

XV.

*Letters to Johnny Cocktail on the Cinema (1994)*



Some of the most pleasing performances have been produced by learning and genius exercised upon subjects of little importance. It seems to have been, in all ages, the pride of wit, to shew how it could exalt the low, and amplify the little. To speak not inadequately of things really and naturally great, is a task not only difficult but disagreeable; because the writer is degraded in his own eyes by standing in comparison with his subject, to which he can hope to add nothing from his imagination: but it is a perpetual triumph of fancy to expand a scanty theme, to raise glittering ideas from obscure properties, and to produce to the world an object of wonder to which nature had contributed little. To this ambition, perhaps, we owe the *Frogs* of Homer, the *Gnat* and the *Bees* of Virgil, the *Butterfly* of Spenser, the *Shadow* of Wowerus, and the *Quincunx* of Browne.

Samuel Johnson: *The Life of Sir Thomas Browne*.

*Der Satz ist ein Bild der Wirklichkeit (10/4/94)*

Wittgenstein was always exhausted by his lectures. He was also revolted by them. He felt disgusted with what he had said and with himself. Often he would rush off to a cinema immediately after the class ended. ... He insisted on sitting in the very first row of seats, so that the screen would occupy his entire field of vision, and his mind would be turned away from the thoughts of the lecture and his feelings of revulsion. ... His observation of the film was not relaxed or detached. He leaned forward tensely in his seat and rarely took his eyes off the screen. ... He wished to become totally absorbed in the film no matter how trivial or artificial it was, in order to free his mind from the philosophical thoughts that tortured and exhausted him.

Norman Malcolm: *Ludwig Wittgenstein. A Memoir.*

This all feels familiar: I too go to the movies for escape; I always sit in the middle of the second row from the front, so that I can slump down in my chair and put my legs up on the row in front of me, with the screen filling my entire field of vision,<sup>1</sup> and eat a colossal tub of popcorn; I detest interruptions.....

..... no, I'm not familiar with Ms. Sontag's views on photography (nor with much else of her oeuvre, for that matter, though I regard it with respect), but, yes, I do incline to the view that film is mainly a visual art, and I'm not ashamed of my admiration for the comic-book cinema. – But this isn't anything to argue about. Images can't replace thought (contra the MTV apologists). It's just that they are, in many circumstances, equally interesting.

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<sup>1</sup> Multiplex seating destroyed all, this, of course; along with much else.

I could say one or two other things, I suppose, without launching into the three-volume treatise....

First, contra Eisenstein, it's a curious but incontrovertible fact that it's essentially impossible to present ideas in narrative film. You can do the talking heads a la *My Dinner With Andre* (which I loved, of course), but there's nothing intrinsically cinematic about that; it would have worked exactly the same way if it had been a radio play. — The one exception I can recall is a scene in the made-for-highbrow-TV movie *The Race For The Double Helix*:<sup>2</sup> Jeff Goldblum is playing Jim Watson, and toward the end of it he's sitting at a table, with the cardboard cutouts drawn to scale for adenine, guanine, cytosine, and thymine sitting in front of him, toying with them absently. The camera moves in on the molecular models, and there's this one really beautiful moment, if you're paying attention, when you're looking at them over Goldblum/Watson's shoulder and you have the chance to realize just before he does that when you paste A-T together it's the same shape as G-C. — So you have the chance to share the inspiration, as it were.<sup>3</sup> — This, I want to say, is the exception that proves the rule. — And as I think of it I guess it isn't necessarily the visual nature of the medium, but the invariability of the narrative timestream, the lack of interactivity, that renders it inadequate for conveying ideas. Contemporary misapprehension notwithstanding, books actually *are* interactive: you can page back and forth, you can read things over and over, you can stop dead and try to figure out what's going to happen next, you can make notes in the margin. Narrative films and, obviously, televised lectures have none of these advantages.

Now everything has to be televised nonetheless. No wonder we're raising a generation of imbeciles. — As I said in a recent diatribe on the subject of the misuse of the apostrophe, “Fuck’ing moron’s. Thi’s i’s

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<sup>2</sup> Aka *Life Story*; dir. Mick Jackson, 1987.

<sup>3</sup> I should probably add that in Watson's account [*The Double Helix*, 1968] this is presented as the “Aha!” moment toward which the entire narrative was building. Others, of course, begged to differ.

what hap'ened when the'y repla'ced elementary 'school with 'Sesame 'Street." .....

Second, probably in consequence: despite the mysterious inevitability of some kind of narrative structure in film, most of what's actually conveyed by a movie has little or nothing to do with a summary of the plot.....

I think I first realized this when I kept watching *Blade Runner* over and over again even though the story makes no sense.<sup>4</sup> But there are extreme cases that might be better illustrations of the thesis. — *Prayer of the Rollerboys*,<sup>5</sup> for instance, wasn't about much of anything except how wonderfully cool a pack of teenage guys wearing long overcoats look rollerblading out of the mist in longshot. (But they did look wonderfully cool, and one shouldn't underestimate the significance of such fashion statements.) ...

And videos, of course, aren't about anything at all. (Well: sex and death. But only in the abstract.) But I like videos anyway; at least the ones which don't consist solely of closeups of the bozos in the band. — Admittedly this is probably like saying I like political discourse, except for having to listen to the assholes.

Like Wittgenstein (who loved Westerns), I go to the movies for escape; and, accordingly, tend to avoid thoughtprovoking characterdriven dramas and feelgood movies all America's talking about in favor of action spectacles, in which things blow up, cars hurtle off the road, and starlets rip their shirts off. But such spectacles are cinematically valid in a way that filmed plays (what Hitchcock

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<sup>4</sup> Terry Rawlings on the editing of *Blade Runner*: "After I'd finished my first assembly of the whole film ... Ridley and I went into a screening room at Warner Brothers and ran the picture ...The entire time, we never said a word. Then, when the film finished and the lights came up, Ridley turned to me and said, 'God, it's marvelous. What the fuck does it all mean?'"

<sup>5</sup> Dir. Rick King, 1991. I think I only watched this for the young Patricia Arquette.

referred to derisively as “photographs of people talking”) are not. — And again: the movies are the dialectic of art and sleaze, and, at least for somebody who read Bohr at a tender age, this seems less an indication of internal contradiction than another illustration of complementarity. — Anyway, if I come up with an unusually outrageous double feature (the locus classicus was *L’Age D’Or/Lady Terminator*)<sup>6</sup> the guys at the Video Station give me a discount.

Academic film criticism interests me slightly. But I wouldn’t be able to practice it myself without the feeling that I was indulging a rather nasty vice. — I read this stuff occasionally nonetheless. — To quote one of my favorite passages from a fascinating volume edited by Joan Copjec titled *Shades of Noir*:<sup>7</sup> “In the same way, clearly, the work’s emergence as a kind of aerolith in free space — a meteor from the void, taking a place, being measurable, weighing, being accessible to the physical senses — can never quite entitle it to full inert status as a thing among other things.”<sup>8</sup> — I’m sure you recognize this instantly as yet another attempt to explain Chandler via Heidegger — which, to paraphrase Chandler himself, “comes about as close as such accounts usually come — about as close as Mars is to Saturn.” — My favorite essay in this volume, however, was a little piece called “The Kantian Background of the Noir Subject”;<sup>9</sup> and that (I am not making this up) really was about *Blade Runner*.

As for why it is that literary critics in general and film critics by specialization are the last intellectuals in America to think that what they do won’t look sufficiently deep or important without reference to the worst offenses of the deliberately obscurantist European philosophical tradition: that’s a sociological question, and one to which

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<sup>6</sup> Dir. Jalil Jackson, 1989. (I take Buñuel/Dali for obvious.)

<sup>7</sup> London: Verso, 1993.

<sup>8</sup> Fredric Jameson, “The Synoptic Chandler”.

<sup>9</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “‘The Thing That Thinks’: The Kantian Background of the Noir Subject”.

I haven't got an immediate answer. But it's probably just that France seems like the only place that's east of New York....

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*Tarantino's method (10/23/94)*

Bresson explains it thus: "Let the cause follow the effect, not accompany it or precede it."<sup>10</sup> And elaborates in a footnote:

The other day I was walking through the gardens by Notre-Dame and saw approaching a man whose eyes caught something behind me, which I could not see: at once they lit up. If, at the same time as I saw the man, I had perceived the young woman and the child towards whom he now began running, that happy face of his would not have struck me so; indeed I might not have noticed it.

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*Kubrick (11/10/1994)*

Two appreciations:

[1] The only story about Daniel Ellsberg that ever registered with me was this: in the early Sixties he was one of McNamara's whiz kids at the Pentagon, and spent his days and nights hanging with a bunch of other boy wonders, trying to apply the mathematical theory of games to the balance of terror. One night he and one of his buddies decided they ought to try to relax, and went out to the movies; as you

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography*, transl. Jonathan Griffin. [New York: Urizen Books.]

can guess, they went to see *Strangelove*, which they'd been told was a comedy. The audience roared all the way through it, but Ellsberg and his friend ground their teeth — because, said Ellsberg, they knew everyone in that movie: every character was drawn from life.

[2] There are a variety of ways that you might choose to try to plot the decline of the West, but this may be the best: at the height of the first great war scare, when everyone talked openly about invading Cuba and knocking down the Berlin wall and nuking the Russkies, when everyone was at least thinking about building a fallout shelter and kids muttered among themselves about what their parents said about not letting the neighbors in when the time came, and when I actually went to school the morning after Kennedy's ultimatum in October 1962 and discovered that we had the day off from class because my teachers obviously expected the sirens to go off at any minute and had their game faces on to disguise the fact that they were all scared shitless — at the very height of this panic, Kubrick made his movie and forced everyone to look again at the situation, at how absurd it was, and made them laugh at themselves and more importantly at the self-appointed experts, the theoreticians of the Apocalypse, Herman Kahn, Edward Teller, Henry Kissinger. And after that no one could take it seriously any longer, and since they thought about the final war so differently, it became, in a way, no longer possible. — This was the greatest miracle accomplished by art in my time. — At the height of the second great war scare, in the early Eighties, *The Day After* was shown on television and Kissinger himself made a big speech during the panel discussion afterwards and the City of Boulder injected Peace Studies into the school curriculum and it was all so fucking stupid you actually wished they drop the Big One and get it over with....

*Godard (11/15/1994)*

He was everything a Bohemian kid wanted to be when he grew up, the apotheosis of the chainsmoking European intellectual who hung out in Parisian cafes arguing about existentialism — the artist, the revolutionary, the metaphysical adventurer; the film geek who got the girl and a gun and captured it all of it at twenty-four frames a second.

He made you feel that you could start out reading a book about Velázquez in the bathtub and end up going on the run from the law with Anna Karina, exchanging bogus gunfire with the Keystone Kops; and that when the time came to blow yourself up in a grand existential gesture, Raoul Coutard would be there to capture it all on film.

Godard is never simply telling a story, and it is always a mistake to ask what his films are “about”. He may begin to tell a story, but then immediately gets distracted by the question of what *makes* it a story, and what makes it work; what makes narrative structure necessary in film, that is what arrests his attention. The story itself is a contrivance, an experiment — “for instance *this*” — mere epiphenomenon.<sup>11</sup>

Asked once whether his movies had any structure at all, even beginning, middle, and end, Godard replied “Yes, but not necessarily in that order.”

Postmodernism in general is a joke, but it is coherent in Godard — maybe only in Godard. The picture always exhibits its frame.

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<sup>11</sup> He began, of course, as a critic, but remarked once that the best way to critique a movie was to make a movie. In that sense one may think of his *oeuvre* as all of a piece. — Later he made the series *Histoire(s) du cinéma* as an expression of his dissatisfaction with lectures as a means of conveying his vision of the history of film as a whole.

Thus a characteristic of his technique is that he is often deliberately disturbing, trying to push you off-balance — not simply with the famous jump cuts, but in the way that he will underscore (and therefore make comment on) some cinematic convention by defying it. — Three examples off the top of my head: nearly every one of his films has a scene in which somebody delivers a lengthy speech while facing the camera and standing or sitting in front of a bright window illuminating a darkened room, so that he/she appears only as a shadowy outline (no fill lights or reflectors in real life, says Godard); in his musical, *A Woman Is A Woman* [*Une Femme Est Une Femme*], over and over again the orchestral soundtrack swells up in the conventional fashion to preface a musical number, and then abruptly disappears, leaving Anna Karina to sing *a capella* (as she would, of course, if she really were, e.g., singing to herself while walking down a Parisian street); and in *Alphaville* there's a scene in that classic film noir location, a cheap hotel, in which two guys are talking in a hallway beneath a single very bright naked light bulb dangling from a chain over their heads — and just exactly at the moment when your eyes are starting to hurt and you tell yourself “I wish he'd move that fucking light bulb out of the shot” one of the guys reaches up and starts it swinging back and forth — straight *at* the camera.

Godard's characters are always conscious that they are being watched, indeed everyone in his movies acts *like* a character in a movie. — We are watching them watch themselves.

Belmondo stands in front of a Bogart poster and mimics the pose: he doesn't simply want to look like Bogart, he wants to be Bogart *in a movie*.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Much later we can see that he's posing for a selfie — several decades before the selfie was invented. The ubiquity of cameras has finally turned everyone into Belmondo, and the world into a Godard movie.

You can go through *Breathless* practically line by line and dissect it in these terms: from the “suffocation” of the title — the constraint imposed by the reality principle, by the world outside the movies, where one is never free to choose one’s role — to the moment when Belmondo expires with a gesture. In every moment he is acting the role of a character who is — quite consciously — acting the role of a character.

Again:

— The girl watching the fight in *Les Carabiniers*, playacting along by waving her fists. — What does she look like? like a kid watching a fight in a movie, not like someone witnessing an actual fight.

— A particular favorite: in *Alphaville* a gungel tries to jump Lemmy in a phone booth; he pulls a knife, but Lemmy grabs the knife hand and breaks his arm, slamming it into the booth. — There is a priceless look of confusion on the gungel’s face when he realizes he’s going to have to let go of the cigarette drooping from his lip and compromise his cool — he is incapable of doing this and thus helpless as Lemmy drags him into the other booth —

— Lemmy’s colleague Dickson chooses to die literally on-camera, with Lemmy watching and snapping photographs and going out with his boots on, while nailing a prostitute. — Even the computer seems to have learned its role by studying spy-movie villains.

— The revolutionaries in *Weekend* look like kids playing dressup. — How prescient this seems in retrospect; more, probably, than Godard himself realized at the time. — The relevance of his famous remark in this connection that his films didn’t have a lot of blood but rather a lot of “red” in them.

— A recurrent motif, girls performing strangely stylized dances before the camera. (This was particularly pronounced in, e.g., his

contribution to the ensemble film *Aria*.) — They act like girls dancing *for* the camera, unnaturally self-conscious.

— Again: he writes Anna Karina a musical. She wants to be a girl in a musical, and he indulges her. He writes her a musical in which she is, literally, a girl who wants to be in a musical.

— The curious perspective in *Le Mepris*. The lovingly prolonged tracking shot, which turns upon the viewer as if to ask: who is watching whom? — This is a movie about making a movie, nothing new there, but the characters are curiously confused about their ontological status: Palanca explaining with gusto his identification with the Greek gods; the writer becomes one of his own characters; Lang and Bardot, icons of cinema, simply play themselves.

— *Le Petit Soldat* seems more like a “real” movie — a spy movie — but the protagonist is, after all, someone who *poses* as a photographer, this is his cover, and had it been plausible at the time, he could well have been posing as a documentary filmmaker; as if *The Battle of Algiers* had been made about a guy filming *The Battle of Algiers*.

I once summarized his method as follows: “Two guys who think they're Bogart sit in a cafe and argue about aesthetics with a famous academic; fart joke; fake gunfight with deliberately fake blood; fart joke; guy plays Mozart in a barnyard; fart joke, fart joke; girl takes her shirt off and starts talking about quantum mechanics.” — Really the fart jokes are an artifact of translating Godard into me, but you get the idea. (I would probably also throw in a trapdoor that drops everyone into a tank containing a giant octopus, but that's more like translating Feuillade into me.)

*Before Sunrise (2/5/95)*

Or, *Slackers on a Train*: itinerant students Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy meet cute en route to Vienna and talk even cuter, conversing with intense animation about love, death, time travel, ideas for television series, and why dogs are beautiful sleeping in the sun but people standing in line at the ATM look like morons. When Hawke gets off, he asks Delpy to come along and [since he lacks money for a hotel] walk around the city with him all night; predictably smitten, she acquiesces, and the two tour the Austin of mittelEuropa, discussing sex, first love, what they hate, what records they listen to, the war in the Balkans, their parents, the media, the moral imperative for foreigners to learn English, and what one may learn riding on the bus. — They visit the Magic Theater; Julie gets her palm read; Ethan explains to her that we are all stardust (a line I've used myself, though of course it never gets *me* anywhere). Finally they make it in the park by the faint diffused light of the distant and inscrutable stellar furnaces in whose bowels our atoms were all made. — The punch line, let drop at the station as they bid farewell, is that this miniature Odyssey is all supposed to have transpired on June 16th: Bloomsday. — As an afterthought they agree to meet here again in six months' time — i.e., in the city of Beethoven, on his birthday. Thus intimating the moral of Joyce himself: that the apparently trivial and quotidian can have an unseen dimension which may be very deep indeed.<sup>13</sup>

That, or maybe this is just another idea for a television series. But with two such charming talking heads, I suppose I might actually watch it.

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<sup>13</sup> Linklater underscored the reference with the opening shot of the sequel *Before Sunset* [2004], which shows Hawke, now become an author, doing a signing in Paris at Shakespeare and Company.

*Lost worlds (2/21/95)*

**Vampire Men of the Lost Planet.** [Al Adamson, 1970.]

An intrepid crew of astronauts take flight in a spaceship made from pie tins to escape a bad vampire movie, are waylaid by cartooned cosmic radiation, and crashland into a Filipino movie about cavemen and dinosaurs. Here, by the miracle of “Spectravision”, an alien landscape is revealed bathed by the “chromatic radiation” created by printing black and white footage through colored filters. —  
Meanwhile, back at Mission Control, Vicki Volante and her paramour take time off from the command consoles to beat Woody Allen to publication with the invention of the Orgasmatron. Take that, William Burroughs. — It says everything about his career that this was not the worst nor the weirdest movie John Carradine ever made, and everything about the talent of Vilmos Zsigmond that he survived this debacle and went on to become the most renowned cinematographer in Hollywood.

*Quest for dirt (8/23/95)*

**Waterworld.** [Kevin Reynolds, 1995.]

After a new deluge (preceded, presumably, by some unspecified holocaust, but who’s keeping score) has drowned the world, webfooted misanthrope Kevin Costner sails around in an outrigger looking for the lost legend of dry land; accompanied, to his considerable annoyance, by toothsome refugee Jeanne Tripplehorn and a cute little girl with a map tattooed on her back (yes, it is a Clue) and pursued by the minions of piratical evildoer Dennis Hopper, who

smokes cigarettes and sports an eyepatch. Mankind having reverted if not to savagery then to a somewhat rusty re-enactment of the Bronze Age, functioning machinery is rare (thus an occasion for theft, thus mainly in the hands of the buccaneers), and everybody dresses in rags. — This is, in other words, *Mad Max* in Polynesia, complete with weird cargo-cult religious rituals, deranged bikers on distressed jetskis, dreadlock hairdos, a lot of recycled naval wreckage, windmills, homebrew stills, many native eccentrics (indeed everyone seems a few shrimp short of a salad), crossbows, chain mail, and harpoon guns, a lot of climbing up into the rigging (unaccompanied, for once, by mutterings of “avast, me hearties”), not much in the way of fresh vegetables, the usual weirdo flying around in a balloon, a few unconvincing hints at colorful barbaric practices like rape, pillage, and torture for sport, and guys in funny hats, and probably lacks only Frankie and Annette and a cameo by Dick Dale and the Deltones to keep it from sailing off into worldgirdling Ocean and falling off the edge of the earth.

The joke, of course, is that the *Road Warrior* movies represented an inspired answer to the question of how to shoot an action movie for next to nothing (no wonder they engendered a thousand imitations), whereas this piece of shit somehow cost two hundred million dollars. Somewhere George Miller is laughing his ass off.

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*The importance of being Cindy (11/11/95)*

“He’s a cop on the edge. She’s a woman with a dangerous secret. And now they’re both...”

**Fair Game.** [Andrew Sipes, 1995. Written by Charlie Fletcher; after a novel by Paula Gosling.]

Joel Silver does it again: Type A legal eagle Cindy Crawford is jogging down the beach one sunny afternoon when abruptly somebody (surely it couldn't be a critic) starts shooting at her, which gets her hauled off to the police station to file a report, where she is granted a rather perfunctory interview by Billy Baldwin (after — I'm sure you've never seen this before — he disarms a psycho suspect who grabs a gun and starts blasting in the stationhouse) just long enough to establish that lawyers are amoral scum who let criminals go free, the Florida police are corrupt fascist tools on the take, and (what a coincidence) that he's just split up with his girlfriend Salma Hayek, who drops by to register a protest against his dilatory approach to moving out by dumping a truckload of his personal possessions in the street. Meanwhile Dan Hedaya walks briefly through the scenario as a scumbag lawyer (indeed he is to the manner born), but, in a testimonial to his own good judgment, keeps right on going; and some very unsavory characters with Russian accents are doing something nefarious in a rusty old freighter off the coast — which, I guess, entails whacking our heroine. We repair to her beachside mansion, which sports a lot of brightly lit windows before which she habitually parades in a state of undress; here Baldwin happens by with some unfinished paperwork just as the bomb some Slavic humorist planted in her television goes off, blowing her off the balcony and into the pool. Baldwin deters the wouldbe assassin from finishing her off with machinegun fire by flying through the air firing his forty-fives just like Chow Yun Fat. "Whoever's after you, they're real pros," he remarks. "It would be embarrassing to be killed by amateurs," she replies. How true. Having thus officially Met Cute, our protagonists repair to a safehouse, where they remain undiscovered just long enough to start taking the first of a long series of showers. Alas, the cunning Russian fiends have been busily filling their computer screens with Unix pathnames in Cyrillic characters, hack into the legendary Pizza Database, and then into the delivery guy himself ("My pizzas are getting cold!" he protests when they cut him off — "And so are you," says the hitman), with the result that Billy has to dash out of the shower and run around a darkened apartment naked with his gun in his hand (and surely there must be a song in that). At any rate they

now realize They Can Trust No One, and after that they're young, they're beautiful, they're on the road and on the run in a stylized southFloridian landscape with palm trees and skies so heavily processed they look like a fucking Tiffin filter ad on the back cover of the *American Cinematographer*, their tshirts are torn, their faces are streaked with photogenic dirt even though the action grinds to a halt every few minutes so that they can take more showers, they bark at one another testily right up to the point at which they abruptly start sucking face and clawing each other's clothing off, they're harried by gunsels and must shoot back, they keep leaping toward the camera away from explosions behind them which fill the sky, the cops are after them, the Russian mob is after them, the geeks at the computer store are after them, the world pursues them and they must fly, fly, to the round earth's imagin'd corners, where they're chased through the locker room of the Miami Dolphins' cheerleaders by a truckload of pigs and an FBI guy who has to be a phony because he smokes cigars... . — Shit, I think they really sank that rusty old freighter. Was that the terminal whammy? — And in the dismal annals of supermodel movie debuts, was this even close to being the worst? — "It's all right," he says, "it's over." One can only hope.

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*La jetée (1/8/1996)*

... I try to refrain from commenting on actual works of genius, feeling it is inappropriate for someone who is less a critic than a graffiti artist, but have to remark that one of the discoveries Marker made with this extraordinary experiment was that even a sequential display of still photographs, timed with such exquisite precision as these, can exhibit an editing rhythm ... .



“You will emerge....”



“...a woman of super strength and beauty...”



“—the Bride of the Atom!”

*Exile on Main Street (1/19/96)*

**Bride Of The Monster.** [Edward D. Wood Jr., 1955.]

In a gloomy dismal swamp in the deep dark woods, in a lonely Gothic mansion over which hovers a perpetual thunderstorm (“Maybe it’s all those atom bomb tests,” somebody suggests helpfully), lives mad scientist Bela Lugosi with his boon companions the mute giant Tor Johnson and a giant octopus. Here he experiments on unwary visitors in his secret laboratory — freezing them in the headlights with his mesmeric influence, strapping them to an operating table, sticking electrodes into their heads, and, by dint of much hurling of switches and twirling of giant radio knobs, trying to turn them into atomic supermen. Unfortunately, this usually results in their being turned into atomic burnt toast instead, but faint heart ne’er won fair maiden Cosmic Truth, let alone world mastery, and the intrepid Lugosi undaunted soldiers on; until, alas, nosy girl reporter Loretta King comes sniffing around, gets her bony ass captured and tossed in the dungeon, and prompts a charge to the rescue by dumbass cop boyfriend Tony McCoy — which, despite his getting bounced around the walls by the gigantic Johnson, necessarily precipitates a chain of events which can only end in general cataclysm and the tragic demise of Lugosi — devoured, I regret to report, by his multitentacled pet.

Wood’s formidable reputation notwithstanding, this picture doesn’t suck: it is quite as good as any other specimen of Bmovie scifi from the drivein era — better photographed, for example, than the equivalent Cormans; and though the writing for the most part exhibits that tin ear for dialogue for which Ed was famous, Lugosi does get off at least one great speech (meticulously reproduced by Martin Landau in the Tim Burton biopic) which says just about as much about silence, exile, and cunning as you can expect this side of James Joyce.

A certain mystery lingers nonetheless around the setting of the action, which is variously intimated to lie in the Midwest, the Louisiana bayou, and the jungles of the Amazon; and somebody, really, ought to explain what that refrigerator is doing in Lugosi's laboratory. — When a mad scientist needs a pickmeup, what does he reach for? chilled vodka? cappuccino? carrot juice? the blood of teenaged virgins? Enquiring minds want to know.

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*The problem of the video store (3/21/1996)*<sup>14</sup>

How do you sort and arrange the titles on the shelves? Inevitably some classification scheme is imposed which is completely arbitrary, and makes it impossible to find anything unless you already know where it is. — Is *Alphaville* filed under Foreign/French/New Wave or Famous Directors/Godard or Cult/Science Fiction or Great Eurobabes/Anna Karina, or what?

There is a similar problem with computer filing systems, though there you don't have the excuse that you do in the video store, i.e. that you probably have only one box.

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<sup>14</sup>I now look back on this era with the kind of qualified nostalgia the march of technological progress imposes on us: image quality sucked, sound was terrible, but — the size was perfect, just about that of a book. I could keep them on my shelves as part of my library. Films noir and books about film noir could be interleaved in a natural progression. — And they were colorful! it is little remarked that one of the principal advantages of a physical over a digital library is the speed of random access, which is facilitated by associating a volume with a spatial location and a color, making the individual title easy to identify. — Compare the vinyl LP, which was exactly the right size to accommodate cover art and liner notes. The CD was decidedly inferior in both respects. — And I miss the double and triple features that fell together by a kind of surrealistic chance juxtaposition, governed by length and the imperative to minimize wasted storage. One favorite tape, e.g., held *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and *Hollywood Chainsaw Hookers*. As a double feature, this was totally awesome.

This is a bit like the “name ?= description” question in the philosophy of logic. — Compare, e.g., “/usr/local/bin/sbcl” with “John of Gaunt”. — If names *were* descriptions, you’d have the same problem, there’d be an arbitrarily large number of names attached to any individual. The number of possible filing systems, and thus of unique pathnames, is potentially infinite.

The correct solution would be to regard a classification scheme as analogous to a coordinate system: something which you take for granted can be changed according to convenience. A primitive version of this is already visible in the IMDB, which sorts either by (person, list of movies) or (movie, list of persons) depending on choice. But there are countless other predicates that might be employed, time/ place e.g. (“the Lower East Side in the early Thirties”), plot devices (“*Under Siege* = *Die Hard* on a battleship”), film stock, costume design, whatever.

But how to implement this with physical objects? with boxes? The proper way to do it would be to embed the store in a (much) higher-dimensional space. *Alphaville* would then sit on a shelf extending in the x direction to include the other films of the New Wave, in the y direction to include the films of Godard, in the z direction to include films about evil computers, and in assorted other directions to include the films of Anna Karina, the films of Eddie Constantine, the films of Raoul Coutard, etc. So then to find films “like” the one in question you would look along one of these shelves, in one of these directions. (This seems geometrically implausible, and I’m not sure it’s possible to implement it as described.)

In principle you could make do in three dimensions by attaching the boxes to one another with colored threads (x is connected to y with a purple thread by virtue of having the same cinematographer, etc.), but [a] you’d need a lot of colors and [b] you wouldn’t be able to walk around the store without tripping over threads and bringing everything crashing down around you. — Well, it’s always something.

The INCREDIBLE

# CHESTY

SEE THE MOB  
GET BUSTED

WHEN 'CHESTY'  
TAKES HER REVENGE



COLOR



# MORGAN

SEEING IS BELIEVING!

# 73 - 32 - 36

- A HALLMARK Presentation -

# "DEADLY WEAPONS"

... THE ONLY WAY TO GO!

Excessive.

*Rising barometer, plunging neckline (4/6/1996)*

... 1492 reminded me of nothing so much as the story about the two theatrical agents discussing their clients. The first says to the second that he's handling a stripper with a seventy-six inch bust. — “Jesus,” says the other guy, “a seventy-six inch bust? What does she do?” — “Well,” admits the first, “mostly she crawls out onto the stage and tries to stand up.” — The discovery of the New World was a stripper with such a chest, I concluded, and thus no wonder Ridley Scott's movie never got off the ground... .

... *Thelma and Louise* always annoyed me, in truth, for the following reason: it is often said that the essence of a story can be conveyed in a single sentence — not the pitch line, which is the premise, but the conclusion, as it were: the summary, what it entails. This has some justice to it, though the result can be ridiculous — *Hamlet*, e.g., “After seeing a ghost, everyone dies.” But it's true of *Thelma and Louise*, and what the movie says is this: women have no escape from the brutal domination of men, save in death. — That may be true, but it is an ugly and depressing moral, and to claim that a film which promotes it makes some kind of statement of liberation seems absurd to me.....



*Correction and amplification (5/4/96)*

To quote myself:

Somewhere in *How To Stuff A Wild Bikini* (at least I think it was that one) Annette (backed by the inevitable dramatic chorus of beach babes) sings the usual soulful ballad to Frankie, stating the usual argument; couched (however) in unusual terms. It begins something like:

ANNETTE: The boy I marry doesn't have to be a Hercules....

CHORUS (echoing): ...Hercules....

ANNETTE: The boy I marry doesn't have to be Euripides....

CHORUS: ...Euripides....

At this point, of course — in Pasadena, in the Heroic Age — we all leapt severally from our decaying armchairs, regarded one another with disbelief, and cried in unison: “Hercules and Euripides?!” — The rest of it is lost in the mists of time. But this part's good enough; isn't it?

Our research department can now report that this isn't entirely accurate. — The motion picture in question was, indeed, *How To Stuff A Wild Bikini*. The plot, however, though a variation on the usual themes, marked a departure from the standard development: in this version Frankie, summoned by the Naval Reserve to a hitch in Goona Goona in the South Seas, calls on the services of a native witchdoctor

(Buster Keaton, in another of those roles that proved — as if it needed further confirmation — that there is no limit to the mortification Hollywood may require of genius) to dispatch a familiar spirit to spy upon Annette, whom he suspects of cheating on him, even as he himself is enjoying the favors of a nubile (but refreshingly cynical) Polynesian babe. The spirit takes the form either of an albatross or a buxom redhead, perhaps both; I confess some lingering confusion.. — Mickey Rooney makes an appearance; the bogus bikers become involved; complications ensue. — Midway through this merry sport Annette (who is energetically resisting the advances of Dwayne Hickman) receives an uncandid letter from Frankie, who claims to be pining away for her unattended. — Pleased with the tenor of this missive, she turns to her supporting chorus of beach babes, and bursts into song:

ANNETTE: The perfect boy  
Doesn't have to be a Hercules

CHORUS: ...Hercules...

ANNETTE: The perfect boy  
Doesn't have to be Euripides

CHORUS: ...'Ripides...

ANNETTE: Brawn or brain  
He doesn't have to be  
What I mean  
To say is actually  
The perfect boy  
Only has to be  
Just true  
To me.  
The perfect boy  
Doesn't have to be a movie star

CHORUS: ...movie star...

ANNETTE: The perfect boy  
Doesn't have to drive a fancy car

CHORUS: ...fancy car...

ANNETTE: Fame nor wealth  
He doesn't need you see  
What I mean  
To say is actually  
The perfect boy  
Only has to be  
Faithful  
True and faithful to me!

Almost immediately, alas, she is made aware of Frankie's deception. — Even Annette may contemplate revenge: Dwayne Hickman gains in her affections. — We fear the worst.

Fortunately, as was always the case in MCMLXV, the right prevails: the bikers are thwarted, Dwayne Hickman falls for someone else, Frankie and Annette are reunited, the weather never breaks, and no one ever pops a zit. No wonder we all grew up to be airheads.

—472—

*Cartesian doubt (7/20/96)*

It occurred to me that it wouldn't make a bad poster if one were to depict Beavis and Butt-head, striking Rodin poses, with the legend beneath: "Cogito, ergo suck." So I called you up to explain this to you, but you weren't there ... .

*Ed Wood returns; and other misadventures (7/20/96)*<sup>15</sup>

Notes of your itinerant reviewer:

*Independence Day*: Trust me on this point of elementary physics: if a spaceship is fifteen miles across, even tactical nukes will bounce off it like spitwads from a peashooter; or [more to the point] like spears off an ironclad. — And on this elementary point of film criticism: the only good disaster movie, ever, was *Airplane*. — A point which seems not to have been lost upon the authors, since what this looks like, actually, is not the movie per se but rather the remake of the parody of the movie, made by some guys who though they themselves may see the joke nonetheless trust that the audience will not: the idea of President Bill Pullman climbing into his jet to lead his aerial troops into the final battle against the invading aliens, for instance, is obviously stolen from the epic swordfight in *Hot Shots Part Deux* between President Lloyd Bridges and Saddam Hussein; never mind the risibility of Goldblum's plugging his laptop into an alien mainframe and instantly hacking their operating system [do they run Unix?] — The best comedy of the season, in any case; I only wish they'd gone all the way and cast Leslie Nielsen in the lead.

*The Truth About Cats And Dogs*: Cute. Cute. Cute. *Cyrano* for girls; and why not. But isn't there another way to do it? Why does the homely girl have to win out over the cute girl at the end? Why can't the two girls decide they don't need the guy at all and ride off together into the sunset? Why can't the guy turn out to have been twins all along? or two guys, you know, not indistinguishable, so that the cute guy falls for the homely girl and the homely guy falls for the cute girl... no, I think this is another one that was old when Shakespeare stole it from the Italians... But maybe the guy falls for the homely girl but she

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<sup>15</sup> Here and subsequently thes compendia have been selectively edited.

decides at the last moment that she really wants his dog, and then Uma... wait a minute...

—473.1—

*Degrees of idiocy (7/23/96)*

.....It's always foolish to attempt to explain a joke. — But: I think my intention was not to appeal directly to the (firstorder) fans of Beavis and Butthead, i.e., those who think they're laughing at them because they suppose they've finally found a couple of adolescents even dumber than they are themselves (though actually they haven't), but, rather, to appeal by indirection to those (secondorder) cultural observers who are fascinated by this phenomenon of people who don't realize they're laughing at themselves; and, of course, the apologists who don't realize the people laughing don't realize they're laughing at themselves. — I recall, e.g., having heard some GenX analyst expounding not long ago on the ironic dimensions of the Beavis-and-Butthead boomlet: "Just think of it!" he exclaimed. "MTV making fun of adolescent boys! its own core constituency! — You simply can't imagine the *New Yorker*, say, doing anything so daring!" — indicating that (first) he'd never looked at the *New Yorker* and noticed, for instance, the cartoons, and (second) he hadn't noticed that most of the people watching Beavis and Butthead on MTV, having little or no capacity for the kind of ironic distancing he was projecting, have in effect adopted them as role models. — Because this imagined, this hypothetical, this fondly supposed ironic distancing, so essential to the GenX pose, is completely phony. Isn't it. — It's all very well to pretend that those eighty hours a week spent watching reruns of *Gilligan's Island* are mere exercise for your sneer. But meanwhile your brain really has turned to oatmeal. And you've started to talk like Bob Denver. — So the point isn't the (real) absence of irony, but the ironic dimensions of imagined (virtual) irony. — It's hardly accidental that the plot of *Reality Bites* turns on Winona Ryder's inability to define the

word, for instance. — At any rate, when I make fun of the tendency to overintellectualize, I know perfectly well I'm making fun of myself. — I think too much. And I do suck.



She came here for the waters.

*Way, way over the top (10/29/96)*

**Barb Wire.** [David Hogan, 1996.]

Disturbing rumors had reached my ears regarding the narrative antecedents of *Barb Wire*, the new futuristic action/adventure/mammaryfixation feature produced by everyone who could get a piece of it and starring the celebrated megabimbo Pamela Anderson (Lee), but I'd chosen to ignore them. My tastes, after all, are simple: I'm fond of these vehicles that serve to introduce the latest B-girls to the virtual drive-in, and if you tell me, as in the case at hand, that the year is 2017 and a dedicated Resistance is waging a heroic twilight struggle against a despotic central government, I'll expect, at worst, leatherclad punkerbabes careening round the postindustrial ruins of the western deserts in rusting hotrods: boobs and bazookas; *Mad Max Beyond Wonderbra*.

But big-budget filmmaking is itself an exercise in the action/adventure genre, filled with comicbook characters, colorful explosions, and women whose clothes keep falling off, and when too much money starts chasing an illconceived project, it may, like the stuntman's motorcycle, hurtle off the road into empty space. It's unfortunate, therefore, that the Hollywood imagination contains so much empty space: you might strike another planet before you strike a fresh idea; or (more to the point) the appropriate stale one.

Which is to say, alas, the rumors all are true. *Barb Wire* is a note-for-note remake of *Casablanca*, with: an evil dictatorship called the Congressional Directorate as the Nazis; Steel Harbor ("the last free city in America") as *Casablanca*; an industrial-warehouse nightclub called the Hammerhead as Rick's; a magical pair of contact lenses which render the wearer undetectable to retinal scans as the stolen Letters of Transit; a conscience-stricken renegade government

scientist named Cora D. as Paul Henreid; a bland hunk named Axel Hood as Ingrid Bergman; a slimy hood named Schmitz as Peter Lorre; a corrupt cop named Willis as Claude Rains; a repellent thug named Colonel Pryzer as Conrad Veidt; the last helicopter out of Seattle as the last train out of Paris; a corpulent mob boss named Big Fatso as Sydney Greenstreet; Wild Turkey (thanks to energetic product placement) as the hitherto anonymous whiskey Rick swilled to drown his sorrows; a catchall Daddy Warbucks clone named Curly to stand in for S. Z. Sakall, Madeleine LeBeau, Leonid Kinskey, and Dooley Wilson; and, preposterous though this may seem, an emphatically three-dimensional lady terminator named Barb Wire (the redoubtable Ms. Anderson) as Humphrey Bogart. Who said the fundamental things apply?

Not that this isn't fun to watch. True, art is usually supposed to be the pure work of the imagination. But then again (as Edison said) genius is at best one percent inspiration, ninety-nine percent perspiration. And whatever the quality of their inspiration, no one can fault the work ethic of our authors, who send vital fluids pumping to the remotest extremities from the first frames of this opus, opening with a stunning title sequence, a flamboyantly-lit rock-video montage of Pam, solo, performing a dazzling striptease while swinging on a trapeze and being hosed down, apparently, by most of the Steel Harbor fire department. — One must admire such uncompromising candor. Feebler characters might attempt somehow to appease the critics. But Mr. Hogan and his colleagues make it clear they have nothing to offer us but blood, toil, tits, and sweat.

This introduction concludes (in apparent homage to Ursula Andress in *The Tenth Victim*) when our heroine — who is, it develops, performing in front of an audience — takes offense at the attentions of a particularly obnoxious patron and nails him between the eyes with a skillfully-thrown stiletto heel — passing sentence on him with her signature line: Don't Call Me Babe. Indeed, perish the thought.

I don't know about Pam, but here I had to pause to towel myself off. When I returned I found the story developing along familiar lines: Ms. Wire, proprietor of the Hammerhead, is an embittered former Resistance leader who moonlights for illdefined reasons as some kind of mercenary/private-eye. Her distinguished position (sooner or later everybody comes to, etc.) ensures that the magical lenses drop neatly into her lap; pursued, naturally, by her ex-boyfriend and his new spouse Cora, who flee, in turn, the evil Congressionals/Nazis. This entails the familiar dilemma: should she sell the lenses for her own profit and fly away to Paris? or give them to the good guys, and let them run the blockade to Canada?

What renders the original *Casablanca* distinctive, of course, is the ambiguity of the character of Rick, whose intentions remain unknown and unreadable until literally the last moment. Indeed, famously, no one — not the writer, not the director, not the actors — knew how the story would end until they'd filmed one version of the final scene, looked at it, and decided not to film another. Modern audiences, however — not to mention modern writers, directors, and would-be actresses — do not embrace such nuances gladly, and, accordingly, Pam (who is nothing if not unambiguous) is provided with a blinded war-hero brother whose welfare she'd unselfishly be advancing if she were to take the money and run. Naturally this means a way must be found to kill the sibling off before the denouement; but that's a relatively minor detail of the narrative machinery, which must in any case effect the transformation of the oldfashioned dramatic tension which animated the antique melodrama into the now-essential third-act bloodbath. And they say there's no such thing as progress.

In the course of this action we explore a couple of beautiful warehouse sets and an elegantly distressed shipyard, observe a number of colorful detonations, learn some really cool twentyfirst century brainscanning interrogation techniques (which, fortunately, don't seem to have eliminated the necessity of torturing naked women), meet a junkyard dog named Camille with an amusing taste for biker dick, and study

Pam attentively as she experiments with a dazzling variety of arresting postures from which to fire her many weapons. At the last, naturally, we welcome the richly-deserved demise of all of the bad guys; and find ourselves trying to take seriously the barely-disguised implication that the Second World War would have been just this simple, had the Allies displayed the appropriate combination of attitude and fashion sense.

The finale, now (in the absence of suspense about Pam's intentions) a mere coda, is letter-perfect, complete with airplane, rain, umbrellas, fog, and the row of landinglights in the background as our heroine walks off into the night — sans faux-Claude-Rains, of course, who simply doesn't seem to measure up. (As indeed who could: Tommy Lee must already be perusing catalogs for marital aids.) — And though none of the principals can be persuaded to wear anything so pedestrian as a trenchcoat, given the obvious effort the costumers put into designing leather bustiers, one simply can't complain. — Again (as I think of it) though I'd have to put a call through to Joe Bob to be sure, I suspect the scene in which Pam leaps from the tub to gun down an intruder while clad in nothing but strategically-deployed soapsuds may be unique in the history of cinematic bubblebath.

Of course the moral of this spectacle is problematic.

What the narrative conveys (I find that I'm unable to throttle the urge to refer to it as the ideological substrate of the filmic text) is, at bottom, determined by the fact that it is a translation of the original *Casablanca* into the action/adventure genre. Though it's easy to make fun of this, the exercise is not illegitimate a priori: after all, Kurosawa obtained brilliant results translating *Macbeth* and *King Lear* into samurai movies (*Throne of Blood* and *Ran*, respectively); projects which, before the fact, might have seemed equally silly.

