Apple introduced the affordable Macintosh personal computer in 1984 that made computers more accessible to a wider audience, even to children. It featured the Graphical User Interface (GUI) which hides a large amount of computer jargon that most users do not need or want to see. Instead of code, users see symbolic representations of folders, windows, and recycling bins on a “desktop.” Instead of writing the code required to run a program, users today work with preprogrammed applications, such as word processors, that simulate and amplify the capabilities of real-world tools.

Adapting technology to the point of view of human experience is the essential definition of the term “user-friendly.” Those who are new to using the software feel at ease by trial and error; because the consequences of their actions are easy to predict and the consequences are often consistent. The great part about the interface is that it is normally lenient to the user in the form of the “Undo Command” and also being customizable to each user. Graphical folders and windows are far more intuitive and abstract than machine language, as they correlate with the physical objects around us. The future of digital interfaces is striving to reach a point where they do not require the user to be, at the very least, conscious of their existence as digital interfaces.

The icons present within GUI interfaces are becoming more than simply symbols, as what were once physical actions can now be digitally accomplished. Film-editing programs, like Final Cut Pro, have already taken over much of the physical labor of post-production. The Final Cut Pro toolbar contains a “button” with the icon of scissors that, when indented, cuts the film that has been captured onto a computer hard drive. This is but one of multiple editing options for a filmmaker to choose from and if any mistakes are made, they can easily be undone without affecting the film’s quality. At present, the digital information can last virtually forever, under the circumstances of investments into its maintenance and preservation. Simultaneously, it is also transforming and expanding with the development of new hardware technology.

By “transcending” space and time, with designs compatible with human instincts, digital interfaces lend themselves significantly to human convenience limited only by the speed that people can read and comprehend data. The World Wide Web has already proven to be a strong model of how computers can be linked together to increase productivity. Open-source websites called “Wikis,” such as www.wikipedia.org, allow users to share, compile, organize, and revise vast categories of information. This type of human interaction is both collaborative and constructive as information is being processed and edited in a dialectic fashion. Also, part of the future digital interface is to give each individual an insurmountable freedom to not only access various sites of information throughout the world, but also to accomplish the most mundane of daily activities. Within the last few years, locations with leapfrogging technological progress, such as Tokyo, Japan, or Singapore, have been expanding the use of cell-phones from using them as credit cards, personal passbooks, and buying access to concerts where your cell-phone is your ticket.

We come to depend heavily on digital interfaces to function and they also constantly shape any given person’s identity and subjectivity. Without digital interfaces, most of our technology will be rendered useless. Also, much of these technologies have come to define interaction, relationships, and even intimacy between individuals. This is not to say that digital interfaces exhibit purely positive attributes. Users may be bombarded with unwanted information, such as excessive advertisements, and there tends to be a loss of individuality as various separate entities pool resources online. Along with digital interfaces replacing physical activities, such as cashing and film editing, they also display correlating consequences with the real world.

Newer digital interfaces may also seem formidable for use in the eyes of the public, even if they are extremely intuitive. Though many self-checkout stations have been installed into modern grocery stores, people still desire to wait in line to be serviced by an employee. However, to do so can also be interpreted as a form of resistance to the current social direction taken by businesses and governmental institutions; since development in technology calls for continuous investments and participation in consumerism. With digital interfaces being sites through which authorities can exercise and moderate power, we must take into account that freedom in the usage of intuitive interfaces does not mean autonomy from higher social structures.

LINUS CHEN


Epic Stew

I found a recipe the other day, and it looked a little something like this:

- I unlikely hero
- I villain possessing unimaginable power
- I gorgeous, sassy female
- I monumental task (i.e. saving the world)
- Budget-sucking, cast of millions battle sequences
- Optionally, add elf ears for taste.