In fact the problem doesn't necessarily lie in the idea of making *Casablanca* over as an action/adventure picture; it lies instead in the

rather narrow contemporary interpretation of that genre, which is peculiar to the culture of Hollywood as presently constituted and to the audience Hollywood has trained to share its preconceptions.

For the modern action movie instantiates a sort of demented Calvinism: throughout the gunbattles, the car chases, the explosions, and the slaughter, there are the few, God's elect, the chosen, who will survive to make the sequel; and the many, the fallen, the mere casualties, who (riddled by bullets, flattened into road pizzas, impaled on meathooks) will not. The former are named above the title, receive gross points, and are profiled in *People* magazine; the latter are enumerated at the end of the closing credits, get union scale, and are lucky if they're listed in the Internet Movie Database.

There are winners and losers, in short; and about them the classic statement is now that of Sean Connery to Nicolas Cage: "Losers are always whining that they did their best. Winners go home and fuck the prom queen." Clearly this is an idea that must seem profound in Hollywood, a town populated exclusively by prom queens and the guys who fucked them.

But *Casablanca* is a movie about losers. It is set in 1941; the war in Europe has at this point ended in catastrophic defeat. If there is a prom queen to be found here, she is Paris; and the Wehrmacht is having a gangbang at her expense. Thus the story, insofar as Hollywood could now discover one, is already over; and had no happy ending. The characters who populate the scenario are the powerless — refugees, émigrés, the damaged and the dispossessed, helpless and desperate fugitives on the run; they are not larger than ordinary men and women, quite the contrary, they are eccentric, individual, small, mean — though gradually it may dawn upon us that this is something like life and not like a movie and that these are in fact just like real survivors, the quick and the fortunate who are not the dead. Indeed the purported hero, Rick, is singled out not as the bravest or the strongest but only as the quickest and the cleverest: the first rat to

have fled the sinking ship. And though the modern action picture must be constructed around some kind of superman who can walk out into the street and face down, say, the German army, as Stallone or Arnold might, with a few karate kicks and some random gunfire — in fact just as Pam faces down the Congressionals — in *Casablanca* it is quite the opposite: the supermen are the Germans; they are invincible monsters, beyond the capability of the protagonists even directly to confront, let alone to overcome. Certainly Rick will not confront them; not until the last, and then not by choice.

Worst of all, and most unthinkable, he has to give the girl away. And though it's always easy, really, to forget the prom queen, it is absolutely impossible to forget Ingrid Bergman.

But the moral of *Casablanca* is just the moral of the last good war: that one must learn to lose gracefully. For it may be that if you keep your head, wait your chance, watch for your moment, you may not have lost for good and all. That caution, a cool head, and a calculated persistence will eventually prevail, that they are in the end infinitely more valuable than brute strength and theatrical bravado; that even the nobility and élan of a Victor Laszlo, however admirable, can accomplish little against an ultimate evil wielding overwhelming force; that what will finally prevail will be the consistent exercise of rational intelligence, even manipulative cunning — the qualities exemplified by Rick.

None of this is new. In the first action movie in the Western tradition — the *Iliad* — the Trojan war was won not by the martial exploits of the hero Achilles but by the cunning stratagems of the wily Odysseus. — Though now, naturally, you have to wonder whether Homer would be able to get an agent; and, if anyone were to hire him, what kinds of notes the studio executives would give him on his scripts.

Why does *Casablanca* seem so alien to the contemporary culture of Hollywood? Perhaps it is no accident that the strutting Nazis who

march into Rick's expecting the best table as the right of the conquerors would not seem out of place in the restaurants where the brokers of the motion picture industry take power lunch. For (in fact) as the theology of Hollywood is Calvinist and its culture is elitist, the ethic of its most characteristic product, the action/adventure, is fundamentally fascist. Thus it should be no surprise that the essential lessons of *Casablanca* — that diversity must prevail over elitism, democracy over fascism, pluralism over monism — cannot be reproduced in a modern (major) motion picture; and certainly not in this one. There were a lot of blonde bimbos in leather in the real war against the Nazis; but they were all on the other side.

One apparent subtext begs mention: save for the obligatory overhead shot of Barb and her ex kissing in a descending freight elevator (completely unmotivated as always, but, as always, who cares: it's a great shot), romance is absent, and (in fact) Ms. Wire seems always to choose to spurn her many suitors with fatal gunfire. I presume that this is meant to convey some kind of Revolt Of The Sex Object; with which I'm sure in other circumstances I might sympathize. But, really, when these gestures originate with a character who spends most of the movie changing her clothes in front of the camera, a character depicted by a young woman, incidentally, whose nude poses fill volumes, whose lips are now swollen to the size of bicycle tires, whose mammaries have metamorphosed into silicone footballs, and whose honeymoon video mysteriously materialized on the desk of the publisher of *Penthouse* on the very eve of the release of this motion picture, these protests lack, shall we say, a certain resonance.

And, indeed, whither Pam? No doubt it is presumptuous to try to guess what inspiration may next descend from Olympus onto the laureled brows of the high priests of high concept, but I can't help but wonder: Pam as Klaus Kinski in *Aguirre, The Wrath of God*? Pam as Orson Welles in *Touch Of Evil*? Pam as Toshiro Mifune in *The Seven Samurai*? Pam as Erich Von Stroheim in *Grand Illusion*? But take my vote for this last. I rather fancy Pam the fallen aviator ensconced in

her medieval castle: screwing in her monocle, clicking her bootheels, toasting her Allied prisoners in champagne, sniffing sadly at her lone geranium, tucking herself into an amazing variety of corsets. And say what you will about Von Stroheim — that he was a great artist of the cinema, a genius, a grand auteur, a master of mise-en-scène, though nonetheless a spendthrift, a poseur, the selfinvented epitome of European decadence — *The Man (in short) You Loved To Hate* — say what you will about Von Stroheim, you must remember this: no one ever called him Babe.

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*Somebody stop me, before I eat popcorn again (2/23/97)*

**A Time To Kill.** [Joel Schumacher, 1996.]

A video screening subjected to a number of interruptions, which I suppose I might title *A Time To Get Up And Go To The Bathroom, A Time To Look For Something In The Refrigerator, A Time To Check For Email And Browse Through Usenet, A Time To Pause To Do The Dishes*, and finally *A Time To Turn The Television Off And Read*.

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*Just like Paul Newman with the Blues (5/14/97)*

About two o'clock in the morning, after I get drunk and blow the match with Minnesota Fats, dump my erstwhile mentor, drift into a marriage of convenience with a babe who albeit attractive and intellectual is obviously a rudderless lush, sit through an extremely painful lecture from George C. Scott on the nature and properties of the Loser with particular application to me, and finally get my thumbs broken in a dimestore pool game, I remember why I never make it all

the way through this movie anymore and decide maybe I ought to get up and catch up on my correspondence. — If I kill another hour I can watch Tom Selleck play a writer of detective stories who falls for Paulina Porizkova;<sup>16</sup> if I work at it hard enough, maybe I can learn to identify with him instead. — If, if. — As if. — Well, it was a thought.

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*Journey to the center of the mind (7/20/97)*

**Contact.** [Robert Zemeckis, 1997.]

There's an old cartoon that appeared in *Mad* sometime during the Sixties: it depicted a scalyfaced monstrosity not dissimilar to the Creature from the Black Lagoon, just humanoid enough that it was easy to read its facial expression and realize it was pissed off past belief. The monster was framed by a television screen and apparently broadcasting a message of some kind. And what it was saying was this: "People of the planet Earth: We inhabitants of the planet Saturn applaud the scientific advances you have made which allow your television broadcasts to reach us here, eight hundred million miles from the Sun. Be advised, however, that if you continue to send us reruns of the *Gail Storm Show* we will have no alternative but to DESTROY YOUR PLANET!"

And that's why Jodie Foster goes to Vega.....

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<sup>16</sup> *Her Alibi* [Bruce Beresford, 1988]. Note for future reference that Paulina plays a "Romanian immigrant" yclept "Nina". Yikes.

*Mistakes have been made (9/21/97)*

**In Love and War.** [Richard Attenborough, 1997.]

Sandra Bullock saves Chris O'Donnell from gangrene (and posterity from the title "A Farewell to Legs"), but just can't seem to clean his bass. War is hell. Thank God for gin.

*Conversations on the plurality of worlds (2/14/98)*

**Mars Needs Women.** [Larry Buchanan, 1967.]

Compelled to seek mates elsewhere by a biological catastrophe which has erased the female population of their native orb and brought their race to the verge of extinction, an intrepid party of adventurers led by Tommy Kirk brave the gulf between the worlds and rocket through the void of interplanetary space to the Earth, to search for suitable female specimens to carry back to the Red Planet as experimental breeding stock.

Landing by virtue of some defect in their guidance mechanism in Texas, they stash their ship in an abandoned factory on the outskirts of town, and, adopting protective coloration, set about the hunt — which, predictably, seems mainly to involve hanging around a lot of dimly lit smoky bars trying out lame pickup lines.

Their strange otherworldly hypnotic powers prove irresistible, and in short order they manage to carry off a stewardess, an artist, and an exotic dancer, pluck the homecoming queen of Delta Gamma from the bosom of her sorority, and, unkindest cut of all, seduce to their cause

the very chick astrophysicist (Yvonne Craig) on whom the establishment is counting to mastermind the Earth's defense; leaving the military-industrial complex and a lot of whitelabcoated Movie Scientists baffled, enraged, and gnashing their teeth, and the fate of the genetic purity of the planet hanging in the balance. Oh the humanity.

This cover story about the women dying off on their own world isn't fooling anybody (though that Martian women would *rather* be dead than be seen with these guys is certainly plausible), but there's an uncanny realism in the idea that five geeks like these would have to travel forty million miles to another planet to score, that the uniformed military in all its iconic Cold War majesty would mobilize to try to stop them, and that the media would react hysterically and announce the news with screaming headlines.

And, in fact, the whole thing reminds me of a friend of mine who abandoned the bars of Boulder in midcareer, and, armed only with his copy of *How To Pick Up Girls*, drove off into the badlands of New Mexico to try to find a mate. (He did succeed, but that's another tale.)

Weird and funny, at any rate, and not without its moments of insight: "These ties serve no functional purpose," sniffs one of the Martians as they don their disguises. "The Red Planet abandoned the use of ties fifty years ago...it simply reveals the environmental naiveté of the Earthmen."

I couldn't have put it better myself.

*Night and the City (2/27/1998)*

**Dark City.** [Alex Proyas, 1998.]

A parable of Hollywood: the City is a stage set; the citizens are Actors who keep changing roles; the evil aliens are Producers; Sewell is the Director/Auteur who triumphs over the (Studio) System; Sutherland, of course, is the poor bitchslapped Writer, so naturally he's the one who knows *It's Water They Can't Stand*.

It is always night, because that is the time of dreams. (Thus it must always be dark in the theater.)

The detective Hurt is the Critic. ("Nobody ever listens to me," he laments.) In the end he falls through the facade into infinite space — pierces the screen and discovers there is nothing behind it. But it is he in his final vision who is the only one to see the City as a whole, from without.

Sewell doesn't know who he is because that is the crisis of artistic identity. Shell Beach is his lost childhood, which he strives to recover; which means to create it, since it does not really exist.<sup>17</sup> The pages of his scrapbook are blank because he has yet to invent himself.

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<sup>17</sup> Compare *8 1/2*. (Of course.) — For that matter compare Proust: "It is plain that the truth I am seeking lies not in the cup but in myself. The drink has called it into being, but does not know it, and can only repeat indefinitely, with a progressive diminution of strength, the same message which I cannot interpret, though I hope at least to be able to call it forth again and to find it there presently, intact and at my disposal, for my final enlightenment. I put down the cup and examine my own mind. It alone can discover the truth. But how? What an abyss of uncertainty, whenever the mind feels overtaken by itself; when it, the seeker, is at the same time the dark region through which it must go seeking and where all its equipment will avail it nothing. Seek? More than that: create. It is face to face with something which does not yet exist, to which it alone can give reality and substance, which it alone can bring into the light of day." [Transl. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin.]

The spiral motif is a whorl, like a fingerprint; an identifier. The labyrinth.

Even those who think they know who they are are baffled by unresolved questions about their backstories — holes in their maps, scrapbooks with blank pages. — Hurt has an old piano accordion his mother gave him. But he doesn't know when she did, because it isn't in the script.

The Producers are vampires: cold, hairless, soulless, ominous creatures in hats and overcoats. They glide in motion, like Nosferatu, and freeze their victims with a gesture. They cannot bear the light, and know not Authorship. They cannot even blindly rearrange plot elements to try to score a hit; they need Sutherland for that. — He recites his formulas for the chemistry of character and history; they sound like pitch lines.

They worship a Moloch from whom they derive their power, i.e. the box office. The machine-god amplifies their thoughts; this is the technology of cinema.

They act by taking meetings. Presumably they abuse the Personal Assistants who bring them coffee.

The fatal moment: when a producer actually reads the script! regarded by his fellows as a rash move with unpredictable consequences....rather than simply taking meetings....

The final injection with which Sutherland makes Sewell master of them all is consciousness of self: the narrative that reveals all other narratives, the meta-scenario. Sewell is stretched out on the rack when he receives it, in the posture of Leonardo's Vitruvian Man: Ecce Homo.

In the end he attains Final Cut, and carte blanche to render his fantasies as he sees fit. — Somewhat unrealistic, is it not? somewhere

behind the scenes we still must imagine The Guys With The Money, who brought all this to pass. And we know they never lose.

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*More life and times (7/26/98)*

.....I don't recall the story about *Dangerous Liaisons/Valmont*; I think it was just one of those cases where two guys had the same idea at the same time (or, maybe more plausible, ripped off the same spec script without giving credit — I guess it does strain credulity that Frears and Forman should simultaneously have developed an interest in the same eighteenth-century novel) and one beat the other to publication. Cf., as I said, *Relic/Mimic*; or *Deep Impact/Armageddon*. — I loved Malkovich in *Dangerous Liaisons*, in any case; and they said Von Stroheim was The Man You Loved To Hate. — Actually though I think I neglected to mention it I enjoyed *The Man In The Iron Mask*,<sup>18</sup> at least insofar as I was successful in filtering out Leonardo di Whiningbrat. But, sheesh, Gabriel Byrne as D'Artagnan! Malkovich, Jeremy Irons, and Gerard Depardieu as the aging Musketeers! they should try this again....

I too look forward to Spielberg's landing at Omaha Beach, though I suspect this will be another one of those cases where I'll be hardpressed to get through the flick without hurling into my popcorn. — But, you know, the story ought to be told as it really happened, before everyone who remembers it is gone. At this point, strange but true, the Normandy landing is as distant as the Civil War was when Griffith made *The Birth of a Nation*.

I recall an evening a number of years ago, shortly after I got out of school and came back to Boulder. I was going out for some purpose or another, and had, as usual, packed some books and papers into an Army surplus musette bag with a long strap I'd picked up at a

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<sup>18</sup> Dir. Randall Wallace, 1998.

junkstore in Pasadena; and on my way out through the dining room came upon my old man having drinks with one of his old work buddies visiting from Michigan, a guy I knew fairly well from the days before I went off to school, a pleasant enough guy but someone whom I had a tendency to dismiss as inconsequential — as a harmless old faggot, to tell you the truth. So I said hello and we exchanged a few pleasantries and I was about to make my way out. — And then he caught sight of my pack. — To my astonishment, he insisted that I give it to him, and he turned it over and over again in his hands, exclaiming. — And he explained to me that this had been part of the infantryman's kit when he had been a grunt, and that, in fact (and the hair rose upon the back of my neck as he told me this) the bottom of the English Channel is littered with them. Because when the troops crossed over to Normandy, the closer they got to the point at which — seasick, sleepless, terrified — they were going to have to jump out of their tincans into the surf and try to run up onto the beach through a curtain of steel, the more they threw away. Because they knew the most formidable army in the world had had four years to dig in at the top of those bluffs and was waiting for them, and every quantum lighter they could make their burden might make it just a fraction likelier that they'd live long enough to die on dry land. — Dumbstruck with sympathy and admiration, I took the bag back, and I've kept it ever since. Nor have I ever again been quite so hasty to judge by appearances.

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*Antz (10/28/98)*

I saw this the other day (as it happened, on Nietzsche's birthday), and thought it very impressive, though the educated eye can detect areas that need either more work or less. Everything looks as it were too simple or too fractal. No doubt you have heard the dictum, that physics is simple in the limits of very few and very many degrees of

freedom, and that what's difficult lies in between. Similarly, visual reality lies somewhere in between the realms of the geometrically primitive and the self-similar. — Or something like that. In any case my eye is tired of both texture-mapping and perfectly reflective shiny things with sharp shadows. — And what about wave optics? diffraction around edges? a real shadow (like real life) is blurry. — But: it was clever to get Woody and Sharon, the product placements cracked me up, and it's the first time in years I've heard Stallone's voice without cringing. — Not *Lady and the Tramp* by any means, but it didn't suck. — An amazing number of nerds in the credits. — Check it out.

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*Booger nights (11/10/98)*

**Irma Vep.** [Olivier Assayas, 1996.]

A French director on the brink of a nervous breakdown forms the notion of a remake of Louis Feuillade's 1915 serial *Les Vampires*; on the basis of a morose viewing of the Hong Kong action fantasy *The Heroic Trio* he recruits Maggie Cheung to play the lead. The production veers rapidly off the rails, but not before everyone falls for Maggie; indeed she does look great in a Catwoman suit. — Movies about moviemaking are nothing new, but this may be the first in which one of the movies you see within the movie is a movie about making a movie; not to mention that the metatextual intention of Mr. Assayas in authoring this film seems to have been to come up with an excuse to meet Maggie himself so that he could marry her; thus (I suspect) the piquant choice of Truffaut's erstwhile alter ego Jean-Pierre Léaud to play the lead. — If we try to carry this much farther we'll have to start writing our screenplays in Lisp.

**Clay Pigeons.** [David Dobkin, 1998.]

Please: don't shoot. Unless there's some chance of hitting Janeane Garofalo.

**Glory Daze.** [Rich Wilkes, 1996.]

Ben Affleck leads a cast of slackers in a gripping drama about that magic moment right after they've all graduated from college and right before they all go to work at the convenience store and discover they've never learned to make change.

**Public Enemies.** [Mark L. Lester, 1996.]

Theresa Russell plays Ma Barker. Accept no substitutes.

**The Chosen One: Legend of the Raven.** [Lawrence Lanoff, 1998.]

Tutored by a Native American sage, Carmen Electra and Shauna Sand are possessed by the spirits of the Earth and waters to get naked and combat evil.

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*Liquid refreshment (11/23/98)*

**Detective.** [Jean-Luc Godard, 1985.]

Paris. A hotel. A detective. A mystery. Guns, money, mobsters. A boxer gorges himself on chocolate. A braless girl takes her shirt off and puts another on; takes her shirt off and puts another on. No one seems to notice, probably because she is sitting next to the television. — “I'll KO Tiger Jones!” the fighter exclaims. “But isn't he Tiger Jones?” a girl asks. “A champion always fights himself,” his manager

replies. — “We are taking Sicily as a metaphor,” Uncle William is saying in the next room. A girl bursts into tears. — “Why are pornographic movies called X-rated?” a girl asks. “Why ‘X’? as in mathematics.” “Exactly,” someone answers, off. “Oh yes,” she says after a pause. “The unknown.” — “You think the killer will be back?” “History keeps repeating. It’s one long stammer.” — Room service sends up a dead rat on a plate. — “Ah, young girls’ breasts...” a man is sighing. A cut. A woman is folding a wad of bills. “Ah, men’s money... .” — Nobody does it better; nobody ever did.

**Hugo Pool.** [Robert Downey, 1997.]

Robert Downey Senior directs like an actor; Robert Downey Junior acts like a director. Malcolm McDowell has a jones for horse; Cathy Moriarty has a jones for the horses. Alyssa Milano has a blue Chevy truck and Sean Penn has a pair of blue suede shoes. I’ll pass on the shoes, the junk, and the sport of kings; but tell the babe to leave the engine running.

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*Hits and misses (3/16/99)*

**8 mm.** [Joel Schumacher, 1999.]

Schumacher, a guy who (after *The Lost Boys*, *Flatliners*, and the last couple of *Batman* movies) is not exactly afraid of the dark, here outdoes himself in directing this elegant but unrelievedly gloomy homage to Raymond Chandler, in which private eye Nicolas Cage, from his opening audience with an invalid millionairess (in a house not quite as large as Buckingham Palace, with fewer windows than the Chrysler Building) through the interrogation of the boozy widow who takes a shine to him through the wadslimesplattered tour of the pornographic underworld of Los Angeles (far slimier now than in

Philip Marlowe's day) through the rats' alleys of New York to the inevitable deathbattle in the rain, bids grimly eloquent farewell to yet another fallen lovely. Though in fact the plot seems only a device to excuse the look, which can only be described as Miltonic (yet from those flames/No light, but rather darkness visible/Serv'd only to discover sights of woe) — interiors apparently lit with AA cells, exteriors so heavily filtered that they all seem to have been shot in December at dusk — and which is apparently intended to illustrate the paradoxical thesis that modern color filmstock allows one to shoot something even bleaker than the traditional black and white of the classic film noir. — Indeed the screenplay has a sort of sunny side which, under the circumstances, can only be regarded as inappropriate: Cage is provided with a backstory and a domestic life which seem to have been imported from some other movie, or indeed another genre. I am reminded of Nietzsche's derisive remark about the impossibility of imagining a married philosopher; he'd have heaped even more scorn on the idea of a married private eye. — But why quibble. At this point I'd watch Nicolas Cage in *Showgirls Two*; let alone in this beautiful and terrifying tale of the transformation of a wandering knight into an avenging angel. — "I'll never get tired of hurting you, Eddie," he remarks matter-of-factly as he's kicking the shit out of one of the villains. Nor will you want him to. Check this out.

**My Sex Life.** [*Comment Je Me Suis Disputé* ("ma vie sexuelle"); Arnaud Desplechin, 1996.]

There's a memorable moment in the otherwise forgettable slackers-after-college comedy *Reality Bites* in which aspiring video producer Winona Ryder, distraught, sets out looking for underemployed intellectual Ethan Hawke and finds him at last sitting in a cowboy bar, reading Heidegger. I remember thinking at the time that if the cowboys had all been hanging around the bar arguing about Heidegger [rather in the spirit of that classic passage in the adventures of Zippy the Pinhead in which he went to the Kierkegaard Memorial

Launderette to find the last five intellectuals in America] that that could have been a great movie. — And sure enough, here that movie is, and it's even better than I would have thought. — Though difficult to summarize: suffice it that it does [for the most part] concern itself with the romantic misadventures of the protagonist, a Parisian philosophy professor named [in obvious imitation of Joyce] Paul Dedalus whose external circumstances have begun to mirror the labyrinthine complexity of his interior life; and that, though he and his friends talk about pussy just as much as Tarantino characters would, they don't talk like morons. [Paul, verbatim, to one of his girlfriends: "Take those things off. You look like...an Ostrogoth."] — The scenario is rich with literary and philosophical references: Paul's nervous breakdown in the middle of the picture, for instance, owes more than a little to Sartre's *Nausea*. But this does nothing to detract from the wonderful originality of this picture, which by itself more than justifies the talk about a new French New Wave: three hours long, and not a moment wasted. Check it out.

### **Hercules Against The Moon Men.** [Giacomo Gentilomo, 1964.]

My interest tweaked by a passing reference in Geoffrey O'Brien's *The Phantom Empire* [a work I recommend without reservation, incidentally], I checked this out in its latest rerelease. And, really, it isn't bad: the brawny demigod [Alan Steel] is summoned to assist the heroic Resistance in a city ruled by a wicked queen in cahoots with alien monsters who have [literally] dropped from the Moon to lunch on the occasional human sacrifice while they perfect their schemes of universal conquest; after a variety of exploits at the expense of the bandits, mutants, soldiers, and telephone solicitors who stand in his way, Herc beards the aliens in their mistfilled lair beneath the local volcano and by dint of energetic flexing saves the girl, the city, and the planet. — No dumber than a Van Damme movie, and a lot more fun to watch.

**26 Bathrooms.** [Peter Greenaway, 1985.]

A documentary exhibiting an English bathroom for each letter of the alphabet. S is for the Samuel Beckett memorial bathroom. As if you hadn't guessed.

**Kurt And Courtney.** [Nick Broomfield, 1997.]

Unquestionably the worst documentary I have ever seen. Mr. Broomfield, who seems to have been dispatched to Seattle by the BBC simply because they couldn't figure out any other way of getting rid of him, careens around the Pacific Northwest filming himself trying to puzzle out why no one will give him an interview; pausing, occasionally, to take in the wisdom proffered by a pathetic collection of junkaddled toadies, burnout remoras, and halfwitted bullshit artists. — Indeed, who killed Kurt Cobain? Zombies from Pluto, for all I care. I just hope they get Nick Broomfield next.

**Vampires.** [John Carpenter, 1998.]

Even I can't catch every cheap exploitation thriller that lurches across the local screens, and this was one that slipped through my net during its theatrical release. But, hey, it isn't bad. A merry band of geeks in vans and Jeeps led by James Woods not Bill Paxton are chasing vampires not twisters through the Southwest not the Midwest under the auspices of the Catholic Church not the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration; then (oops) they all get betrayed and killed (this part is *Mission Impossible*), leaving Woods and his trusty sidekick Daniel Baldwin (the fat one) to pursue the legions of Hell alone, with the unwilling assistance of neophyte vampire Sheryl Lee, who is telepathically linked to the boss bloodsucker. Against all odds they prevail. — The sexual connotations of vampirism aren't developed at length, but the expression on Sheryl's face when the Vampire King goes down on her is by itself worth the price of the rental: How can those terrified vague fingers push/The feathered glory

from her loosening thighs? — Sheesh.

**Happiness.** [Todd Solondz, 1998.]

Much though I admired the great John Hughes cycle of teenage romances, they were fairy tales: in each one the dormant princess Molly Ringwald came into her kingdom after she managed to figure out just which frog she was supposed to kiss. But the only accurate portrayal of an American adolescence ever attempted was Todd Solondz' Sundance hit of 1996, *Welcome To The Dollhouse*. Predictably this was greeted with dismay and consternation by many critics, who found the portrait of Dawn [Wiener Dog] Wiener — a homely bespectacled postpreteenager trapped in suburban New Jersey whose parents really do ignore her, whose siblings really do hate her, and whose only romantic option isn't the football hero/rockstar she desperately wants to notice her but the youthful psychopath who tries to rape her — cold, cruel, bleak, and nihilistic. With this second feature, Solondz forges onward into New Jersey adulthood, taking as his apparent point of departure the famous dictum of Tolstoy, that though every happy family is alike, every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. Solondz suggests what Tolstoy would not have cared to admit, that happiness is a delusion, a sort of banal corollary of willful ignorance; and to the examination of the domestic arrangements of three sisters — a writer whose success has been founded on fantasies of pornographic violence, a daydreaming innocent whose every plan goes awry, and a contented hausfrau unaware of her husband's penchant for raping small boys — he brings the satiric ferocity of Jonathan Swift and a savage unblinking honesty one might seriously compare to that of Wittgenstein or Nietzsche. — Of course this isn't making him any friends. It is hardly an accident that many of the most interesting films of recent years — one thinks not only of Lyne's *Lolita*, but Cronenberg's *Crash* and Atom Egoyan's *The Sweet Hereafter* — for that matter one might think back to Gilliam's *Brazil* — have proven nearly impossible to distribute. — This film is brilliant, dark, funny, and appalling; something that Terry Southern would have admired,

and John Waters must wish he could have made. But it's a safe bet that you won't see it at the multiplex. Nor will Blockbuster stock it on their shelves; lest you be tempted to buttfuck the kid behind the counter.

**Rushmore.** [Wes Anderson, 1999.]

A mere summary of the plot [which has something to do with the prep school career of an alter ego of the director] cannot possibly do justice to this new feature from Wes Anderson, director of the underground hit *Bottle Rocket* [1996]. Suffice it that it simply isn't like anything else: though the protagonist is an energetic and imaginative teenaged boy, he isn't Ferris Bueller; though Bill Murray is the second lead, it isn't a Bill Murray movie; though boy meets girl and boy loses girl, boy actually ends up giving girl away. Something about the syntactic elaboration of jokes so cryptic and complex that no one else would attempt them might remind you of Albert Brooks; but this isn't much like Albert Brooks either. — Very original; very amusing. Check it out.

**Forbidden Zone.** [Richard Elfman, 1980.]

An eccentric little operetta with a goofy little libretto: a secret doorway in the basement of a slum dwelling in Venice, California, leads to the Sixth Dimension, a land of naked babes and surrealistic stagesets ruled over by King Fausto, who used to be the dwarf on *Fantasy Island*. Music by Danny Elfman, who also plays the Devil. I wish I'd made this.

**Atomic Submarine.** [Spencer Gordon Bennet, 1959.]

Intrepid sailors of the American military voyage to the far North, where undersea vessels have been disappearing beneath the Pole. There they discover a flying saucer piloted by alien monsters from the Bible Belt, who are plotting to seize control of the government and undo the outcome of the 1996 elections, get even for Iran/Contra and

the Watergate scandal, reverse the cultural revolution of the Nineteen-Sixties, and then continue to rewrite history back to the English Civil War. Only true grit, nuclear torpedoes, and the repeal of the independent counsel statute can save the day. Watch for the cameo by Henry Hyde: you'll love him in tendrils.

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*I think the Matrix has you, Neo (4/14/1999)*

An extreme statement of the “Caméra stylo” (Alexandre Astruc): “Today a Descartes would lock himself in his room with a 16mm camera and would write on film the *Discourse on Method*.”<sup>19</sup> — But presumably only after attending a Hong Kong film festival.

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*The cruelest month (5/13/99)*

**The Vengeance Of She.** [Cliff Owen, 1967.]

A spate of Hammer rereleases resurrects this obscure effort at a sequel to the classic Ursula Andress portrayal of Haggard’s Ayesha, deathless queen of the city lost within the Caves of Kor. For some reasons the studio masterminds determined to forge ahead with the project despite the unavailability of Ms. Andress, or for that matter Peter Cushing or Christopher Lee; a decision which seems baffling in retrospect, though (to give their talentscouts credit) they did manage to turn up the remarkably pneumatic Olinka Berova as a standin. — Sheesh, what a costume. If only there were a plot.

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<sup>19</sup> “Birth of a New Avant-Garde,” *L’Ecran français* March 30 1948.

### **Chinese Box.** [Wayne Wang, 1997]

The Chinese-American auteur's not-particularly-inscrutable meditation on the fate of Hong Kong, with Jeremy Irons [a foreign journalist who has conveniently picked 1997 to die of leukemia] as, uh, British imperialism, Gong Li as the Hong Kong beloved by the foreign devil, and Maggie Cheung (made up with a colorful scar and a pretty line of bullshit) as the Hong Kong that loves the foreign devil back. The love story is silly, the metaphor labored, and the location underemployed; but Hong Kong indifferently photographed toward a foolish purpose, like Maggie made up with a scar in an indifferent story, is still exotic, fascinating, and impossibly alluring.

### **The Story Of Adele H.** [Francois Truffaut, 1975.]

Isabelle Adjani depicts the deranged daughter of Victor Hugo, who followed an English officer across the Atlantic and died the victim of romantic obsession. Posterity does not record whether she saved a blue dress.

### **The Tragicall Historie of Doctor Faustus.** [Leonardo Garbonzo, 1999.]

Brainy geek Johannes, the smartest kid at Wittenberg High, wearies of the ceaseless quest for knowledge that never seems to get him any babes and hacks into a necromantic server, conjuring up legendary Goth Mephisto, who offers him twentyfour days of popularity in exchange for his soul. Transformed into an epitome of cool, Johannes scores with the cutest chick in school, Helena, and plays many pranks upon the administration before his bargain becomes due at midnight the day of the Prom, when his soul is sent gibbering to eternal detention and his mindless body is condemned to remain in high school forever. ...

The producers promise us forthcoming remakes of *Volpone*, *The School For Scandal*, and *The Seven Against Thebes*. And there are those who still wonder why we need to keep our nuclear deterrent.

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*Sein und Zeit (5/14/99)*

**She Demons.** [Richard Cunha, 1958.]

Blown off course by a tropical storm, a crew of shipwrecked mariners (the intrepid adventurer, the rich bitch, the native-guide captain, and a Chinese/Hawaiian dude named Sammy) find themselves cast away upon an island shore not found on any chart, where mysterious naked footprints in the sand, the sound of distant jungle drums, the fact that one of their number turns up skewered by a few dozen spears, and, oh yes, the mutant female corpse that washes up on the beach indicate that something out of the ordinary is transpiring. Sure enough, the company of cave girls they espy dancing about a campfire in the woods are seized by Nazis in SS regalia and hauled back into a system of caves containing the secret laboratories of a mad German scientist who has been experimenting upon the native babes with radiation treatments as part of an ongoing project to restore his wife to youth and beauty and put the finishing touches to the creation of the master race. Naturally, once he gets a look at the castaway blonde bombshell (Irish McCalla, known in her day as *The Girl With The Moreso Torso*), his focus begins to waver. Do you think that volcano will erupt? — Of course the best shot in the whole thing may be in the framing video, in which Elvira wears Groucho nose/mustache/glasses not merely on her face but also in her cleavage; this creates an effect which must be seen to be believed.

## eXistenZ. [David Cronenberg, 1999.]

In a future not distant, when computers have transcended silicon and again become organic, famed virtual-reality game designer Jennifer Jason Leigh appears in person to a focus group made up of her devoted fans for a product launch (in a church!) of a new multiuser game environment called eXistenZ. Threats have been made against her life, and security is tight, but a wouldbe assassin slips past the metal detectors with a strange organic bonelike gun that fires teeth rather than bullets. She escapes with a company PR flack who by virtue of some misguided neoMormonism has never been fitted with a modern computer interface, a bioport at the base of the spine that looks like a sphincter and accepts a data cable that resembles a length of intestine; this shortcoming is corrected at a country gas station by unlicensed biomechanic Willem Dafoe, who gleefully performs the operation (which he obviously interprets as a species of homosexual rape) before revealing himself to be allied with the ubiquitous agents who wish Ms. Jason Leigh's demise. The designer and her assistant escape again nonetheless and, safely ensconced in their motel room, jack into the world of her organic gamepod (a crablike creature which she cuddles like an infant and refers to as "my baby") to determine whether or not the resident software has been damaged by the stress attendant to their precipitous flight. Once immersed they become players in a strange industrial-espionage melodrama involving another game, another computer company, and another plot against the designers of virtual environments by the agents of something called the Reality Underground. Obviously, game and reality at this point have become hopelessly confused; and grow only more and not less so as this incredibly convoluted narrative moves toward its conclusion.

— Those familiar with the author's work will recognize the themes of the distressed organic, the sense of the abattoir (in which we murder to dissect), and the interpenetration — the ghastly miscegenation — of man and machine; moreover, since his computers are organic, his technicians are always busy with something that looks and sounds (and would certainly smell, could he arrange it) like vivisection, and

indeed at one point his protagonists find themselves working on a hardware assembly line that looks like a fishing-industry slaughterhouse. — Of course all this is wonderfully ingenious: the whole film together could scarcely have cost as much as any single scene in *The Matrix*. — Now: obviously Cronenberg is as fascinated as anyone with the idea of an artificial world functionally equivalent to reality; lacking the prodigious resources available to Hollywood in the way of special effects, he must attempt to explore the theme with conceptual and not visual sophistication. But this just makes it a contest between Hollywood's army of technicians and programmers and Cronenberg's wits; the result makes it clear that this is a fairly even match. — A final note: Cronenberg's analysis of the cult of virtual reality underlines the extent to which it all looks backward to the drug culture rather than forward to the Brave New World of the MIT Media Lab; the transparent irony is that we see that the drug culture had more conceptual depth. — Who could have guessed it? — Jaron Lanier and the editors of *Wired* have succeeded in making Timothy Leary look deep. And they say there's no such thing as progress.

### **Confidentially Yours.** [Francois Truffaut, 1983.]

A real-estate broker (Jean-Louis Trintignant) fires his secretary (Fanny Ardant) for insubordination, then thinks better of it when he discovers his wife and her lover dead and himself the prime suspect; who better than the impertinent typist to carry out the investigation that will clear his name while he hides out in the back of the office? Though this, Truffaut's last movie, is obviously intended as a final homage to his idol Hitchcock (a protagonist wrongfully accused in black and white, etc.) the premise is actually reminiscent of Siodmak's classic film noir *The Phantom Lady* (1944, based on a novel by Cornell Woolrich), and, despite the noirlike trappings — night exteriors, spying, the intruder in a darkened bedroom, casual slaughter — in many ways it reminds one more of earlier detective films; this is, for instance, a much better mystery than one ever had from Hitchcock

(for whom mystery was never the point) or indeed in classic film noir. The humor is certainly Hitchcockian, e.g. the cameo involving the world's fastest onefingered typist (a blonde), not to mention the outcome, which is (I can't resist saying) that the lawyer did it. But the point, finally, is not whether this is an adequate imitation of Hitchcock: after all, a lot of people have imitated Hitchcock; few have imitated Truffaut. Like all comedies, this one concludes with a wedding: in the final scene, a photographer taking pictures of the ceremony drops a lens cap; it lands at the feet of a row of uniformed schoolgirls, who kick it back and forth among them, playing keepaway. Over this long and inexpressibly charming shot — the lenscap skating back and forth along the floor, the dancing stockinged feet of the girls keeping it in motion — the closing credits run, the film concludes. It is precisely this, a particular kind of light and playful touch of genius, that passed from the world with the untimely death of the great French auteur; and it is that, not yet another resurrection of the melodrama of suspense, that the world needs more.

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*Burning love (6/15/99)*

**Mighty Peking Man.** [Ho Meng Hwa, 1977. Produced by the Shaw Brothers.]

Hong Kong does King Kong: a Chinese adventurer leads an expedition into the nearest convenient jungle (I think this was supposed to be in India, or Nepal, or somewhere like that) in search of a giant ape, and, after various exploits that serve to illustrate his derring-do and separate him from his colleagues and attendants, finds the Big Guy hanging out in the deep woods with Evelyne Kraft, a blonds bombshell jungle girl who swings through the trees, speaks to the animals, and keeps falling out of her cavegirl outfit. After she gets bitten by a snake and he sucks the poison out of her thigh romance

blossoms, but before the ape can figure out what the two of them are doing in the upper berth our hero sells the babe on the idea of a return to civilization. This proves to be a Bad Idea. Evil exploitative Hong Kong hucksters — like, well, the Shaw Brothers themselves — cage the noble savage, embroil the hero in an inappropriate romance, and threaten Sheena with poor performance reviews if she fails to satisfy their base bestial cravings. Enraged by a chance glimpse of the inner workings of the Oval Office, Bigfoot busts out, climbs the nearest tower, and battles the colonial air force to a standstill before (a nice touch) falling to his death in flames; the cavegirl, alas, expires nobly after stepping into the line of fire trying to protect her pet primate from the final onslaught. Our hero is left gnashing his teeth: what a moron.

Slipping into the midnight show with other matters on my mind, I failed to notice the drawing for the door prizes and missed my chance to collect a poster of the spectacular Ms. Kraft in costume. But now that I've seen this flick I won't rest until I find another.

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*After the late show (9/11/99)*

Lang in Hollywood in the Forties: “Fritz had a wonderful Western shirt with a silver bull’s head holding the kerchief, and cowboy boots,” [a frequent female companion said.] “I wore ruffled petticoats and skirts. We went square dancing all over this town for about a year and a half. Let me tell you, there’s nothing like a man square-dancing in a cowboy suit with a monocle.”

I’ll bet.

**Wild Wild West.** [Barry Sonnenfeld, 1999. Written by Jim and/or John Thomas.]

In May of 1869 the lines of the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific railroads met near Ogden, Utah, spanning the continent with a marvel of engineering that was the wonder of the age. The occasion was marked by the ceremonial driving of a golden spike and the attack of a giant steampowered mechanical spider designed by a wheelchairbound mad scientist bearing a striking resemblance to the upper half of Kenneth Branagh. Fortunately this plot was thwarted by the timely intervention of Will Smith and Kevin Klein; unfortunately, they seem not to have been able to step between Branagh and world domination without simultaneously stepping between Salma Hayek and the camera, dramatically lowering my appreciation of their exploits. Mysteriously these incidents have been suppressed from the historical record; rather as, I suspect, this motion picture will be quietly removed from the résumés of Messrs. Smith, Klein, and Sonnenfeld. — Branagh, of course, can afford the occasional joke against himself; anyway he can always claim he left his brain in his pants.

**Deep Blue Sea.** [Renny Harlin, 1999. Written by Duncan Kennedy and Wayne Powers.]

Brilliant bombshell molecular biologist Saffron Burrows, obsessed with the quest for a cure for Alzheimer's disease (you can guess the backstory), discovers the requisite silver bullet in the biochemistry of the shark cortex and constructs a seagoing laboratory (said to be some kind of floating submarine pen but resembling more an offshore drilling platform and having in any case no real design requirement save that it should flood easily during the hurricane the writers conjure up to end Act One) for the purpose of breeding sharks with oversized brains, the better to harvest her magic protein. The sharks, thus mentally amplified, develop their own ideas, with the predictable result: really smart sharks eat really dumb people. Naturally this is

entertaining as hell. — With Samuel L. Jackson, Michael Rapaport, and LL Cool J (an actor who promises to be every bit as good as Ice Cube) as the preacher/cook. Try to guess who gets munched first.

**The Warriors.** [Walter Hill, 1979. From the novel by Sol Yurick.]

The original *Escape from New York*: the charismatic Cyrus, a gangleader with Napoleonic ambitions, calls a nocturnal meeting in the heart of Manhattan to which come delegations from hundreds of gangs under flag of truce. In a spellbinding oration filled with revolutionary rhetoric, he proposes that they all unite to rule the metropolis. The gathered masses are inspired by his argument, but just as it seems they may be prepared to mount Cyrus upon a white horse and march on City Hall, a rival in the audience pulls a gun out and whacks him. In the ensuing pandemonium, as the police bust in and the crowd scatters, the murderer points the finger at the leader of the Warriors, a gang from Coney Island. The frame sticks, and within moments the tom-toms have spread the word to everyone: pursued by cops and gangs alike the Warriors now have the whole night long to fight their way across the city and return to their home turf. Notwithstanding a train derailment, a firefight with Molotov cocktails, a punchout with some dudes in Yankee uniforms who call themselves the Baseball Furies, a chase through the subways, a near-seduction by a Siren-gang of gangster-girls, a beautifully-choreographed fight in a Union Station men's room, and a final faceoff with their pursuers on the beach at Coney Island itself, they succeed and survive; though the triumph, obviously, is qualified. [Looking down upon the rollercoaster we all remember from *Annie Hall*, their leader asks: "We fought all night to get back to *this*?"] — All this of course is supposed to have transpired in that romantic golden age of gang warfare [cf. *West Side Story*] before everyone started packing an AK-47. — A powerful narrative developed from a simple, elegant premise, very nearly attaining the cinematic perfection of a continuous chase. A great motion picture.

Finally, the scourge of Shannen Doherty

**Moby Dick.** [Herman Melville, 1851.]

Boy meets whale. Boy loses whale. Whale gets boy. Followed by the lesser-known sequels *Dick Two*, *Dick 3D*, *Dick: The Revenge*, and *Beach Blanket Moby*. — However far James Cameron may have recovered in my esteem by making fun of himself in Brooks' latest comedy,<sup>20</sup> it remains my fervent hope that he has never heard of Herman Melville; and that no one will ever tell him.

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*Smoke gets in your eyes (10/20/99)*

**White Slaves Of Chinatown.** [Joseph Mawra, 1964.]

In the dungeons cunningly secreted beneath an unassuming New York City brownstone, wicked dominatrix Olga tortures and brainwashes captive teenage bimbos, the better to enlist them in her army of drug-dealing prostitutes. After a while opium-smoking makes their clothes fall off, clarifying the evil nature of drug addiction but failing to answer the burning question: will the authors of this picture ever get around to shooting any of these scenes with real synch sound? or will we have to listen to that docudrama narration and that twentysecond loop of cheesy Chinese music for an hour and a half? — No and therefore yes, as it turns out; but if you make it all the way through you get to see the rapidfire package trailer for the Something Weird video catalogue, which includes *Hoodlum Girls*, *Mundo Depravados*, *I Eat Your Skin*, *Tijuana After Midnight*, *Jail Bait*, *Teenage Gang Debs*, *Child Bride*, *Cannibal Island*, *Wild Women*, *The Acid Eaters*, *Blast Off Girls*, *She Freak*, and *Scum Of The Earth*. I stand in awe.

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<sup>20</sup> *The Muse* [Albert Brooks, 1999].

**Creature From The Haunted Sea.** [Roger Corman, 1961; written by Charles B. Griffith.]

In the chaotic days following the fall of the Batista regime, a group of fascist sympathizers snatch a substantial chunk of the national treasury and flee Cuba on a fishingboat, escorted by a motley assortment of gangsters including a guy who speaks only in animal imitations, a gunmoll in a bathingsuit, a dude who's seen *To Have And Have Not* one time too many, and that fabled master of disguise, Secret Agent XK-150. On the passage to exile the gangsters hatch an absurd plot to seize the loot which requires they impersonate a legendary monster which [they claim] keeps crawling out of the ocean to feed on the Cuban party; unfortunately for the success of this scheme the real monster crashes the party and [after a variety of intervening comic incident] eats everybody and hauls the treasure away to the bottom of the sea. ["That's it," Corman exclaimed when he was seized by this inspiration: "The monster wins."] — Among other things this was probably the first spymovie put-on: remarkably, it appeared a year before even *Doctor No* [let alone *Our Man Flint*], and therefore [as the great comedies will] parodied in advance. — Another testimonial, in short, to the fertility of the imagination of the great B-movie writer Charles Griffith; also the author of *Bucket Of Blood*, *Little Shop Of Horrors*, *The Wild Angels*, *Death Race 2000*, and the twice-remade *Not Of This Earth*.

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*Putting on the hits (10/29/99)*

Producer and former Playmate of the Year India Allen on her acting career: "I always got scripts for movies in which I took a lot of showers ... I wasn't a particularly good actress, but I was a very *clean* actress."

**American Beauty.** [Sam Mendes; written by Alan Ball.]

A pastiche: Mena Suvari plays Denise Richards in *Wild Things*, Annette Bening plays Kathleen Turner in *Serial Mom*, Wes Bentley plays Timothy Hutton in *Ordinary People*, Kevin Spacey plays William Holden in *Sunset Boulevard*, Jack Lemmon in one of those patented midlife-crisis roles, and Jeremy Irons/James Mason/Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*, and Thora Birch plays Christina Ricci in practically anything, Despite occasional moments of outrageous hilarity, on balance this is good but not great. Still, no one can shoot roses like the old master Conrad Hall. — A note in protest: after everybody's favorite scene in *The Adventures Of Baron Munchausen*, Terry Gilliam told Uma Thurman "It's all over for you now. You can't go back to high school; I've taken your clothes off in front of the entire world." — And it was still a joke. — It isn't a joke anymore. The two little girls are cute, obviously, but I can't watch them pulling their shirts off without feeling as depraved as, well, one of the producers who insisted that they do it.

**Three Kings.** [David O. Russell; story by Russell, screenplay by John Ridley.]

Everyone knows the story of the Warsaw uprising: how in August, 1944, with the German army in headlong retreat on the Eastern front and the sound of Russian guns audible across the Vistula, the Polish underground rose up against the Nazi occupation — and how the Red Army stopped within sight of the city and halted its advance for two months while the Germans systematically slaughtered two hundred thousand people; refusing, incidentally, the use of their airfields to the British and American attempts to fly supplies to the resistance. — This was a monstrous act, and by itself an adequate *casus belli* for the ensuing Cold War. — Forty-six years later, by way of putting a period to the perfectly splendid little police action that ushered in the New World Order, George Bush encouraged the inhabitants of Southern Iraq to rebel against Saddam Hussein; and, then, by refusing to come

to their aid with the formidable army that had routed Baghdad's legions only days before, ensured their martyrdom. He did this not because he was like Stalin consciously wicked; not because he wanted to work evil with malice aforethought, as Stalin did, not because he was like Stalin a man who knew what he was, who was what he was. Rather, Bush did this because he was a rudderless imbecile with no grasp of the consequences of his actions: that quintessentially postmodern creation, that soulless cipher, the American politician.

Perhaps this explains why Special Forces malcontent George Clooney is pissed off at the way the Gulf War has been so abruptly concluded as this narrative commences; and why, when Marky Mark and Ice Cube turn up a treasure map pulled from the ass of an Iraqi prisoner, one indicating the location of a stash of Kuwaiti bullion stolen by the Republican Guard and destined for the coffers of Saddam, he improvises an inspiring peroration about the role of Necessity in human affairs which seems at first an appeal to an ethics of convenience: if no one can tell them what they're doing here, why shouldn't they seize the moment and get rich? Moved by his eloquence, they all hop into a Hummer and — pursued by that stock character of Hollywood postmodernism, the Ambitious Female Television Journalist — take off across the border to grab the loot. — Thus far, obviously, we have a simple warzone caper movie, the kind of ironic exercise in the style of Tarantino that allows (very amusing) exploration of such questions as the relative political correctness of “towelhead” and “sand nigger”, what happens to a steer that steps on a cluster bomb, where the electrodes should be placed to facilitate the employment of modern interrogation techniques, and whether it is Lexus or Infiniti that makes the convertible. — But David Russell, unlike Bush or for that matter Tarantino, has no problem with the vision thing; and it becomes apparent that, as his heroes inevitably become entangled in the civil war they've been ordered not to intervene in, the dramatic arc he has designed has a moral dimension beyond the grasp of his supposed mentors: indeed though the situation of the first act is one of ironic detachment from reality, the conflict of the second, characterized by an explicitly surrealistic cognitive

dissonance, can only be resolved by a re-establishment of the reality principle in the third; and you arrive gradually at the realization that Clooney's appeal to Necessity isn't at all a nod to some kind of vacuous relativism, but an acknowledgement of fate or destiny, of what must be, and must be done; something like the recognition of the will of the gods.

So this isn't, finally, about whether you get to shoot the guy who tortured you, or whether black guys can play quarterback, or even whether American GIs with hearts as big as the land that gave them birth can still hand out candybars to darkeyed war orphans and teach them in their needful hour the power of hope. What it is about, rather, is what Nietzsche called the revaluation of all values — the transformation of reality, the reinterpretation of appearances: you have a glimpse however brief of another reading of the phenomenal text, of an alternative world, one in which the cinema offers moral choices and the foreign policy of God's country can accomplish the liberation of oppressed peoples; a world with a different ethical map, one that wasn't pulled out of somebody's ass. — If Buñuel had lived to make this movie it would have been better; but I'm still tempted to call it a great motion picture. Check it out.

**Paris, Texas.** [Wim "Wild Buffalo" Wenders, 1999.]

Exterior. Desert. Day. The barren landscape of the American Southwest. Empty, desolate. Nothing moves...there is no sign of life...save perhaps...there: a faint distant dark speck stirs in the white expanse at the right edge of the frame. — The camera is perfectly still; it waits with infinite patience. — Gradually, the blot grows larger. Finally we can make it out: a human figure, clad in hat and trenchcoat despite the desert sun, the burning heat. It walks toward the camera...closer...closer...finally close enough that we can make out his features [for indeed it is a male figure of a certain age]. It is John "Wild Buffalo" Craig [played by Harry Dean Stanton]. He stumbles toward the camera, apparently oblivious to his surroundings, his eyes

fixed on something impossibly remote, infinitely distant. — He lurches through the frame. — He passes on.

Later. A desert highway, twolane blacktop. A car hurtles past. The camera turns to follow it and fixes on a highway sign: “Lubbock: 300 miles.”

Another car approaches; slows, and pulls off the highway onto the shoulder. The driver lights a Lucky Strike and studies a roadmap. It is Douglas “Mad Dog” Hoyer [played by Dean Stockwell]. He takes a pull from a flask of bourbon. Perhaps he is lost.

He plucks a cellular phone from his pocket and, after dialing a few dozen digits, converses at length with parties unknown. We cannot hear what he is saying, but infer from appearances that he is consulting either satellite reconnaissance or the Psychic Pussy Network.

Presently he concludes. He restarts the car. He drives on.

The camera follows the car into the desert sun. Fade up into white and out. Try it with that cool whooshing noise.

Fade in.

The Starlite Motel. Late afternoon. The sun is sinking behind the low mountains beyond a row of cabins to the West. The Dog’s car pulls into the parking lot.

Within the office, the exotic beauty behind the desk [Sherilyn Fenn] explains: “We found him two days ago, wandering in the desert. He does not move or speak. He chainsmokes Camel straights and consumes a quart of gin every four and one half hours. Bimbos find him strangely irresistible.”

By the pool of this desert oasis, amid an assortment of cheesy lawn

furniture, John reclines upon a chaiselounge. Half-a-dozen bikini-clad starlets [Maria Ford, Monique Gabrielle, Andrea Dorian, Michelle Bauer, Nikki Fritz, Griffen Drew] surround him. They affect a variety of arresting postures as they adjust his umbrella, fan him with stadium programs, bring him drinks, and apply cool towels to his fevered brow. He stares straight ahead into the distance.

“John,” says the Dog, with evident emotion.

John makes no response.

In a lengthy monologue which shows the influence of the Hong Kong cinema and the campaign speeches of Fritz Mondale, the Dog describes his search for the errant scribe, which has led him to every drive-in burger joint, billiard parlor, and roach-infested whorehouse in the Southwest. “We might never have found you,” he says, “had not the proprietors of this desert oasis not recognized you from a picture in the *Enquirer*.”

John stares at him blankly.

Fade out.

Fade in.

Montage at poolside:

The Dog talks patiently to John, who makes little response save occasionally to light another cigarette.

The Dog shows film of upcoming opponents: the Sooners, the Huskers, the Serb militia, the House Judiciary Committee.

The Dog displays his latest recruiting posters, which feature stampeding buffalo and live nude coeds.

The Dog holds up a football, demonstrating how to hold it, the proper alignment of the stitches, the appropriate throwing motion. The bikini-clad babes run elaborate routes around the pool, illustrating his intricate offensive schemes. While the Dog explains their various assignments with pointer and blackboard, the babes all run into one another and fall down; strangely, he does not seem to notice. John chugs another pint of gin.

The Dog plays a medley of stirring football melodies upon the electric piano. The babes sing backup.

The Dog watches, making noises of encouragement, as John reaches for the football...picks it up...turns it over in his hands with unaffected ape-like curiosity...makes a few tentative passing motions...and then flips it to one of the girls, wide open all by herself at the end of the pool. In slow motion the ball describes a perfect spiraling arc toward the babe, who, laughing in excitement, jumps up and down [with remarkable concomitant mammary oscillation]...until the ball arrives and she freezes like a doe in the headlights and the pass bounces off her hands into the shrubbery. — The Dog claps enthusiastically and shouts words of encouragement. — John smites himself on the forehead and reaches for another drink.

Fade out.

Fade in.

The motel manager [Dennis Hopper] hobbles out on a cane. After declining the Dog's offer of a full scholarship, he tells a tale in flashback of a long voyage by dirigible, a crashlanding on a desert isle, a race of genetic deviants half man half beast whose mad-genius creator had been banished from the civilized world for performing forbidden experiments, a volcanic eruption, a week adrift on a floating coffin listening to the Fugees on a tinny Walkman, a rescue by two couples on a passing yacht, a passage to California fraught with

murderous intrigue and sexual tension, a shipwreck on the beach at Venice, a drug deal gone bad, a firefight in a warehouse, a long motorcycle ride into the rising sun, and a couple of decades of cheap whiskey and cable television. This inspires the Dog to hypnotize one of the pool girls, who retrogresses to a past cinematic life in which [as Allison Hayes] she was burnt at the stake for witchcraft after being subjected to a variety of colorful medieval tortures by a leatherhooded assistant to Vincent Price. Exerting the techniques of mesmeric influence taught him by his Tibetan masters in a dangerous attempt to meddle with the integrity of the temporal continuum, Dog tries to use her to interfere in the Satanic ceremony in which the founders of the Nebraska football dynasty sold their souls to the Devil, with the intent of thwarting the Huskers' rise to dominance. Alas, the evil necromancer Doctor Tom Osborne perceives this plot developing in his magic retroscope, and, placing a phone call on his private line to Satan, confounds the Dog's scheme and ensures that a curse will descend upon Buff football that cannot be raised until a coach sacrifices his firstborn at an Alumni Black Mass. The ensuing double-reverse flashback traps the Dog and several assisting starlets in the second act of *Satan's Swinging Cheerleaders*, and many twists of the plot must be resolved before they can find an egress.

Escaping this cunning snare, the Dog flees even further backward into the mists of time, into a lost-world epic in which stampeding dinosaurs pursue the starlets; who, clad in skins, strike arresting poses and brandish spears.

John meanwhile has wandered away again into the desert, and at a massage parlor in nearby Las Vegas, New Mexico, dictates his memoirs ["Blood, Sand, Astroturf: Camus, Valentino, and the Way of the Tantric Buffalo"] through a one-way mirror to Nastassja Kinski, who listens in motionless silence; obviously still consumed by guilt for having abandoned him at the postgame party at the Orange Bowl of 1990.

Returning from their expedition into lost time, the Dog and his assistants commence a pool party which lasts for several weeks.

After adventures too numerous to relate [and which the viewer may in any case steal as easily as I or Corman from Homer, Ariosto, and Edgar Rice Burroughs] John is initiated into the Masai tribe in a torchlit pagan ceremony and, after slaying a lion with a homemade spear made from a pool cue and a canopener, drags the carcass back to the Starlite Motel for a midnight barbecue. There he discovers that Albino has jilted the Dog and made good on her threat to wed Slobodan Milosevic, Gary Barnett's *Buffalo Stampede* has acquired a new time slot on the Comedy Channel between Ben Stein and the *South Park* reruns, and, capitalizing on the notoriety she has acquired from the publication of John's memoirs, Nastassja Kinski has signed a three-picture deal with ESPN.

Drunk on the gin of the Dog and and clothed in the skin of the lion, John wanders off again into the desert. The Dog tries to restrain him, but John brushes past with his eyes fixed on the horizon. "Got to keep moving the chains," he mutters. "Got to keep moving the chains."

The camera pulls back from the side of the pool, from the Dog, staring after John in frustration and tossing his gameplan into the air, from John, stumbling off into the empty badlands, from the bikini-clad babes, loading a microbus with gin and potatochips and a satellite TV and taking off after him, from the great state of Texas, from the vast emptiness of the Southwest...with an abrupt reverse zoom from this microscope slide in the laboratory of God the camera recedes to a bounding surface at infinity, a place beyond space and time...beyond even football, if that were possible.

And fade out.

*Through the looking glass (11/11/99)*

I was watching Joe Bob Briggs on TNT the other night, shepherding his audience through the complexities of that old Seventies classic *The Golden Voyage Of Sinbad*. In the middle of a plot recap he referred to Caroline Munro's performance as "opening up a can of estrogen whupass," and, I'll have to admit, for a moment there I considered hanging it up. — But the violin couldn't end with Heifetz, could it. One must soldier on.



Thesis



Antithesis



Synthesis

*Sleepless* (12/7/99)

A crew of cable guys in cheap plastic hardhats cruised through the neighborhood a couple of weeks ago and, while replacing the old obsolete TCI thou-shalt-not-tamper deaththreats on the little boxes with new and much more literate AT&T deaththreats, twiddled a few knobs and switched some wires around and inaugurated a brave new world of television programming. The immediate effect was that I got Showtime for a week or so before they changed the encryption, or whatever it is, at the end of the month; no great loss, I'm afraid. But then (mirabile dictu) they waved their magic wands and actually added a few channels; something which TCI always claimed was completely impossible, despite the fact that the bill seemed to double every couple of years. — So it came to pass that I found myself watching Chaplin for nine hours straight this evening on the Turner classic-movie channel: *Modern Times*, *The Great Dictator*, *Tillie's Punctured Romance*, and the so-called Chaplin Mutuals. — The world is not so poor a place, if you can fall off the couch at two in the morning laughing at a foodfight somebody filmed in 1916. — Bring on the new century. I'm morally prepared.

*Scenes from the class struggle in Beverly Hills* (12/21/1999)

The sense in which Hollywood is “out of touch”: those moments of dissonance that are for the suspension of disbelief like fingernails scraped across a blackboard — these always involve economic presuppositions invisible to the affluent ...

Paradigmatic is the scene in *Point Break* in which Keanu Reeves trains his binoculars on Lori Petty as she leaves the beach, trying to figure out who she is and where she comes from; we see her changing out of her surfing garb in a parking lot and hopping into her car (he gets the plates to run through the FBI database) to drive away. — It has been established that she is a free spirit, a surfer chick who works in a burger joint on the beach; so what that means in practice, we here discover, is that she drives an *old* Porsche.<sup>21</sup> — Moreover mysteriously she isn't sleeping in it, it still runs despite her obvious inability to pay for maintenance (one might also be skeptical about registration and insurance), and it doesn't have an emissions problem for which she is repeatedly ticketed until she's thrown in jail, the car is seized, and she can't afford to bail it out of the impound lot.

Admittedly one might maintain all this is *aspirational*; something like the pretense that high school kids can speak in complete sentences and make use of vocabularies of more than twenty words.....

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*Die Jungfrau von Orleans (12/24/99)*

**End Of Days.** [Peter Hyams, 1999. Written by Andrew W. Marlowe.]

Yes, it's New Year's Eve in Times Square ... and Satan is crashing the party! — Indeed, as every Hollywood producer knows from flipping through to the end of the Bible to find out how it comes out, the Prince of Darkness (here portrayed by the redoubtable Gabriel Byrne) awakens every thousand years, and (naturally) the first thing on his mind is getting laid. Nor will any ordinary bimbo do, for the mother of the Antichrist; in fact only Patricia Arquette will really do,

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<sup>21</sup> A 1600 Super, to be precise, like the one Janis had. Of course after seeing this I wanted one for years afterward.

but since she wasn't available Robin Tunney is pressed into service as the prospective Babe of the Black Mass. Naturally against so dire a threat to universal order only one guy can be called upon to save the world from chaos and the endless night; and, give him credit, Arnold does his best, though you have to wonder whether that unshaven-alcoholic look is really part of his character or whether it's just something that happened after he read the script.

A few questions:

— Can the Devil be a character? In Dante, certainly, he's only a part of the production design; in the Faust legends (and by derivation then in Goethe) he's a Mephistophelean prankster; in Milton he's the prototype of the Romantic hero; in Dostoevsky he's the voice of doubt, in Thomas Mann a critic. But somehow *The Exorcist* erased all this progress, and we're back to a medieval bogeyman. — On reflection (and I'm entirely serious), after having now variously admired Nicholson, De Niro, Byrne, and Billy Crystal in the role, on balance I think the best depiction of Satan that I've seen in recent motion pictures was the one in *South Park*: certainly it was silly, but it had the overriding virtue of originality.

— Isn't it strange that Vatican councils are now always shot just like the equivalent scenes in *The Godfather*? as if the Pope were Don Corleone. Is it just the part where they kiss the ring?

— At one point the authors explain that the number of the Beast is actually 999, since in the original Greek they wrote numerals upside-down. Didn't it occur to them that the decimal notation hadn't been invented when the New Testament was written?

(Incidentally 666 is 1010011010 in binary: a conjugate palindrome. Coincidence? Or...the work of Satan?)

In sum: if Arnold is really thinking about going into politics (and why

should he not), this might be a good moment to make the move. Another turkey like this can only, shall we say, endanger his legacy.

As for the black-mass genre, unless Polanski wants to stage a comeback, you can stick a pitchfork in it. — Happy New Year  
11111010000.

### **Sherlock Jr.** [Buster Keaton, 1924.]

Motion-picture projectionist and wouldbe detective Keaton, thwarted in his courtship of best girl Kathryn McGuire by the local Sheik, retreats to his projection booth, dozes off, and is transported in a dream into the melodrama playing on the screen (“Hearts and Pearls, Or, The Lounge Lizard’s Lost Love”)[“In Five Parts”) — where, as the dashing detective Sherlock Jr., he confounds his rival and wins his ladylove; though not, of course, without remarkable pratfalls and a wildly inventive chase. — Thus obviously the original of *The Purple Rose Of Cairo*, *The Last Action Hero*, etc. — though rather more: Keaton’s opening sequence of gags is based on the idea that his hero is trying to integrate himself not into a smoothly-flowing stream of reality, but into a carefully-edited representation of the flow of events; when he tries to sit down on a chair, for instance, the film cuts away to a city street and he falls over backwards. I don’t recall ever seeing a similar progression of ideas (save possibly in a channelsurfing passage in *Amazon Women On The Moon*) in any other film; which certainly says something interesting about cinematic depictions of the cinematic depiction of reality. — But at this point Wittgenstein would be telling me to shut up and watch the fucking movie. — Good idea.

### **The Undead.** [Roger Corman, 1957. Written by Charles Griffith and Mark Hanna.]

A couple of mad psychiatrists with a thirst for forbidden knowledge grab a prostitute off the streets, hypnotize her, and project her astral body back into a past life in which she is accused of witchcraft and

doomed to be burned at the stake. Uncertain what consequences may follow if they allow her to die on the couch, one of them injects himself into the experiment, with appalling consequences. — Shot for next to nothing on a cheap soundstage in black and white; the principal expenditure sees to have been for a fog machine. But very, very creepy, with a really spooky black mass and a Satan far more convincing than any you'll see on the big screen this year: Corman could do more than Peter Hyams with less than Arnold tips at lunch. — With Pamela Duncan as the good girl, Allison Hayes (the celebrated Fifty-Foot Woman) as the bad girl, and Richard Garland as the hunk.

**From Dusk Till Dawn Two: Texas Blood Money.** [Scott Spiegel, 1999. Written by Spiegel and Boaz Yakin.]

True, this is only a lamentable turkey I stumbled across while channelsurfing. But there must be some deep sociological significance in the opening scene, in which a couple of scumbag lawyers trapped in an elevator are attacked by a swarm of bloodsucking bats: whatever happened to professional courtesy?

Finally:

**South Beach Sorority Ninja Carwash: The Defenestration.** [Leonardo Garbonzo, 1999.]

On a covert mission deep within enemy territory the commandos of Delta Force pause at a carwash to get their humvees hosed off by some sudsy babes in bikinis and are caught with their pants down by a blackgarbed company of terrorists who take them hostage and chain them to Cybex machines in the loathsome dungeons of a beach volleyball school. Back at CIA headquarters consternation reigns, and messengers are dispatched to the four corners of the globe to find retired superagent Elizabeth Kaitan; who is discovered, presently, teaching a seminar on exploitation cinema to a tribe of African gorillas

under the auspices of the Peace Corps. With the beasts of the field arrayed about her, she spurns the proffered mission, pleading a higher allegiance to the defense of the natural world against the Satanic incursions of Man and Machine. As the baffled supplicants from Langley ponder their next move, henchmen of the Ninja King kidnap Kaitan and spirit her away to the Caribbean Alps, necessitating a rescue by the daring dudes of the JetSki Patrol (led by Corey Feldman) just in time for a winner-take-all volleyball match against the tattooed Men in Black. — With cameos by Ron Jeremy, Gerhard 't Hooft, and Trent (Bubba) Lott. — Perhaps I've been watching too many of these things...

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*Father Time, Mother Night (1/22/00)*

Helen Mirren on her role in Guccione's *Caligula* [1980]: "It has an irresistible mixture of art and genitals in it."

Compare the following:

**Girl, Interrupted.** [James Mangold, 1999; screenplay by Lisa Loomer and Anna Hamilton Phelan, from the memoir by Susanna Kaysen.]

A tale so improbable that one must believe it is, indeed, true: Winona Ryder graduates from high school [no, really] in 1967 and gets tossed into a mental hospital because she feels sad and confused and makes a feeble attempt at suicide. Once in the joint, she and her fellow sad girls take some downers, watch some television, and bond in a restrained sort of way; meanwhile, as everyone remembers, thirty million functional schizophrenics were running loose in the streets taking over the country. Really, this is absurd. — Whoopi Goldberg and Vanessa Redgrave do their best in a bad cause trying to make the psychiatric profession look good [the shrinks' vacuous definition of "borderline

personality” brought down the house, and provided a perfect illustration of why psychiatry is barely a borderline science]; but the really memorable performance is that of Angelina Jolie, who despite the constraints of an inadequate script is little short of phenomenal in the role of the bull-moose loonie. — Rumor has it Ridley Scott is considering her for the Starling role, now that Jodie’s bailed from the *Hannibal* project; I say give the girl a shot. Maybe she’ll vote for Eisenhower again.

**Run Lola Run.** [Lola Rennt. Tom Tykwer, 1998.]

Redheaded technopunk Lola gets a call from her cute but apparently incompetent boyfriend Manni, who sold some smuggled diamonds for a very dangerous gangster and then lost the money and now has twenty minutes to find a hundred thousand marks before the payoff is due. Dropping the phone, Lola runs out the door and across the city to save him. And she never stops running. — Nor does this movie, which (employing a variety of media including film, video, montages of still photographs, and animation) loops three times through different variations of the story [and different relationships of action to consequence] before it nears a conclusion. In the process everyone gets killed at least once, and Herr Tykwer manages the weirdest quote from *Vertigo* I think I’ve ever seen. — A brilliant essay on the themes of chance and necessity; an endlessly inventive exploration of the simple but profound truth that motion pictures ought to move; a German *Breathless*. Check this out.

**Tinseltown.** [Tony Spiridakis, 1997; after the play by Spiridakis and Shem Bitterman.]

Down on their luck in darkest Hollywood, writers Tom Wood and Arye Gross break into a self-storage lot on Christmas Eve, looking for a place to crash, and discover it populated by an entire colony of starving artists; mistaking chief resident and manager Ron Perlman for a notorious serial killer, they pitch the idea for a snuff docudrama

to sleazemeister producer Joe Pantoliano (who himself seems to be sleeping in his Mercedes), only to find that they've mistaken an actor's preparations for actualities, and the murders they thought they'd witnessed were only scenes played in the film project of aspiring director Kristy Swanson. Combining forces, the four put together a joint proposal that seems to be taking in the money guys; at least until the real killer finds out about it. Clever and funny.

**Any Given Sunday.** [Oliver Stone, 1999. Written by Stone and John Logan; after novels by Rob Huizenga and Pat Toomay.]

The student of molecular biology who views this movie will inevitably be reminded of the structure of the genome; in which, it has been discovered, the portions of the text that code for proteins (the exons) are interrupted by apparently irrelevant and accidental interpolations (the introns), which seem to represent genetic instructions left over from earlier stages of evolution, and must be spliced out and discarded in the processes of transcription and translation. — Similarly here we have the best football game (or games) I've ever seen, interrupted at unpredictable intervals by plot segments incorporated at random from earlier football movies; which one must, accordingly, skip over in the process of making sense of the viewing experience. (The fastforward on the tape machine is not the right idea; you need a conditional branch, an actual discontinuous goto.) — Thus it was, I must say, fascinating to see the audience (myself included) shouting encouragement like a sportsbar mob at a receiver streaking down the sideline and rising from their seats in anticipation when he leapt for the ball — even though the outcome of the play was decided in the final draft of the screenplay a couple of years ago and could hardly be considered to be, in any ordinary sense, in doubt. — Unfortunately to see these passages of action you have to sit through the intervening segments in which you are introduced to the all-too-familiar characters and their even-more-familiar mutual conflicts: the embattled coach, striving against all odds to make the playoffs one more time; his trusty sidekick, the defensive coordinator; the veteran quarterback who is

one hit away from a wheelchair; the veteran quarterback's wife, who (slightly against type) does not want him to retire; the upstart backup quarterback who scratches plays in the dirt and listens to rap music (but not of course the coach); the upstart's loyal girlfriend, dumped when he becomes a starter and a star; the mercenary running back who used to be a star until the upstart stopped handing off to him; the old team doctor, who dispenses drugs like candy; the new team doctor, momentarily a voice of conscience until he too starts dispensing drugs like candy; the veteran linebacker who is one hit away from a wheelchair; the skyboxdwelling MBA megababe team owner intent on micromanagement; her dead father; her alcoholic mother; the mayor she's trying to bludgeon into building a new stadium with the thinly-veiled threat of moving the team to LA; the Machiavellian football commissioner who's one hit away from a wheelchair; the supermodel groupie who's one hit away from a wheelchair; the braindamaged scriptwriter who's one hit away from a wheelchair...(sorry, I was drifting off) — played, variously, by Al Pacino, Jamie Foxx, Cameron Diaz, James Woods, Dennis Quaid, Edward Burns, Ann-Margret, LL Cool J, Tom Sizemore, Lauren Holly, Matthew Modine, Charlton Heston, F. Scott Fitzgerald, G. Gordon Liddy, K. Farley Dingwipe, and, shucks, just about everybody who is anybody. — Pacino does, in fact, do a respectable imitation of Mike Shanahan after a bender, but the real jocks are the best part of the show: familiar faces include Frank Gifford, Lawrence Taylor, Johnny Unitas, and the great Jim Brown, who remains a pretty respectable actor (nearly up to the standard of Buster Crabbe), and (for whatever reason) the only guy who looks like he really belongs here.

**Groundhog Day.** [Harold Ramis, 1993.]

In Kaufmann's translation:

[Suppose] a demon were to sneak after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you, 'This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times

more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything immeasurably small or great in your life must return to you — all in the same succession and sequence — even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over again and again — and you with it, a grain of dust.’ Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him, ‘You are a god, and never have I heard anything more divine!’ If this thought were to gain possession of you, it would change you as you are, or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, ‘Do you want this once more and innumerable times more?’ would weigh upon your actions as the greatest weight. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to *crave nothing more fervently* than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?

Nietzsche: *The Gay Science* [341].

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*Flying fool (5/4/00)*

**Dog Park.** [Bruce McCulloch, 1998.]

Luke Wilson, first among equals in a circle united by the social interactions of their dogs, suffers a traumatic break with his girlfriend, goes to the bar to drown his sorrows, and immediately makes the acquaintance of Natasha Henstridge; then falls prey to an attack of conscience on the part of the screenwriter, who decides verisimilitude might be better served if the protagonist has to wait through ninety minutes of intervening incident to the closing credits before getting

into her pants. On behalf of the inhabitants of the planet Earth, I applaud this concession to realism. — But however imperfect Mr. McCulloch's grasp of the facts of the romantic lives of humans, his observations on dog psychology are acute and funny.

**The Viking Queen.** [Don Chaffey, 1967. Written by Clarke Reynolds; from a story by John Temple-Smith.]

Another of those Hammer rereleases that make modern life worthwhile: in the reign of that noted party animal the Emperor Nero, handsome Roman governor Don Murray and severely stacked native Briton queen Carita are setting a positive example for the intercourse of their peoples by frequently getting lost in the woods during long chariot rides through the countryside. Those feeble excuses about hunting wild boar would probably hold up forever, were it not the case, alas, that the Good Romans have excited the jealousy of the scheming evil ambitious brutal Bad Romans, the common Britons chafe beneath the imperial yoke, the fat oily merchants have figured out they can get better tax breaks from the Bad Romans than the Good Romans (especially if they make their presence known at those big-ticket fundraisers), the rabbleroising Druids are just itching to daub themselves with woad and go on the warpath, and at any moment some wellmeaning but hotheaded relative, an accidentprone little brother for example, is bound to be duped into some incident that will provoke catastrophe, divide the fortunes of the starcrossed lovers, and set the countryside afire. — Sure enough, before you know it everyone is riding around energetically hurling spears at one another in the name of the Sacred Mistletoe and the Golden Sickle. — Hooters on horseback: talk about High Concept.

**Boys Don't Cry.** [Kimberly Peirce, 1999; written by Peirce and Andy Bienen.]

A nearly mystical invocation of the sense of the Midwest: a magic, timeless, geographically undifferentiated land of boundless extent,

through which teenagers are cursed in perpetuity by crushing cosmic boredom to cruise endlessly in search of some escape from the Idea of the Small Town — which is instantiated in tiny strips of burgerjoints, feedstores, gas stations, and biker bars, in trailerparks and shantytowns, in nameless agricultural packaging plants that pay a dime and a half above the minimum wage to brainnumbed industrial serfs dressed like robot zombies in gauze masks hairnets and coveralls embroidered with the company logo, identically in every direction, as far as the longest conceivable roadtrip can carry them — worse: as far as the human imagination seems capable of taking them. In this land for which the automobile had to be invented, they are doomed eternally to explore the infinite landscape of an endless Saturday night, picking pointless fights, dragging one another behind their pickups through the dirt of boundless cornfields, sniffing Reddiwhip on merrygorounds, puking uncontrollably off highway overpasses, racing one another from nowhere to nowhere; and, of course, occasionally making sport of stomping queers to death. Into this world that can only have prepared a brutal welcome is delivered Hilary Swank/Teena Brandon/Brandon Teena/Swank Hilary, the girl who'd rather be a boy; with results which however predictable are nonetheless shocking. — The accents are bogus and the moral somewhat labored, but this is nearly as good as they say it is; Ms. Swank and Chloë Sevigny certainly deserved their numerous awards. Check it out.

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*A nerd in full (5/4/00)*

Nikki Fritz fans know her to be a girl abreast of the times, and will not be surprised to discover her riding the crest of the Prepare-for-Blair exploitation wave not only in the forthcoming *Bare Tits Project*, but also in the Jim Wynorski opus *The Bare Wench Project*. The famed exploitation auteur Andy Sidaris plans a cameo in this last, which will

also feature the prodigious talents of Antonia Dorian, Julie K. Smith, and (natürlich) Julie Strain. — Point me at the woods, and, let's get lost.

Meanwhile:

**Meet Joe Black.** [Alan Smithee aka Martin Brest, 1998; written by Walter Ferris, after the play by Alberto Casella.]

Death takes a holiday and fucks the boss's daughter.

**Wonder Boys.** [Curtis Hanson, 2000; written by Steven Kloves, after a novel by Michael Chabon.]

Very ruffled academic and once-successful novelist Michael Douglas, a guy who likes a drink, a drag on a joint, and the occasional appeal to pharmaceutical potluck, has taken to fainting in public; though actually, it develops, it is his girlfriend France McDormand who is pregnant, Douglas himself being involved in nothing more overtly biological than the gestation of an enormous and obviously unfinishable novel, and though her status as chancellor of the university is not necessarily germane to the situation, it is predictably embarrassing that her husband Richard Thomas is the head of the English department — whose willful ignorance regarding the involvement of the two lovebirds is not shared by his blind and perpetually furious dog, who seizes every opportunity to sink his teeth into the usurper's leg. — Meanwhile Douglas's own wife has finally left him, his editor/agent Robert Downey Junior is coming to town (he must be out on bail) to find out what happened to that new novel everyone has been expecting for seven years, the cute little cookie (Katie Holmes) from the afternoon seminar has abandoned subtlety and started wandering around the house in her underwear, the very talented kid (Tobey Maguire) who has decided to pass out on the couch may not yet write like Hemingway, but already drinks like Kerouac, takes drugs like Kesey, and exhibits the mental stability of

Robert Pirsig, and somebody else seems to think he owns that '66 Ford Galaxie Douglas is driving around Pittsburgh in the snow. In due course you discover what Marilyn was wearing when she married Dimaggio and what Errol Flynn liked to spray on his dick: this is not exactly DeLillo, but it doesn't suck either. — James Ellroy does a cameo at the writer's conference, and I sat all the way through the credits just to listen to Bobby Dylan. — Beautifully photographed by Dante (*Last of the Mohicans*) Spinotti. Check it out.

**The Limey.** [Steven Soderbergh, 1999. Written by Lem Dobbs.]

Cockney hardcase Terence Stamp steps out of a British slammer, gets onto a plane, flies to Los Angeles, and kicks the living shit out of everyone who stands between him and finding out why the wealthy and powerful record executive Peter Fonda killed his daughter: *Point Blank* with a more sympathetic protagonist. — Very focussed; very elegant. — It is worth emphasizing that the composition of this picture — which relies systematically on jump cuts, temporal dislocation (indeed at times almost a kind of Burroughsian editing), the desynchronization of sound and action, and a kind of stylized cinema-verite cinematography employing not only the much-abused big handheld closeups but also the kind of unvarnished atmospheric longshots Vilmos Zsigmund devised for Altman in *The Long Goodbye* — is brilliant; and demonstrates that in the hands of someone like Soderbergh who knows how to use it the postmodern film grammar can produce a sort of nonEuclidean action movie that is really wonderful to watch; far more satisfying than, e.g., Walter Hill butchering a space opera or Woody Allen pretending to be French. — With Luis Guzmán and the perennially dazzling Lesley Ann Warren as Stamp's native guides, Melissa George as the little girl lost, and a younger Stamp, in black and white — excerpted from *Poor Cow* (1967) — playing his own flashbacks.

**The Great Texas Dynamite Chase.** [Michael Pressman, 1977.]

Armed with a lit fuse and a sweet smile, Claudia Jennings busts out of the joint, and, assisted by partner in crime Jocelyn Jones, embarks upon an exhilarating career as a bankrobber whose powers of persuasion derive from her virtuosity with explosives. — The original redheaded bombshell in the original *Thelma and Louise*: fast cars, beautiful women, moronic cops, loud explosions, and no bullshit martyrdom. Accept no substitutes.

**The Creature From The Black Lagoon.** [Jack Arnold, 1954. Written by Harry Essex and Arthur A. Ross.]

Searching for the origins of a mysterious fossil which seems to represent a missing link between humanity and the lost denizens of the lizard world, paleontologist/adventurers Richard Carlson and Richard Denning venture to the unexplored headwaters of the Amazon; contending, the meanwhile, for the attentions of their megababe colleague Julia Adams. Becalmed in the murky waters of the mysterious Black Lagoon, they do what all brilliant movie scientists do in this situation, i.e., strap on their aqualungs and jump into the water to see if anything will try to eat them; thus making the acquaintance of the irascible Gill Man, an amphibious anachronism who is not at all extinct, has himself a pretty fair eye for a heaving bosom, and (as you might expect) begs to differ just who is hunting whom. — The famous submarine-stalker underwater sequences in this flick are still among the best ever filmed. — Arnold had a brief but brilliant career as a science-fiction auteur in the Fifties before settling down to pass his dotage directing the likes of the *Love Boat* and *Gilligan's Island*; his credits include many of the classics of the drivein decade, including *It Came from Outer Space*, *This Island Earth*, *Revenge Of The Creature*, *Tarantula*, *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, and the never-to-be-forgotten *High School Confidential*.

**Supreme Sanction.** [John Terlesky, 1999.]

Balking at the order to whack investigative reporter David Dukes, la femme Kristy Swanson turns on her rogue-spook superiors Michael Madsen and Ron Perlman and, with the aid of ace hacker Tom (“Tiny”) Lister Jr., saves all the good guys and kills all the bad guys; and, wow, does she look good in ninja black. Hardly deep but certainly amusing; and an excellent career move for Terlesky, whom last I recall flexing before the camera opposite Monique Gabrielle in *Deathstalker Two*.

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*Far from Kansas (6/7/00)*

**The Oz Witch Project.** [Michael Rotman, 1999.]

While munchkin voices singing eerie but familiar tunes intrude upon the diageitic space, intrepid documentarian Dorothy and her assistants the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion set off to fathom the legend of the Wicked Witch of the West, get lost in the woods, and enter into the heart of darkness; all this in eight minutes and assorted seconds: brevity is the soul of wit.

Nor among hacks, crashes, server overloads, and the vagaries of network traffic did it take any more time to pluck this film from the bosom of its website that I might view it than it would have to hike to the library and read the collected works of L. Frank Baum (fourteen volumes, at least in the Oz cycle) — no more than three or four days; the ways deep and the weather sharp; with the voices singing in my ears, saying, That this was so not cool.

(I know, I said. I know it's not cool.)

It remains an article of my faith that in due course all this must be natural and easy, I won't have to give myself a hernia tricking the server into letting me download the file instead of streaming it, and I'll dance down the fiberoptic boulevard arm in arm with Meredith Salenger, never lost in the woods, never kicking my map into the river, never pelted with dung by flying monkeys.

But in the meantime, where the fuck is the yellow brick road?

**The Man Who Fell To Earth.** [Nicolas Roeg, 1976; screenplay by Paul Mayersberg, after a novel by Walter Tevis.]

Alien explorer David Bowie takes a wrong turn cruising for cometburgers and crashlands in the New Mexico desert; lurching out of the wasteland the embodiment of purpose, he masters the language and curious economic customs of the savages around him with extraordinary rapidity, and leverages his considerable technological edge into a string of patents which make him a billionaire capable of building the spacecraft that will carry him home to the Dust Bowl Planet — where, repeated flashbacks reveal, his wife and family have been reduced to starving extraterrestrial Okies. Alas, in the course of his rise to power he discovers television, liquor, and that Earth girls are easy; his focus wavers, he stumbles into the snares of the CIA, and, rendered captive by their evil behaviorists, is reduced to the status of a laboratory rat. Escaping at the last to South America, he is left to slowly waste away in Margaritaville; the fadeout savors of Graham Greene. — Though all this is justifiably famous, something about it rings false; maybe the motivation of the Bowie character, which comes off as unaccountably bourgeois. (The allegory here lies close to the heart of one who used to write papers about the foundations of quantum mechanics, and now pens wisecracks about the contents of Julie Strain's jogbra; perhaps this makes me unduly sensitive.) — Be that as it may, Roeg, who began as a (pure) cinematographer, remains unique in his application of the principles of Eisensteinian montage to the fuck scene: those like myself who admired the celebrated sequence

in *Don't Look Now* in which Donald Sutherland and Julie Christie seem simultaneously to get it on and dress for dinner afterwards and the astonishing crosscutting in *Bad Timing* between an Art Garfunkel/Theresa Russell humporama and an emergency tracheotomy, will here find a striking exercise in editing that connects the erotic adventures of college professor Rip Torn with a display of ceremonial swordplay in a Japanese restaurant, and an admirably outrageous lovescene coupling Bowie, Candy Clark, and rapid gunfire.