If it hadn’t already crossed your mind, the recipe in question recently cooked up the critically acclaimed trilogy, The Lord of the Rings [2001, Peter Jackson]. However, Peter Jackson isn’t the first director to cook audiences this kind of delicious cinema. In fact, the modern day high concept epic is a staple in the American cinematic diet, mine included. We seem to enjoy the simple story lines and the visual spectacle of epic cinema so much that at least thirteen of the twenty highest grossing movies of all time (in the U.S.) follow this extremely tried-and-true plotline. This Top Twenty list includes the following epics: Star Wars (A New Hope, Phantom Menace, and Attack of the Clones), Spider-Man (both the original and the sequel), Independence Day, Pirates of the Caribbean, Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone, Jurassic Park, The Lion King, and of course—all three Lord of the Rings movies. Not only do epics bring in a lot of box office dollars, but they tend to receive a disproportionate amount of critical acclaim and attention. Since 1982, ten different epic films have received the Academy of Motion Picture’s highest award of “Best Picture.” Perhaps even more telling is that in 2003, Lord of the Rings: Return of the King was given a record-tying eleven Oscars. Despite the sales figures and the acclaim, however, post-Star Wars modern epics have been less than innovative. Each one of these flicks—LOTR included—follows the recipe above as if the ingredients were handed down by the lovechild of Akira Kurosawa and Martha Stewart. The repetitiveness in style, content, and the conventions of the modern epic begs the question, why do these films do so well commercially and critically if we know exactly what to expect? The answer seems to be: post-Star Wars epics do well commercially and critically because they deliver familiarity expectedly what the audience expects and supposedly wants.

In 1977, the release of Star Wars signaled a shift in big-budget cinema. Roger Ebert wrote of Star Wars, “It defined the summer as the prime releasing season, placed a new emphasis on young audiences, used special effects, animation, computers and exhilarating action to speed up the pacing and grossed so much money that many of the best young directors gave up their quest for the Great American Film and aimed for the box office crown instead.” Ebert’s statement raises interesting questions about the relationships between commerce and art. Does one always get sacrificed at the altar of the other? Since 1977, Hollywood has been playing a game of epic one-upmanship by developing blockbusters that outdo the previous movies in terms of special effects while retaining the core conventions and themes. From Star Wars in the 70s, to Indiana Jones in the 80s, and all the way up to The Matrix and The Lord of the Rings in the last decade and a half, these conventions have cemented themselves as the recipe for box office success.

What are the benefits of a movie carefully walking along the heavily beaten, trodden, and otherwise trampled paths of filmmaking? A genre film gives the audience what it expects, allowing them to safely enjoy their move going experience. “Safe” films make certain that audiences get what they expect. For example, the presentation of Lord of the Rings, while expertly and meticulously executed, is the nothing other than the industry standard. The editing is “invisible,” the narrative structure is linear, and the finished product is drenched with that Hollywood gloss American audiences have become accustomed to. Because of this standard form of presentation, viewers do not have to work through the pleasurable rigors of novelty or innovation, activities historically synonymous with art. The very fact that the editing style Hollywood most often uses is referred to as “invisible” exemplifies why genre movies like epics are so popular. Continuity editing, through its smoothness and its prevalence in modern movies, helps develop a story with the least amount of jarring and the highest degree of audience immersion.

The process of continuity editing is analogous to the way that a genre film is able to achieve a successful audience reaction. Like editing conventions such as
“shot/reverse shot” and “eye-line match,” epics possess conventions such as the unlikely hero, rough females, and gigantic battles. When the conventions of epics are expertly utilized, the characters and plot devices themselves become “invisible.” Frodo, Neo, Luke, and most other epic heroes share so many traits that we can immediately identify their role. We have seen this character and this character arc before. The modern epic film does not require a learning curve because the characters and plot devices are nearly always interchangeable. Indeed, the interchangeability of epics contributes to their popularity. Writing on this topic, Judith Hess offers the following analysis: “So we return to genre films for easy comfort and solace—hence their popularity... Genre films address themselves to these conflicts and resolve them in a simplistic and reactionary way” (Hess 16). Hess explains that we prefer genre films because they’re easier to watch compared to more “difficult” films. In epics, we know who the good characters are, we know their plight, and we know that they will be victorious. These common characteristics allow us to find comfort in the good-vs.-bad conflict. Though we may be on the edge of our seats during the more tense parts of the film, we know that—in the end—good will triumph over evil.

People preferring to re-experience the norm as opposed to discovering a new experience is not a phenomenon exclusive to the world of filmmaking. The ritual act of seeing an epic is similar to the ritual act of listening to a favorite album or a dining at a favorite restaurant. How often do people dislike a musical group after their “sound changed” or become displeased with a restaurant after a certain menu item is discontinued? The appeal of familiarity and consistency is a very powerful draw.