**White Zombie.** [Victor Halperin, 1932; written by Garnett Weston.]

In a Haiti where the sun can never shine, a young couple taking the scenic route to their marriage ceremony stumble across a weird native ritual which has also attracted the attention of evil mesmerist Bela Lugosi; his brainless entourage of shambling zombies warn them off the scene, but not before his hypnotic gaze has fallen upon the bride-to-be and the sight of her blonde loveliness has spawned covetous thoughts. Seizing her scarf as a souvenir, he trails them to the wedding banquet, and, by dint of a bit of fetishistic wax-sculpture, drains the soul from her body in the middle of the second toast, sending her straightaway to the burial vaults and her husband to the nearest Haitian drunken-European-failure theme bar. With the aid of a spurned suitor of the late lamented (what kind of guy goes to Bela Lugosi for help scoring chicks? there should be an Ed Wood movie on that premise alone), the mad doctor hauls her out of her casket, jumpstarts her lower centers, and brings her home to take her place among his collection of human robots — among whom, he gleefully explains, are numbered all of his former rivals and many key figures of the colonial administration. — The interpolation of a tour of his plantation, where crude machines devour his dehumanized workforce, makes it clear that what had already seemed homage to Fritz Lang is less inspired by *Der Müde Tod* than *Metropolis*; and Lugosi's flatlined zombies begin to look, not like Fate's victims, the legions of the walking dead, but the brokenwilled industrial serfs of the plantation economy. — Ensclosed in her new position as trophy girlfriend, the

babe takes her place in the vast hall of Lugosi's castle overlooking the sea, staring blankly straight ahead as she plays the piano — not at all badly for a zombie; though the sight of a white zombie playing a musical instrument reminds me inevitably of Janis Joplin's sidemen in *Big Brother and the Holding Company*. All is certainly lost, and the final triumph of modern capitalism over the workers assured; but at the last moment the heartbroken husband and the helpful Van Helsing figure stumble across the castle (a shadow-infested winding-stairwell-beringed monument to Expressionism) in their meanderings. Aided by several improbabilities and the obvious desire of the screenwriter to stamp a happy face on the proceedings with the utmost expedition, Love overmasters Tyranny and the bad guys all fall off a cliff into the roaring surf hundreds of feet below — Lugosi last, of course, though this hardly serves poetic justice: one would have preferred to see him out stumbling through the fields with his own brain unplugged, lifting that barge, toting that bale. But then I suppose this is like wishing Steve Forbes would have to get a real job.

**New Rose Hotel.** [Abel Ferrara, 1998.]

An addendum to an earlier notice: midway through this misbegotten opus, Christopher Walken and Willem Dafoe are (as usual) sitting in a bar talking and Walken tells a dumb joke about a dog walking into a bar dressed up in a business suit and ordering a drink from the bartender: "Scotch and toilet water." — The joke about the joke is that Walken, after taking about a minute to deliver the punchline, claims it is a haiku. — The joke about the joke about the joke is that it is, in fact, very easy to condense it into seventeen syllables. E.g.:

Dog walks into bar  
In suit and tie. Orders: "Scotch  
And toilet water."

(The reader is invited to improve on this; and, incidentally, it suggests the program of distilling all guy-walks-into-bar jokes into haiku form,

which might by recombination actually render interesting two forms which otherwise bore the hell out of me.)

The joke about the joke about the joke about the joke is that this little episode summarizes the problem with *New Rose Hotel*: the whole movie could have easily been recut to run in twenty minutes. — The joke about the joke about the joke about the joke about the joke is just another joke on me: I keep watching the fucking thing anyway; maybe out of a sense of annoyance at the way Ferrara, whether illfunded or not, bungled this opportunity to film William Gibson, or maybe because it's the only practical means I have at my disposal of stalking Asia Argento.

I think this is an infinite regress. Or maybe I just think that I think that. But let's stop right here.

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*Me, Myself, and Samuel L. Jackson (7/4/2000)*

**The Straight Story.** [David Lynch, 1999. Written by John Roach and Mary Sweeney.]

The auteur of *Blue Velvet* removes yet another mask, and this time reveals himself to be Garrison Keillor — and, like Keillor's stories, this one is mostly true: cantankerous old Iowan geezer Alvin Straight (Richard Farnsworth), himself suffering from a degenerative hip condition and incipient emphysema, receives word his brother in Wisconsin (who else but Harry Dean Stanton) has suffered a stroke; determined to mend fences with his estranged sibling, to whom he hasn't spoken in ten years, he decides to do ritual penance by negotiating the three hundred fifty miles that separate them. Since diabetes has rendered him nearly blind, he has no car and cannot, in the ordinary sense, drive; undaunted, he grafts a homespun camper

onto the back of a John Deere tractor-mower and, over the stuttering protests of daughter Sissy Spacek, sets off on a pilgrimage across America's heartland. — On this premise Lynch constructs an entirely anti-Californian motion picture, one embued with an almost Heideggarian sense of communion with nature (I think I want the German for "being-among-the-cornfields") — in which most of the characters are old, and none are pretty; in which no one seems to have sexual intercourse, but everyone seems to have children; in which no highway spans more than a couple of lanes, and no business district more than a couple of blocks; in which (in pointed contrast to the recent exploits of Nicolas Cage) the hero's velocity never exceeds one or two miles an hour; and in which the closest approach to action/adventure is an utterly static but profoundly moving scene in a bar in which Farnsworth and another lifebattered old fart, with nary the hint of a flashback, weep unashamedly into their beers as they recall their travails in the campaign against the Germans. — I am long past the point at which I can be surprised by Lynch's originality, but it's still remarkable just how good he can be, when that alone is his purpose. — A great motion picture.

**Battlefield Earth.** [Roger Christian, 2000. Written by Corey Mandell and J. David Shapiro; from an abominable novel by L. Ron Hubbard.]

A thousand years after the conquest of the Earth by the evil race of Psychlos, a ragged tribe of survivors hiding in the remote wilderness of the Rocky Mountains (picture Cro-Magnons clad in skins who inexplicably possess Hollywood teeth) pause during the ritual contemplation of their expository cavepaintings to expel rebellious youth Jonnie Goodboy Tyler — who, denouncing the smallminded cowardice of his elders in words familiar to all of us from a thousand earlier rite-of-passage pictures, leaps onto his horse and rides forth into the world beyond to seek the truth behind the legends of the conquerors. A mere mouthful of popcorn later he happens on a ruined amusement park which must undoubtedly be the work of the fallen

gods, and no more than a couple of swallows after that he's seized by hovercraft which fairly reek of alien menace and hauled off to the remains of Denver to pursue a rewarding career as a slave laborer. Here posed amid some striking CGI matte paintings he meets the principal representatives of the race of conquerors (John Travolta and Forest Whitaker, dressed for success in slimy evil-alien garb and sporting very bad unHollywood teeth), who are explained to be quasiSpanish conquistadors preoccupied with amassing plunder and scheming incessantly to stab one another in the back (referred to internally as employing/exerting "leverage") so they can get their butts off this stinking colonial rock and back to "the Home Office" — which, naturally, several hundred commentators speculated must be in Milwaukee. Seeing in Jonnie an unusually bright animal whom they may exploit to increase the output of their gold mines, they plug him into an educational engine which (in keeping with the law of unanticipated consequences) teaches him enough about mathematics and the physical sciences to lead a revolt. — In short, another of those heroic-resistance-to-alien-tyranny stories, once a staple of the genre; doubtless inspired by historical precedents like the brilliant military campaign of Crazy Horse that drove the white man out of North America.....

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*Falling bodies (8/8/2000)*

Not long ago I happened across the latest paperback release from Elmore Leonard: *Be Cool*, a sequel to the celebrated novel-turned-to-movie *Get Shorty*; containing the further adventures of Chili Palmer in Hollywood, and dropping by the way assorted opinions of Mr. Leonard on motion pictures — opinions with which (as you might expect) I almost invariably agree. I took note, accordingly, when during an early lull in the action Palmer pauses while channelsurfing in his living room (an occupation to which, apparently, even the

buccaneers of the film industry must occasionally be reduced), and locks in on the Michael Mann version of *The Last Of The Mohicans* (1992); remarking that it is a great motion picture, and that he would certainly watch it any time it might happen to be on the television.

I was struck by this observation, since though I had very vivid memories of the theatrical release of the film (which I sat through twice in succession), I'd never been able to watch it all the way through since. The reason was stupidly simple: I thought it was one of the most beautiful pictures I'd ever seen; and that the variously watered-down versions later made available on broadcast television, VHS, and even classical laserdisc were, at best, pathetic travesties of the original. As a result so far as I was concerned the film might as well have been lost; and I regarded any subsequent attempt to pretend it was still extant with impatient annoyance.

This probably requires an explanation.

Even under the best of circumstances, i.e., when a film shot in the classical aspect ratio of 4:3 is transferred to video, at each of the several stages of the process which reproduces the image it is cropped to ensure overscanning. The final result is usually about sixty-five percent of the original frame; when allowance is made for distortion around the edges of the television screen, the so-called title-safe area is really only about fifty-five percent. And this is the best case. When a film is shot in the Cinemascope aspect ratio of 7:3, pan-and-scan truncation removes an additional forty-two percent of the image; at this point, even if the resolution and color quality of the television monitor were equivalent to that of the original negative, no more than a third of the picture need be left. But at this point, of course, one must make allowance for the loss of color bitdepth in the NTSC conversion (a loss of two-thirds to three-quarters; even classical laserdisc is no more than eight-bit color), and, finally, the fact that a television image measures at best 720 by 480 pixels (*not* 640; it would be too much to expect from television engineers that the pixels should

be square) and an adequate digital transfer of the thirty-five millimeter frame is generally supposed to require a grid of about 3600 by 2600 (cf. the *American Cinematographer's Manual* for details regarding this and related technical issues.) Moreover, at the last minute, adding insult to injury, the interlaced display of the television monitor divides the effective resolution neatly in half. After multiplying all these factors out, you realize that you might as well be listening to the movie on the radio.

But improvements have been made of late: films presented on DVD are usually letterboxed, to preserve the original aspect ratio (though there is some concern that the imposition of the new video widescreen pseudostandard of 16:9 — a figure which bears no relationship to any established convention of feature film<sup>22</sup> — will provide a new excuse for pan-and-scan),<sup>23</sup> and the options of S-video and even three-component output (approximating 16- and 24-bit color) transmit two or three times the previous maximum in color information to the screen; there is also an apparent improvement in (horizontal) resolution, though really fine detail still inevitably disappears. (Sean Young, in a Ridley Scott homage to *The Maltese Falcon*, smokes what look like handrolled cigarettes in *Blade Runner*; I have yet to see this detail reproduced on the small screen.)

But it isn't as bad as it used to be. And, therefore, prompted by Elmore Leonard, I went out directly to look for the DVD; brought it back; and, what can I say, watched it four times in a row. It isn't all there, of course (this would appear to be one instance — another is the

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<sup>22</sup> This isn't precisely correct, though I have never heard anyone admit what must have been the reasoning: 16:9 is the geometric mean of 4:3 and 64:27, a good approximation of the usual widescreen ratio of 2.35:1, meaning that the relative loss of area letterboxing on the sides for the former and at top and bottom for the latter is identical; moreover 1.78:1 is close to the standard (American) 35 mm. aspect ratio of 1.85:1.

<sup>23</sup> Ironically this provided instead an excuse to crop films shot in the classical 4:3 aspect ratio to 16:9; which as it turns out, frequently improves the composition. (Not that we shouldn't still be pissed.)

great French arthouse comedy *Delicatessen*<sup>24</sup> — where some of the atmospheric effects cannot be reproduced in any video format), but enough has been restored to do justice to my memory of the original. — Still (and I remain emphatic on this point): if you have only seen this on television, you've never seen the movie.

This rant discharged, a word about the film.

The story is not unfamiliar: it is a somewhat re-engineered version of the ancient Fenimore Cooper novel — one of a series in which the legendary woodsman the Deerslayer/Hawkeye/Natty Bumppo showed off a woodsy lore more than slightly exaggerated for the benefit of Cooper's adoring audience of cloistered urban Yankee rubes, each a disconnected series of episodes in which the keeneyed and seemingly omniscient protagonist tracked bugs walking over water, whiffed farts on the wind days after the moment of truth, and shot lice out of the wings of flying birds; the redesign is the work of Michael Mann, a director who made his reputation with a television show about a couple of putative detectives who wore a lot of Armani and seemed fond of striking strong silent brooding poses before the Miami waterfront while throbbing rockandroll music swelled on the soundtrack beneath. Fortunately the whole was somewhat more than the sum of these parts.

The filmed scenario runs as follows: it is 1757, and the French and Indian Wars have commenced on the American continent. The protagonists, the abovementioned Hawkeye (Daniel Day-Lewis) and his adopted Indian father and brother Chingachgook (Russell Means) and Uncas (Eric Schweig) — the last two of the once-numerous tribe of the Mohicans — are discovered chasing a stag through the forest; after Hawkeye drops it with an impressive shot from his long Kentucky rifle, they pronounce a prayer over the carcass expressing

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<sup>24</sup> Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro, 1992. I first saw this in the theater, and was so struck by its unique visual texture that I guessed (correctly) it had been shot on Agfa film stock.

their gratitude to the spirit of the deer for providing them with sustenance. Having thus established their pagan religious credentials, they repair to a frontier outpost, there discovering representatives of the British army (the usual clichéd stiffnecked inflexible arrogant redcoat cocksuckers we've been rooting against since the dawn of our national mythology) attempting to recruit colonial volunteers for the holy campaign against the Frogs. A local militia is raised, but not without the exchange of harsh words between several of the colonials (our hero in particular) and the always-insensitive Brits. Meanwhile, one particularly tightassed redcoat specimen named Hayward (Steven Waddington) is attempting unsuccessfully to make time with the dazzling Cora Munro (the brunette Madeleine Stowe); tabling his proposal for the moment, he undertakes the escort of herself and her sister Alice (the blonde Jodhi May) to meet their father Colonel Edmund Munro (Maurice Roëves) at Fort William Henry. Clueless rookies that they are, they have no idea how to find the fortress in question, and take as native guide for their expedition the formidable Magua (Wes Studi) — a really mean-looking dude who predictably turns out to be a French mole with some kind of blood hatred for the old Colonel. In consequence it's no surprise when Magua's buddies waylay the party in the deep woods, killing many extras and doubtless steering the story to a premature conclusion, were it not fortuitously the case that Hawkeye and his blood brothers happen across the ambush and drive the bad guys off. Taking up the duty of guiding the babes through the enchanted forest, they drop a few hints regarding the dos and donts of life in the American wilderness, and by the time they all arrive at the (now heavily besieged) fortress, to the jealous disgust of Hayward Cora has fallen for Hawkeye, and Alice and Uncas though somewhat less demonstrative are pretty obviously making eyes at one another. Slipping through the enemy lines in another demonstration of American native-scout expertise, they arrive within the walls and accept the eternal gratitude of the elder Munro — which, naturally (since he is, after all, a British heavy) lasts no more than a couple of minutes before he tosses Hawkeye into irons for his insolence. But after a brief interval of uncertainty the French triumph in their strategic project and bring their bigger guns to bear,

and Munro must surrender his position and, under some peculiar eighteenth-century gentlemen's agreement, march his defeated army out under flag of truce to transport them back to Europe. Magua and the French commander have, however, a purely twentieth-century discussion about the terms of this surrender, and the British don't get far before an Indian ambush cuts them to ribbons in what is, without question, the most beautifully-photographed firefight I have ever seen (smoke, confusion, bright red uniforms, brilliant forest greens.) Magua makes good on his promise to cut Munro's heart out and eat it raw, but Hawkeye has thrown off his irons and he and Uncas and Chingachgook escort Hayward and the two girls away from the battlefield. They then flee in canoes across a lake and down a river infested with rapids with the Bad Indians in hot pursuit; taking refuge, finally, behind a waterfall. Finding that their powder is wet and that they can make no effective defense, they make the traumatic decision to abandon the girls and the disbelieving redcoat temporarily to the pursuers (whose torches, in a memorable image, are seen approaching through the veil of falling water), the better to effect a reversal of fortune. Pledging his eternal troth and vowing his return (this shot always makes the trailers, and it certainly ought to) Hawkeye turns from the never-more-dazzling Ms. Munro and leaps through the waterfall into outer space. — True to their word, our heroes immediately resume the chase, and trail Magua's braves to a Huron encampment, where the heavy is pitching his plea for justice to a tribal elder of great age and impressive gravitas. Hawkeye interrupts and argues his own case; the resulting Solomonic judgment is that Magua gets to keep Alice for his own plaything and the Hurons get to burn Hayward at the stake, but Hawkeye and Cora are allowed to go free. Running from the encampment to a nearby overlook, Hawkeye takes his loaded rifle from his waiting companions and with a phenomenal shot drills the flamebroiling redcoat through the heart, ending his death-agonies (and finally shutting him up). — It remains to free the blonde from Magua's clutches. The four pursue the Huron posse over rocky bluffs to a high, high place; one that seems to overlook the whole of the ancient natural world. Fired by love, Uncas arrives in advance of the others and, in keeping with the relevant conventions

(for in these days war had rules), hacks his way with knife and tomahawk alone through the entire party to Magua himself, who guards the girl. But the race of the Mohicans is at an end; Magua cuts Uncas down and he falls, disbelief upon his features, from the bluffs to the valley far below. Magua, curiously humanized by this triumph, now turns to the girl, solicitous, as it seems, for her welfare, and beckons her to come with him. But with a look and a purpose that were, I assure you, never to be found in Fenimore Cooper, she turns away and casts herself from the rocks to join her lover in death. Hawkeye and Chingachgook now arrive, and though the Deerslayer disposes of the remaining Hurons it is the elder Indian who dispatches Magua with a prodigious blow from his tomahawk. The trio of survivors, then, standing on the bluffs overlooking this world now at an end, pronounce an elegy not only for the race of the Mohicans, but, it is clear, for the savage nobility of the natural man and the lost American wilderness. I have never seen anything like it.

There is much that is memorable about this production: the cinematography of Dante Spinotti; the elegiac score of Trevor Jones and Randy Edelman; the casting, particularly the leads. Mr. Day-Lewis makes a very photogenic woodsman, and I concur with Elmore Leonard: every great beauty of the silver screen seems to have that moment when her face alone could launch a thousand ships, and this was that moment for Madeleine Stowe; certainly I've been in love with her ever since.

But what is most remarkable is the way that it conveys a sort of myth of the Fall: the sense of the loss of the nomadic life, the life of the Indian, of the natural man who lived in harmony with nature and with the divinity that expresses itself in nature; and of its replacement with a soulless mechanistic civilization that must always have been some kind of sick fucking mistake, even from the moment of the first cultivation of crops. — It is, of course, easy to make fun of this idea (as Mark Twain made fun of Fenimore Cooper, and everyone made fun of Rousseau), but there is a real and undeniably deeprooted anxiety that it touches, a primordial unease that is always there and

whose expressions are found everywhere in the cinema, which foregrounds such concerns. It cannot be an accident that everything in modern life is about coloring between the lines, and every instinct tells us to rip the book in half; that though the hero rides into town at the beginning of the Western, he always rides out (into a sunset) at its end; that (incidentally) he never seems to need a job, and never wants a wife; that when the village mob marches out in torchlit procession to capture the Frankenstein monster, you're pulling for the monster, and when the biplanes go after King Kong, you're pulling for the ape; that it doesn't seem that Beauty killed the beast, for that matter, but something more like Beauty's hidden agenda; that Chaplin had it right about the industrialists, Mack Sennett had it right about the cops, and Mel Brooks had it right about the emperors and kings; that every action movie begins by identifying a threat to civilization that will provide an excuse for the hero to ignore every one of its strictures; that thereafter no speed limit will be obeyed, and no window will remain unbroken; that the hero will fuck every woman he finds attractive, and shoot every asshole he finds annoying; that the best line in all three of the *Die Hard* movies comes when Bruce Willis is driving not simply off the road and on the sidewalk but through the middle of Central Park, and admits to Sam Jackson that, yes, maybe he was trying to hit that mime. — For if man is born free, why is he everywhere in chains?

One might make another, complementary point; a point as it were about the cinema's original sin.

There's an interesting compilation that came out not long ago (now available on DVD), called *Landmarks of Early Film*, a sampler of classic vignettes from the dawn of the art of motion pictures: Edison's shortshorts of boxers and bellydancers; some footage of presidential candidate William McKinley feigning studied unconcern as he lounged upon his porch, pretending that he still awaited the news of his nomination at the 1896 convention — history's first staged photo opportunity; the Lumière Brothers' early microdocumentaries, e.g. the

famous platform-point-of-view of a train arriving in a station which is said to have sent people stampeding from their seats the first time it was exhibited; Méliès' fantastic rendition of Verne's *From The Earth To The Moon* (1902); Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (the first Western, 1903); and the like. Though all this is great fun to watch, the most striking thing about the collection is that, after a couple of hours of pioneer experiments that look, by and large, like turn-of-the-century home movies, the anthology ends with a one-reel fifteen-minute feature made by D. W. Griffith in 1912 titled *The Girl And Her Trust* — at that a remake of the somewhat more famous *The Lonedale Operator* (1911) — a little melodrama about a telegraph operator on the railroad line who is entrapped by thieves intent on a payroll robbery, kidnapped, and carried off on a handcar down the tracks while railroad men on a pursuing engine race to her rescue (and while Griffith's cameraman, Billy Bitzer, flies along in an open car parallel to the tracks handcranking the chase from a few yards away.) — What's striking, after all the other amateurish footage, is that this is recognizably a movie: it's exciting to watch, beautifully photographed, and ends with a terrific chase, skillfully edited to accentuate the action. When you see this so pointedly juxtaposed with what came before it you can't help but be amazed by how rapidly the modern narrative cinema was invented; and how completely it was the invention of one man.

Indeed Griffith appeared even to his contemporaries to be the veritable Newton of the cinema; the entire art and industry of motion pictures seemed to have leapt fully armored from his brain, like Athena from the head of Zeus. His first experiments were confined, like everyone else's, to the fifteen- and thirty-minute confines of the one- and two-reel format. But he advanced rapidly to the exploration of longer forms, with his twelve-reel Civil War epic *The Birth Of A Nation* (1915) — the first and still one of the greatest of feature films, and (after renormalization) almost certainly still the top moneymaker of all time: accounting was fragmentary, and theft on the part of the distributors, systematic, but at the best estimates it may have grossed

as much as fifty million dollars — before 1920. Griffith had invented the blockbuster; the distributors had invented gross point participation.

No one had ever seen anything like it — the battle scenes in particular were unprecedented in their verisimilitude — and audience response suggested not a night at the theater but the absorption of some kind of divine revelation: people were absolutely thunderstruck; they staggered out into the streets weeping, and seized passersby by the lapels and tried to stammer out descriptions of what they had witnessed.

Alas, *The Birth Of A Nation* does not stop at telling the story of the Civil War from the Southern point of view (it is no more objectionable in that regard than *Gone With The Wind*), but proceeds, in its second moiety, to tell a very unfortunate version of the story of Reconstruction — in which, after the death of the saintly Lincoln (whose noble intentions, says Griffith, no one ever doubted) the dastardly House Republicans (why does this sound familiar?) seize control of the government from more sober judgments and impose a mad scheme of retribution upon the South which results in the legislature, the courts, and the very streets being taken away from good godfearing white citizens by their brainwashed and now strangely agitated former wards and employees; necessitating, as the terminal crisis looms and even the ashblonde virgin goddess Lillian Gish is imperiled by lustmaddened darkies beating down her door, that Griffith, the veritable inventor of the chase, the guy who first contrived the lastminute arrival of the cavalry, must launch a climactic Ride to the Rescue by an army of masked riders clad in white — the saviors not merely of the girl but (thus the title) of the Aryan Nation — the Ku Klux Klan. — Griffith, in short, seems also to have invented political incorrectness.

But, contrary to the received wisdom, there is no point in burying this film under a rock and pretending that it was never made; that no one

ever saw it and admired it; that those who did, and did admire it (notably the sainted Woodrow Wilson, who had promulgated an identical view of Reconstruction in his very influential history of the American republic) were sports, monsters, freaks, or amoral savages. The very best people show up at lynchings; I'm German, and I ought to know.

In fact everyone ought to see *The Birth Of A Nation*. — I'm not sure I know how to express it properly, but the point may be this: it is a profoundly liberating experience to be manipulated by the author of a motion picture into cheering on the Ku Klux Klan. Never after that can you believe without question what you see in film or on television; never after that can your perceptions be twisted quite so easily. More than learning not to trust the author, you learn not to trust yourself. This is a difficult lesson, but an important one.

In any case the most disturbing scene of all occurs before the climax; though unfortunately it has not preserved in its entirety (public outcry resulted in extensive re-editing after the first release), enough remains in the surviving prints to make a profound impression. This is a shocking sequence in which the teenaged Southern belle Mae Marsh — not Griffith's most beautiful nor his most accomplished actress, but certainly his cutest — is confronted by a black man as she walks in the woods alone; pursued to the top of a high bluff and faced with the unambiguous threat of savage rape, she leaps from a cliff to her death. It is utterly appalling.

And what has Michael Mann given us in reply? Jodhi May, who plays Alice Munro — not as cute as the incomparable Mae Marsh, but quite cute enough — steps back aghast from the Indian brave who has slain her lover — an Indian brave who seems for the first time not repellent, not ignoble, but concerned for her welfare, and anxious that she should understand that he has, by the rules of his culture and that of the fallen Uncas, won her hand, fair and square — steps back, considers, and makes her choice: not for the Indian who stands before

her, but for the Indian who does not; and casts herself from the precipice — falling, falling; from the heavens to the earth. This is at once homage, and reproach.

So, there it is: a hymn to the American wilderness, a trenchant statement of the myth of the Fall, and an elegant apology for the original sin of the cinema; perhaps the most beautiful movie I've ever seen.

And though killing animals for meat must invariably be evil when it is not personal, it's always a good idea to kill your television.

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*Dancing on the bar (10/5/00)*

“You guys are really weird, you know that?” the girl remarks to the two nerds. “They're not *weird!*” the Monster exclaims — seizing the two geeks one in each paw and crushing them to his bosom with a fond embrace. “They're *scientists!*” [*Frankenstein: The College Years.*]

**Almost Famous.** [Cameron Crowe, 2000.]

Cameron Crowe's beautiful autobiographical essay about his first tour on the road with a rock-and-roll band as a Boy Wonder stringer for the *Rolling Stone* — in which his alter ego Patrick Fugit by dint of talent luck and bullshit attracts the attention of the famous editor Ben Fong-Torres, acquires the assignment of following a group of rising stars (the fictional Stillwater) as they ride off to look for America, escapes the suffocating influence of his controlfreak mother (Frances McDormand), skips his high school graduation, and launches himself into an adventure that bounces him all over the Midwest in a tourbus, lands him in the exotic ports of Cleveland, Topeka, and New York, and places him finally on a chartered flight to hear the (memorably

hilarious) last confessions of the band members as they prepare to auger into a cornfield in Tupelo; brooding, the while, over his portable typewriter as he tries to fathom the Deeper Significance of this roadtrip. For these were the now-distant days when sex was still safe, drugs were still plentiful, and rock and roll still meant something: when musicians were more than merely another species of the rich and famous; when there was a journalistic currency other than that of celebrity; and when the best writing in America appeared in the *Rolling Stone*.

These delusions have long since evaporated; oddly enough it is only what once seemed most ephemeral, the sense of how much fun it all was, that remains. Oliver Stone may have found the war, but Cameron Crowe found the party. And since he may have been the only geek ever to have done so, his triumph sustains all of us.

So though obviously this is not the cinematic Bildungsroman that will make you forget *Platoon* or *The 400 Blows*, still, it's one of the best rock and roll movies ever made. — With Philip Seymour Hoffman brilliant once again as Fugit/Crowe's mentor the semilegendary rock critic Lester Bangs (pay particular attention to the speech in which he explicates the relationship of critic to rock musician as that of dweeb anthropologist to the tribes of the cool and the beautiful), Billy Crudup (actually better in the role than would have been the prior choices Cruise and Pitt) as the fledgling-star guitarist, and Kate Hudson as the leader of the Band Aids, Penny Lane. — When the riddle of the human genome has been finally deciphered, someone will be able to explain to me what makes Goldie Goldie, and how Kate inherited it; I want to hear how this is supposed to follow from protein folding.

**Frankenstein's Daughter.** [Richard Cunha, 1958; written by H.E. Barrie.]

A high school girl figures out the mysterious laboratory assistant aiding her uncle in his scientific research is actually the last remaining scion of the Frankensteins: no wonder he's been making eyes at her; he wants her body, and not necessarily all in one piece. Complications ensue. — An architectural quibble: I don't recall that an attached dungeon was a standard option on the typical Fifties suburban home. But admittedly it should have been.

**Coyote Ugly.** [John Craig, 2K.]

It is Christmas in a town without pity. As a light snow falls on the seasonal decorations that adorn the streets and jolly elves in Santasuits ring bells on every corner soliciting softmoney contributions to political action committees, a lone waif dressed in rags looks wistfully through the window of a department store at an expensive garment draped upon the voluptuous form of a rubber mannequin. "Look at those hooters," she sighs. "Just like Nikki Fritz. Someday... ." Her voice trails off. Gathering her tattered garments more closely about her against the bitter chill of the December breeze, she limps slowly down the sidewalk. She does not notice the man in the Santasuit muttering something into a cellular telephone. Passing the entrance to an alley, she hears a faint voice calling out for aid. Pausing, she looks both ways up and down the street; but it is now strangely empty, and no one is in sight. She turns to leave, but hears the voice again, more clearly now. "Help me," it croaks. It seems the voice of an elderly man, crying for help. At the thought of a fellow human being alone, in pain, perhaps dying, she cannot hesitate. She enters the alley. Within the narrow passage the light is dim, crepuscular. Almost invisible, the figure of the old man, seemingly crushed and discarded, slumps against the wall beside a dumpster. "Help me," he says. "It's dragging in the dirt, and I just can't get it up." "What?" she asks, puzzled and now somewhat apprehensive. "Can I help you?" "Sure, baby," he

cackles, stepping toward her. "Just take a look at this." Ripping open his trenchcoat, he reveals an intricate pattern of ceremonial tattoos declaring him a prince of the Yakuza. A physically disgusting prince of the Yakuza. "Gaah," she mutters. "What's your name, sweetheart?" he asks as he advances. "Why...why...I don't know!" she realizes. And swoons. She recovers consciousness in a dank stinking dungeon, chained to a wall splattered with blood and covered with politically-incorrect graffiti. Oil portraits of Jerry Bruckheimer hang everywhere around the room, protected by sheets of plastic. "What evil fate can have brought me here?" she wonders aloud. As if on cue there enter Ilsa, She-Wolf of the Heidelberg Bartending Academy, and her blonde-bimbo assistants, Gretchen and Brunhilda. "Welcome, my little cupcake," Ilsa announces in a thick Teutonic accent. "It is time for your orientation." Her assistants smile, strip to the waist, and begin to oil one another's torsos. Ilsa flips a row of switches activating an alarming bank of electrical apparatus, attaches alligator clips to the most delicate portions of our heroine's anatomy, and examines the readings on a bank of ammeters. "Interesting," she murmurs. She adjusts a voltage. A pen begins to twitch up and down across a moving band of paper. "It is my contention that the female of the species can withstand more pain than the male," she explains. "When I can prove this to the producers, it will undoubtedly result in larger grosses." She throws a lever. A section of the wall revolves about a hidden axis, bringing a polka band into the cell. She makes a peremptory gesture with her riding crop. They break into song. Our heroine screams. Montage: other gruesome scenes of torture: leather whips, cattleprod dildos, repeated screenings of *Con Air*. The pen jerks up and down upon the moving strip of paper, leaving a jagged trail behind it. Dreadful polka music. Dissolve through a ghastly accordion solo to a tavern scene: as a horde of drunken Yale fraternity men with dueling scars and promises of ambassadorships in the Bush administration wave beer mugs in the air and shout their approbation, a chorus line of dancing St. Pauli Girls decked out in peasant dresses cavort upon the top of the bar; our heroine among them. Swirling her skirts about her hips, she reveals unusually gaudy bloomers. The number concludes

when a red 1969 GTO convertible hurtles through the front window with an explosion of glass and splintering timber, scattering the crowd and crushing several lawyers; a stunt driver staggers out and collapses, groaning “Tequila...tequila... .” Restoratives are applied. He gasps out a tale of a man wrongfully accused, prosecuted, incarcerated, busting out of jail and commencing an outlaw roadtrip through the Nevada desert with a girl and a gun which ends in armed robbery and a spectacular carchase; a barmaid takes notes for later review by studio executives. Having dived behind the bar to avoid possible gunfire, our heroine finds herself alone and unnoticed; crawling away from the others toward the egress, she notices that the wall-sized mirror behind the liquorshelves has grown strangely translucent. Reaching out to touch it, she is amazed to discover that her hand goes into it as if into water; waves emanate in concentric rings from the point of entry. She crawls through the looking-glass to investigate. On the other side she finds a bizarre mirror-world in grainy black-and-white where the bar is a Parisian cafe, the fraternity boys are chainsmoking intellectuals who drink coffee and argue incessantly about the articulation of the noumenal self in the films of Jerry Lewis, and nobody understands money. Since everyone speaks French without subtitles, she has no idea what they are saying; she herself delivers a three-hour lecture on Dick Powell’s incarnation of the Cartesian ego in *Murder My Sweet* without understanding anything that comes out of her mouth. Despairing, she crawls back through the looking-glass, finding the bar now empty save for a mysterious stranger seated by himself at a table in the back dressed in a black trenchcoat, wearing shades, and chewing on a wooden matchstick. “If you’re another tattooed flasher I’m going to rip your lungs out,” she warns. “No, baby,” he replies. “I’m the writer.” “All right,” she demands. “If you’re the writer then who am I?” He laughs easily. “The errant daughter of the wildcat oilman who disarms the biological weapons and saves the reformed carthief from the falling meteorite at the end of act two,” he says. “Played by Nikki Fritz.” “Oh yeah?” she says. “If I’m Nikki Fritz then what about these?” — ripping her shirt open and revealing to her own astonishment a pair of melons unmistakably those of Nikki herself.

“But if I’m Nikki Fritz then you must be... .” “That’s right, baby. Leonardo Garbonzo.” A team of commandos burst in, weapons drawn. “Hands off that nipple ring,” their leader demands. Garbonzo sneers, whips out a forty-five, and points it at the head of an enormous stuffed animal. “Freeze!” he says. “Or the bunny gets it!” As each of the three dozen triggers of each of the three dozen guns now aimed at him makes a loudly audible click, with his free hand he dials a cell phone. “Quentin?” he asks quietly. “I have a problem with a standoff... .”

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*Holes in space (10/5/00)*

Director Don Edmunds on his first perusal of the script for *Ilsa, She-Wolf Of The SS* [1974]: “I was just flat-on-my-back broke...I read it and thought, ‘Man, what a piece of shit,’ went back the next day and told [the producer] Dunning: ‘This is a piece of shit. No — this is the worst piece of shit I have ever read in my life,’ And he said, ‘Yeah, but I’ve got this much money.’ So, where that I am, I said, ‘Well, there is something very distinctive about it... .’”

**Whipped.** [Peter M. Cohen, 1999.]

Essentially a feature-length episode of *Sex In The City*: the Sunday morning breakfast meeting (a sort of Village-diner SportsCenter where the panelists swap stories about rimjobs) of three selfproclaimed urban sexual adventurers (once again the Mad Hatter, the March Hare, and the Dormouse) is disrupted when by apparent freak coincidence they all separately and simultaneously encounter Amanda Peet, find in her the love that transcends affectation, and become contenders for her hand. In a few brief weeks their friendship is over, their egos are crushed, their boners have wilted, and the joy they once derived from loudly swapping tall tales of sexual conquest is at an end. Is this mere accident, or some elaborately plotted comic

revenge? Take a wild guess. — Though there are amusing observations regarding jerking off, ass crust, the effects of pineapple juice on the flavor of semen, the equation of Marriage with Shopping, and the difficulty of retrieving a vibrator that's fallen down the toilet, after ninety minutes of listening to these people accuse one another of totally messing with each other's shit (Dude, that is like, so fucked up), I feel a powerful need for a couple of Merchant-Ivory Edwardian costume dramas to restore my acquaintance with the English tongue. — Ms. Peet, however, appears with this feature to have arrived at the stardom she richly deserves. So I guess every fucking cloud has, like, this totally silver lining.

### **Corman Retrospective, Volume One.**

Any remaining skeptics will be instantly convinced of the superiority of the DVD format when they discover that it makes possible the presentation of a Roger Corman triple feature on a single disc: an entire evening at the drive-in for the price of a single rental. Here provided for your viewing pleasure are *Attack Of The Giant Leeches* (swampdwelling bloodsuckers of improbable dimensions develop a culinary interest in the neighboring trailertrash, notably Designated Slattern Yvette Vickers), *The Wasp Woman* (aging cosmetic tycoon Susan Cabot rejuvenates her appearance with injections of wasp venom which have the unfortunate side effect of giving her a monstrous lust for human flesh), and *A Bucket Of Blood* — the legendary cult classic, written by Charles Griffith, in which B-movie great Dick Miller depicts a dim but earnest busboy so desperate to acquire status with the beatniks who frequent the coffeehouse scene that when he discovers by macabre accident the striking sculptural effect created by packing a dead body in modeling clay, he goes on a killing spree in the name of Art. — This last is one of the best remaining portraits of classical beatnik culture (“the *old* coffeehouse scene,” laughs George Figgs in the John Waters documentary, “where people dressed in black, had cigarette holders, played bongo drums, read poetry, drank Chianti all day... .”) — And its affectations. —

Miller, transmogrified, orders confidently at his reception: “Bring me a cappuccino and a piece of papaya cheesecake. And a bottle of Yugoslavian white wine.” — Ah, those were the days.

**Hollow Man.** [Paul Verhoeven, 2000. Written by Andrew W. Marlowe; story by Gary Scott Thompson.]

Brilliant megalomaniac Kevin Bacon — the kind of movie scientist who in essence announces with his first entrance upon the screen that he is going to transgress against the cosmic moral order, usurp powers Man was not Meant to Wield, and call down upon himself the dreadful retribution of the gods — invents invisibility in an underground laboratory, with the incidental assistance of Elisabeth Shue, Josh Brolin, Kim Dickens, and a guy in a gorilla suit, and then, alas (don't these people ever get out to the movies?) chugs a draught of his own magic potion to make sure of its effect on human subjects. Before you know it he's sneaking into the neighbor's apartment to watch her undress, and after that it's a short slide down the slippery slope before he's a mad serial killer and a danger to all mankind. Fortunately he returns to the subterranean fortress to gloat, allowing Ms. Shue and her posse to overcome him in the industry-standard grand finale, a firefight in a warehouse; the chase concludes (I am not making this up) with a scene in which she outruns an explosion by climbing a ladder up an elevator shaft. — Kids, don't try this in your underground laboratories at home.

I'm not sure that everyone knows exactly why Galileo didn't really have to drop a bowling ball and a golf ball off the Leaning Tower; it was because he had a gift for the embarrassing question. — If you tie a twenty pound weight to a ten pound weight, does the heavy one speed up the lighter one, or does the lighter one act as a brake? But, wait a minute, ten and twenty is thirty; shouldn't the two joined together fall faster than either one separately? [Where do you draw the invisible dotted lines?] — Similarly, if you're invisible and you eat a visible Twinkie, does it disappear when it enters your aura? or does the

camera record its mastication by invisible teeth, the progress of its fragments down an invisible throat, their attack by invisible stomach acids and transformation into — what? — invisible sugars and carbohydrates? How is this supposed to work? Do you gradually become visible again? Or is it the other way around? So if you're walking around invisible in a cloud of smoke, do you acquire a layer of visible soot? Or does your invisibility start to rub off on everything you come in contact with? like the invisible imitation butter on this fucking popcorn, come to think of it; gaah, the slime... . Anyway, if light passes through you, it passes through your retinas; so it should work out that they can't see you and you can't see them. Right?

Wrong. Always wrong. — Ah well. — Astonishing effects in the service of a really dumb plot; but, then, what did you expect. Check it out.

—505—

*Serial structure (10/30/00)*

.... The idea of a serial (at least superficially) presupposes a kind of dynamic equilibrium: if you adopt the three-act model of a motion-picture scenario, in which the first act introduces the characters and their predicament, and the third act resolves it, then the serial is constructed by interpolating an arbitrary number of multiples of the second act (the conflict); i.e. into the trivial grammar

plot  $\rightarrow$  1 2 3

1  $\rightarrow$  1, 2  $\rightarrow$  2, 3  $\rightarrow$  3

you introduce the substitution rule

2  $\rightarrow$  2 | 2 2

which allows indefinite elaboration.

But now if you introduce some new twist to the plot in the middle of the chain, it meddles with the balance of forces and the nearest dynamical attractor is usually a conclusion. — This explains why television doesn't translate into movies; a similar principle distinguishes the romance from the novel. — Characters and relationships are permitted to evolve, but only on a scale which is long compared to the length of an episode: thus Quixote gradually becomes sympathetic, and Hawkeye in *MASH* is eventually more than a fraternity prankster ...

—506—

*Angels and ministers of grace (12/19/00)*

Travolta has threatened a sequel to *Battlefield Earth*, rumor now attaches the name of Ridley Scott to *Terminator Three*, Terry Gilliam's latest project is accursed, Meg Ryan is mulling over the idea of playing the lead in a Linda Lovelace biopic (presumably working with Nora Ephron will teach you a lot about suppressing the gag reflex), and Stallone's mom's psychic dogs are predicting a bright romantic future for newly-minted billionaire Anna Nicole Smith (so are mine.) But our aims this week are purely spiritual:

**Charlie's Angels.** [McG, 2000; writers beyond number.]

Irresistible megaditz and wouldbe Dancing Fool Cameron Diaz, leatherclad dominatrix (but abominable cook) Lucy Liu, and producer/gigababe Drew Barrymore — so supremely confident of her ability to pull this one off that she allows her fabulously untalented boyfriend not one but two scenes herein — reprise the roles made famous by whatstheirnames in the late and now mysteriously lamented

Seventies action/titillation series; accompanied by the new Bosley, Bill Murray; and assisted by a phenomenally talented assortment of effects wizards and martial arts choreographers and an army of writers whose willingness to hurl their bodies beneath the chariots of the studio Pharaohs must recall the sacrifices of the slaves who died to erect the Pyramids.

Of course, the Pyramids are impressive, and, in its own way, so is this scenario: after preliminary flourishes which serve to establish our heroines as daredevil Masters of Disguise, they converse by telephone with their invisible and mysterious employer, the eponymous Charlie (still the voice of John Forsythe), receiving the intelligence that computer zillionaire Tim Curry (here as always a guy who looks like he is twirling his mustachios whether he has them or not) is supposed to have kidnapped rival computer zillionaire Sam Rockwell in order to steal...something (as Hitchcock was always fond of pointing out, it never matters *what* it is, only *that* it is) — with which (dare I say it) he can rule the world. Bounding from the office sofa with girlish enthusiasm, they dance through a succession of undercover roles, imitating, variously, massage therapists, swank-party caterers, Formula One drivers, bellydancers, corporate consultants, ninja safecrackers, frog girls, and birthday-telegram singers decked out in Heidi outfits (this one was by itself worth the price of admission); mimicking, the while (thanks to the expert wirework of Hong Kong import Corey Yuen), kung fu badasses; establishing, in the meantime, the relative innocence of Curry (who hams it up with admirable relish nonetheless) and the relative culpability of Rockwell and his all-too-slinky ExecVeep Kelly Lynch; and prancing through whole transplanted chapters of several recent action hits before the Grand Finale, a threeringcircus shootout in an entirely improbable cliff-top fortress. — Though none of this quite achieves, say, the playful touch of the classic Doctor Who episodes — in which the writers would manage to steal the plots of two or three bad old scifi movies in a single halfhour — the authors do exhibit a certain lighthearted grace in their systematic plundering of the recent history of the action flick;

and one need only imagine what Stallone would have done to a script like this to realize that it might have been much, much worse.

Critical opinion has been remarkably undivided regarding the merit of this opus; and, indeed, it is difficult to see how it could stir any deeper controversy than a dispute over the proper spelling of “babe-a-licious”. (I take no position.) But where else can you see a sumowrestling match between Bill Murray and Tim Curry? And wouldn’t it be great if Bill Gates and Larry Ellison took the hint and kidnapped one another? hopefully never to reappear. However though its remarkable success has prompted the usual speculations about the birth of a franchise, the penurious studio executives at Columbia have already indicated their reluctance to rehire the current Heroic (and, accordingly, Expensive) Trio for the sequel — as always, penny wise, pound foolish: if they think I’d sit through this again without Cameron Diaz and Drew Barrymore, they’re out of their minds. Even a worm has his pride. At least I think he has.

### **Fallen Angel.** [John Quinn, 1997.]

Saxophones. A rainslicked city street, at night. As a couple of 1947 roadsters cruise by to set the period of the piece, we dissolve through the entrance of a seedy tavern to the interior, where amid a festive crowd in period costume hardbitten private investigator James Patrick Keefe is knocking them down at the end of the bar while delivering the kind of worldweary voiceover that makes you wish for an international moratorium on bad imitations of Raymond Chandler. Fortunately for the sensibilities of the audience, his ruminations are cut short by the appearance of the slinky female Oriental chauffeur of Rich Bitch Samantha Phillips (presumably on loan to the Playboy Entertainment Group from Andy Sidaris), who in an audience in the back of her limousine represents herself as the wife of a mobster who is planning to kill her to cash in her life insurance policy; and, though our hero doesn’t exactly fall for the story, naturally he can’t help but fall for her. Sure enough, after the requisite atmospheric

peregrinations through seedy office, smoky nightclub, fleabitten hotel, urinestained shoeshine stand, lowlife racetrack, dark dank alley, and rundown poolhall, and some weirdly anachronistic scenes of bikiniwaxed babes with silicone-inflated hooters and collagen-swollen lips making out in the bathtub, he fucks her, she fucks him, by dint of the feral cunning of the femme fatale she gets away with the money, and by dint of the pure dumb luck of the shamus he gets away with his life. "I knew from the start a dame like her was trouble," he says ruefully. And I knew from the start a flick like this would suck. Both of us will have to console ourselves with the knowledge that we got to see Samantha naked.

**Fallen Angels.** [Wong Kar Wai, 1995.]

Or, night creatures of Hong Kong: after a shootout goes bad, a strangely detached (indeed almost unselfconscious) professional assassin decides, uncharacteristically, to take the reins of his career into his own hands and retire; he informs his agent/assistant, a leatherskirted Dragon Lady in spike heels and fishnet stockings, by leaving her the message that she should play a certain song redolent of renunciation and loss on the jukebox of a club which they both frequent (though they never seem to meet.) She reacts to this indirect announcement, as usual, by masturbating furiously on the table next to her fax machine. Meanwhile a curiously sympathetic (but alarmingly eccentric and apparently mute) thief is falling for an unbalanced girl strangely unreceptive to his solicitations; presently, all paths cross. The action takes place in garishly green neonlit urban night interiors (clubs, malls, subway stations) and is captured at 12 frames per second by a near-fisheye wideangle lens that never seems to be more than a few inches from somebody's face. An arresting essay in romantic obsession and alienation; is this the Chinese film noir?

**A For Andromeda.** [Michael Hayes, 1961; story and novel by Fred Hoyle.]

A sevenpart BBC series based upon a scenario written by the noted astrophysicist and more-than-occasional author (in his heyday referred to by envious colleagues as “Leonardo da Hoyle” — later knighted, but mysteriously unmentioned by the Swedish Academy when his collaborator Fowler was awarded the Nobel Prize for their joint work on the stellar nucleosynthesis of the chemical elements) about the detection of the first message from space by a harddrinking young radio astronomer whose brilliance ensures both the decipherment of the code and the alienation of his superiors — a shortsighted lot of selfserving bureaucrats who choose to ignore his warnings as they construct a massive supercomputer after the alien blueprints and, subsequently, synthesize a series of biological experiments which culminate in a beautiful girl (portrayed by the young Julie Christie) whose function (our hero warns) is that of a Trojan Horse. The later debt of *Contact*, *Species*, and even (one might argue) of Gibson’s *Idoru* (which concludes with the incarnation of the network-resident synthetic female personality, the Idoru, via transmission by hypothetical nanofax) should be obvious. But Hoyle is deeper and more subtle — and, of course, got there far ahead of anyone else: indeed, the idea of a an alien intelligence invading the Earth not by physical intrusion but by sending instructions for its own construction seemed impossibly abstract at the time, and many people had difficulty understanding it. — After seeing *Species*, I realize finally Hoyle’s mistake was the failure to make his alien heroine sufficiently buxom. Anyone interested in the exposition of scientific ideas should absorb this moral.

**The Exterminating Angel.** [Luis Buñuel, 1962.]

A titlecard displays the epigraph: “The best explanation of this film is that, from the standpoint of pure reason, it has no explanation.”

In an imposing mansion, in a Spanish-speaking country, in the not-too-distant past, servants prepare for a dinner party. Strangely apprehensive, they mutter nervously among themselves; by twos and threes they find contrived excuses to quit the scene, ignoring even threats of dismissal. They scurry out as the guests (about twenty of them) begin to arrive.

The invitees are an elegant lot: among them are a military man (the generic “Colonel”), an author, an architect, a doctor, a conductor, an actress, a diva, and the usual load of tightassed society women. They exchange elevated sentiments over the long dinner table, attended by the sole remaining (now strangely accidentprone) head waiter. The host, for no apparent reason, repeats a toast.

The party repairs to an elegantly-appointed drawing room (paintings, sculptures, ornate mirrors, a grand piano) to converse after dinner.

And here, as the evening winds down and the camera moves from one of the guests to another, making their excuses to their host and preparing to leave, it gradually becomes apparent that some peculiar field of force has descended over the company, and that no one — albeit for no obvious reason — indeed in each case it almost seems to be by whim or accident — will actually depart.

Overcome by exhaustion, members of the party begin to doze off unselfconsciously on the couches; some even lie down on the floor. Those still standing remark their dismay, even disgust at this behavior. Nonetheless no one can seem to cross the invisible boundary that separates the drawingroom from the rest of the house.

Finally, past five in the morning, all fall asleep.

What follows once the new day dawns — the continuing ordeal of the partyguests, their rising panic, their mutual recrimination, the vigil without by the townspeople (Buñuel has the military ringed around the house; in contemporary America, it would be the media), the tacit

agreements determining which closets are reserved for the toilet facilities and which for the trysts, the unrelieved stench, the religious observances (freemasonry revealed by signs and countersigns, fevered visions, prayers to Satan), the suicide pact of the young lovers, why one of the women declares her intention to insure herself against future recurrences of this situation by purchasing a washable rubber Virgin when she gets out, and what a bear and a couple of sheep are doing wandering around the house — passes for variation on the essential theme. Suffice it that though the party eventually escape, their liberation is quite as arbitrary as their incarceration; and is immediately qualified.

Others have realized the comic possibilities in dumping a boatload of the upper classes on, say, a desert island (with or without Gilligan and the Skipper); but the idea of marooning them within sight of shore in a prison of their own devise is perniciously subtle, and savors of Sartre's vision of Hell.

An entirely original investigation of the structure of unconscious compulsion; a devastating critique of bourgeois society. Undoubtedly a work of genius.

**Date With An Angel.** [Tom McLoughlin, 1987.]

Accidentprone celestial messenger Emmanuelle Béart trips over an errant satellite, busts a wing, and augers into the swimming pool of wouldbe composer Michael Knight; who, mortally hung over from the bachelor party at which he has attempted to reconcile himself to a forthcoming bourgeois marriage to uptight society bitch Phoebe Cates, takes a moment or two to settle into playing the role of Peter Pan nursing the world's most beautiful Tinkerbell back to health. (I do believe in fairies. Honestly I do.) — The details of what follows (*Splash* with feathers) aren't terribly important; suffice it that animals love her, she develops a taste for French fries, and the soundtrack is an abomination. — It is, however, interesting to note that, had the story

been set in the Fifties, she'd have been a Commie mole; in the Sixties, she'd have fallen in among hippies who would have saved her from contending agents of the CIA and the KGB; in the Seventies, she'd have been a hit at the disco; and in the Nineties, she'd have materialized from a hacker's computer screen. But since Ms. Béart crashes into the Eighties, she lands in the set of *The Wedding Singer* and everyone immediately starts trying to make a buck off her. Personally, I think I might have developed other ideas.

**Angel Heart.** [Alan Parker, 1987. From a novel by William Hjortsberg.]

Lowlife New York detective Harry Angel (Mickey Rourke) is called up into Harlem in 1955 to meet the mysterious and frightening Louis Cyphre (Robert De Niro), who represents himself as the former handler of a once-famous crooner named Johnny Favorite — maimed in the war, reduced to a vegetable state, placed in a sanitarium, and now disappeared. Services were performed for the missing singer, De Niro explains, and bills have come due; “certain collateral was involved.” Though Rourke agrees to take the case, it is plain that De Niro terrifies him; nor does it seem that he himself escaped the war without some devious form of brain damage, which manifests itself in vivid and strangely unsettling recurrent flashbacks — images of whirling fanblades, black nuns, a crowd carousing in a crowded square, a hotelroom with drawn blinds, circling spiral stairs, a descending elevator. Moreover everyone he can discover who knows something of the fate of Favorite — a junkie doctor (Michael Higgins), a jazz guitarist (Brownie McGhee), a palm reader (Charlotte Rampling) — is no sooner interrogated than murdered (indeed, subjected to some kind of heinous ritual slaughter) by parties unknown. Unnerved by his exposure to this ghastly violence, Rourke grows increasingly paranoid and distraught: chickens terrify him; dogs attack him; he keeps staring at himself in broken mirrors. Following the trail from Harlem to New Orleans, he finds at last the daughter of Johnny's longlost black mistress (Lisa Bonet) — a true

voodoo child, fond of dancing naked in the woods covered with animal blood. — And here, presently, it becomes clear where Favorite is hidden, why De Niro pursues him, what Angel's visions mean, and just who's been fucking his own daughter; and why the elevator leads to Hell. — Dark, violent, and profoundly disturbing; something like Cornell Woolrich in voodoo. With *Blue Velvet*, one of the great modern films noir.

**Wings Of Desire.** [Der Himmel Über Berlin. Wim Wenders, 1987; screenplay by Wenders and Peter Handke.]

Invisible to all save children, angelic creatures Bruno Ganz and Otto Sander wander in long black overcoats through the streets of Berlin, dark capital of the dread history of the Twentieth century, listening in on the (remarkably poetic) streams-of-consciousness of its inhabitants — among them an elderly author, a teenage prostitute, an actor (Peter Falk, playing himself), a suicide — channelsurfing, as it were, among the inner lives of mortals. Gradually Ganz falls prey to the lure of temporality, and begins to yearn for the chance to step out of eternity into the flow of time, out of Being into Becoming — in Wenders' visual metaphor, to descend from the abstract moral clarity of black and white into the messy particularity captured by color filmstock. He wants weight, wind, dirt: “to come home after a long day like Philip Marlowe, and feed the cat” — to have the thrill of discovery, not to know it all and to have known it all all along — no longer simply to observe, but to participate (doesn't this seem like the desire of the critic to work on the other side of the camera? or perhaps the traditional anxiety of the artist over his detachment from a life of action) — to bleed, shiver, learn the names of the colors, mingle with beatniks, drink coffee, smoke cigarettes, act not watch — descend into reality and (are angels voyeurs then?) cop a feel off trapeze artist Solveig Dommartin. Presently he gets his wish, enters into history, and doffs his austere overcoat in favor of a loudly-checked jacket which in itself says everything we need to know about the relief one must feel at being released from the burden of angelically perfect taste.

— And gets the girl as well, of course; but why spoil any more of the story.

Wenders made the sequel *Faraway, So Close!* (*In Weiter Ferne, So Nah!*) in 1993 with the same cast, augmented by, among others, angel Nastassja Kinski (talk about typecasting) and mortals Willem Dafoe, Lou Reed, and (no shit) Mikhail Gorbachev. — There is a satisfying poetic justice in the way that the two films so neatly bookend the fall of the Wall; and it is, of course, appropriate that the man ultimately responsible for the liberation of Berlin should make a cameo appearance.)

This last begins, incidentally, with an amazing shot: an iris-in on Sander (or his double), perched atop the statue — a wingéd Victory, of course — that crowns the Siegessaule in the center of the Tiergarten as the camera swoops in and circles; revealing, as it does, the whole of the city turning in the background. — This effect beautifully evokes the view the Immortals must have of the fallen world: a ball of light at a great distance, confined to a plane — one might say, projected on a screen; seen as it were through the wrong end of the telescope.

Wenders was shamelessly ripped off by the Hollywood remake *City Of Angels*. But accept no substitutes.

**Lost Angel.** [Roy Rowland, 1944.]

An infant abandoned on the steps of an orphanage is adopted by scientists determined to manufacture a prodigy; after six years, sure enough, she turns into pigtailed Übertyke Margaret O'Brien (John Stuart Mill was never so cute), who has mastered algebra, semantics, economics, Chinese, and the details of Napoleon's Peninsular campaigns, but (reach for that hanky) just doesn't know how to be a kid. Fortunately for her emotional development, she is discovered by a newspaper reporter trying to make a story out of her, and follows him

home; compelling him, in due course, to adopt her, but not before a series of adventures in the real unscientific world of New York that acquaint her with a variety of Damon Runyan characters — boxers, torch singers, gangsters — though none so terrifying, we are meant to conclude, as the evil behaviorists whose mania for control has poisoned her childhood. — The fabulous irony, that the coldblooded manipulative skill of these fictional scientists must pale by comparison with that of the actual showbusiness mother who pushed a real sixtyyearold into playing this role in a motion picture, somehow goes unstated.

**Drunken Angel.** [Akira Kurosawa, 1948.]

Alcoholic doctor Takashi Shimura (obviously talented but compelled, somehow, to drown a sense of failure) while treating bulletwounded gangster Toshirô Mifune as an afterthought diagnoses tuberculosis; their subsequent relationship, which flickers in and out of focus with Mifune's cycles of denial and Shimura's erratic sobriety, forms the nominal matter of the picture — though the real subject (which Kurosawa cannot address directly) is the (graphically depicted) postwar degradation of Tokyo, a city which has obviously been bombed flat and left to choke in filth, garbage, and disease; it would, apparently, be a breach of propriety to state this explicitly, let alone to explain how and why it happened. (It is typical, for example, that the only indication of the occupation is a sign in English above the entrance to a club.) Still, the result is rare enough in its candor: an unsanitized Japanese specimen of the classic American gangster film — thugs, gamblers, swing bands, dancehall girls, and all. (And the women talk back, just as if they had the right to.)

As for the moral: Mifune, here a very young man, is magnetic and arresting; but it is the character of the doctor, who despite of or even because of his selfloathing is fearless and unfailingly energetic in the pursuit of his duty, that is, one must suspect, Kurosawa's suggestion of a rolemodel for his countrymen.

## **Lucifer Rising.** [Kenneth Anger, 1973.]

Another episode in the Anger Magick Lantern Cycle; or, what happens when you drop acid and read Aleister Crowley. (Honestly, in the days before Manson this was harmless fun.) — Some studies of vulcanism; a topless chick in an Egyptian-priestess outfit waving some magic wands around; hatching crocodiles; boiling mud; Egyptian ruins; either an imagined real or an imagined imagined ritual murder; the Moon; assorted poses against the backdrop of the Pyramids and the Sphinx; night procession of hooded figures bearing torches, having something to do with Stonehenge; a couple of Yeatsian towers; a few sacred circles and pentagrams; lightning on the plains; (my personal favorite) unsuccessfully-disguised footage of dancing girls arrayed around the Great God Tao (or whatever his name was) stolen from the Flash Gordon serials; and the descent of a flying saucer every bit as convincing as the ones you see in the home movies they show in the bullshit documentaries on the SciFi channel. — Music by among others Mick Jagger and Jimmy Page; it does sound like somebody's album played backwards. — However impenetrable Anger's intentions in most of this, one of the great mysteries of the Art Film, at least, can be cleared up herewith: the puzzle of why everything (and everyone) moves so slowly. Every shot, every motion, is painfully slow and impossibly deliberate, as if its significance (as contrasted, say, to a cream pie to the face or a smoking-rubber wheelie) were so vast and cosmic that the viewer should be given ten times the usual space and time to contemplate it. The explanation is simple: it's because everyone (the cameraman included) is so fucking stoned. — These details one may garner from a perusal of the memoirs of the babe playing Lilith (hooded, cloaked, and smeared with imitation woad), Marianne Faithfull — famous as a singer herself, of course, and as Jagger's girlfriend in the glory days of Swinging London; but here captured like a fly swimming slowly through thickening amber in the middle of her epochal smack addition. — Ms. Faithfull was discovered in the midSixties at a party in London by the Stones' manager Andrew Loog

Oldham; who signed her to a contract on the spot, muttering to himself the immortal phrase, “an angel with big tits.” Whatever the limits of Anger’s vision, Oldham’s, obviously, was boundless.

**Paradise Lost.** [John Milton, 1674.]

Terminated with prejudice after leading an employee walkout, unrepentant miscreant Satan and his posse regroup in a tropical rental to plot their revenge. Determining to corrupt the unspoiled inhabitants of Eden, they dispatch Lucifer himself on an undercover mission to the newly-created Earth; after a vividly-imagined flight through the landscape of Chaos, he crashes the party, confuses the allegiance of the newly-minted Barbie and Ken dolls, and simultaneously precipitates their fall from grace and the birth of consciousness — thus establishing the principle that knowledge is sin, and leads to death; sure enough, Fundamentalists have been as dumb as dirt ever since. — In the end, Adam and Eve take a walk: fallen angels meet fallen arches. I loved the thing with the snake.

Roger Corman on his difficulties making *The Wild Angels* [1966] — the exploitation classic which introduced the Hell’s Angels to the drive-in audience and the director to the mechanical failings of Harleys: “We were always sitting and waiting for the damned bikes to be repaired, and I said to one of them (the bikers): ‘Look, I understand what you guys do. You come into town. You beat up the men, you rape the women, you steal from the stores, the police come charging after you, you run to your choppers, and you know the fucking things aren’t going to start. What do you do then?’...’They start, they start,’ they mumbled. ‘Bad luck, that’s all.’”

*The tears of a clone (12/19/00)*

**The Sixth Day.** [Roger Spottiswoode, 2000.]

In the not-too-distant future, an illegal attempt to render the darkly brilliant paranoid vision of Philip K. Dick immortal by recombinant cloning of the plots of his novels is thwarted by subtle transcription errors, raising philosophical questions of identity which as usual can only be resolved by car chases, laserblast gunfights, a vertiginous swan dive over a precipitous waterfall, many colorful explosions, and a rooftop chase that ends with the hero hanging onehanded from a helicopter skid fifty stories above the pavement of the cold cruel city. (No doubt Quine would have enjoyed better grosses had he employed these devices in *Word And Object*.) — One must feel a certain skepticism regarding the possibility of downloading a human genome and personality into a body-blank in less time than it takes to install Linux (not to mention the instantaneous retinal-scan brain coredump, which elementary arguments show to be impossible); but, then, there are decent effects (I particularly liked the simulated holograms), a few amusing speculations about virtual outcall massage, some exercises in memory-playback montage which suggest the influence of the Japanese arthouse hit *Tetsuo* (The Iron Man), a repeated-cloning joke which turns into a homage to the *Road Runner* cartoons, Tony Goldwyn as a villainous combination of Bill Gates and Vince MacMahon, Robert Duvall as the wellmeaning scientist who nonetheless (all together now) transgresses against the cosmic moral order; and Arnold, of course, of whom for some reason I never tire. If they want to clone him first, it's all right with me. But let the author of *Total Recall* rest in peace.

**Cobra Verde.** [Werner Herzog, 1988. After a novel by Bruce Chatwin.]

Brazilian brigand Klaus Kinski (herein the notorious Cobra Verde) ingratiates himself with an obscenely wealthy plantation owner and temporarily goes straight; alas, when the bloated plutocrat discovers that Kinski has impregnated all three of his daughters, he concocts a scheme to rid the continent of this menace to the gene pool by shipping him off to Africa with orders to resurrect the moribund slave trade. Landing at an abandoned fortress on the coast, Kinski finds the country under the spell of a mad king perennially at war with his people, his neighbors, and the gods, but by dint of luck and force of personality manages to set up a brisk trade in guns and bodies that satisfies the depraved needs of all interested parties; not least himself. After an alarming reversal which leaves him at the mercy of the deranged monarch and threatened with colorful native tortures, he escapes with the aid of an even loonier (but, naturally, insanely ambitious) royal relative and leads an army of barebomed Amazons against the incumbent to install the pretender. Alas, as must always be the case with a Herzog hero, his triumph is qualified by the reassertion of the reality principle, and Kinski once again ends cursing Fate and shaking his fist impotently in the face of an overwhelming Nature. — Shot, in Herzog's uniquely metadocumentarian style, with authentic Africans, ineffably charming in the way that they all keep glancing sidewise at the camera (Herzog always somehow manages simultaneously to shoot a fiction film and a documentary about the natives he's dragooned into appearing in it), real South Americans; and the really deranged Kinski; who inhabits these mad-European-adventurer roles so convincingly one cannot help but believe that, in another time and place, he would have been exactly what he portrays.



The Devil is a cheerleader.

### **Bedazzled.** [Harold Ramis, 2000.]

A very polished attempt at a remake of the Peter Cook/Dudley Moore classic of 1967: social pariah Brendan Fraser, a minor Valley technoid ostracized even among a society of geeks, despairing of ever getting the attention (let alone gaining the affections) of coworker Frances O'Connor, sells his soul to the exquisitely Mephistophelean Elizabeth Hurley and gets seven wishes, none of which (duh) work out quite as he expects: asking to be wealthy and powerful and married to the damsel in question, e.g., he is instantaneously transformed into a Columbian druglord whose lieutenants are plotting his downfall; his wife, who, naturally, despises him, is humping the chief conspirator in every closet of his mansion. — And, so on. — Each amendment to a previous wish only creates greater opportunity for humiliating disaster; with every iteration of the scenario he moves farther from the satisfaction he covets, and closer to eternal damnation. Unfortunately this sense of comic progress was somewhat lost on me, since every motion of the plot carried Fraser farther from his original persona, whose bumbling efforts to obtain acceptance reminded me all-too-vividly of the eighth grade, and left me groaning aloud in the dark: the delayed stress syndrome of the career dork. For this reason I must recuse myself from any decision as to whether the flick works or not: Fraser and Hurley are obviously great, but the whole may be somewhat less than the sum of the parts; it's probably indicative that I walked out of the theater trying to decide whether the moral of the picture really was that selling your soul to the devil can be a positive experience that promotes personal growth. Christopher Marlowe, after all, put it rather differently.

### **Tales From The Gimli Hospital.** [Guy Maddin, 1988.]

Kafka meets Garrison Keillor: the eccentric Canadian auteur (whose nicknames the IMDB lists as “Magma Head”, “Guymoe”, and “Flurpie”) sets his narrative in some mythical plague-ridden land (apparently meant to resemble his native Winnipeg) in a hospital that

doubles as a (very) rude stable where the staff operate upon the patients with farming implements; the two protagonists (one of whom spends a considerable interval after his introduction to the camera shaving the space between his eyebrows and washing his hair with fisheggs), who occupy adjacent beds, befriend one another but then fall out when one discovers the other fucked his girlfriend's corpse. (The Norse-saga-on-acid flavor of all this might best be conveyed by explaining that the three corners of this love triangle are named Gunnar, Einar The Lonely, and Snjófridur.) — An essay filled with Scandinavian dread, Lutheran guilt, and Expressionist shadows, with a disturbing look which could be described as *Eraserhead* black-and-white (perhaps it most closely resembles a very bad print of Murnau's *Faust*); the visual signature is a peculiar irising effect (probably a variation on the old vaseline-on-the-lens trick, though knowing Maddin he might actually have mushrooms growing in his optics) which creates the impression that the subjective eye of the camera is that of someone with blurred peripheral vision — connoting a sort of narrative migraine, actually. — But words cannot adequately convey the freakish weirdness of this feature. Maddin is unique.

This appears on DVD with the companion semishort feature *The Dead Father* [1985] — possibly (as the title suggests) inspired by the late great Donald Barthelme, though not nearly so funny.

**U-571.** [Jonathon Mostow, 2000.]

After a plot setup which seems to imply the theft of the German Enigma machine (which by itself may have determined the outcome of the Second World War) was a coup of American intelligence, this turns into a fairly ordinary submarine drama — i.e., an ode to claustrophobia fraught with strained sweaty oilstained faces with eyes cast upward in that signature reddish sepulchral submarine runninglight as they listen for the depth charges which (intercut, intercut) we perceive are drifting right past the hull: not *Das Boot*, but not really bad either. — As for the premise, it is inaccurate and

unfortunate, but not so integral to the development as one might have feared; still, don't be surprised if you now hear of impending projects celebrating the brilliant Yankee victory at Jutland, Andrew Jackson's rout of the Imperial Guard at Waterloo, and the triumph of the American longbow at Crécy. Those ignorant of the lessons of history are condemned to relive Hollywood's versions of them.

The movie itself is less interesting than the occasion it provides to remark the proliferation of personal-assistant credits in major motion pictures: I had, in truth, hardly noticed the existence of this crew category before Altman's *Prêt-à-Porter* (1994) — when, as it were out of the blue, while sitting through the trailing litanies I happened to observe that Kim Basinger had demanded an additional personal assistant to ensure that she would have two to Sophia Loren's one; the gesture seemed so risibly pretentious that I burst out laughing on the dark. — The present example illustrates the lengths to which this kind of behavior has been taken: Mr. and Mrs. De Laurentis get four assistants; Mr. Mostow gets three; Mr McConaughey gets two (one for "security", presumably to protect him from himself). Mr. Harvey Keitel, whose career has been more valuable to the cinema than all of the above put together, has none at all.

### **Zoo/A Zed And Two Noughts.** [Peter Greenaway, 1985.]

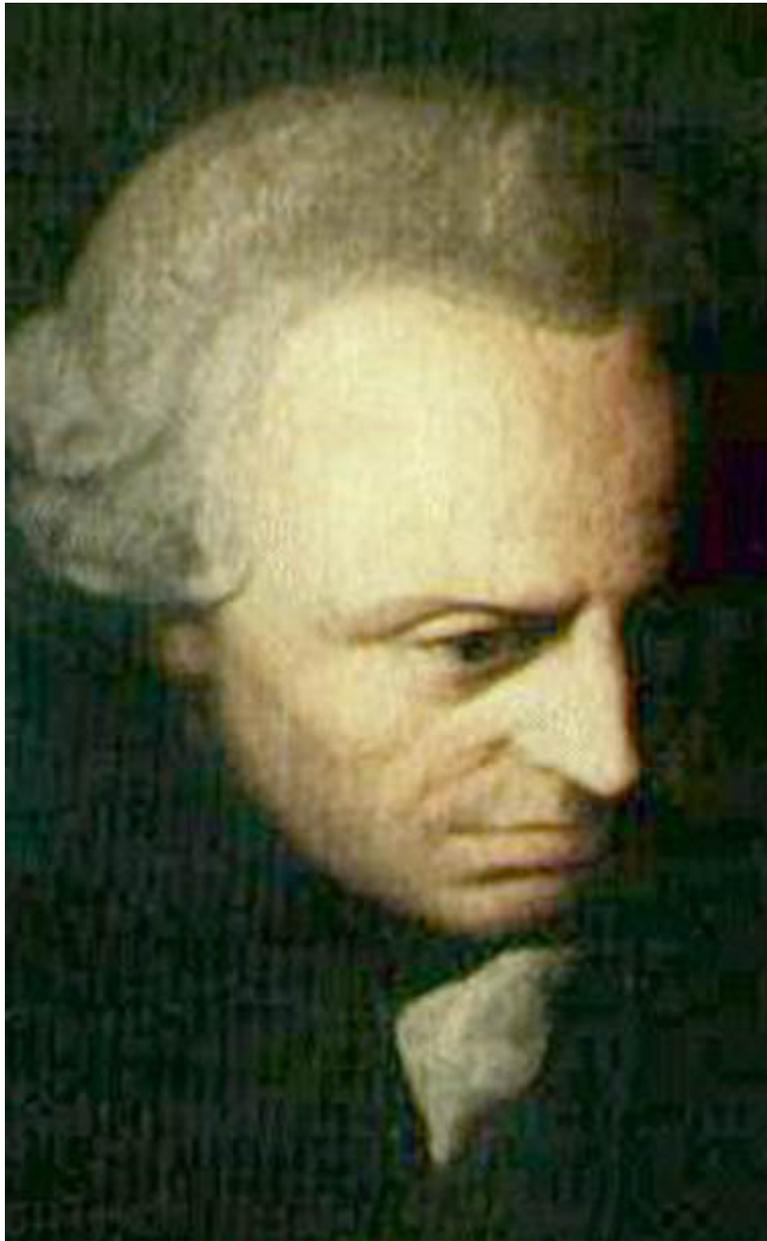
It is not enough that this narrative should commence with an automobile accident at the entrance to a zoo which results in the death of two women and the amputation of the leg of a third; no, the car has to be a white Mercury with a wingéd-messenger hood ornament, the collision has to involve an eggbound Mute Swan, the collision must take place on Swann's Way [though if there were any further references to Proust I spaced them out], the relationship of the alphabet [as an enumerative ordering device] to the taxonomic classification of animals by species must be invoked and systematically exploited, the driver has to change her name to Leda and must turn out to be pregnant [Z is for Zeus], there should be a string of

Venetian-blinds shots visually punning on the stripes of the Zebra, and the husbands of the dead women must be two Siamese twins separated at birth [Zoologists Oliver and Oswald, who are always arranged symmetrically about the central axis of the frame] obsessed with the idea that time-lapsed photography of decomposing corpses will reveal the secret distinction between animate and inanimate [Is life an accident? or, E is for Entropy.] — “Darwin was a great storyteller,” says the Dude In The Black Hat. So is Greenaway; though Darwin is usually easier to figure out.

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*Deja vu all over again (6/5/2000)*

Having taken the unusual step of dropping a few of these compendia into a word processor to analyze their content, I discover, either to my chagrin or amusement, that the ongoing quest for the one-sentence summary of the major motion picture has led my prose into an unfamiliar region of baroque complexity; and that the longest single run-on sentence (to date) exceeds two hundred fifty words. — To the best of my knowledge the modern record for European languages is held by Immanuel “Bubba” Kant, who broke the eight-hundred-word barrier somewhere in the *Critique Of Pure Reason* (one reason why — I am not making this up — German students are introduced to the *Critique* via a retranslation of an English translation of the original). If Jerry Bruckheimer doesn’t retire, this mark may lie within reach.



The god of prolixity.

**Memento.** [Christopher Nolan, 2000.]

Kierkegaard said that the tragedy of life is that it must be lived forward but is only understood backward. (He might have said that the functor expressing the duality of the mental and the physical is contravariant and reverses all arrows, but then he would have been fucking with you.) This is a movie that explains what he meant.

The opening shot is time-reversed: a Polaroid photograph of a dead man fades and pops back into the camera, and the victim (Joe Pantoliano) gets up off the floor and coughs up a bullet which returns to the barrel of a gun unfired by the protagonist (Guy Pearce.)

The rest of the action is exhibited in brief scenes of a few minutes' duration, which, though they run forward, are presented in reverse order; a telephone conversation between the protagonist and an unknown listener, intercut in counterpoint, provides additional exposition.

It is explained that Pearce has suffered a brain injury, during an attack by some unknown assailant who murdered his wife and left him for dead. As a result he cannot translate short-term into permanent memories, and lives in a sort of eternal present, as it were from vignette to vignette: though he may know, at any moment, where he is and what he's doing (and seems to know who he was before all this began), he never knows how he got where he is, or how long his sense of the moment in progress will persist. (Again and again a scene begins with Pearce starting to explain his condition to someone only to receive the reply: "You already told me." — In one amusing instance he fades in to discover himself running around a corner toward someone whom at first he assumes he's chasing; only when the other guy starts shooting at him does he realize he's supposed to be running away.)

Despite this handicap Pearce is attempting to find the murderer of his

wife and avenge her death. In order to remind himself that this is what he is doing and to keep track of the progress of his investigation he has tattooed himself with data and instructions like the Illustrated Man, and carries with him a collection of Polaroid photographs of persons (e.g. Pantoliano), places (e.g. the lowlife motel he finds himself living in), and things (e.g. his Jaguar convertible), with brief notations upon them which remind him of their significance: axioms and facts from which he can reason his way to a conclusion.

Eventually we discover how these items entered his database; and thus find out, e.g., (though in the opposite order), how he found out the licenseplate number of the killer and tattooed it onto his arm, and how he found out that the driver of the car in question was, indeed, the guy we saw him shoot.

Whether or not Pantoliano was, in fact, guilty, whether Pearce's barmaid girlfriend Carrie-Anne Moss is indeed the good angel she appears to be, and whether Pearce has been telling himself the truth appears in the prequel. Suffice it that the step-by-step reconstruction of Pearce's argument (the proof carried back from conclusion to premises) is difficult to follow and produces in the viewer an exact correlate of the disorientation of the protagonist. The effect is profoundly disturbing.

The result, at first order, is a kind of deconstruction of the situation of the classical Cartesian detective. (It is very significant, a very pointed reference, that Pearce in his former life was supposed to have been a claims investigator at an insurance company — not the Fred MacMurray character in *Double Indemnity*, in other words, but the Edward G. Robinson character: in the universe of film noir, the very embodiment of mathematical rationality.) Though repeatedly Pearce states his belief that there is a real objective world, that his actions matter whether he can remember them or not, and that by establishing the facts and employing his reason upon them he can take control of his life and destiny, everything that happens serves to undermine these

positions. And, it becomes clear, once you start taking apart the idea of the detective — of the rational observer faced with an epistemological problem of life and death, forced to weigh evidence critically, to find the signature of the demon (the perpetrator) who is working to deceive him — you start taking apart rationality itself: the memory, the self; the world, the flesh, the devil. Usually the detective cannot trust what others tell him; but what if he cannot trust himself? What if he really doesn't know what he has been doing? There is a rapid dissolve here from the anxiety about the foundations of knowledge that Descartes discovered and Poe codified in detective fiction through the Freudian anxieties of film noir to the anxiety about the foundations of self that lie at the root of film noir's logical antecedent, German Expressionism — in which the Cartesian demon is embodied in the alter ego, the figure of the double. — How can you fail to love a movie that is so completely successful in fucking with your head?

Cornell Woolrich once wrote a thriller in which an amnesiac protagonist simultaneously recovered the memory of his previous life and forgot what he'd been doing since he'd lost it: restored to his former bourgeois contentment, he finds himself trying to decide why sinister figures are following him, and whether he's committed a murder he cannot remember. But a more immediate precursor, obviously, is the story (written by Jonathan Nolan) on which this scenario was directly based (archived when last I looked at [www.esquire.com](http://www.esquire.com).)

The original refers explicitly to a famous argument of John Searle, designed, with considerable malice aforethought, to show the impossibility of artificial intelligence: suppose that, say, the understanding of Chinese (in the sense of being able to translate it into English) could be reduced to a computer program; then, since any such algorithm would be machine-independent, it could be implemented by a guy playing the role of a mechanical translator sitting in a closed room with a list of rules written down, say, on three-by-five index cards. The linguistic input could be broken down into a string of symbols (even binary symbols — even Chinese can be

digitized) written on other cards shoved in through a slot one at a time; each one could, then, be processed according to the rules and, when output is required, a symbol (an X or an O, say) could be written on yet another little card and shoved out through another slot.

Even granting the hypothesis that something like this could work, still it seems obvious that at no time would the guy in the room necessarily know what he was doing; in particular, and perhaps paradoxically, you can't say that he knows Chinese.

So where does the knowledge reside? What knows Chinese? Something appears to be missing in the Chinese room; something like consciousness.

Thomas Gold once (quite independently) attempted a similar deconstruction of the problem of the direction of time (not a trivial problem, as it turns out, in theoretical physics.) He imagines an observer writing brief descriptions of events down on index cards in sequence and then shuffling them and handing the deck to somebody else. How could the second party put them in the correct order?

(This is Pearce's problem with his Polaroids, of course, but also, curiously enough, exactly the problem the cinematographer hands the editor, in the making of any motion picture.)

The answer, obviously, under ordinary circumstances, is that memory sets the index cards in order; and it is memory, in this sense, that assures the unity of the Cartesian ego. But if memory fails and has to be replaced by mechanical procedure, the ego is replaced with a simulacrum; and the substitution somehow seems invalid, like Searle's Chinese translator.

The anxiety you feel at your inability to put your finger on the gap in this argument becomes an anxiety about the reality of the ego under *any* circumstances. — Perhaps you are always like Pearce, an

intelligence adrift, annotating the backs of your Polaroids, never certain whether somebody else is following you around amending what you've written. — Perhaps the Cartesian ego is a myth. To borrow one of Kafka's punchlines, it suggests that the world-order is founded on a lie.

### **Freddy Got Fingered.** [Tom Green, 2001.]

The notorious premiere of Stravinsky's *Rite Of Spring* in Paris, May 29, 1913, which literally provoked a riot among its audience, created a rather unfortunate historical precedent, in effect raising the bar for subsequent avant-garde debuts: after this spectacularly negative reception, it has always been an unspoken assumption (at least in every Bohemian discussion) that no work of art can be really original or consequential if it doesn't dismay the uncomprehending bourgeois, outrage the critics, and goad an audience of high-rolling patrons of the arts into ripping off their black ties and storming the stage. Thus naturally after hearing the first reviews of this opus (Ebert "a vomitorium" — the Washington Post "creative bankruptcy," "an abomination" — Paul Clinton for CNN "quite simply the worst movie ever released by a major studio in Hollywood history") I knew I would be obligated to attend, to find out whether this is a misunderstood work of genius, an elaborate con perpetrated upon the studio moguls who financed it, or just another piece of shit. Life being more complicated than the rhetorical simplifications we attempt to impose upon it, it turned out to be all three.

Mr. Green introduces himself as a pathetic loser who, in quick succession, leaves home in the Pacific Northwest to seek his fortune in Hollywood as an animator, takes a job in a cheese-sandwich factory (less Chaplin I'm afraid than *Laverne and Shirley*), pitches a show unsuccessfully to network executive Anthony Michael Hall, goes home again, broods upon his destiny, builds a skateboarding halfpipe in the driveway, hits upon a wheelchairbound girl rocket scientist (Marisa Coughlan) who likes to have her shins caned, is improbably

struck with inspiration, returns to Hollywood, makes a lot of money, and blows it all immediately on an elaborate and inexplicably-motivated revenge upon his father (Rip Torn) which involves an expedition to Pakistan. Other themes include animal porn (Green jerks off a horse, cloaks himself in the skin of a roadkilled deer, and directs an avalanche of elephant spunk — the phrase “a dork like a fire hydrant” does come to mind — upon the very professional Mr. Torn, who may with this gig have carried good sportmanship a couple of tokens over the line), the sexual abuse of children (specifically the eponymous brother Freddy) and their even more dreadful subsequent exploitation by the psychiatric profession, childbirth, and suddenly getting hit by a truck. Meanwhile the auteur comports himself like a retarded eightyyearold, and spends most of his screen time whining that his parents don't understand him. Perhaps he's been too long on MTV.

The shock value of all this has been (a cough behind the hand) grossly exaggerated: John Waters did it all much better a long time ago, and if we measure, say, the money shot with the elephant against, say, the spectacle of Divine being raped by a giant lobster, it is clear that Mr. Green has fallen short of the mark. — Moreover there is (of course) an entire website devoted exclusively to scenes of women getting whipped in movies; and though one might have groaned when the cute little kid steps into the airplane propeller, this is, in the first place, telegraphed, and in the second place an obvious steal from the original ending to *There's Something About Mary*, in which Ben Stiller while crossing the street to embrace his beloved was supposed to be dismembered by a bus. (The final line in the published screenplay is Mary's instruction to the crowd: “All right, everyone, let's fan out and look for the penis!”) — Not only could it have been much worse, if this alone had been the intention it should have been much worse.

The difficulty, rather, is that every time Green gets a good idea — e.g., in the scene in which he sits at the piano with strings attached to his fingers simultaneously playing a song and animating an elaborate mobile sculpture of dangling sausages — something which must recall

classic surrealistic exhibitions like the dinner jacket to which Dali sewed eighty shotglasses filled with milk — he immediately spoils it by opening his mouth — and, usually, singing something infantile and obnoxious. But Pee Wee Herman is over; and anyway he did it better.

Furthermore the film is not merely not plotless, but formulaic and uninspired: boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl. How should this provoke a riot?

Should Mr. Green have another opportunity to write and direct, I would suggest a complete departure from his methods here: he should stay behind the camera, put real talent out in front of it, and throw away that copy of Syd Field's manual of screenwriting some wellmeaning advisor obviously pressed upon him. — I fancy something like a remake of *Candy*, with his girlfriend in the lead; I'd pay to see Drew Barrymore screaming at the hunchback "Give...me....your...hump!" — As might others pay: though I haven't reviewed the grosses, it cannot bode well that when I went to catch *Freddy* at a matinee I had the entire theater to myself.

But on balance one must think of the scene midway through these proceedings in which Green, preparing rather ineffectually for a job interview, puts a suit on backwards and dances back and forth in front of a full-length mirror while singing an atonal little ditty about the Backwards Man. — Tom Wolfe in his brilliant analysis of the New York artworld remarked that the Bohemian pose of contempt for the bourgeois resembled a ritual mating dance: that the point in feigning an attitude of superior disdain toward the wealthy patrons of the arts was to attract their attention, as it were by playing hard to get; and that once this attention had been successfully obtained (and one's reputation made and one's shows mobbed by the patrons and the press), the pose became superfluous. — As Wittgenstein said, having climbed up our ladder we can kick it away. — But Green already has fortune, celebrity, and one of the principal babes of Hollywood as a trophy girlfriend; why is he going through these motions? to back

through the mating dance and throw it all away?