Familiarity, however, comes at a price. Hollywood has stagnated into a self-feeding cycle in which it continually dumps more cash into epic and genre films, takes note of the films’ monetary success, and subsequently dumps even more cash into these movies. When immediate box office success is the only fuel that runs the engine of creativity, then up and coming filmmakers find themselves “running on empty.” When immediate financial success is the only determinant of a film’s worthiness, then young filmmakers have less incentive to produce films that are innovative on the level of form and content. Because of Hollywood’s rigid adherence to conventions, the modern epic exists as a mad lib of moving pictures in which the nouns can change, but the ideas remain the same. We can and should love the wonderfully produced epic such as Lord of the Rings, but we’d be remiss to ignore the industry stranglehold that their popularity and profitability produce. How many innovative and interesting projects are shelved in lieu of such “marketable” cinema? Film culture is at its most alive when there is a push and pull between the needs of commerce and art. This push and pull invigorates producers and viewers alike, reminding us that familiarity is a feeling best enjoyed in tandem with the exhilarating challenges of innovation.

MATT McKENNA

From Psycho-Carrot to Picard
What Happened to Science Fiction Film?

UFO invasions, foam oozing pods, and man-eating aliens—mmm, delicious. The science fiction films of the 1950s wet the public’s appetite for vile creatures and apocalyptic scenarios like no other. Looking back, they were the spawling ground for sci-fi cinema as we know it. And yet, the books they stemmed from were a different kettle of fish entirely. Unlike the cautionary parables of mid-century sci-fi cinema, these earlier stories explored the progress and possibilities for mankind in scientific advancement. H.G. Wells’ The Time Machine is one recognizable example. They envisioned the future world in a more complex form, but positioned science as a subject for wonder. In many ways, the path that science fiction film has taken, from optimism to dystopia, goes far beyond its literary roots, in directions largely unintended by its original makers. As historical forces shape our perception of the present and dictate our expectations for the future, the fundamental message proves as unstable as the plutonium that powered the first UFO. Science fiction is, historically, a form dominated by internal contradictions. The question must be posed: Does science fiction film as a genre exist anymore? If so, how might we actually define it?

The conventions of Germanic horror have long dominated the “scary movie” narrative, which prevailed in early sci-fi films. Frankenstein (1931) demonstrated these conventions through its portrayal of a mad scientist who desires an unholy power over nature, but is ultimately confronted by the fallibility of human nature. However, it can be said to be a precursor to science fiction film in that it dealt with the question of how technology affects society. Its morality play on the danger of knowledge gave rise to a veritable litany in sci-fi film, extolling the dreadful lesson. There Are Some Things Man Is Not Meant To Know. From The Day the Earth Stood Still (1951) to Forbidden Planet (1956), this dire message was repeated with such fervor as to reach a level of pop-spiritual profundity. However, critics of sci-fi film describe this attitude as “squarely opposed to the spirit of science fiction,” which in its purest sense seeks to embrace, not reject technology (Baxter 107). How strange it is that such thematic enemies—ignorance/knowledge, fear/lucidity—would find their way into the same film genre.

The 1951 film, The Thing, exemplified a deep entrenchment of this contradictory message in its association of advanced science with global danger. In a dramatic sub-conflict, Doctor Carrington vies to study a supersonic egg-laying carrot monster that drinks human blood. This intergalactic vampire is also a UFO pilot (not a very good one—he crashed after all) who harbors technological knowledge undreamed of by humanity. With his evil Trotsky-beard and Slavic accent, the doctor en-

dangers the whole world in order to research it—neatly paralleling the role of the mad scientist in Frankenstein. In this film as in others, the pursuit of knowledge is suppressed by fear, and the spirit of curiosity inherent to science fiction is lost.

Time and again throughout the 1950s, the scientist is painted as a Red leftist intellectual who hates humanity and never gets the girl. Who does? Why, Captain Hendry, the charismatic military man who burns that psycho-carrot monster to the ground. As usual, the science fiction film of the 50s values action over discovery. Though a modern audience may look back on these gems of history with ironic nostalgic affection, (I certainly do!) their infusion of the sci-fi with political paranoia constitutes a dubious impact on the genre.

As always, there are exceptions to the rule. Even in the 50s, science fiction films like It Came From... "Science fiction is, historically, a form dominated by internal contradictions. The question must be posed: Does science fiction film as a genre exist anymore? If so, how might we actually define it?"

Outer Space (1953) occasionally suggested that it might be better to ask questions before shooting. Instead of positioning the scientist as the villain and pursuit of knowledge as the conflict, Andromeda Strain (1971) "insists that man can understand the world," and that the search for knowledge can save it (Craig 34). Science is to fear as holy water is to vampires. The 1968 film, 2001 A Space Odyssey is also widely respected for the sense of wonder it strove to convey for mankind’s place in the universe. Shouldn’t it strike someone as odd that the sci-fi most in line with the genre’s intentions is also the most rare?