### **Dracula Versus Frankenstein.** [Al Adamson, 1971.]

Notes: After a couple of preliminary bloodsucker-in-the-cemetery shots, we relocate abruptly to Vegas, where the auteur's wife Regina Carrol is doing a song-and-dance for the benefit of a sparse crowd among whom Adamson himself (it's that Hitchcock thing) is seated. — Then there's something about a carnival; a house of horrors. — Mad Doctor Frankenstein, played from a wheelchair by J. Carrol Naish, dispatches Lon Chaney Jr. (muta persona: throat cancer, alas; not that he could easily retain his lines in any case here at the end of his long and alcoholic career) to fetch more subjects for the current round of experiments, which seem to require a copious supply of naked dead girls. — Then Count Dracula (played by Adamson's accountant), who just happens to be in the neighborhood, drops in and expresses an interest in reviving the family monster. — Doctor Frankenstein's dwarf (an erstwhile star of *Freaks* and an old drinking buddy of John Barrymore's) cackles with delight. — A couple is making out on the beach. Chaney appears and hacks them to pieces with his trusty axe. — But he still loves his puppy. Hmmm. — Abrupt cut to Exterior, Day, Student Protests: for this is a document of the Sixties, after all. — Ms. Carrol reappears here on the beach, apparently in search of her missing sister; it is darkly hinted that the runaway may have fallen prey to the white slave trade. — The crowd of hipsters at the coffeeshop, thinking she must be some kind of nark, put LSD in her coffee. Bummer, man. — Meanwhile our heroes are reviving the monster in the laboratory. A bunch of wires run into a face that looks like mold on cottage cheese. — Appearances are deceptive: far from continuing its obviously advanced decomposition, the monster gets up, goes out for a stroll, and eats the first guy he happens across, who turns out to be the legendary horror geek Forrest J. Ackerman. (A guy who gets great cameos: check him out in *Attack Of The Sixty Foot Centerfold*.) — Meanwhile social misfit Russ Tamblyn briefly reprises his role as the leader of *Satan's Sadists* ("the *Citizen Kane* of biker

films”), but nobody seems to be able to figure out how to insert that movie into this one, and he promptly disappears. — Miss Carrol is revived from her bum trip by Good Guy Anthony Eislely, who offers his services as Virgil to guide her through this weird Dantean hippie underworld. — Romance blossoms. Or blooms, or whatever it’s supposed to do. — Meanwhile to appease the expectations of the drivein crowd that is watching all this, the monster wanders around for a bit menacing couples in parked cars. (This is supposed to scare the girls in the audience and induce them to move across the seats toward the boys.) — Chaney Junior takes his axe/Gives the bikers forty whacks/Since the rushes don’t look great/Gives the cinematographer forty-eight. — Carrol and Eiseley hear something suspicious on the beach at night and investigate; leading them into the carnival, and thus into the lair of Frankenstein. — If you look closely you notice that the dead zombie chicks strapped to the walls in the background keep blinking. — One of the zombie chicks is the missing sister! (But after this they forget about her again.) — Frankenstein explains that he is trying to harness the psychic energy released by traumatic shocks. Unfortunately in the confusion that ensues when he attempts to illustrate this point he gets beheaded by his own guillotine: what could be more ignominious. — Time for a chase: Chaney pursues Ms. Carrol. But gets shot. Dracula appears out of nowhere and takes over, so impressing Ms. Carrol with his unearthly menace that she is stricken with a monumental case of Heaving Bosom. No wonder Adamson married her. Eislely arrives in the nick of time! he saves the day! — No, actually, Dracula turns him into a heap of ash with a lightningbolt. (Dude, that was pretty harsh.) — But now the monster reappears and the two of them drag her off to an abandoned church to contend for her hand. — Big fight. They stagger outside just as the sun is coming up. Dracula is winning. He rips the arms off the monster! just like in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. — Then he rips its head off! game over. — But the rays of the rising sun catch him as he’s trying to get back to his coffin. He evaporates. — Ms. Carrol escapes from the church into the light of the new day and staggers off to commence a life of perpetual therapy. The end.

Adamson having been shipped off to his reward by a psychopathologic cement contractor (but you can watch that episode of the *E! True Hollywood Story* for yourself), his old comrade-in-arms and producer Sam Sherman is left to reminisce about the Golden Age of exploitation cinema on the commentary track all by himself, and provides the definitive explanation of the genesis of this cult classic, namely, that the bizarre incongruity of the disparate segments stitched together to assemble the narrative arose from necessity: they started out making one movie, ran out of money, hustled a few more bucks and started making another, got some negative feedback from the distributors, started again, etc., etc. — until when finally they had enough footage to edit into something of feature length (and had spent enough money that they had to), it didn't make any sense. — When William Burroughs did this, it was supposed to be Art. (For that matter, compare the junk in the genome.) — Uniquely weird and completely nonsensical, and I mean that in the best way. Check it out.

This stands, incidentally, at Number 84 on the IMDB bottom one hundred. Presumably with a silver bullet.



The burning man.

**Straight To Hell.** [Alex Cox, 1987. Written by Cox and Dick Rude.]

Alex Cox, who claims to have written his thesis at UCLA on the spaghetti Western, here (at least to hear him and Dick Rude tell it) grabbed a few of his musician buddies (e.g. Courtney Love and Elvis Costello), spent a couple of days writing a script, and drove off into the Spanish outback to a town built for a Bronson flick (not far from the famous Eastwood sets) to shoot this rather plotless feature (in which a gang of unshaven American hoodlums who drink beer and a gang of unshaven Irish hoodlums who drink coffee glare at one another for a few days before they all start blasting) over the space of a few weeks without the slightest recourse to cocaine — and, despite the relative polish of the homage and the surreal hilarity of the musical numbers, one is tempted to take this claim at face value and suggest they needed stronger drugs. Not quite Sergio Leone as interpreted by Buñuel; forethought might have helped. — With Dennis Hopper, Grace Jones, Jim Jarmusch, the unrelenting Iberian sun, and several thousand tons of blowing dust. — My mistake: four coffees.

**Time Regained.** [*Le Temps Retrouvé* (d'après l'œuvre de Marcel Proust). Raoul Ruiz, 1999.]

**The** credits run over a goldenlit shot of a flowing stream; the concluding shot exhibits the ocean. In between Marcello Mazzarella, Emmanuelle Béart, Catherine Deneuve, and John Malkovich debate the nature of Time, the disintegration of the linear text, the propriety of playing Beethoven at a Parisian social function in wartime, and the therapeutic virtues of getting whipped by cute guys in uniform. The results are mixed.

The story, like *Reservoir Dogs*, begins near its end: the dying writer (Proust/Mazzarella), not actually gutshot but certainly sounding like it, dictates from his bed; attempting with a last obsessive burst of concentration to make sense of his life before it ends — or, to be absolutely precise, to make sense of his life (and thus render it Art

with a capital alpha) *as* it ends.

It is the conceit of the project that he should be able to compose his memories into an organization that reflects their natural order — their structure as seen *sub specie aeternitatis*, like Vaughan's vision of Eternity — and that this natural ordering should not necessarily be congruent with the simple-minded scheme suggested by the literal order of events; that though Time may be something like a stream or an oceanic receptacle, the true pattern of things is something more like that of a very complicated web document with a lot of hyperlinks in it.

Translated into the language of the cinema, this means that the narrative should be presented as a network of flashbacks; that characters should dissolve into one another (actually they ought to morph, but apparently this trick still lies beyond the technical capabilities of French cinema); that there should be abrupt associative transitions between situations and eras; that the sight of an advertisement may transport Marcel instantaneously back to his childhood, and that something equally arbitrary (but, guess what, there is no such thing as chance) may carry him back (or elsewhere); that the Ghost of Christmas Present should invariably invoke the Ghosts of Christmas Past and Yet To Come. Thus we have metaphysical assurance of the indivisibility of the Three Amigos.

A Proustian narrative, in other words, should look a lot like one of Tarantino's; making it rather a disappointment that this one does not. Marcel's idea of action is, alas, deficient: though it would be a vast relief if he ever actually knocked over a bank — or, in view of the fact that the center of gravity of this fragmented narrative lies somewhere during the First World War, took a cab to the front and fired a few shots at the Germans — his life instead, for curious reasons of social determinism, consists mainly of putting on starched collars and going to dinner parties where he hangs out with a lot of people who bore the hell out of him because he can see through them at a glance. (Lots of servants. Lots of junk art: statues, paintings, trinkets, bricabrac. Lots

of cheesy pseudoclassical architecture. Lots of wallpaper. Apparently this was the Age of Wallpaper.) Since he is rather inappropriately gifted with an acute intellect and prodigious powers of observation (Sherlock Holmes becalmed among the Four Hundred), his air of decadent languor is clearly less a pose than the result of asphyxiating ennui. But an abrupt departure from the drawing rooms of Paris for a career as a consulting detective or as one of Sergeant Fury's Howling Commandos seems out of the question. In fact, were it not for the occasional blackout or bombardment, and Marcel's occasional expeditions to a male brothel where the (wildly various) sexual propensities of war heroes are acted out, it would be difficult for someone moving in his orbit to know there was a war at all. — The surreal contrast between the world of the drawing rooms and the world of the war is, in fact, so pronounced that even the members of the upper classes begin to remark it; though naturally only one or two go so far as to abandon their lives of privilege, enlist, and (predictably) get killed. (The suggestion that these one or two casualties have some special significance, measured against a conflict which slaughtered an entire generation is, weird but true, the most convincing evidence of the isolation of the upper classes from reality.) We see a fashion show with designs based on military themes; we hear complaints from the attendees when the pianist at a dinner party — no doubt some kind of Bolshevik — plays Beethoven. ("No," says Ms. Deneuve with a smile, cocking her head to listen: "Schumann.") It must be difficult to get good help, with so many in the trenches. Occasionally the lights go out. War is hell.

Presently the strain of reconciling these contradictions overcomes him, and Marcel retires to a sanitarium for the duration; emerging after the Armistice to discover his friends subtly altered (and not for the better), but his world, apparently — and this is strangest of all — not changed in the slightest. — Even Proust must find this depressing; he despairs of literature. We recognize even in this purportedly shapeless storyline the familiar fourth-act crisis. — But presently our hero is reconciled with his talent and his sense of smell; and, though there's no chase, no shootout, and no last-minute rescue, something, perhaps, is

saved after all. There is a certain familiar satisfaction in the conclusion.

Perhaps smell is just the problem here. Proust famously found the nonlinearity of experience best illustrated by odors, which, at least subjectively, seem to have the power to connect the present directly with the past; to recall childhood memories more rapidly (and one must hope more faithfully) than hypnotic suggestion. And it has often been remarked, for instance, that the classical view of epistemology (with which the author is trying to pick a fight) is largely the product of unquestioned assumptions about the primacy of vision. — The world would seem very different if we whistled it; as Marcel himself remarks herein, improvising a little essay on the idea of the leitmotif and the significance of the repeated phrase when a lady friend complains about the repetitiveness of one of his favorite composers. (Proust obviously would have loved the Ramones.) — Thus Thomas Mann claimed to have derived his own (very elaborate) system of correspondences in *The Magic Mountain* from the example of Wagner.

But film doesn't stink, at least if Joe Eszterhas didn't write it; and this is supposed to be a movie. — Movies are, by definition, visual: they tell stories in pictures. And though every idea we find in Proust did, eventually, find its way into the cinema, each one had to be reinvented; and, actually, improved in the process. The vision of Proust is solipsistic: the correspondences are all internal, as if the hypertext could only link to itself. The vision of the cinema, if not precisely objective, nonetheless synthesizes multiple points of view: correspondences are established between several narratives (and several narrators) at once; it suggests, even if it cannot provide it exactly, the perspective of the eye of God. Actions and events are associated with one another even if they do not lie exclusively within the experience of a single protagonist. (Moreover, there is always something forced and unnatural about an attempted singularity of perspective; as evidenced by experiments like Robert Montgomery's *The Lady In The Lake*.) — One might think, for example, of the beautiful dissolve in Tykwer's *Winter Sleepers* between two still-

unrelated characters, male and female, smoking cigarettes: as one exhales, the other inhales. (Later, naturally, they become involved.) — Nor should there in principle be a distinction between associative hyperlinks between events in a single writer's life, or events in two soon-to-be-related characters' lives, and correspondences between events separated by decades, generations, or geologic eras; the dreams of the world-soul (if you will) can take any shape, and take place on any scale. — This is the point, after all, of the most famous and audacious of all cinematic match-cuts: Kubrick's dissolve from the spinning thigh-bone of the antelope to the spaceshuttle falling toward its docking station, which summarizes in a single associative conjunction the nature of tools. — Marcel, on the other hand, doesn't get to ancient Egypt to investigate the invention of papyrus; in fact, so far as I can discern, he never gets as far as Marseilles.

In sum: nothing happens (and nothing is supposed to happen), the flick looks cheap (I'm starting to think there's no cinematographer in all of France good enough to shoot a Guns'n'Roses video)(Luc Besson doesn't count), and it's pretty rough sledding trying to get through a movie with so many Margaret Dumonts and no Groucho. — On the other hand, how can you resist a French art movie with Malkovich as a decadent aristocrat, Emmanuelle Béart as the babe who turns the head even of Proust, and the apparently ageless Catherine Deneuve as the unmoved mover of their social world? If only they'd thrown in a carchase.

“So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.” Oh, you bet your ass.

*Talkin' bout my trepanation (6/5/2000)*

**Hannibal.** [Ridley Scott, 2001.]

The further adventures of Hannibal Lecter, played mainly for grisly laughs: the good doctor, long incognito as an art critic, is unmasked in Florence by an ambitious but unwary Italian detective (naturally the mark goes down hard, though for some reason it takes a third of the picture to have done with him), motivating the master psychiatrist's return to America and his interpolation into the political difficulties which have befallen his — uh, protégé — FBI agent Clarisse Starling (this time the redoubtable Julianne Moore), who has been busted off the force thanks to the insidious machinations of billionaire Fiend Without A Face Gary Oldman, a Lecter victim only partially, and by himself consumed, now perhaps understandably obsessed with the project of luring the cannibal genius back to Virginia to be fed to a penful of wild boars. Complications ensue. — The rather heavily underscored subtext of the romantic connection between Lecter and Starling (who share, it is made clear, an inhuman integrity and strength of purpose that sets them apart from everyone else in the story) sets up the punchline: a letter-perfect quotation of the fireworks display that lit up the Riviera sky behind Grant and Kelly kissing in *It Takes A Thief*; I laughed helplessly in the dark. — Really, if you can hold your gorge, this flick is quite a yuck, and Scott is relatively restrained by contemporary standards: the Farrellys must already be plotting something involving the Three Stooges and meatcleavers.

As for protests over the gruesome fate of the Bad Fed: much ridicule has been unjustly heaped upon the French critic who exclaimed, in a moment of excessive enthusiasm, that Charlton Heston was “an axiom of the cinema!” — for there are, after all, certain axioms of the cinema, and there are certain persons who embody them. Whatever they may be (and I doubt I could enumerate them), I think it goes without

saying that one of them must be that, whatever happens to Ray Liotta in the final reel, he had it coming.

**The Arena.** [Joe D'Amato, 1973. Written by John William Corrington and Joyce Hooper Corrington.]

*Gladiator* for chicks: in the dark days of the decadence of the Roman Empire, Margaret Markov and Pam Grier are kidnapped at opposite ends of the Earth and sold into slavery in the circuses, where they end up dancing, serving drinks at orgies, and getting pawed over by fat disgusting Italian guys with hair on their backs. This wouldn't carry us very far, but when a picturesque foodfight reveals Pam to be the Chyna of her day a lightbulb goes off over somebody's head and the babes are sent to gladiator school, where they learn the rudiments of swordplay and how to sneer at fallen enemies; they do several star turns about the blood-and-sand circuit which repay their owner's investment handsomely before the ugliness of it all registers, their political consciousness is raised, and they lead a slave revolt that sends many a motherfucker up against the wall.

Thus predictably we have naked babes auctioned off in chains (really, eBay should give this some thought), torture, crucifixion, ritual disembowelment, the hungry drooling mob waving thumbs down (but not at least holding up those fucking signs for the television cameras), a chase through the catacombs, swords, sandals, and helmets with fancy plumes; all they needed was a bit of digital trickery to make the crowds look bigger, and, presumably, this could have carried off the Academy Awards. — Seriously, I wish Ridley Scott had screened this before he cast Russell Crowe; he might have reconsidered his concept, to the betterment of all.

D'Amato (née Aristide Massaccesi) may hold the IMDB record for aliases, having worked as a director under thirty-five or forty different names (not including "Steve Carver", the name that trails the credits here); his one hundred fifty films include such titles as *Emmanuelle And*

*The Last Cannibals, Sex Penitentiary, and Porno Holocaust.*

**Chungking Express.** [Wong Kar Wai, 1994.]

A couple of stories about a couple of lovelorn cops in Hong Kong, connected by the little fastfood stand (the Midnight Express) where they both occasionally hang out: since the first (Takeshi Kaneshiro) is dumped by his girlfriend May on the first day of April; every day for thirty days he buys another metaphor-laden can of pineapple with the expiration date of May first. When the new month arrives he abandons denial, eats all the cans at once, hurls like a volcano, and goes off to the bar for ritual cleansing, where he meets woman-of-mystery Brigitte Lin, in blonde wig and sunglasses, winding down after a rough day in the drug trade. The second (Tony Leung) is dumped by his stewardess girlfriend; the new waitress at the stand (Faye Wong) falls for him but (being a Wong character) finds it impossible to express her interest directly. Instead she begins to sneak into his apartment while he's away, buying him groceries, doing his laundry and his dishes, and stocking his aquarium with fresh goldfish. The epitome of bachelor absentmindedness, he never seems to figure out what is going on; but finally catches her redhanded, absorbs the implications of her obsession, and asks her out. Abruptly she runs away to California to become a stewardess herself.

One of the cops advances the theory that jogging is good for the lovelorn, since sweat expels moisture from the body that would otherwise be shed as tears: something about this argument reminds me of Ben Jonson.

The VHS print (now several years old) is introduced by Quentin Tarantino (remember him?), who in an energetic albeit ungrammatical commentary explains that *Chungking Express* was a near-improvisation tossed off as an aside while Wong was bogged down in the interminable editing of his epic *Ashes Of Time* (1994); it was originally intended as a three-story edifice, but when the first two parts seemed

long enough, he left the third for a later film (*Fallen Angels*). Tarantino also points out the considerable debt of Wong to Godard; which, with a bit of a jumpcut, he chooses to illustrate with the admission that the Uma Thurman character in *Pulp Fiction* was modeled after the Anna Karina character in *Vivre Sa Vie*. (After all, that wig.) — The connection, actually, is best seen in the beautiful sequence (over which Tarantino enthuses at length) in which Faye Wong, solo, wholly unselfconscious though wholly selfabsorbed, dances behind the counter of the fastfood stand while her boombox (tuned, apparently, to some Hong Kong source of American oldies) plays “California Dreaming”. This is an exact counterpart of the little dance Uma performs in her livingroom in *Pulp Fiction* to an old Neil Diamond tune (“Girl, You’ll Be A Woman Soon”), and both are imitations of the poolhall ballet of Anna Karina in *Vivre Sa Vie*.

It is curiously difficult to convey in words the appeal of these scenes, but Tarantino, certainly, has put his finger on one of the great mysteries of film: why something so seemingly simple as the spectacle of a girl, alone, dancing to a tune playing on a jukebox/a reel-to-reel tapedeck/the boombox over the refrigerator should be so endlessly fascinating.

Compare Yeats:

That the topless towers be burnt  
And men recall that face,  
Move most gently if move you must  
In this lonely place.  
She thinks, part woman, three parts a child,  
That nobody looks; her feet  
Practise a tinker shuffle  
Picked up on a street.

Like a long-legged fly upon the stream  
Her mind moves upon silence.

**Quills.** [Philip Kaufman, 2000. Written by Doug Wright.]

Sade but true: Art, in the person of Geoffrey Rush, overcomes madness, incarceration, privation, obloquy, sexual frustration [Kate Winslet], the Church [Joaquin Phoenix], the State [Ron Cook as Napoleon], Psychiatry [Michael Caine; naturally he is the true sadist], guilt, anxiety, mutilation, and finally mortality itself. — Questions: Now that he's done Henry Miller and the Marquis de Sade, how long must I wait for Kaufman to do Baudelaire? Can the transmission of the artistic heritage in fact be regarded as a transmigration of souls? And if you were that poor pathetic priest unhinged by lust, wringing your hands over Kate Winslet's slowly cooling stiff, wouldn't you be tempted?

Meanwhile, after watching Rush paint his prose on the dungeon walls with his own shit, I think I'll stop bitching about this sticky keyboard.

**The Astro-Zombies.** [Ted V. Mikels, 1968.]

Mad scientist John Carradine's forbidden experiments reanimating skullfaced cadavers controlled by telepathy and powered by solar cells succeed in creating a race of remote-controlled robot astronauts ideally suited for the exploration of the solar system; unfortunately the defective criminal brains implanted in his robot zombies possess them with a lust for blood which can only be slaked by raping and butchering women in filmy underthings. CIA bozos must contend with a posse of foreign agents led by the formidable black widow Tura Satana as they try to hunt the madman down and find his secret laboratory. — Renowned as a cult classic, though it hardly seems bad enough to warrant this distinction. — The most jarring moment, actually, came early in the development, when the Feds met in somebody's office to talk strategy and I realized the portrait hanging on the wall in the background was that of Lyndon Johnson. — Gaah.

— And you thought Bush was a mistake.

### **O Brother Where Art Thou?** [Joel and Ethan Coen, 2000.]

There's a moment about twenty minutes into this feature, when the three cons who've escaped from the chaingang (George Clooney, John Turturro, and Tim Blake Nelson) are camping out in the woods — posed, to be precise, before a faded yellow forest background (etiolated; as if every leaf on every tree had been pressed into a book in 1937 and left to wait for the Coens to come and collect it to dress their set), debating their options in their best witless-cracker accents — when suddenly all around them in the woods a host of mysterious ethereal figures materialize, moving slowly and silently (though voices are heard singing, off) like ghosts or apparitions toward some unknown destination: a moment of pure Fellini inserted seamlessly (for it turns out they're all going down to the water to be baptized) into what seems superficially a period piece about Mississippi in the Depression. At this point I laughed out loud (not for the first time), and muttered “fucking genius” under my popcorn-saturated breath. — Suffice it that this is not the only inspired moment in this opus, which among other things is loosely based upon the *Odyssey* (John Goodman does a Bible-salesman Cyclops and Holly Hunter is the somewhat-faithful Penelope beset by suitors), and touches on the legend of Robert Johnson, the secret empire of the Ku Klux Klan, the career of Baby Face Nelson, Southern politicians, rural electrification, radio, and pomade. — The title makes reference to the great Preston Sturges comedy *Sullivan's Travels*: that was one of the best movies of the Forties, and this is a worthy homage. Check it out.

### **Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon.** [Ang Lee, 2000.]

Legendary swordsman Chow Yun Fat, having resolved to hang it up, and, maybe, if he can overcome his native bashfulness, at long last pitch some woo to his longsuffering (but obviously adoring) sidekick martial-arts babe Michelle Yeoh, gets sidetracked by the discovery of

the whereabouts of the evil Jade Fox (Cheng Pei Pei), the wicked witch who poisoned his master and against whom he has sworn vengeance. Said Fox, it appears, has been hiding out incognito as the governess of teenage kungfu whizkid Zhang Ziyi, teaching her (Senator Palpatine to her Darth Maul) the forbidden secrets of the Wudan masters, and poisoning her attitude; which may explain why Zhang steals Chow's famous sword, the Green Destiny, skips out on the marriage her government-bureaucrat father has thoughtfully arranged for her, and sets off to seek the life of adventure she has read about in the dime novels of the Chinese Wild West.

Or it may not. In fact nothing seems to explain the behavior of the wonderfully contrary Zhang (the very antithesis of the mythical submissive Oriental woman); who, it develops, has absorbed more of the Wudan chordcharts than her supposed mentor knows, and (in pointed contrast to her painfully repressed rolemodels) has run away from home before, to live in sin with a Byronically romantic brigand (Chang Chen) in the wilds of the western deserts; though not, of course, without first kicking his ass.

So perhaps it should be no surprise that she spurns the renewed overtures of her former lover, the friendship of Ms. Yeoh, and even Chow's me-Yoda-you-Skywalker proposal to teach her the fine points of the wandering swordsman's trade: sometimes, after all, a babe must walk alone.

And anyway there must be some dramatic conflict to excuse the fights: a series of duels which constitute an extraordinary aerial ballet in which the protagonists bound up and down the walls and fly over the rooftops of Beijing, dance among the treetops, and (literally) walk on water, waving their swords at one another and arguing like Scholastics; not to mention the memorable saloon brawl (yes, this is a sort of Chinese Western, complete with horseplay) in which Zhang (in character as the Invincible Sword Goddess) takes on every guy in the joint and knocks the walls down with their flying bodies.

So though in due course the witch gets in the penultimate word and Chow (once again) satisfies the requirements of Chinese romance by expiring nobly, the little girl, who shares with the phenomenal Ms. Yeoh a remarkable beauty, a preternatural quickness, and a grace beyond the reach of art, very nearly steals the show.

Obviously this doesn't represent a radical departure from the genre standards. Maybe Tsui Hark could do better, if he had this kind of money. — On the other hand George Lucas has more money than the Treasury, and he hasn't made anything this good since the Seventies.

Photographed by Peter Pau (who did *The Killer*); cello by Yo Yo Ma; choreography, again, by the remarkable Yuen Wo Ping. Nobody seems to be able to dream up an Academy Award for this guy; maybe it's time to consider nominating him for the Nobel prize.

Terrific scenery; who would have guessed the Gobi looks like Utah?

The best movie of the year.

**Buck Rogers.** [Ford Beebe et al., 1939.]

When a dirigible attempting to circumnavigate the globe is forced down in an arctic blizzard, intrepid pilot Buck Rogers/Buster Crabbe and his teenage sidekick Buddy, thinking it may take a while to be rescued, pop the cork on a bottle of experimental suspended-animation gas. This works a trifle better than expected, as they figure out when they are awakened by explorers five hundred years later in the world of the twenty-fifth century and are hauled off to the Hidden City, the refuge of a heroic band of scientists who represent the last line of resistance to universal domination by blackclad gangsters led by the evil Killer Kane, whose political platform seems to involve turning everybody into brainwiped zombie slave laborers. Fortunately, somebody gets the bright idea of enlisting the aid of the inhabitants of the planet Saturn; complications ensue. — Great stuff, obviously, but

some aspects strike the contemporary viewer as odd: though in the future they have antigravity belts, disintegrator rays, retroscopic television that shows past events, and rays that make them invisible, their radios still work on vacuum tubes, for some reason in the future as in the distant past everybody is living in caves, and Buck's faithful sidekick Wilma Deering (Constance Moore) is, to judge by all appearances, the last woman left alive on either of two planets.

**Scary Movie.** [Wayans Brothers, 2000.]

Farts. Bimbo gets stabbed through the breast implant. Dick joke. Rubbers. Pissing at targets. Snot. Football as male homosexual ritual. Bitches. Teenage frigidity. Blowjobs. Cellphones at the movies. Stoners. Girls' gym coaches are dykes. Farts. Drool. Retards. Farts. Farts. Fastforward. The end.

**Coyote Ugly.** [David McNally, 2000. Screenplay by Gina Wendkos. From a novel by Marcel Proust.]

All right, all right: I finally did see it. But I like my version better.

And, the chariest maid is prodigal enough:

**Let The Devil Wear Black.** [Stacy Title, 1999. Written by Jonathan Penner.]

Having apparently been dropped on my head that evening, I was well into this dark and noirish thriller about a blackclad doctoral candidate given to lengthy philosophical ruminations who lingers at the family mansion in L.A. after his father's funeral, haunted by unsettling visions and the suspicion of foul play, disgusted by the alacrity with which his loathed uncle is taking over the old man's business empire, holding oddly charged conversations with his disturbingly attractive mother (Jacqueline Bisset), trying to avoid his crazy poor-little-rich-

girlfriend, and followed everywhere by a couple of ne'er-dowell drinking buddies who seem as interchangeable as Tweedledum and Tweedledee — or, well, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern — before I figured out what was going on, and began to develop a real appreciation for the ingenuity of the interpretation. — As it turns out there isn't room in the scenario for Laertes, Polonius doesn't get killed (though our hero does kick the shit out of him), Ophelia throws herself in front of a bus instead of drowning, and though the protagonist does pause in a graveyard on his way to the terminal shootout (in any version, *Hamlet* ends as bloodily as a John Woo movie), it isn't an entire skull that prompts his reflections on mortality. But, sheesh, not at all bad. And I thought I was watching it for the strippers.



For I'll have a suit of sables.

*I'll help you scrape the burned rubber off your hood (7/13/01)*

**The Fast And The Furious.** [Rob Cohen, 2001.]

Paul Walker as Keanu Reeves goes undercover among gangs of Los Angeles street racers as surfers led by Vin Diesel as Patrick Swayze in an attempt to discover whether they're responsible for a series of truck hijackings as a series of bank robberies being investigated by some unholy alliance of the cops, the FBI, and jackbooted thugs in assault gear as the FBI simpliciter; going rather too enthusiastically native, he falls in love with Jordana Brewster as Lori Petty and, of course, with screaming engines, smoking clutches, burning rubber, and motion blur: *Point Break* with turbochargers.

The false bust is abbreviated, the Gary Busey mentor-character didn't make the cut, and Swayze's many speeches about the Cosmic Significance of surfing don't seem to have been translated, Diesel confining himself to a few remarks about preferring to handle his life a quarter-mile at a time; maybe that should provoke some cutting remarks about this being the abridged version for younger readers, but, let's face it, James Cameron<sup>25</sup> is on no one's short list of the great Twentieth Century philosophers, and the racing scenes are really, really great.

Not the Great American Dragracing Movie (that distinction still belongs to the technically more primitive but philosophically more satisfying *Two-Lane Blacktop*), but as good as any other. Tell the authors to pump that nitrous and keep that sequel coming.

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<sup>25</sup> I am loathe to begin footnoting these asides, since there is no way to stop, but just this once: Ms. Bigelow's early period of success was less the consequence of her own formidable talents than the result of her association (they were briefly married) with Cameron, who gave her the original treatments for both *Point Break* and *Strange Days*. The irony is that she was (and is) a much better director than Cameron was a screenwriter.

*A stroll in the park (7/19/01.)*

**Jurassic Park Three.** [Joe Johnston, 2001.]

Despite his loud protests that he'll never whiff tyrannosaur again, ace paleontologist Sam Neill falls for the old seven-figure-check trick, abandons his dig in Montana, flies to L'Isle d'Dinos, and, after the mandatory crashlanding, discovers he's expected to lead the search for Lost (but Plucky) Lad Trevor Morgan — last seen augering into the jungle in the credit sequence — on behalf of estranged but temporarily reunited parents William H. Macy and Tia Leoni. The dread certainty of repeated attacks by giant lizards is of course as nothing beside the possibility of reuniting the nuclear family, and despite the best efforts of Stan Winston's animators to stop them (the pteranodons were particularly impressive), the party eventually succeeds in reaching the coast and reaffirming the vows never to set foot on the island again that they'll be breaking in the opening reel of *Jurassic Four*.

Neill's repeated denunciations of all this Frankensteinian meddling with the natural order are getting pretty tired. The phenomenal success of this franchise makes two things clear: first, at the very instant it becomes possible to genetically engineer a dinosaur, someone will do it, and the world will immediately beat a path to his door to gawk at it; second, if there really were an island full of prehistoric monsters off the coast of Costa Rica, no quarantine would be adequate to keep people out of it. In fact, they'd be shooting the next season of *Survivor* there as we speak, and all America would be arguing over lunch which of the participants ought next to be sacrificed to appease the anger of the reptile gods.

Somebody get me Spielberg's number. I feel a pitch coming on.

*Dream lover (12/17/2001)*

**Mulholland Drive.** [David Lynch, 2001.]

In brief: the narrative is a sort of Moebius strip; it loops through everything twice, with opposite senses. (Other examples are *Vertigo*, and *Run, Lola, Run*,<sup>26</sup> which in effect quotes itself quoting *Vertigo* and cycles the action three times.) At bottom (though it takes a while to get to it) you have the familiar story of a girl from somewhere out in the sticks (viz. Missoula, Montana, where Lynch grew up to become an Eagle Scout, and lived in a house with a white picket fence, just like *Blue Velvet*) who comes to Hollywood starry-eyed at the prospect of getting into the movies, discovers it is an evil place run by gangsters, falls for a fellow-starlet who is, alas, much more willing than she herself to fuck her way to the top, gets dumped, freaks out, hires a hit on her ex, and then kills herself out of remorse. Her life flashes before her eyes either just before or just after she shoots herself (see William Holden in *Sunset Boulevard*, who narrates the movie while floating face-down in Gloria Swanson's pool), and this is what we see first: she spins a different version of the story (the Hollywood version, of course), in which her girlfriend escapes the hit conveniently amnesiac (the classic soap-opera device for introducing a personality transplant), the two of them start all over again by meeting cute, she goes to an audition and is instantly marked for stardom, etc. (Note the abrupt transition in the audition, incidentally, from "I love you" to "I want to kill you.") — As with any mystery, the meaning of the first part only becomes apparent in the second. — The names are changed around in the two halves because one part is the ugly truth and the other is the fairy-tale she is telling herself about it. — "And now I'm in this....dream place," she says about Hollywood in the first part. —

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<sup>26</sup> Dir. Tom Tykwer, 1998.

Though of course: is this a dream within a dream? who's dreaming whom? etc. — The moment of revelation is the one in Club Silencio when the singer falls over dead in the middle of “Crying Over You” and the recording keeps playing: so much the worse, as Rimbaud would say, for the wood that finds itself a violin.

(It passed into cliché so long ago that one may forget the argument of Hamlet's soliloquy about suicide, but this was the root of it, the identity of Death with Sleep; and what might you dream?)

Much of the ancillary detail — the misadventures of the director, the hit man accidentally shooting the fat lady in the adjacent office and then having to whack her and the janitor — is layered onto the first half of the story because the original intention (unrealized) was to do this as a series a la *Twin Peaks*, painting a sort of light-operatic comic portrait of Hollywood with a few strange false notes in it — e.g., the cowboy and Mister Big — and then gradually strip the facade away and reveal the nightmare beneath it. (Again, see *Blue Velvet*.)

If it had been up to me I would have left it ambiguous: the two versions of Naomi dreaming one another, and neither with ontological priority. But Lynch, alas, loves unrelieved gloom: the whole thing begins on a close shot of Naomi breathing heavily under the blankets that will shroud her, and ends with the lady with the blue hair pronouncing “Silencio” with unmistakable finality.

The moment when the two halves break is the moment when the girls disappear (Naomi before Laura) and the aunt walks into the bedroom and looks puzzled for a moment, as if she thought she'd heard something but then decided she hadn't. Folk wisdom has it that at such moments we sense the presence of ghosts.

As for why the key, the box, the hair, etc., are blue — Why did Rimbaud give colors to the vowels? Why do Satan's armies gather in the North? Why do fools fall in love? — One would hope Lynch

couldn't explain it himself; it might compromise his uncanny direct connection with the irrational. — The apartment buildings, on the other hand, are deliberately retro, and evoke memories of the old Hollywood; Naomi's little cabaña is reminiscent of the place Bogart's screenwriter had in *In A Lonely Place*.

But it's the accidental and peripheral things that are most impressive, scariest. The director's glasses. The blue key. the insane laughter of the elderly couple. The singer's makeup, in the Magic Theater. (As if made up by an undertaker.) The way Laura moves, like a broken doll. The doors of the apartments. The terrifying vision in Denny's of the unfinished breakfast left upon the plate. The cowboy hat. The little guy in the wheelchair. The drapes. The long shot in the kitchen. The dusk at the end of the hall.

Cinematic precedents include, again, *Vertigo* (the classic necrophilic love story); perhaps *Point Blank*, in which, as is generally true of the Revenger genre,<sup>27</sup> it is left ambiguous whether the protagonist is alive or not; but more specifically *Carnival of Souls* [Harold Harvey, 1962] and *Siesta* [Mary Lambert, 1987], in which female protagonists take the whole movie to figure out they're really dead.<sup>28</sup>

— Well: this one almost makes sense, at any rate. I still have no fucking clue about *Lost Highway*....

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<sup>27</sup> The original would probably be *The Count of Monte Cristo* (Dantes escapes the Chateau D'If by getting tossed into the sea wrapped in a winding-sheet), but see also *The Crow* [Alex Proyas, 1993]; *Kill Bill* of course is self-conscious commentary on the conventions of the genre.

<sup>28</sup> There are other films in which the heroine's status is ambiguous, e.g. in *Laura* [Otto Preminger, 1944] one may wonder whether Gene Tierney has really come back to life. But if she has not, it is Dana Andrews who is dreaming her; she isn't dreaming herself.

*The midnight Nash Rambler (1/14/02)*

**A Beautiful Mind.** [Ron Howard, 2001.]

Another fucking triumph of the human spirit: curiously obnoxious mathematical wizard Russell Crowe/John Nash rockets through Princeton on the fast track to immortality, but is shunted off to neverneverland by schizophrenic delusions which begin with the idea that he is cracking secret codes for the spooks (represented by Ed Harris) and escalate to an allconsuming obsessive belief that every scrap of text that crosses his path (newspapers, magazines, advertising jingles, street signs, the fine print at the bottom of the label, any label) contains some kind of secret message from the Russians, or the pod-people, or somebody, necessitating the construction of gigantic (and visually very striking) collages meant to represent the progress of a hidden conspiracy whose machinations only he is capable of perceiving. After repeated cycles of institutionalization and release and a few decades hanging around Princeton acting gonzo, he finally recovers after a fashion, and, his contributions to game theory having been recognized in the interim, wins the Nobel Prize in economics — leading to the grand dramatic finale in which, having gone fifteen rounds with the Apollo Creed of mental illness, he stumbles blindly with his medal from the podium crying “Adrian! Adrian!” in an Italian-Stallion accent and embraces his longsuffering wife Jennifer Connelly, who depicts faithfully a woman who should be nominated for sainthood.

This is based, as they say, on a true story, though the true story in question (cf. Sylvia Nasar’s book of the same title) differs in several critical respects from this one. More obvious and purely cinematic debts include the character of the deranged detective in *Dark City* (a film in which, perhaps not coincidentally, Ms. Connelly played essentially the same role that she does here), Darren Aronofsky’s

(much more interesting and explicitly cabalistic) *Pi* [1998], *Shine* (the Riemann hypothesis equals the Rachmaninoff concerto), and, thanks to my own ongoing delusional expectation that Ed Harris was about to morph into Tommy Lee Jones, *Men In Black*, though I never quite received that final reassurance I was seeking that the headlines in the tabloids really are (Secrets Entrusted Only To A Few) coded messages from the alien masters of the cosmos.

Nor while they are engaged in embroidery can the authors resist exploiting the usual jokes about the pathetic attempts of geeks to pick up girls: Nash is represented as one of those legendary pioneers of the direct “Want to fuck?” approach whose exploits we used to hear in tales whispered around the Bunsen burner, and his analysis of the strategic options of the pickup artist is supposed to be the origin of his interest in game theory. (Actually Nash took the much more pedestrian approach of attending a seminar on international trade, but this version is admittedly funnier, and for all I know about either hustling in bars or international trade they follow the same rules.)

Crowe, however, is remarkable, approaching the standard of the great cinematic loonies (one thinks of Robin Williams in *The Fisher King* and Peter O’Toole in *The Ruling Class*), and you have to wonder where he studied to perfect his mannerisms: a misfocused gaze, a curiously hunched posture and strangely constrained walk, an oddly unselfconscious manner of mumbling to himself.

But the real hero of the real story is Princeton University, which allowed the real Nash, a gaunt purple-sneakered specter with rotting teeth, to lurk in its shrubbery for a couple of decades until he returned from the Ozone; indeed, they gave him a computer account (a big deal in the old punched-card-and-mainframe days) and library privileges, and tolerated his habit of leaving lengthy messages on the campus blackboards which purported, e.g., to be letters from Nikita Khrushchev to Moses about the factorization of large numbers. There is a hidden message here, sure enough, though it has nothing to do

with Commie plots to smuggle nuclear weapons; rather with patience, magnanimity, a tolerance for eccentricity, and the occasionally justified human faith that the degenerate panhandler bumming cigarettes in the park with a plastic pint of Kamchatka vodka in the pocket of his Army jacket is, as you would yourself to be, a creature with an immortal soul with a capacity for surprise who may yet redeem himself.

—514—

*Dude, where's my nuke? (5/31/02)*

**The Sum of All Fears.** [Phil Alden Robinson, 2002.]

The sum of all fears: that when the moment of truth arrived, you would have to count on Ben Affleck to save the world.

—515—

*The Hollow Earth (8/31/02)*

**The Mole People.** [Virgil W. Vogel, 1956; written by László Görög.]

Fire Maidens of Inner Space: on a remote dig in Central Asia, dashing young archaeologist John Agar pulls a mysterious Sumerian tablet out of a heap of ruins and is just translating the curse of Ishtar it contains for the benefit of his colleagues when — an earthquake strikes! — Coincidence? or the wrath of the goddess? — Undaunted, the adventurous antiquarians drop everything when a native lad points toward an imposing sacred mountain (the very epicenter of the recent upheaval) as the source of another intriguing artifact; after negotiating some interpolated mountaineering footage, the party finds itself on a plateau near the summit where a timely avalanche uncovers a commemorative temple erected shortly after the Biblical deluge,

apparently the work of some business rival of Noah (Atrahasis, actually, though I don't recall whether they get the name right.) They admire this for fifteen or twenty seconds before a yawning void opens beneath the feet of one of their number and he disappears down a shaft of indeterminate depth; descending with the aid of their climbing gear to attempt a rescue, they're cut off by (you guessed it) yet another landslide and find themselves wandering through caverns measureless to man down finally to a sunless sea in the bowels of the Earth lit by an inexplicable phosphorescence which casts an eerie light upon a lost city inhabited by descendants of the Sumerians — completely fitted out with: a witless nobility that falls for their improvised story about being messengers from the gods; an evil priesthood that does not; a boatload of dancing girls in Grecian robes (close enough to Sumerian, what the hell) to provide (somewhat ultravioletly-challenged) human sacrifices to the sun god (absence makes the hierophantic heart grow fonder); and a slave race of subhuman laborers (the eponymous Mole Dudes) who can undoubtedly be counted on to revolt when the moment is ripe. "In archaeology all things are possible," says Agar. I guess so.

Absurd but for some reason entertaining; how many silly Fifties scifi movies claimed to take the Epic of Gilgamesh as their point of departure, after all? — Reassuring technical note: the inhabitants of the city did not, for once, learn English from our radio broadcasts; rather, Agar and his colleagues are supposed to have acquired a speaking knowledge of Sumerian from studying ancient codices.

*Mehr Licht (9/17/02)*

**Soigne ta droite, ou Une place sur la terre.** [*Keep your right up.* Jean-Luc Godard, 1987.]

An Idiot named Prince Myshkin bearing a suspicious resemblance to Jean-Luc Godard is awakened at dawn in Switzerland by a telephone call informing him that he has until sundown to produce a feature film, and, if so, all is forgiven. (Why precisely he needs to be forgiven isn't made clear, but, then, this is the human condition, that you are much more likely to know that you are guilty than to know what you are guilty of.) Needing no further prompting, like many a naive knight-errant before him he sets off on his adventures, carrying a can of film and a paperback edition of Dostoevsky — and, in the best tradition of Romance, encounters a series of characters, symbols, concepts, types, historical allusions, illustrative quotations, aphoristic oneliners, and rhetorical questions (Godard makes no particular ontological distinction among these) including: the Individual; the Man; the principle that conversation between strangers is impossible; a yellow Ferrari; Wimbledon; Andre Malraux (or what he stood for); the last words of Goethe (in several versions); the relation of Art and Commerce; the difference between a novel and a novella; a band in a studio (compare the Rolling Stones in *One Plus One*) trying to write a song (at one point this nearly turns into *Rock and Roll High School*, but, alas, the inspiration slips from their nerveless fingers); the existential Angst of those waiting for their boarding passes at the ticket counter and the insensate Kafkaesque indifference of the airline clerk who types furiously at her terminal before them; the Average Frenchman; the Daddy, the Mummy, the Writer; the nature of Angels; the (male) Ant and the (female) Grasshopper (or was it the other way around?); the Admiral; assorted perpetrators of slapstick who stage a variety of pratfalls; the Countess; a Greek chorus of airline passengers chanting “Hail to thee, ancient Ocean”; their pilot, studying a manual on suicide

before taking off (not nearly so funny since the EgyptAir disaster); the discovery that there are no grownups; the observation that there are so many sobs, for a tune on the guitar; Borges; the failure of May 1968; golf with bimbos; Mickey Mouse; transcendence; an opened window as illustration that Death is the path toward the Light; a little girl with pigtails who has something to do with the transmigration of souls; a hooker with eyes like pearls (she was either Finnish or Dutch); the repeated assurance that “What happened next is from long ago”; a certain anxiety in re our acquiescence in the detachment of the Earth from the Sun; and the observation that, in nothingness, any creation is a miracle. — This ends, finally, on the beautiful image of the projection of the film itself: light stabbing the darkness in the back; a whispering which supplants the silence. More light, indeed.

Godard somehow kept frustrating my ongoing expectation that he was just about to quote the tennis match from *Blowup*, but buried every other quibble beneath an avalanche of allusion. — “Ah, who gave us the sponge to erase the horizon?” (*Zarathustra*, if you’re keeping score: the madman who announces God is dead.) — Indeed, who built the shore so near the ancient Ocean? You tell me, Jean-Luc.

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*School for scandal (9/17/02)*

**The Unearthly.** [Brooke L. Peters, 1957.]

Laid low but hardly flattened by a nervous breakdown, erstwhile fifty-foot-woman Allison Hayes (the New Girl) arrives at the remote country sanitarium of mad doctor John (“To the true scientist, nothing is impossible!”) Carradine for a rest cure; and, though she can hardly be expected to realize that the avuncular procurer who escorts her here has already reported her as a suicide, she might at least take the hint from the howling dogs, the Gothic setting, and the fact that Tor

Johnson (still bearing the monicker “Lobo” hung on him by Ed Wood) answers the door when she rings the bell that her personal physician may not have had her best interests in mind. Indeed, it rapidly becomes apparent that, under the guise of treating the anxiety disorders of his patients (nubile young bimbos apparently preferred, see in particular very tasty but alas expendable former Playmate Sally Todd), Carradine is performing (but of course) *Forbidden Experiments with the aim of discovering the secret of Eternal Youth*; which, unfortunately, keep going awry one way or another, meaning that he keeps discovering instead the secret of *Eternal Jaw-Twitching Pizzafaced Drooling Into A Bucket* — and, gnashing his teeth in bafflement, must repair to the pipe organ for another therapeutic rendition of the *Toccatina and Fugue in D Minor*. (Just once, I would like to see somebody sit down for one of these *Phantom-of-the-Opera* moments at the pipe organ and play “*Louie-Louie*”.)

The stage thus set, a guy (Myron Healey) who looks a bit too much like a romantic lead to be, as advertised, an accused murderer on the run, stumbles into the compound, is offered sanctuary conditional on services to be named later, and immediately starts snooping around like a detective — and, at this point, the resemblance of this device to the old undercover-cop-masquerading-as-juvenile-delinquent ploy from *High School Confidential* and of Carradine’s blonde-bombshell assistant Marilyn Buford to Mamie Van Doren, not to mention Carradine’s bizarre and indeed terrifying explanation of his quest for immortality in terms of a search for a hypothetical *Seventeenth Gland* (as if there were not enough already), firm the suspicion that this is yet another allegory of high school; and, sure enough, from here on in the entire plot seems to turn on a love quadrangle involving the competition of Carradine and Healey for the attentions of the curiously passive Ms. Hayes (here playing very much against type as a dim and malleable specimen of Fifties femininity) and the consequent jealousy of displaced main squeeze Buford (not a nurse but a doctor herself, and therefore, in Fifties typology, dangerously selfassertive), the lumpy, grotesque, and curiously hairy failures of the *Forbidden*

Experiments all begin to look like steroid-induced exaggerations of the theme of puberty (cf. the famously metaphorical *I Was A Teenage Werewolf*), and their subsequent banishment to the sanitarium basement suggests the advertised fate of all those black-leather-jacketed greasers who hung around the auto shop smoking Lucky Strikes and looking at dirty magazines: that's what will happen to you if you jack off all the time and don't get an education. — The doom of Carradine (the radical educator) himself is, of course, a foregone conclusion, and the whole thing reads (convincingly) as a solemn warning that though Frankensteinian tinkering with the secrets of Life and Death might be tolerated by the gods, any attempt to meddle with the secrets of Adolescence will meet with swift and terrible punishment.

The dialogue is laced with quotable zingers (“You’ve got it pretty well figured out, haven’t you?” asks Healey. — “I am a scientist!” Carradine replies. “Thinking is my business!”), and there is certainly a moral to be read from the embarrassing fact that the screwball theoretical premise of a B-movie like this looks, actually, more sophisticated than the classical theories of the physiology of the human organism — seventeen glands are quite a few more than four humors, after all.

But the main impression you carry away is that left by the denouement, in which the cop in charge of the contingent of uniformed representatives of the patriarchy called in to restore Sanity and Order regards aghast the dungeon full of shambling zombies and shakes his head, saying: “It’s a good thing we have institutions that will take care of them for the rest of their lives.” Surely this confuses cause and effect.

*Black Ice (12/23/02)*

**Die Another Day.** [Lee Tamahori, 2002.]

Bond reminds us once again why we'd all be happier if the British were still running the world: captured when a black op in North Korea is betrayed and goes south, our hero gets tossed into a dungeon and tortured by extremely professional specialists for the space of fourteen months — and, unkindest cut of all, discovers when his handlers finally swap him out that they think he's been reprogrammed as some kind of Manchurian candidate, necessitating that he go off the reservation to try to track down the mole who sold him out. The quest leads, as the conventions of the franchise require, to a series of picturesque locales, including Hong Kong, Havana, London, and (after suspicion focuses on a diamond millionaire who seems rather too much larger than life) Iceland, and resolves itself in a grand finale (again on the embattled Korean peninsula) in which Bond duking it out with the evil mastermind in an aerial command post while a giant orbiting laser burns a path through the DMZ toward general war, universal cataclysm, and the triumph of inadequate fashion sense.

Herein we discover the standard elements, including: the villain with the glove (Toby Stephens) coded in some ingenious new fashion as inhuman (thanks to genetic reprogramming, he cannot sleep); the henchman with a startling physical peculiarity (Rick Yune, with diamonds embedded by an explosion in one side of his face — nearly good enough for an old Dick Tracy baddie); the opposed pair of gorgeous babes (Halle Berry and Rosamund Pike as either the bad good and good bad or good bad and bad good girls, you figure it out), one of whom, at least, does manage to hold out for a couple of minutes of screen time before she has sexual intercourse with our hero; the chases in unusual vehicles (military-issue hovercraft and some kind of rocket sled); the real hightech toys (the VR trainer, cellphones

transmitting images, PDAs adapted as controllers for satellites) and their parodies (the familiar multifunctional watch and a magical glass-shattering ultrasonic ring); the *reductio ad absurdum* of the luxury car (an invisible Aston Martin); the ultimate weapon (called Icarus: yes, this does turn night into day and is, therefore, the chariot of the sun, and, yes, it is driven by the offspring of a famous father, but, no, the old man isn't really Daedalus; still, two out of three ain't bad); the penultimate weapon (very fancy body armor wired to dish out a hundred thousand volts); the fight choreography (beginning to look derivative of Hong Kong, but there's a great swordfight and a cleverly-designed punchout in which the participants have to keep dodging automated laserblasts); the bad puns (also meted out to Halle and one or two of the bad guys); the inspired production design (an ice palace in the Arctic which improves on Superman's Fortress of Solitude); the creative ways of wrecking flashy cars (here, by dropping them out of a plane); the big stars in small parts (Madonna as a fencing master — I'll bet she loved that corset — and Michael Madsen as a boss spook — as best I can recall the first guy in several episodes permitted to light a cigarette); the filthy lucre (diamonds); the glimpses of the lifestyles of the rich and famous (at nearly every turn: a rejuvenation clinic in the Carribean, a private club in London, a luxury hotel in Hong Kong, an exclusive reception in Iceland); the amusing pseudoscientific patter (in re genetic engineering); the jokes at the expense of traditional high culture (Sun Tzu and Gainsborough); and a couple of absolutely priceless moments, viz., the opening night shots of Bond and his fellow Seals in black wetsuits surfing into the shores of North Korea (somebody must have seen the Surf Ninjas on the late show), and the improbable spectacle of a barefooted Bond, fresh from the dungeon in ragged hospital pajamas and looking just like Robinson Crusoe with unkempt full beard and long tangled hair, walking coolly into the lobby of an elegant Hong Kong hotel past a gawking horde of affluent Chinese in evening dress and demanding (and getting) the best suite in the house.

As for what didn't belong: it is difficult to articulate precisely the way in which the Bond films have traditionally been "realistic", but

obviously this has always been the case: when Brosnan dived off the top of the Russian equivalent of Hoover Dam in *Goldeneye*, it wasn't Brosnan, and the dam wasn't in Russia, but there was a real guy, a real dam, and a real fall at the end of a bungeecord recorded by real film in real cameras stationed a couple hundred feet away in the real fabric of three-dimensional space; when Roger Moore skied off the edge of a cliff in Austria in *The Spy Who Loved Me* and flew away on a parachute sporting the Union Jack, it wasn't Moore, and it wasn't Austria, but the fact that they had to go to Greenland to find a cliff high enough and hire a world-class athlete to do the jump and pull the ripcord made the stunt all that much more impressive. And here though you know that the North Korean beaches are actually on Maui and that Spain is standing in for Havana and that the Aston Martin and the Jaguar aren't really firing rockets at one another in that chase across the surface of that frozen lake in Iceland, you also know that this really is a lake in Iceland and that there really are a couple of madfool stunt drivers out powersliding around having a hell of a good time, and this is enough to ensure the suspension of disbelief, enough to ensure that the proposition "Brosnan/Bond is driving that Aston Martin" will pass the test for make-believe — and, by implication, carry much of the rest of the flick with it. But unfortunately you don't believe for a moment that Halle Berry (or anyone at all) is actually doing a backflip off a sheer vertical cliff a couple hundred feet into the Caribbean or that Brosnan is really surfing on a tidal wave chockfull of pack ice in the Arctic or that Brosnan and Berry are really bailing out of a crashing airplane; in fact all this looks unforgivably bogus. (The icepack-surfing sequence in particular looks even cheesier than the old AIP fakery posing Frankie and Annette in front of rolling breakers on the back-projection screen, which I would have thought impossible.) And the effect is (as Sartre would have said) one of bad faith. — The Bond movies have always represented the gold standard in stunt work — a standard embraced, for instance, by Jackie Chan, and adhered to faithfully by that master of the carchase John Frankenheimer — and have always made what many (e.g. Andre Bazin) have described as an essentially ethical choice about the

relationship of film to reality — best explained, paradoxically, by a counterfactual conditional: if Werner Herzog had made *Twister*, he would have chased real tornadoes. A departure from this standard is disturbing (and as it were debases the currency) because it suggests the kind of deviation from principle that presages the degeneration of a species or genre; or, in contemporary parlance, that the series is jumping the shark.

On the other hand, how else are you going to show a spacebased laser cutting a path through the minefields of the Korean DMZ? maybe they just need to hire some American effects houses and a real Hong Kong fight choreographer.

Or maybe they need hormone therapy, who knows. But what the hell, I loved that invisible car.

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*Rocket science (1/15/2003)*

**World Without End.** [Edward Bernds, 1956.]

Intrepid explorers Hugh Marlowe, Rod Taylor, Nelson Leigh, and Christopher Dark while performing the first circumnavigation of the planet Mars run into one of those troublesome time warps that seem to clutter up the solar system, and, after a period of intense acceleration during which all the dials on the console twirl round and smoke comes out from under the dash, black out (a narrative device usually introduced to code everything that follows as a dream, but, see below) and come to just in time to discover themselves crashlanding in an alpine landscape on an unknown world. After peering dazedly out the portholes for a minute or two, one of the party points out that they are “experiencing Plus Gravity”, which, in keeping with the tenets of Movie Science, means that there must be oxygen in the atmosphere

outside; as they immediately verify by opening the door and sticking their heads out to take deep breaths. (I wouldn't advise performing this experiment on Neptune.) Venturing forth to explore this alien planet, they descend into green but uninhabited country uncannily reminiscent of the American Southwest and realize presently that they've been magically transported five centuries forward in the future light cone and back to the Earth itself, where a nuclear holocaust has exterminated most of the human race and divided the survivors (maybe you saw this coming) into Eloi and Morlocks — though in this version the effete intellectual Eloi cower in the gleaming corridors of a futuristic city underground and the degenerate mutant Morlocks run around the surface clubbing anything that moves with savage gusto. Taking issue with the eugenic implications of this state of affairs, the newcomers, in a series of addresses to what looks suspiciously like the Student Council, attempt to convince the testosterone-deficient male Eloi of the virtues of sun, surf, sand, random gunfire, and economic imperialism; without much success, though they do manage to impress the Eloi chicks, a nubile lot of shameless hussies who prance around in high heels and miniskirts copping feels off Taylor's biceps and making googoo eyes at his companions. This sexual tension/ideological conflict generates predictable friction, precipitating a crisis which is somehow not resolved in porno holocaust but in a rather silly final battle between the cute people and the cave trolls whose outcome does not exactly confound expectation for anyone who attended an American high school (and which, indeed, could have been staged without loss of generality as a trial by combat between the leaders of rival cliques in a parking lot). The novelty is that, since the time warp for once really is irreversible, our heroes don't have to escape at the last minute as the lost city is consumed by an erupting volcano (i.e., awoken from the dream), and, weird but true, we leave them, like Candide, cultivating their garden; and can expect several more centuries to elapse before the victorious pureblooded Aryans start squabbling over the composition of the Prom Committee and nuke one another all over again. — Thus, I guess, the title; or, as Joyce would have put it, high school is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake. Where are the Ramones when you really need them?

This owes not a little to previous exercises in the bubble-helmet-and-blaster genre, viz. *Catwomen of the Moon* and *Flight to Mars*, and in turn influenced later epics, notably *Queen Of Outer Space*, *The Time Travelers*, and *Planet of the Apes*. — Which should probably set up some final wisecracks about the debased genetic inheritance of the mutant Morlocks bearing the same relation to that of their ancestors that this scenario does to H. Rider Haggard, but I haven't the heart for it. As so often happens, I liked the silly piece of shit despite myself (maybe it was the space opera, or maybe it was just those cheerleaders' outfits), and anyway I haven't time to argue: I'm late for an appointment with my guidance counselor.

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*Perfect pitch (3/28/2003)*

**The Core.** [Jon Amiel, 2003.]

“It's *Armageddon* meets *Journey to the Center of the Earth*.”

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*Jennifers (5/17/2003)*

Idly channelsurfing the other night, I paused for a couple of hours on VH-1 to watch that recent contribution to the high-school-graduation-party genre, *Can't Hardly Wait*;<sup>29</sup> in which some geek whose name I forget discovers at the last possible moment (Dreyfuss staring helplessly after the blonde in the Corvette) that Jennifer Love Hewitt

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<sup>29</sup> Dir. Harry Elfont and Deborah Kaplan, 1998.

has ditched her football-star boyfriend and may finally be available, if only he can work up enough nerve to hit on her, if only she'll realize finally that his name, not that of the jock, is written in the stars beside hers — if only; if only. Of course I can't resist pointing out that, since the geek is represented as a fledgling writer, this is transparently the representation of some writer's wish-fulfillment fantasy; but there was something elegant in the way it managed to adhere to the traditional dramatic unities (almost the whole movie transpires at the party — and, nota bene, this means a cheap shoot), and Ms. Hewitt, certainly, was well-cast — the contemporary Gidget: cute, wholesome, improbably stacked; the kind of bimbo who would once have starred in a string of beach-blanket movies and now stars in the modern equivalent, a string of slasher flicks. (These may be combined: cf. Charles Busch's *Psycho Beach Party*.)

By the kind of ridiculous coincidence Douglas Adams attempted to elevate to a cosmic principle in the Dirk Gently novels, I then turned the television off, fired up the web browser, checked into Google to update my gallery of portraits of famous philosophers, and immediately found myself after typing in "Friedrich Nietzsche" staring at a picture of the selfsame Jennifer. It turned out that this was a link to a site erected by an industrious Aussie devoted entirely to the subject of Ms. Hewitt's breasts (as you can imagine, this required an extensive treatment); and that the image in question bore as caption the famous line (I think from *Beyond Good And Evil*) about the importance of remembering that, when you look long into the abyss, the abyss also looks back into you. — The "abyss", in this case, is the cleavage of Ms Hewitt; the kind of dumb joke that leaves me laughing for hours.

Another note on the late great Conrad Hall: a few days ago I dug out an old tape of what should have been a lackluster police procedural, *Jennifer 8* [Bruce Robinson, 1992], about the search for (of course) a serial killer, and, watching it again, was reminded why I'd so

improbably fallen in love with this flick when first I saw it: the cast was excellent (Andy Garcia, Uma Thurman, Lance Henriksen, and John Malkovich, among others), and the photography was phenomenal. As a general rule, you know you're onto something when you start asking yourself who the cinematographer was with the opening shot (Garcia halfrevealed through a reflective windshield, driving through northern California, playing with a Zippo lighter), and this only gets better: there are some beautiful exteriors shot in what looks like genuine coastal fog (very hard to manage this), a strikingly original interior lighting design that gives one of the principal locations the look and feel of a school for the blind, and a memorable scene in which Garcia and his assistants dig through a smoldering dump at night looking for body parts. — Maybe this is the best measure of Hall's talent: that he could have taken a burning dump and made it look like a Vermeer.

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*A greening comes across the sky (6/23/03)*

Looking over my notes on *The Matrix Reloaded*, I see that every fight seems to have been prefaced with, accompanied by, and then footnoted after the fact with some none-too-edifying discussion of the conflict between freedom and determinism. Personally, I don't think this was necessary, but I'm sure the Wachowskis would immediately reply that they had no choice in the matter.

Meanwhile:

**Hulk.** [Ang Lee, 2003.]

Variations on a theme of Lee and Kirby: somewhat-too-dedicated scientific Boy Wonder Eric Bana and his coworker and estranged girlfriend Jennifer Connelly (now typecast, I'm afraid, as the

significant other of the mentally disturbed Great Man) are, notwithstanding their problems with emotional distance, forging merrily ahead into the scientific unknown at Berkeley, trying to advance the application of some sort of gamma-ray-energized nanotechnological goo (green not gray, as the frequent representations of madly-multiplying molecular chaos on their computer screens remind us)(and as the color scheme requires — though, nota bene, whatever the traditional connotation of gamma radiation for longtime Marvel readers, it isn't green at all, of course, but rather ultraultraultraultraviolet) to the repair of biological organisms.

Thus far, alas, they've mainly succeeded in finding new ways of making frogs explode; a cause of much anxiety since, in a rare cinematic display of the realities of scientific funding, they have been backed into a position in which they must Demo or Die; or, worse, succumb to the blandishments of the military — represented by romantic rival Josh Lucas, who works for Jennifer's father, four-star general Sam Elliott, who in the somewhat-distant past fired Bana's longlost father, Mad Scientist Nick Nolte, who performed a variety of Forbidden Experiments on, among others, Bana himself and then disappeared into prison for thirty years, until reappearing, incognito, accompanied by an uncanny trio of weird mutant dogs who serve as his familiars, on the eve of these proceedings, as the deranged night janitor of the very building in which all this is taking place. (I think that was everything.)

Explaining all this, one need hardly say, requires the deployment of an enormously complicated apparatus of flashbacks, Big Closeups (Ang has a thing for eyeballs), Significant Glances, abrupt dissolves into near-recoveries of repressed memories, splitscreen explorations of multiple perspectives, startling match cuts and shifts in perspective, Daliesque dream-sequences (check out those jellyfish swimming in the air over the desert), and nonlinear narrative montage — as illustrated, e.g., by one scene in which Bana directs a brooding stare at a photograph of Connelly which animates into a flashback in which Connelly in nested flashback tells the story of a dream based on her

childhood.

We're nowhere near the bottom of this seemingly endless recursion when there's one of those Laboratory Accidents so beloved of the old comic book writers: Bana takes an impossibly-high dose of gamma radiation; and, though he miraculously recovers, begins to display a propensity, when his hairtrigger temper is aroused, to turn into a gigantic green monster of immeasurable strength and run berserk about the countryside. (Well: you read the title on the ticket.)

This allows us to take vicarious pleasure in a great deal of recreational property damage and bear witness to the very satisfying exertion of the righteous wrath of Bana on a world full of assholes — starting with the dickhead romantic rival and working backward through assorted other threats to Connelly to the root of all evil, the great insensate and uncaring bureaucratic mechanism that is the Army — which, naturally, almost immediately tries to Take Charge of the Situation and sequester this new Secret Weapon in a picturesque underground laboratory in the desert (Area 51.5, I guess), where he can be studied and vivisected at leisure; later presumably to be cloned and deployed against Enemies of Freedom like the Commies, the Towelheads, and the Dixie Chicks. — Big mistake. — The Hulk promptly Busts Loose, and, after trashing an armored brigade or two for sport (too bad the Iraqis didn't think of simply picking the tanks up and throwing them at the helicopters), bounds over a few intervening mountain ranges back to San Francisco; where, after a lot of even more intense conversations full of even huger closeups and illustrated by even more convoluted flashbacks, the analytical quest culminates in the denouement with Bana's penetration into the inner mystery (almost the recovery of a repressed Lacanian primal scene) which lies at the root of his boundless and bottomless rage; for which the Hulk, as if you had to have it spelled out, is only a vividly realized metaphor.

Admirers of Ang Lee and his principal collaborator James Schamus will recognize a lot of this: the way, for instance, that Connelly

abruptly retires to a cabin in an Enchanted Forest very like the one in which Chow Yun Fat and Zhang Ziyi fenced among the treetops, apparently for no other reason save to provide the Hulk with a picturesque backdrop against which to duke it out with Nolte's dogs; the uncommon intelligence of the treatment of what would otherwise be rather tedious psychodrama ("It was like a dream," says Bana of his possession by the Hulk — "About what?" asks Connelly, with wholly unexpected acuity — "Rage...power...and freedom," he says); and the explicitly mythological final shootout, which ends on a note of ambiguity almost identical to the denouement of *Crouching Tiger*: Bana floating in water, as Zhang floated on air. — One must eagerly await their next project — which, if they continue to Think Green, will probably be something like the Muppets acting out Thomas Pynchon. (I can just hear Kermit proclaiming that "History is made at night.")

What they certainly got right was the way that the Hulk moves; incredibly, Ang seems to have donned the motion-capture suit at ILM and acted out the part himself. (Is there anything this guy can't do?) — They also deserve credit for the desert locations, the quotes from King Kong, and the return of product placement for Apple computers.

What they seem to have gotten wrong is the cartoonish appearance of the Hulk himself, which is intended, obviously, to put quotes around him. I'm not sure whether this was really necessary, but it wouldn't surprise me to discover, eventually, that this too looks right.

Bana is great, but in his case upward mobility in Hollywood only means gaining the opportunity to allow Brad Pitt to drag his carcass around the walls of Troy. In the meantime check out the remarkable Australian film *Chopper* (Andrew Dominik, 2000.) — Connelly needs to step away from these wife-of-the-great-man roles and take on something more demanding, say, the role of a major babe who inexplicably falls for a total loser. (Naturally I'm willing to offer my services.) — Cameos by Lou Ferrigno and the great Stan Lee himself; if there were any justice, these guys would be rich.

*Siskel and Ebert and Ted and Alice (8/14/2003)*

.... I never watch the program any more, but a glance at the attached rant confirms what would have been my suspicion, i.e., that the chemistry that defined Ebert/Siskel is lost. What made the pair of them work was their authenticity: neither one of them was particularly photogenic, they didn't talk in rehearsed sound bites but kept tripping over their own words trying to get what they wanted to say out of their mouths, and, most important, they had real (and frequently vehement) disagreements about the films that they viewed. This conveyed a sense of the significance of film, and its importance as an art form: it was important enough that these guys, who were such dweebs that they couldn't possibly be concealing what lay in their hearts, could get really passionate about their differences of opinion. — I'm not sure that either one of them really appreciated this, and I can understand why, after Siskel's premature demise, Ebert would be (a) loath to abandon this forum but (b) reluctant to find another partner with whom his arguments would be as violent: I'm sure he found the old show very stressful .....

*The Passion of the Christ (3/5/2004)*

...I'm still working on *Christ Two: This Time They Bleed*. Admittedly I'm not working too hard. — But isn't this puzzling, when you think about it? No matter what the feelings of the Divine Screenwriter or the Divine Director might have been, surely after the Divine Producers (you see how the Catholic idea of dividing the Deity into distinct persons must have arisen) had a look at the grosses they would have

started talking franchise; this thing should have spawned more sequels than *Rocky*.... .

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*The screenplay form (3/5/04)*

The screenplay as presently constituted is (so far as I can determine) a degenerate form of the standard blueprint invented in the Thirties to facilitate the assembly-line production methods of the studio system. At that time, after the old auteur era and before the new one, when techniques were simpler and standardized to a degree more typical now of television than motion pictures, the scenario was a fairly complete visualization of the finished product, consisting of a shot-by-shot breakdown (the persons, the background, camera angle and distance long/medium/closeup/etc., notations regarding use of projected backgrounds and sound effects, etc., etc.) which was used by the technicians to rig the scene while the director coached the actors (basically his<sup>30</sup> only function). After running through a few standard permutations of the camera setups (getting “coverage”) to provide needed redundancy for editing choices and to correct mistakes (budgets and schedules rarely permitted reshoots), they moved on to the next scene; and, as it were, never looked back. The responsibility for assembling the final print belonged to the editing department — subject to the supervision of the producer, who was the real author of the work. (Jerry Bruckheimer, who personally supervises his editors from the first days of shooting to the completion of the final cut, is one of the few contemporary producers who exerts this kind of creative authority.) — At least in the system as it finally took shape; in the Twenties and earlier the writer and the editor were often the same person, and not infrequently women, who were, before the Suits took over, allowed considerable creative input. — Much of the format is

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<sup>30</sup> Alas, after Griffith encouraged Lillian Gish to try her hand at directing (which she did, cf. *Remodeling Her Husband* [1920]), it all went rapidly downhill.

inherited from this era, at any rate, though the approved contemporary practice is to scant on overt instructions regarding camera setups (now regarded as the director's prerogative) and confines the scene-setting to occasional sluglines specifying "INT — BALLROOM — NIGHT," and the like (still claimed to be essential to impart useful information to production crews, though obviously they are not: the interior/exterior and day/night distinctions never meant much in the days when everything was shot on a sound stage anyway, and now whole movies are shot "Interior — Greenscreen — Convenient working hours".) The dialogue runs down the middle of the page, and the layout is designed to leave a lot of empty space for marginal notes. You never really list the Dramatis Personae, though clearly you should. You don't change the screenplay by printing out a new draft, but by inserting new pages of a different color. One page in the approved format is supposed to equal one minute of screen time (this is established by a circular argument worthy of the great Jurg Waser himself),<sup>31</sup> all attempts to tinker with it are met with horrified accusations of sacrilege, and I have seen extended flame wars in screenwriting forums over sectarian issues like the correct number of brass brads with which a screenplay must be bound — whether two or three, the Sunnis and the Shiites will never agree. — Most of this is just inherited custom without any real rationale, though to admit that is anathema to the horde of wannabes who insist on the rigorous application of essentially meaningless standards to distinguish their own "professional" efforts from the "unprofessional" efforts of clueless newbies. And you thought all the morons went into the Army.

Since even the earlier version of the form isn't really much good for visualizing the movie in advance, of course, the practice of storyboarding the shot — i.e., drawing a sort of graphic novel illustrating everything quasistatically (there are conventions for drawing arrows indicating the motion of the characters, the camera, etc.) — long ago became commonplace, at least on high-budget productions, and there is a kind of established art to these, requiring

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<sup>31</sup> A Caltech joke not worth explaining..

the services of very talented people: our old hero Steranko is supposed to have done the storyboards for *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and the Coppola remake of *Dracula*, for instance. — Though many people relied on these heavily even in the classical period — e.g. Hitchcock meticulously storyboarded everything in advance to the extent that, famously, the actual shooting bored him, and he never even bothered to look through the viewfinder when a shot was being framed — they have become, obviously, critical in the modern era of special effects: if Spielberg is telling Jeff Goldblum which way to look up at a tyrannosaurus while simultaneously elsewhere his CGI artists are creating the image on a computer screen, they have to have agreed beforehand what the composition is going to look like, to considerable precision. (The fact that Liam Neeson is obviously *not* looking at Jar Jar Binks is one of the many failings of *The Phantom Menace*.)

The old arrow-notation is fairly crude, and you still have to worry about coordinating picture elements while everything is in motion, meaning that the obvious generalization is something like a simple animated-cartoon rendering (which can also give you a better idea of how long the shot is going to run); i.e., you have this right.<sup>32</sup> I gather that there is now animation software that can handle such problems...

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George Miller's reprise of his classic *Road Warrior* movies, *Mad Max: Fury Road* [2015], is probably the best action film, and conceivably the best movie *simpliciter*, of the twenty-first century to date. It very nearly attains the Platonic ideal of the continuous chase, containing very little dialogue and telling the story visually, an endless progression of high-speed chases through the desert in which real people leap from one speeding vehicle to another, fall and tumble, and it seems that every minute or two there is some kind of spectacular explosion.

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<sup>32</sup> He had made this suggestion, which prompted the response.

About it Steven Soderbergh said:

... I tell you I couldn't direct 30 seconds of that. I'd put a gun in my mouth. I don't understand how [Miller] does that, I really don't, and it's my job to understand it. I don't understand two things: I don't understand how they're not still shooting that film and I don't understand how hundreds of people aren't dead. ... We are talking about the ability in three dimensions to break a sequence into a series of shots in which no matter how fast you're cutting, you know where you are geographically. And each one is a real shot where a lot of things had to go right. ... I guarantee that the handful of people who are even in range of [Miller's ability], when they saw *Fury Road*, had blood squirting out of their eyes.<sup>33</sup>

(Bong Joon-ho, who has seen *The Road Warrior* more than thirty times, said he cried watching it. Edgar Wright said he saw it in the theater five times in four days.)

Miller and his collaborators spent more than a decade putting the project together, and pre-visualized the film to an extraordinary extent; there is a published version of the screenplay, incorporating thousands of storyboards, which is 500 pages in length. The idea that anything less than this could have provided an adequate blueprint for the construction of this movie is ludicrous.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Interview of Soderbergh by Gavin Blair in *The Hollywood Reporter*, November 9, 2017.

<sup>34</sup> The authors of record are Miller, Brendan McCarthy, and Nick Lathouris. Cf. <https://cinephiliabeyond.org/mad-max-fury-road/>

*Boing (11/11/2004)*

I hadn't really understood it until one year when on my birthday my girlfriend — a former children's librarian, and a connoisseur of that branch of literature — got me a coffee-table version of a Little Golden Book about dinosaurs. — "Wow," I said, already impressed. "Thanks." — "No, no, open it," she insisted. — So I opened the cover to the first page and — whoa! — a dinosaur *popped right out of the page*.

Naive lad that I was, I had never seen such a thing, and immediately had to turn all the other pages in succession, oohing and aahing all the way through.

Of course it's the same thing with the cinema. The image is two-dimensional, but some people somehow do that: they pop right off the screen.

So I don't think "star quality" really does the phenomenon justice. I prefer to think of it as that. As *Boing*.

This is not a quality that can be quantified or explained,

It is ineffable.

It has little or nothing to do with acting ability.

It is not even commensurate with how big a star somebody is. — *The Godfather Part III* was a clusterfuck, for instance. It reminded me of one of those camping expeditions you would embark upon after a long hiatus, where you would find yourself out in the woods in the dark, trying to put the tent up but not remembering how to do it, and ending up in the middle of a heap of fabric with only a single tentpole

standing up in the middle of it all preventing a complete collapse. — And that was Andy Garcia: among a mass of famous actors, the one guy who by sheer force of personality, sheer *Boing*, kept it all from collapsing.

Nor is it strictly a question of physical beauty. — Of the two Arquette sisters, I was hopelessly in love with Rosanna for many years, but Patricia was the one with *Boing*...

... I can't identify it easily in the "classic" Hollywood cinema, which still bores me, but you can see it in the silents and pre-Code movies — In Chaplin, obviously, and Douglas Fairbanks. — Of the female stars of the early sound era, Harlow is the most obvious example. The people on the screen around her are reading lines and striking poses, but Harlow is *alive*; so vital and electric that you feel as though if you stood next to her your hair would stand on end....

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*The day the highlands stood still (1/14/05)*

**Devil Girl From Mars.** [Dwight MacDonald, 1954. Written by James Eastwood; from a play by John C. Mather.]

After a catastrophic war between the sexes necessitates an interplanetary raid to kidnap terrestrial studs to replenish a depleted gene pool, Martian Mean Girl Patricia Laffan and her trusty sidekick Johnny — a giant robot! with an electronic brain! — descend in their flying saucer upon a lonely inn in the wilds of Scotland, where riddling Fate and the exquisite sense of dramatic symmetry of the screenwriters have assembled an Addled Landlady, a Harried Barmaid, an Escaped Convict (yes, he was Wrongfully Accused), a Mysterious Babe Traveling Incognito (the well-traveled Hazel Court), an Absentminded Professor, and a Warweary Journalist to receive

her.

Here while the robot rotates her tires and adjusts her plugs and points, the zaftig Ms. Laffan (fetchingly turned out in dominatrix leathers) marches down the gangplank to lord it over the shrinking earthlings, who gape in awe as she drops an impenetrable bubble of invisible adamant around the property, disconnects their telephones, knocks out their power, does some fancy shooting with her rayguns, and lectures them disdainfully (prospective love slaves or no) on the inferiority of the human species.

Their attempts at escape must obviously prove futile, since that would have meant building another set (there's nothing quite like a limited budget to ensure the enforcement of the dramatic unities), but the company regroups around the bar to engage in an orgy of melodramatic soulsearching: the barmaid is sweet on the con, the woman of mystery falls for the journalist, the professor is torn between the thirst for knowledge and the need to repel this alien menace, the proprietess keeps walking around making pronouncements like "there's nothing like a good cup of tea in a crisis," and every few minutes somebody falls prey to Martian hypnosis and starts intoning a dismal zombie speech about Fields of Wheat, or something.

But presently the repairs are completed, and Ms. Laffan seizes the likeliest candidate for a high sperm count (the all-too-expendable con, of course) as a trophy of the chase and takes off to continue barhopping. Alas, before you can say "Klaatu barada nicto," something goes awry, whether by chance or by design I didn't quite catch, and the saucer blows up; providing redemption for the con, I suppose, but a major letdown for the male geek population of the Earth, who might otherwise be looking forward to leaving this lame planet and flying through outer space with cool alien babes who like them.

This unpromising summary notwithstanding, the flick is inexplicably charming: maybe it's Ms. Laffan and her Buck Rogers meets Bondage

Barbie costume, maybe the goofy giant robot, maybe the cool Caligari interior of the flying saucer (where was that steam coming from?), or maybe just that there's a little Zoltan in all of us, I don't know. I do, however, find myself wondering what happened to the scenes in which Ms. Laffan lounges in the bathtub smoking fat Havana cigars and forces the humiliated Earthmen to sing torch songs a capella before she allows them another drink; and, indeed, why a saucerload of Martian critics didn't land in Hollywood, take a bar full of inebriated screenwriters hostage, and lecture them sternly on the dire consequences that await if we continue to allow our radio and television transmissions to pollute the interplanetary ether and our old gangster movies to escape into outer space. The devil from beyond, after all, is never quite a match for the devil within.

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*Lose yourself (2/23/2005)*

... Not having felt any compelling need to watch it earlier, I saw the notorious Eminem in *8 Mile* for the first time the other night, and was, actually, very favorably impressed. Maybe the most interesting thing about the picture was the contrast with its precursor *Flashdance*: this turned out better, obviously (since fortunately Eszterhas came nowhere near it), but the main thing that strikes you is how much more desperate the situation of the working classes has become in the intervening twenty years. — Work as a welder and afford your own loft? Forget that. Work two shifts stamping out fenders and live with Mom in a trailer park....

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*The definition of ennui (4/1/05)*

Whiling away the hours trying to count the polygons in Lara Croft's chest.

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*A beautiful mindfuck (6/10/06)*

**The Da Vinci Code.** [Ron Howard, 2006. Written by Akiva Goldsman, from a novel by Dan Brown.]

When the curator of the Louvre is found dead on the floor of his own museum — naked, adorned with a pentagram, his limbs fanned out like Leonardo's famous drawing of the Vitruvian man and a cryptic message scrawled in blood beside him — stalwart representative of *CSI: Paris* Jean Reno calls on Harvard professor and renowned Symbologist (whoa, does that sound heavy) Robert Langdon/Tom Hanks, either to weigh in with an opinion or (in view of his prior acquaintance with the deceased) to take the fall, it isn't clear which.

As Hanks stares aghast at this grisly spectacle, at any rate, major-babe "police cryptologist" (no shit?) and granddaughter of the deceased Audrey Tautou bursts in upon the scene, bonds with our hero forthwith (Forrest Gump meets Amelie: here is a marriage made in heaven), conveys to him sotto voce the outlines of the rapidly-burgeoning plot against him, and, after the first of their several escapes — a rather perfunctory carchase notwithstanding (how can you stage a carchase in Paris without driving down those stairs?) — accompanies him in a strangely unhurried tour of the art-historical highlights of Paris and London — strangely unhurried, since our

heroes are harried the while by a network of conflicting conspiracies which seems at first so vast, so all-encompassing, that everyone on the continent of Europe must be working for one side or the other if not both at once — though it reduces, presently, to a contest between the Dark Lords of the Sith, aka the Catholic order Opus Dei, here represented by Darth Bishop Alfred Molina (master) and Darth Albino-Assassin Paul Bettany (pupil), and the Jedi Knights Templar aka Priory of Sion, a secret society which seems to be handling legal affairs for the estate of Christ. (Or something.) To this last predictably Everybody Who Was Anybody has belonged, notably Da Vinci himself, Isaac Newton, Alexander Pope, (Athanasius Kircher, Benjamin Franklin, Christian Huyghens, Dante Alighieri, E. Pluribus Unum, F. Scott Fitzgerald, G. Gordon Liddy, H. Alexis Zarkov, I.I. Rabi, Joe Bob Briggs, Knute Rockne, Lindsay Lohan, Mary Shelley, Norman Bates, Otto von Bismarck, Sir Philip Sidney (and other heroes of that kidney), Quentin Tarantino, Roger Rabbit, Salman Rushdie, Tex Avery, Ultra Violet, Vladimir Putin, Willy Wonka, Xander Cage, Young Frankenstein, Zeppo Marx), and (most recently) the art historian whose illuminated stiff we stumbled over in the opening scene. (I think this is supposed to explain why he was murdered, but don't ask me how.)

Hanks and Tautou doggedly burrow their way to the bottom of a stack of puzzles — most purportedly devised by Leonardo himself and involving the interpretations of the Mona Lisa and the Last Supper and the passwords (mysteriously not in Latin or Italian but in English) that unlock the Da Vinci version of the Enigma machine — to the treasure buried beneath them all, which turns out to be the nature and location of the Holy Grail: one of those Secrets Entrusted Only To A Few which cannot be revealed without threatening the foundations of Christianity, the viability of the international financial system, etc., etc. — indeed (given Dan Brown's rather shaky grasp of scientific principle) probably the stability of the elementary particle vacuum and the continued existence of the universe.

All this might be more impressive did it not so strongly remind us of

Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum* — albeit without the intellectual playfulness and postmodern irony that rendered that work so memorable, and minus most of the occult encyclopedia Eco managed to incorporate into his plot, viz. the Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross, the quest for the Philosopher's Stone, the immortal Comte de Saint-Germain, the Illuminati (though Brown seems to have polished them off in the last novel) the Freemasons (though he's supposed to get to them in the next), the Kabbalah, etc., etc. — Not to mention the obvious influence of the numerous adventures of Indiana Jones, from whom the authors with evident malice aforethought have borrowed themes, situations (e.g. knights buried in the catacombs), camera angles (recall how we discovered that "X marks the spot", e.g., and compare the corresponding shots here), and even speeches (cf. not-entirely-trustworthy scholar Ian McKellen's peroration to Hanks regarding the distinction between studying history and taking part in it; this is just the bent archaeologist in *Raiders*, "the Ark *is* History") — though not, alas, chases by car truck boat blimp and runaway tank, evil Nazis, castles with hidden rooms, buried temples boobytrapped by forgotten gods, earthquakes, hurtling over cliffs, walking on air — i.e., the entertaining parts. — Indeed the only guy with a whip here flays himself, which certainly takes all the fun out of it. — And I still cannot believe these bozos passed up the chance to stage a chase through the sewers of Paris: can't anybody here play this game?

Unkindest cut of all, the same themes of the secret of the catacombs (the magic underground), ancient brotherhoods (Freemasonry, the Templars), and the nested set of Chinese puzzle-boxes at whose center lies the buried treasure — among others — were all if not more ably handled then at least better packaged to sell popcorn by *National Treasure*. And though admittedly the Fibonacci numbers would never enter into a Jerry Bruckheimer picture, he does know how to make an action movie.

Which this, alas, is not. Indeed what passes for action in this turgid opus consists mainly of talking heads trying to pass off whole metric

tons of leaden exposition as dialogue: “This must refer to the Eiffel Tower —” — “located on the Seine River in Paris —” — “ancient capital of the French empire, with a population in 2005 of 2,144,700” — “and the location of the Louvre, the most famous art museum in Europe” — etc., etc. — For once one must feel relief the romantic leads don’t get it on.

And the Big Reveal, the revelation of the innermost mystery — not to give away anything unknown to the novel’s sixty million readers — is that a very mortal Nazarene married and fathered children; married, in fact, the reputed prostitute Mary Magdalene, and founded a royal dynasty whose descendants can be traced to this day — against whom the oneholyCatholicandapostolic Church, sensing a threat to its very existence, has been ceaselessly conspiring; and that the current heir apparent to the estate of Christ is, in fact, Ms. Tautou herself. — In other words the burden of this absurdly elaborate contrivance of a plot is a conclusion most of us were able to draw on our own long since, namely, that Audrey Tautou is proof of the existence of a benevolent God.

Nonetheless this ridiculous spectacle has provoked no little moral and theological outrage. For there is, after all, the forbidden suggestion that Jesus had sexual intercourse; not to mention the implicit attempt to restore the feminine principle to the godhead, the accusation (even if fictional) of a coverup dating back a couple of millennia, the challenge to the authority of the Church (even if that monolithic power has long since been divided and diffused), and the not entirely inaccurate characterization of Opus Dei as a bunch of fascist whack jobs who like to whip themselves.

But the reaction is absurd.

After all, no one really knows whether Jesus chose to do the horizontal bop, and if so with whom. It all happened two thousand years ago. And whatever did happen was immediately seized upon by a horde of manipulative scumbags to advance their own agendas; and

they've been energetically fucking with it ever since.

It is, of course, their spiritual heirs who are screaming blasphemy. And as usual they have everything backwards.

Because it doesn't matter about the loaves and the fishes, the water and the wine, the lame getting up to walk, the blind gaining eyes to see, even the Resurrection.

Because about all that, who knows? (Ms. Tautou daintily tries her weight upon the water, wets her foot, shrugs a Gallic shrug, and smiles an enigmatic smile.) — Indeed who cares? — I have seen miracles, the fall of the Berlin Wall for instance, and they have left me no wiser than before regarding the nature and properties of the Deity.

No. What rings most true, what stands out even at the distance of two millennia, is the part about the Master's disciples scurrying for cover at the first sign of trouble and leaving him to suffer on the cross alone. Kept company by a couple of his female relatives, and the hooker that he saved from stoning. That part I believe, that part makes sense. And really I don't need to know any more.