Writer and critic, Judith Merril, argues that the heart and essence of the genre is its drive to "learn something about the nature of the universe, of man, and of reality" (Sobchack 18). First aired in 1967, Star Trek:
The Next Generation’s pilot episode (Encounter at Farpoint) attempted no less than to prove the inherent worth of the entire human species. When the supernatural entity called Q waylays the Star Ship Enterprise, the crew is subject to an Inquisition regarding the history of human barbarism. They are given a test to prove themselves worthy of life. After being attacked by a gigantic celestial jellyfish, Picard and crew refrain from immediately blowing it to smithereens. Instead, they investigate it. The Thing’s Captain Henry would have surely destroyed this ‘enemy.’ This instance of sci fi on screen (albeit on the television screen) recalls something of science fiction’s original intent—exploring new life and civilizations (not blowing them up!) and boldly going where no one has gone before.

Even so, Star Trek has been justifiably criticized for a certain level of campy television hokiness and limp fish political correctness that again, provokes the question—where are the truly thought-provoking and thematically challenging science fiction films to be found?

The 1990s gave us a mixed bag of sci fi disaster/horror/comedies, and dramas. Independence Day (1996), Men in Black (1997), Contact (1997), and The Matrix (1999) easily come to mind. The Matrix in particular has been celebrated and subjected to extensive study insofar as it asks fundamental questions about the role of mankind in a machine age. But whether or not these films are actually part of one genre working under common guidelines is difficult to say. Similarly in the 2000s, films such as Pitch Black (2000) and Donnie Darko (2001) seem to work at genuine cross purposes—glamorizing a badass criminal who slays extraterrestrial dragons (not that that’s a bad thing) and the other depicting the self sacrifice of a disoriented time traveling youth. Though some of these films may share similar iconography (aliens, space ships, etc.) their lack of thematic cohesion suggests a fogginess in the public’s understanding of the genre. If the traditional conception of sci fi as exploration is no longer valid, what have we left?

The new ‘sci-fi’ films of the decade 2000 seem to share a few fundamental commonalities with sci fi films from the past beyond a space-age aesthetic or an unbelievable premise. One could respond that no film should have to be a slave to such an exacting convention as a genre, and when few can identify its core guidelines anyway, perhaps the pretense of it may be dissolved.

What has happened to the optimism of early sci fi cinema? Can we catch glimpses of it only in exceptions to the rule, or during brief snatches in the mainstream? Or did the concept of exploring new technology for the betterment of mankind die with the 19th century? One can love the 50s for its goofiness, the 70s for its bite, the 80s for its optimism, and all of the quirky and surprising exceptions scattered throughout, but what one cannot do is force them all to mean the same thing. After all, history demonstrates that sci fi film obstinately incorporates themes contradictory to its initial premise. And as the technology and goals of the real world change from decade to decade, the attitudes expressed by our films may be expected to evolve also. So when the next alien invasion movie comes out, by all means let’s run to the theaters, but please, ask first and shoot later. Perhaps looking ahead to a civilized future means looking back at how our forbears imagined we would be.Δ

NAN PIERCE

Here are a few samples from our articles on the web:

**Desperate Housewives, Episode 11: Move On**

BY DIANA TSUCHIDA

Welcome back to Wisteria Lane. This week's episode of Desperate Housewives gave perfectionist housewife, Bree Van de Kamp an exercise in suburban deceit and infidelity. Stuck between a rock and a hard place, she asks her handsome pharmacist out on a date in spite of her own unfaithful husband, only to find that purposely dangling herself in front of both men stirs up some friendly competition. The episode concludes with an indefinite ending to the scandal, assuring viewers that Bree's cunning plans have yet to unravel...

(Continued at http://eyecandy.ucsc.edu)

**Bride and Prejudice**

BY SUMMER MARSH

Gurinder Chadha's Bride and Prejudice (India, 2004) has been coined as the perfect "Bollywood meets Hollywood" film in several ways. Firstly, the film's characters literally traverse the globe from Bombay to Hollywood. Secondly, the film starts off being overtly Bollywood, but as the characters are introduced and the plot unfolds, the style swings the other way finding itself somewhere safely in the middle between Bolly/Hollywood. The story is almost an exact replica of Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice, the plot and a majority of the character's names are directly from the novel...

(Continued at http://eyecandy.ucsc.edu)
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