For if love alone could save the world, this is where it would have to begin: with the lepers and the outcasts, the downtrodden, the pariahs; with the pimps and the bitches and the hos. With the girls who work the pole. That is what is beautiful about the story of Magdalene, and that is what saves this otherwise silly sack of shit from utter risibility: the beautiful closing shot of Hanks, his final puzzle solved, framed within the pyramidal structure that now decorates the Louvre, suspended, as it seems, in a geometrical matrix, between the heavens and the earth — praying over the grave of the patron saint of hookers. One can imagine no more elegant tribute to the inscrutable vision of the Divine Architect, who has embedded the carnal mystery in a vast articulated enigmatic dream of mathematical form — in a riddle no one has yet deciphered.

*Great helium (6/14/06)*

**The Lost Zeppelin.** [Edward Sloman, 1929.]

On the eve of an expedition by dirigible to the South pole, intrepid commander Conway Tearle discovers his supposedly-devoted wife Virginia Valli sucking face with illmannered lowborn cad Ricardo Cortez at the absurdly elaborate dinner party the local contingent of the Four Hundred are throwing to send them off, shattering his equipoise (and a large metaphorical vase into which he reels in consternation and dismay), and creating a love triangle whose apex remains in Washington while the two other vertices journey across ocean through storm stress and parlous stock footage to the very ends of the earth; where, after a brief victory lap around the buttocks of the world, they turn about and actually make a few hundred miles back to the north before their airship's engines falter, its surfaces ice up, and ("falling...falling...falling..." taps out the radio operator in poignant Morse) it augers into the unforgiving Antarctic landscape. — Meanwhile, of course, Very Important People In Uniform monitor their transmissions back at the home office, and the guiltstricken wife sits wringing her hands in her drawing room listening to bulletins detailing their progress toward catastrophe on a radio the size of a grand piano while her servants supply her with copious quantities of tea and crumpets.

Presently the survivors stagger out of the wreckage and sally forth to fall one by one into conveniently-situated crevasses, until none remain but the captain (stoic to the last), his rival (rapidly going to pieces), and (the bitch that he can trust) the captain's faithful dog. When a scout plane happens across the lost adventurers and can carry only one of them back, well, you can guess who decides to sacrifice himself nobly for the betterment of mankind. At least temporarily.

There's something irresistibly charming about all this retro tech: the beautiful big open Twenties cars, the enormous radios with their huge knobs and glowing vacuum tubes, the airship itself, obviously inspired by the famous Graf Zeppelin, which circumnavigated the globe (on William Randolph Hearst's nickel) by air — around the world in 21 days! — only a few months before this picture made its debut; the furlined flight suits, the goggled leather flying helmets. But the relentlessly overmannered dialogue — typical of that dismal interval between the introduction of sound and the discovery (thankfully not long-delayed) of Jimmy Cagney, and what Americans really talked like — is a constant reminder that membership in the upper classes was, in this era, coded by bogus British accents and the ponderous carriage and labored mannerisms colonial wannabes thought would make them seem like Really Old Money; and serves to leave, in this case, the summary impression that a big shiny phallic gasbag piloted by a big shiny phallic gasbag has sailed off to a frozen Pole to shrivel and expire. — Not the précis or the epitaph that I, at least, would want to leave behind me.

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*A whole lotta bitches jumpin' ship (8/1/2006)*

**Hustle and Flow.** [Craig Brewer, 2005.]

A brilliant idea, really: there have been any number of movies about whores with hearts of gold, but here at last is one about a pimp with a silver tongue —

*The Jung and the restless (8/23/06)*

**Steppenwolf.** [Fred Haines, 1974.]

A relatively straightforward attempt at a cinematic translation of the Hesse novel — in which the protagonist, an overserious and (therefore) chronically depressed intellectual in his late forties, is introduced to the Weimar equivalents of sex, drugs, and rock and roll, and some flashy shit Hesse picked up in analysis with Jung about the fundamental multiplicity of the personality — flawed by very imperfect dubbing, not especially imaginative cinematography, and unusually inept attempts at hallucinatory surrealism which (having been shot in video, which was then probably supposed to look avant-garde) have dated very badly and now look unforgivably cheesy. (It's an interesting question whether modern CGI would make this better or worse, but, thank you, I really don't care to see anyone try.) — But with, admittedly, a perfect cast — the great Max von Sydow (the right man at the right age) as Harry Haller, the exquisite Dominique Sanda as Hermine, the glittering Pierre Clementi as Pablo, and the suitably voluptuous Carla Romanelli as Maria — some amusing animation a la Terry Gilliam to illustrate the Treatise on the Steppenwolf, and at least one ingenious bit of pantomime between Harry and Maria to act out their argument about what he's going to do after he comes home and finds her waiting in his bed.

Above and beyond the obvious protest that no great novel has ever made a decent movie (and no great movie has ever been made from any other than a bad novel), the particular problem that I have with this is, of course, that I know the story by heart (having read it two or three dozen times) — and, more to the point, it is, literally, the story of my life, page for fucking page, note for fucking note — and it is, accordingly, impossible for any cinematic rendition of it to satisfy me.

But then I have to pause and ask myself what this reminds me of; and it is, of course, Harry's own reaction (not badly rendered by von Sydow here) to what he considers an offensively bourgeois portrait of Goethe which decorates the parlor of an erstwhile colleague who has sold out to the forces of reaction — a kind of tantrum, a sudden explosion of repressed feeling on the part of a fundamentally impatient man who has grown unspeakably tired of disguising his contempt for, his despair at, the folly of the fallen human world around him — an overreaction for which Hermine quite rightly takes him to task, and which motivates, in part, the lecture he receives from Mozart, representative of the artistic Immortals, on the necessity of being able to separate signal from noise: of being able to hear the music, say, of Handel, through the static and distortion of a radio broadcast; of being able to sense the divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hewn though we inevitably must find them. And to learn to laugh then at human folly; beginning with the folly that you find within yourself. — So, sure enough, the movie isn't all that good. But if you listen closely, you can hear Hesse in it. And after all, that doesn't suck.

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*A-whaling for to go (10/11/06)*

**Drawing Restraint 9.** [Matthew Barney, 2005.]

The celebrated artist Herr Barney and his even more celebrated paramour Björk are ferried separately to a Japanese whaler, subjected to elaborate ritual preparations for a wedding ceremony at the hands of a retinue of solemn-faced attendants, and then, partly as an expression of solidarity with our oppressed cetacean brothers but mainly in the spirit of good old-fashioned Surrealist fun, consummate their union by hacking one another to pieces with whaling knives.

Which left me, of course, whistling “I've got you under my skin”, and

reflecting once again that surrealism is largely the visual expression of dumb puns (cf. the locus classicus, Buñuel/Dali on “cut”); and noting that, first, Greenaway was much funnier on cannibalism, but, mainly, second, that the underwater camera angle on the resulting gobs of blood and giblets floating in the water is deliberately meant to suggest an equation of the slaughter with a lava lamp.

And, in fact, the whole thing reads like a series of such equations, some ironic, some not: cannibalism with intercourse; the organization of industrial workers with a form of dance; commercial whaling with the natural way of life of the hunter (thus the Japanese with Eskimos); lemons with tits (and bathing with cooking); minimalism with music; shaving with the pruning of encumbrance; the weirdest hairdos since the Leningrad Cowboys with shells; the conches strapped to the lovers’ backs with guitars; the ritual tea (served in shells) with seaweed; an enormous gnarly coprolitic lump of ambergris with a gigantic dork; whale with ship (a toy ship is harpooned, two ships pass the giant ambergris dork from one stern to the other in a sort of parody of rear entry); ambergris with pearls (vomited up by the antitechnological girl pearl divers); sea with sky; ice with assorted varieties of gelatinous fatty gloppy mess; said glop subjected to a kind of oversized cookiecutter with wedding cake; artistic talent with a talent for self-promotion; and (at 140 fulfilled minutes) length with depth.

Which meant that I was myself attempting to derive the equation of artistic rapture with dozing off until I discovered the young lady sitting in the row in front of me — who was sporting a pretty funny hairdo herself, come to think of it, some sort of topknot with pencils running through it like skewers — and forgot all about Björk. — Suffice it that the chambered nautilus continues its alltime record stay at number one on the charts as metaphor for the labyrinth; and that, since Barney’s cinematography and editing are relatively colorless and uninspired, we must expect his ideas to bear the artistic burden here. Unfortunately, there aren’t enough of them to drag this picture through two-and-a-half hours of Art Movie Slow Motion. — As a five

minute music video, this might have been a work of genius. But as things stand, somebody needs to explain to this dude that brevity is the soul of wit.

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*Should you decide to accept it? (1/14/07)*

**Mission Impossible III.** [J.J. Abrams, 2006.]

On the eve of his marriage to absurdly cute but absolutely clueless medical professional (Scarlett Johansson, Lindsay Lohan, Jennifer Garner, Sofia Vergara, Kate Bosworth, Katie Holmes, no it's) Michelle Monaghan, erstwhile Secret Agent Extraordinaire turned IMF instructor Tom Cruise is dragged out of retirement by curiously affectless bureaucratic spook Billy Crudup to mount an emergency rescue of his onetime prize pupil, talented but green novice spook Keri Russell; who, her attention having lapsed at some critical juncture during an attempt to penetrate the operation of terrorist facilitator and Evil Genius Philip Seymour Hoffman, now languishes in durance vile in an abandoned factory in Berlin, surrounded by barbed wire, broken glass, moonscape, minefields, a midsized army of mercenaries, maneating IRS agents, and a moat full of crocodiles.

Pro forma initial protests notwithstanding, our nominal hero saddles up, rounds up Posse 3.0 (Ving Rhames, Maggie Q., Jonathan Rhys Davies) while strapping on his bulletproof jock, and rockets to the rescue, charging recklessly through a hail of bullets into the enemy citadel, dropping the hapless Evil Mercs like tenpins, and making an exit with typical panache by diving out a window three stories above the pavement girl in arm while the building explodes behind him.

A helicopter chase ensues! through a German windfarm! blades turning slowly like the fatal flapping arms of Laura Palmer's ceiling

fan, while Cruise with missiles bursting all around him attempts emergency brain surgery with Swiss Army Knife and electroshock paddles to remove a bomb the diabolical Hoffman, that incarnation of Doctor Evil, planted in Russell's skull. Just as Cruise is about to apply the paddles — her head explodes!!! blowing the engine out of the helicopter!!! and they crash ignominiously and flying helicopter and windmill blades hack the luckless Cruise to sushi.

No, just kidding. Cruise escapes and returns with the carcass to headquarters to get his ass chewed by Maximum Spook Laurence Fishburne (I told you he'd be next), necessitating the improvisation of another, somewhat more ingenious, caper, in which the charismatic lodestar of our cinematic attentions and his merry men penetrate the formidable security of the Vatican and kidnap Hoffman from a diplomatic reception at which, evil mastermind that he is, he is acquiring information vital to his ongoing pursuit of the MacGuffin, a mysterious object known as The Rabbit's Foot; about which we never learn much save that it is far from lucky and probably some kind of monstrous biological weapon. (See the previous episode.)

Alas, as they are making their escape their getaway Lamborghini explodes! no, that was part of the plan — no, an asteroid steered out of distant orbit by evil Jesuit astronomers recruited by Opus Dei strikes! evaporating the IMF team and leaving nothing but a smoking crater behind! over which bent priests in cassocks decorated with strange insignia sprinkle holy water and speak a brief benediction thanking the God of Fascist Catholicism for eliminating this loathsome insect from the silver screen.

No, just fucking with you. Cruise and his posse make their getaway with Hoffman in tow and fly back to the United States, where while ferrying the prisoner across the Chesapeake Bay Bridge — enemy aircraft strike! riddling the convoy with machinegun and missile fire, and annihilating the IMF team while they free Hoffman. Cruise escapes momentarily and is running toward a van to get a missile launcher to bring down the strafing jets when — giant robots appear!

descending from the heavens and marching in military formation down the middle of the span, trampling the fleeing Cruise and stomping him into a thin layer of pink goo as they all take turns one by one stepping on his carcass. — After *Risky Business*, after *The Color of Money*, after *Top Gun* and *Minority Report*, to end so ignominiously... it brings a tear to your eye and a fart to your shorts ... .

No, just making it up again. Cruise and his posse escape, but the evil Hoffman is carried off by his henchmen, kidnapping Monaghan while they're at it. As he gnashes those famous big white teeth, Cruise is captured by his own side and, suspected to be a terrorist himself, tossed into an airplane and flown to a prison in eastern Europe where he is waterboarded, treated with electroshock, stripped naked and forced to pose for humiliating Polaroids in which hillbilly bimbos leer at him while pointing at his shriveled weenie, and implanted with microchips which whisper to him day and night of the hopelessness of the human condition should mankind not heed the healing word of L. Ron Hubbard. Reprogrammed, Cruise is returned to his native land, where he makes his way to Hollywood and insinuates himself into the highest councils of the motion picture industry as a mole, a Manchurian Candidate planted to turn Hollywood to the service of an obscure religious cult. In a series of increasingly bizarre public appearances he establishes himself as a pain in the collective ass and a menace to rationality and the heritage of the Enlightenment. Finally in a crescendo of aberrant behavior he embarks upon a widely publicized quest to find a leading lady for his next action movie, in which after making weirdly inappropriate proposals to two or three dozen of the most alluring and talented starlets in Hollywood he succeeds instead in alienating all of them by his hamhanded attempts to convert them to his bizarre pseudoreligion. Marginalized and viewed by everyone as unbalanced and dangerous, he compromises his position as the biggest action star in the world and loses his production deal at a major studio, necessitating some fancy footwork to maintain his bankability as a major star.

No, this is too ridiculous; obviously I'm making all that up too. No, Cruise is momentarily incarcerated but effortlessly outwits his superiors and, erstwhile sweetheart of Delta Phi though he may himself have been, escapes with prejudice from the headquarters of the secret spook fraternity, jumping a flight to Shanghai to rescue his swooning bride from the ever-more-nefarious Hoffman. Swinging on vines from tree to tree through the dense foliage and gigantic gnarled trunks of the Chinese rain forest, he summons his faithful elephants and leads a charge into the compound of Terrorist International (traded publicly on the Hong Kong and London exchanges after a wildly successful IPO orchestrated by bent financiers with French accents), where he corners Hoffman and faces him down in a triple Chinese standoff. At the last moment Hoffman rips his mask off and reveals himself to be — Philip Rivers! quarterback of the San Diego Chargers, and someone who has had a hardon for Cruise since *All The Right Moves*. And, ripping off their masks in turn, his henchmen are revealed to be — Philips H. Screw driver! Richard Philips Feynman! Philip of Macedon! Philip Morris! Philip K. Dick! Philippo, Duke of Bohemia! Philerupwithregular! Philip Glass! Mister Philipflop! and Philip Roth! who brandish machineguns and riddle the carcass of the hapless Cruise with depleted uranium rounds from Gatling guns firing ten thousand rounds a minute!! Surely this is the end of the disgusting little parasite.

No, this would be too easy. No, the momentarily daunted Cruise backs away slowly into an apparent cul-de-sac, where he seems to be cornered — but then abruptly makes his escape! basejumping out the window ninety-nine stories to the pavement. As he plummets past the shining glass of this gleaming symbol of the Chinese rise to hegemony, grinning the famous madcap grin of the cinematic daredevil audiences the world over know and love — his progress is arrested at the thirty-third story! by a giant strip of Human Flypaper set out to guard against this very contingency by — Billy Crudup!! whose traitorous intentions are now at last revealed. Dismissing Rivers and his posse to an athletic date with destiny on the other side of the globe, Crudup

straps Cruise into a gigantic restraining device modeled upon the Frankenstein laboratory tables and prepares to jolt the hapless action hero with twenty thousand volts of electronic frontier justice.

“Cables ... fifteen dollars,” says Crudup with evident unctuous satisfaction. “Large alligator clips guaranteed to be exceptionally painful when clamped onto the subject’s genitalia ... ten dollars ... storage battery and handcranked generator ... one hundred fifty dollars .... the look on the face of the meathead action star when he realizes you’re about to barbeque his gonads with electric current ... priceless.” Throwing a switch, he toasts Cruise and puts an end to the career of the obnoxious little twerp for good and all.

Hahaha, just making that part up. No, Cruise’s posse picks this convenient moment to crash through the windows and rescue him. Cruise guns down Crudup and rescues Monaghan, and as they are walking through the park and he explains that he doesn’t really work for the highway department — she cackles and says, “I know, you moron.” Ripping her mask off, she is revealed to be — Scarlett Johansson! leader of a conspiracy of Hollywood starlets who have banded together to put an end to the slimy little maggot. Materializing all around him in the fog of the London slums, they are revealed to be — well, everybody we rattled off in the first paragraph, and a few supporting bimbettes from the Hawaiian Tropics bikini contest besides. — “Your doom is upon you!” cackles Johansson, showing that her dramatic range extends easily to Deranged Villainess — “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned!” Surrounding the terrified symbol of the patriarchy with a slowly closing circle as they chant “One of us ... one of us ...” the avenging-angelic starlets whip out their carving knives and a few yards of dental floss and, in a brief but horrendously gory surgical procedure, splice the business end of a plastic Jenna Jameson doll into the void left by the removal of the genitalia of the screaming Cruise!! who expires of mortification as he realizes the impact his new status as transgendered action hero will have upon his earning potential.

No, just kidding again. The digital alarm clock goes off as it hits six

o'clock and we realize that it's Groundhog Day, and that Cruise, a vain and offensively overbearing weatherman, has been doomed by the true villain of the piece Punxsutawney Phil (not a mere groundhog, of course, but the projection into this dimension of higherdimensional beings) to relive the same day over and over again while he is repeatedly stabbed, shot, run over by trains, hit by cars, thrown over the edge of a cliff, tossed into a quarry hardened into concrete and poured into the foundations of Giants stadium, struck by meteors, and clubbed to a pulp and then flattened by roadgraders into a microscopic layer of protoplasm over which the USC marching band parades while playing "Louie-Louie". Staggering as this realization overwhelms him, Cruise gasps out his disbelief that this can represent the truth of any motion picture in which he might appear. "The truth?!" Jack Nicholson screams at him. "You can't handle the truth!" as his Marines haul Cruise away to the dungeons of Gitmo to be assraped by cave trolls.

No, I'm still fucking with you. Cruise staggers from his last assignation with the evil Hoffman clutching his skull, in which bombs have been implanted. Between clenched teeth he instructs Monaghan how to revive him with acupuncture needles after stopping his heart with electric shock. Grounding himself in a metal pan of saline solution, he takes the paddles. The lights dim! He slumps to the floor!!

Practiced now at rapid discorporation, Cruise flatlines easily and flashes back to a past life in the middle ages when he was one of a merry band of vampire hunters led, somewhat improbably, by Michael Madsen, riding on horseback through greenwood and vale in chainmail boots and leather jerkins sporting Prince Valiant haircuts waving swords in the air stacking shishkabob strings of the undead upon their spears. Kristanna Loken is just about to rip her shirt off and compromise the PG-13 rating the authors have somehow bribed the MPAA into giving them despite this unrelenting blood and slaughter, when — he awakes! revived upon the operating table by Kevin Bacon and Julia Roberts, and now looking just like Kiefer

Sutherland, unshaven and with long gray locks. Summoned personally by the president, he must embark upon a desperate mission to save the country from a paralyzing series of terrorist attacks. No one is who he seems, wheels spin crazily within wheels, an impossibly convoluted plot reveals a descending chain of conspiracies nested one within the other like Chinese boxes, the Constitution is imperiled by the schemes of powermad rightwing fanatics, an inexhaustible army of Arab lunatics everywhere threaten to blow themselves to smithereens for a pack of cigarettes and the promise of Paradise, every babe is put in peril, each cliffhanger is topped by its successor — and our hero possesses a certain gravitas we find lacking elsewhere; an existential sense of responsibility. We sense that he is weighed down by the burden of his actions; that he feels that he must do his duty, but knows that in so doing he embraces his doom.

And, you know what, this looks a lot better. I think maybe I'll take some time off and watch Kiefer instead. And forget all about what's-his-name.

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*Be true to your school (2/8/07)*

**Jet Li's Fearless.** [Ronny Yu, 2006.]

(With apologies to Brian Wilson:)

When some loud braggart tries to put me down  
And says his wushu's great  
I say Now wait a minute  
What's the matter buddy, ain't you seen my kung fu?  
It's Number One in the state.

So be true to your clan now

Just like you would your girl or guy  
Trust in your wushu now  
And let your bare feet fly  
Be true to kung fu.

I got my Shaolin habit like the dope monks wear  
It won't get stuck in my crack  
When I get chi a-pumping  
I got my head shaved in half and a pigtail that runs  
Clear to the small of my back.

So be true to your clan now  
Just like you would your girl or guy  
Trust in your wushu now  
And let your bare feet fly  
Be true to kung fu.

On Friday we'll be jacked up for the death-waiver match  
We're gonna kick some ass  
With mantis eagle claw fist  
And afterwards be rolling with some bitches and hos  
We're gonna burn some gas

So be true to your clan now  
Just like you would your girl or guy  
Trust in your wushu now  
And let your bare feet fly  
Be true to kung fu.

*Further adventures of Tom Cruise (2/14/07)*

**Mission Impossible III.1.** [J.J. Abrams, 2006.]

Cruise is blown to goo. Two hundred years later scientists clone him from a smear on the bottom of somebody's shoe and revive him. A monstrous homunculus in the form of L. Ron Hubbard rips itself out of his chest and runs amuck, with a zillion teeth and acid for blood. Paramount is overrun. Trapped after getting their asses kicked, a small desperate band of critics regroup. Terrence Rafferty says "I say we take off and nuke the site from orbit. It's the only way to be sure." They do so. The studio is reduced to a smoking crater. Cruise is blown to atoms. The end. The end. The end. The end.<sup>35</sup>

*Sympathy for the Devil (3/28/07)*

**Sympathy For The Devil.** [Jean-Luc Godard, 1968.]

Rough sledding even for the most dedicated Godard fan: a series of cartoonlike Marxist parables, interleaved with footage of the Rolling Stones in the studio recording — well, you guessed it. The song, naturally, is repeated so many times that one might become heartily sick of it, were there not so much else here to induce nausea: mindnumbing revolutionary tirades, read aloud in that inimitable speech-at-the-Party-Congress style that made it imperative for two

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<sup>35</sup> I would find the resemblance of *Edge of Tomorrow* [Doug Liman, 2014] to this mock-scenario more than a little suspicious, purported origin in a Japanese science fiction novel or no, but the idea that Christopher McQuarrie (the screenwriter of record) could somehow have stumbled across my archive and ripped me off is obviously ridiculous, so it must be coincidence. I console myself that my version is much funnier.

generations of fellow-travelers to develop the ability to fix waxen expressions of attention upon their countenances while sleeping in their seats with their eyes wide open; the ritual spraypainting of moronic slogans about the urban landscape; black guys in berets machinegunning white women in a junkyard (admittedly still funny, but only because rap video has rendered the militant pose even more ludicrous); and a sort of spy-novel voiceover which purports to describe the exploits of an assortment of characters — Nixon, Franco, Princess Grace — plucked at random from the headlines of the day. — Godard does add a bit of porno-novel narration which serves to spice things up considerably, but inevitably you feel you ought to inform him that this is just the kind of shit that would have had him sent down into the countryside for re-education (or worse.) — Meanwhile the Stones, sex and drugs momentarily forgotten, studiously ignore the cameras and — sober, chainsmoking, bent over their guitars — labor unceasingly to perfect their opus.

The moral, obviously, is Darwinian: you look at this and see instantly that the Stones look like mature professionals; the revolutionaries, like witless amateurs. And this tells you everything you need to know about why rock and roll survived, and The Revolution did not.

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*La vie en rose (11/28/2007)*

A story which was beginning to appeal to me until the narrative donned the cement overshoes of the Hollywood biopic and sank without a trace into the East River of cinema.

*The hero with a thousand faces (2/14/2008)*

**I'm Not There.** [Todd Haynes, 2007.]

Nietzsche, *Mixed Opinions and Maxims* [1879] : “*Siding against oneself.* — Our adherents never forgive us if we take sides against ourselves: for in their eyes this means not only rejecting their love but exposing their intelligence.”

*The dream team (4/16/09)*

**Quantum Hoops.** [Rick Greenwald, 2007.]

The career of a student at the California Institute of Technology can never pass without remarkable incident, and aside from having seen Richard Feynman drunk at a toga party, Murray Gell-Mann baffled by the question why the stone logs in the gas-fueled fireplace in the Fleming House lounge never burned up, and Max Delbrück harassed by a stoned Bengali wunderkind to explain how consciousness might derive from the properties of the DNA molecule, I once saw the football team win a game. The subsequent riot was indeed spectacular (nerds just want to have fun), and I cannot for the life of me recall how I talked my way out of the arrest the officers of the Pasadena police department intended for my sorry ass when they apprehended me hurling water balloons at the massed peasantry on the Olive Walk from the roof of Throop Hall. No doubt some soberer companion bailed me out.

Such moments, obviously, must be rare in the land of the geeks; thus providing the author with his subject, the travails of the Caltech

basketball team (now the figurehead on the Titanic of the Institute's NCAA participation, football having been cancelled in 1993) — which had, at the time the film was made, lost every (conference) game it had played since 1985, a total of something like 245 in a row through the end of the 2006 season; far and away the record for any form of organized athletic competition.

Our intrepid documentarian establishes that the pathetic ineptitude of the last couple of generations has not characterized the entire history of sports at Tech — the Navy boys who attended in the war years kicked ass on all fronts, for instance, beating the likes of UCLA, several Olympic-quality jocks passed through as recently as the Fifties, and one eccentric all-around star from the Eisenhower era has since gained notoriety by setting a number of records for shooting free throws that are enshrined in Guinness — but then moves on, necessarily, to the dark age that commenced in the Sixties and has continued with only occasional exception to the present. Various members of earlier teams are yanked from their offices at NASA and IBM to explain how they managed the single win of their careers, and past coaches (all wearing that look of hardwon philosophical bemusement that marked the faces of the guys I remember holding those jobs) reminisce about what might have been, if only the stars had been right and the other team had been drugged or forced to play with their shoelaces tied together. — Finally we arrive at the 2006 team, whose members were, quite obviously, pretty decent athletes (some even played in high school!), and watch them tear the league apart with a series of inspired performances that result in their losing by margins of only fifteen or twenty points a game, not the sixty of established expectation. All of which, in the best tradition of docudrama, leads up to the blow by blow description of the final game of the season, against I think Whittier, in which the dauntless boys in orange despite as always being overmatched, almost — almost! — pull it out in overtime. I didn't know whether I should laugh or cry.

All narrated by David Duchovny, to bizarre effect: the truth is out there.

The punch line could not have been apparent to the authors, however. The final game concluded, we're shown the graduation ceremonies at which the starting five all take their diplomas and depart for the wider world. One guy, as you might have expected from the old days, goes off to Berkeley to study particle physics; the other four (and I simply could not believe this, but apparently it is true) all took jobs in one form or another of investment banking. And the star went straight to Wall Street — where, Duchovny tells us with evident pride, he immediately gained prominence in the field of designing credit derivatives to sell to foreign banks. — Who says mad scientists can't still destroy the world?



Real genius

*Not with a bang, but a whimper of critical protest (11/24/09)*

2012. [Roland Emmerich, 2009. Written by Emmerich and Harald Kloser.]

Midway through this execrable piece of shit, as earthquakes and volcanic eruptions around the world have made it plain at last to the mass of mankind that the End is, indeed, Nigh, in the course of a rapid sprint around the globe to review the response of humanity to this catastrophe our helpful tour guides bring us to Saint Peter's Square in Vatican City, where, predictably, the Pope is bestowing his blessing upon a wailing mob — praying solemnly among them, most improbably, the Italian premier, who is supposed to have refused evacuation to stay behind in a gesture of solidarity with the little people (trying to picture Berlusconi doing this brought on an attack of helpless laughter nearly as severe as the one that assailed me when on a previous occasion these authors tried to press the thesis that, in the event of the sudden descent of a new Ice Age, Dick Cheney would ask nicely before he invaded Mexico.) — A fresh tremor of redoubled violence strikes! — We cut to the interior of the Sistine Chapel — aim the camera upward — and perceive, with a sinking feeling, that a huge crack has developed in the dome, which propagates, with growing velocity, across the middle of the painted ceiling, severing one half of the immortal work of Michelangelo from the other — until, with unerring accuracy, it passes precisely between the outstretched fingers of God and Adam. — With which, of course, everything collapses. — It was at this point that I decided that mere ridicule could never suffice, and that I would not be truly satisfied until I could beat the living shit out of Roland Emmerich.

But never mind that now. To review the series of unfortunate events that brought us to this sorry pass: when a neutrino detector in India reveals that something has broken in the heart of the sun, ace geologist

Chiwetel Ejiofor (see Aaron Eckhart in *The Core*) makes a dash for Washington, where he convinces an initially skeptical Oliver Platt (see Stanley Tucci, ditto) that the world is about to end because the planet's interior (modeled for expository purposes by a piece of fruit, again see above) is going to boil and the continents are going to start skidding around like buttcheeks on a greased toilet seat. — Mysterious preparations ensue. — Fastforward to Los Angeles on the eve of the Mayan apocalypse two years later, where we discover struggling novelist John Cusack driving a limo for a Russian billionaire while attempting with little success to reconcile himself to his estranged wife Amanda Peet, who has dumped him for a plastic surgeon with whom Cusack's two cute kids are bonding with alarming rapidity (see the fissioned nuclear family in *War of the Worlds*.) A camping trip to Yellowstone does little to re-establish Cusack's credibility with his offspring, but does (by virtue of the first of a bizarre chain of coincidences) acquaint him with Ejiofor and pirateradiopropheticlooney Woody Harrelson (see the deranged DJ — indeed, see his trailer — in *Eight-Legged Freaks*), who explains that the world is about to end and the government is covering it up. Which would lead nowhere, of course, except that the world really is about to end, and the government really has been covering it up; and as earthquakes consume Los Angeles and the crust ruptures and California slides into the sea taking the suspension of disbelief with it and Yellowstone explodes and the seas rise and the Washington monument topples and an aircraft carrier is washed up onto the White House lawn (wasn't that in *Mars Attacks?* never mind) the plucky Cusack commences a more or less continuous but utterly preposterous chase in which in planes trains and automobiles he and his posse hurtle across disintegrating continents and tsunami-swollen oceans to the Himalayas, where in anticipation of the crisis the leaders of the G-8 (the new Illuminati, but in better suits) have built — yes! — giant armored cruise ships on which the most well-connected members of humanity can party in comfort until the flood recedes. — Gaping chasms open beneath their rocketing cars! Buildings fall and miss them by inches! Volcanic fireballs land all around them! Poor

tonguetied mortals wax improbably eloquent in the utmost extremity! The Russian model with the breast implants almost survives into the final reel! The critic, yawning uncontrollably, leaves the theater to get a free refill for his tub of popcorn! but against his better judgment returns in time for the thrilling finale, in which (just as all other rivals for her hand have been eliminated) Cusack is trapped underwater in a sinking metallic behemoth while the swooning Ms. Peet wrings her hands and hopes against hope for him to break free. Can he loose the massive gears that have jammed and close the door they've left ajar in time to start the engines before the drifting ark is cast by the raging torrent into the looming north wall of ... Mount Everest??!!

Oh, who gives a shit.

Beyond the predictable observations that, first, Emmerich's most lasting achievement as an auteur — the one which (thanks to Karl Rove) will cause scorn to be heaped upon his head for generations to come — was that faux moment of glory in *Independence Day* when President Bill Pullman got into his fighter jet to lead the charge against the alien menace in person, second, when in one of the most astonishing stunts in cinematic history Buster Keaton let a house fall on him in *Steamboat Bill, Jr.*, it was a real house, and the frame really did miss him by fractions of an inch, and that is why unlike all this CGI bullshit it still inspires awe eighty years later, and third, that no matter what these authors may have convinced themselves, the Seventies were the golden age of American filmmaking precisely because the studios were so weakened and imaginatively bankrupt that they were driven to desperate expedients like packing entire stables of once-bankable stars into burning buildings and killing them off one by one to try to sell tickets — and even then no one paid attention — beyond all this, a quibble: so long as Emmerich and his army of CGI performers were willing so completely to abandon any pretense of probability or verisimilitude, why not go all the way? why not run another planet into the Earth, and destroy it entirely? thus allowing a brave beleaguered band of scientists to build a fleet of

spaceships to carry the last of the human race away from the ultimate catastrophe? of course at the last minute, as the entire planet ruptures like a pumpkin dropped onto the pavement from the top of a ten story building. (Yes, I've done it. And yes, it was a lot of fun.) — Best of all, the idea is not original: this is just the old George Pal production *When Worlds Collide* [1951].

Oh, God, no. That's going to be the next one. Isn't it?

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*Boys with toys (11/27/09)*

**G.I. Joe: The Rise Of Cobra.** [Stephen Sommers, 2009. Written by Fyodor Dostoevsky.]

A cinematic homage to the celebrated action figure which completes the descent of Stephen Sommers into directorial hell: after an unintelligible prologue set in France in 1641, in which some guys with really bogus accents debate the propriety of stuffing a gunrunning Highlander miscreant's face into an iron mask, we repair to the more familiar killing ground of the 21st century, where manifestly evil arms dealer Christopher Eccleston is announcing the product launch of a nanotechnological ultimate weapon to a rapt audience of military buyers who are apparently so mortally stupid that they do not realize they are bidding on the End of Days.

Indeed, they insist on immediate delivery; and, in a trice, four conveniently transparent shells are filled with standard-issue Ominously Glowing Green Goo, and a military convoy led by the profoundly stolid Channing Tatum and his antithetically manic sidekick Marlon Wayans saddles up and sets out through rapidly darkening mountain terrain (among the many lingering mysteries attending this narrative, I have no fucking idea where this was

supposed to be or why they were going wherever they were going) toward some delivery point or rendezvous nameless here forevermore, indeed unknowable since — suddenly they are ambushed by hightech ninjas! with really cool aircraft and, wow, bows, even better than Jessica Biel's in *Blade: Trinity*, and guns that seem to fire force fields, or something — and despite much frantic missile-launching and rapid gunfire and excited exclamations into our heroes' walkie-talkies ("get those SAMs on him! light him up! ... get those 50s on him!"), it rapidly becomes apparent that their dull Hummer-and-Apache style is no match for the fabulous Cobra Fu of their assailants.

But just as the weapon out of nightmare is about to fall into the hands of Aspiring Batgirl Sienna Miller (one can, parenthetically, divide the black rubberized outfits on display in this feature into two classes: with, and without fake abs) — even cooler ninjas come to the rescue! representatives of the Most Special Forces of all, an elite strike force called (a cough behind the hand) G.I. Joe; and led by stalwart General Dennis Quaid, who must really have needed to get current on his mortgage.

Plucked thus from the jaws of disaster, our heroes are whisked away to a secret underground city somewhere beneath (I think) the Sahara (they fly past the Pyramids, I think this is supposed to be a hint), where, after about ten minutes of macho posturing and at least five minutes of training, our hero and his sidekick are taught the fraternity handshake, issued their very own rayguns and rocket suits, and enlisted in the struggle against Retik, the Moon Menace — or, no, Eccleston himself, who for some reason decided to steal his own weapons rather than simply recording a deranged speech demanding a trillion dollar ransom and then sending the video to the Leaders of the World, as recommended in the Little Red Book of Doctor Evil.

So off we fly to an assault on his underwater city, hidden beneath what's left of the polar ice cap. Or would, if it were not for some reason deemed necessary to interpolate a barrage of flashbacks

explaining why everyone introduced in the scenario thus far either worked for, attended elementary school or the Shaolin Temple with, or used to fuck everyone else; and also to stage a chase through Paris which, in the interests of establishing the bona fides of all concerned as International Men of Mystery, kills about a hundred thousand people and causes several tens of billions of Euros in property damage. (By a perversion of the tradition of Hitchcock, it now seems to be required of every summer blockbuster that it employ hightech wizardry to destroy an international monument.) — But these are mere distractions, of course, from our ultimate purpose, which is to summon all these titillating paraphernalia — ninja swords! cloaks of invisibility! people flying through the air and slamming into walls! girlfights! rocket suits! guys shouting “gogogogogo!” product placement (“it always helps *me*”) by Double Bubble! masked and disfigured mad scientists who deliver the nanomitic kiss of death! particle beams! bumpercars! motorcycle jumps! running like the six million dollar man! chasing down a missile with a jet! Rachel Nichols with red hair and without green skin! Arnold Vosloo by himself! — to a grand finale, in which our elite warrior corps, a breed of hotblooded men and even hotter women for whom no problem exists that does not have a solution involving rapid gunfire, for whom articulate speech has been replaced by military jargon (one cannot merely “know” something, one must instead “have intel”), among whom there is a touching unanimity in the tacit agreement never to mention the tragic affliction of the nominal protagonist, who was obviously born without a personality, parachute into Wall Street behind enemy lines, and against overwhelming odds defeat the minions of the Gnomes of Zürich (led by Michael “Greed is good” Douglas, very imposing in Sith Lord cloak and staff), just as these inhuman fiends are about to release a barrage of collateralized debt obligations into the econosphere and melt the global economy down into gray undifferentiated goo.

Alas, our moment of triumph is compromised by the revelation that the President of the United States (Jonathan Pryce??!) has been

replaced by a clone who will stand idly by while banking reform is defeated in the Congress by lobbyists for the very industry which has just come within a whisker of destroying the universe of capitalism and reducing everyone on the planet to stealing hubcaps for a living. But with something this good, you just can't wait for the sequel.

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*Painting with light (1/26/11)*

**Tron: Legacy.** [Joseph Kosinski, 2010. Written by Miguel Cervantes.]

In search of an errant father who stepped out for a moment during the Reagan administration to debug some software and never came back, heir to corporate power Garrett Hedlund reluctantly dismounts from the Ducati that brands him as a Rebel Without A Cause and passes through a secret doorway in the basement of an ancient ruin of an arcade into the world of an Eighties video game in which God the Missing Father (old Jeff Bridges) and God the Abandoned Son (our hero) are pitted against God the Confused and Alienated Holy Ghost (young Jeff Bridges, restored by CGI and looking rather more like Lloyd, actually) and a legion of dark robotic angels who seem to love to mass in Riefenstahlian formation and shout digital huzzahs in unison; this Miltonic struggle mainly involves striking arresting poses while hurling photonic frisbees and rocketing around on virtual circuit boards etched with electric light upon a strangely luminous darkness, but to be fair this is no dumber than claiming Lucifer invented gunpowder. — Still, what we carry away from this is the knowledge that Olivia Wilde looks good in that jumpsuit; that, and little else.

*The bigger they come (3/8/2011)*

Review of the memoir of Keith Richards:<sup>36</sup> the largest cock mentioned herein belongs to a bull elephant; the smallest, to Mick Jagger.

*Little green men (11/1/11)*

**Green Lantern.** [Martin Campbell, 2011.]

An alien spacecraft crashlands upon the California coast; as he expires, its pilot hands a strangely glowing green lantern to Ryan Reynolds, who just happens to be cruising through the neighborhood. Returning to his apartment, he sets the lantern on a coffee table and rubs it experimentally. To his delight and astonishment, a genie appears and grants him three wishes. “First,” says Reynolds, I want to be handsome and muscular.” “Done,” says the genie. “Second,” says Reynolds, I want to be a movie star, and marry the most gorgeous woman in Hollywood.” “That would be Scarlett Johansson,” says the genie. “Whatever,” says Reynolds. “All right,” says the genie. “Done.” “Third,” says Reynolds, “I want to play a superhero in a big summer popcorn movie.” “Done,” says the genie. “Your wishes all are granted.” Ecstatic, Reynolds leaves at once to have a celebratory beer with his test pilot buddies. The genie settles into the couch, reaches for the remote, and turns the television on. “They never learn,” he says. “They never read the fine print. — He may be handsome, but he’s still a dork. — He’ll marry Scarlett, but she’ll dump him for a loser and walk out. — And he’ll get his popcorn movie. But it’s really going to suck.” He glances at the schedule, makes a selection, and conjures up a

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<sup>36</sup> Keith Richards with James Fox, *Life*; New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2010.

chilled cognac. He takes a sip, and shakes his head. “It’s really, really going to suck.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Reynolds got the last laugh, coming back with *Deadpool*, which was a hundred times better and funny by intention, remarried to the absurdly beautiful Blake Lively, and is unfortunately still handsome and totally ripped, thus proving such petty expressions of jealousy as this are ultimately futile.

*Poets in their youth (8/12/2013)*

Somehow I am reminded of a quote from Ms. Andress to the effect that, when asked what she did to seduce a man, she replied, Nothing, basically all she ever did was stand there. Maybe in Connery's case she felt it was worth the effort to stand on her hands.



*The Guns of Dealey Plaza* (6/10/16)

With the possible exception of the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, the assassination of John Kennedy in Dallas, Texas on November 22, 1963, is the most famous murder in history, and certainly the most thoroughly investigated. Though the putative assassin was himself gunned down in bizarre circumstances only a day later and never stood trial, a presidential commission was immediately convened to establish the facts of the case, and summarized its conclusions in twenty-seven volumes which have rarely been read, and less often believed.

Indeed whole forests have been cleared to print the subsequent literature, which has cast doubt upon the identity of the murderer, his status as an independent actor, his motivation or lack of it, what weapons were employed, how many shots were fired and from where, who saw and heard (even smelled) what, who told the truth and who was lying. The resulting hermeneutic chaos was succinctly summarized by the satirical organ *The Onion* in their historical compendium *Our Dumb Century* with the headline “Kennedy Slain By CIA, Mafia, Castro, LBJ, Teamsters, Freemasons; President Shot 129 Times from 43 Different Angles.”

It is the conclusion, however, of John Craig’s meticulously researched and impeccably reasoned analysis that the original account was essentially correct: Oswald was the lone gunman; three shots were fired in an interval of between 8 and 11 seconds; the first missed; the second struck both Kennedy and Connally; the third was fatal; the rest is bullshit.

Mr. Craig’s principal characters, are, as his title suggests, guns. The chief protagonist is Oswald’s Model 91/38 6.5 millimeter Mannlicher-Carcano rifle — which was, incredibly, obtained by mail order under

an assumed name (technological progress would now probably allow it to be 3D printed from open source specs available on Libertarian websites); other players include one or more 7.65 millimeter Mausers, a Johnson semiautomatic 30.06, an AR-15 .223 automatic, a British Enfield .303, a Winchester .220 Swift, and the snub-nose .38 pistol Oswald used to kill a police officer.

It is a subject of debate (of course) whether Oswald's rifle could easily have been assembled using a dime as a screwdriver; Mr. Craig addresses this issue. The bolt action was slow, the firing pin defective, and the scope misaligned; Mr. Craig addresses these issues as well. He examines ballistics, summarizing laboratory experiments and computer simulations which account for the medical and forensic evidence (notably the observed distribution of bullet fragments); parses the acoustical evidence to explain the confusion caused by echoes in the plaza, the sonic booms of supersonic bullets as they passed their auditors, and the misinterpretation of a police dictabelt recording; explains the use of the Zapruder film to index jiggle/blur and startle reflex analyses and construct a consistent timeline; notes that advances in psychology (confirmed by what the study of artificial intelligence has learned about pattern recognition) have shown that eye-witness accounts, particularly of stressful events, which have a dramatically deleterious effect upon brain chemistry, are inherently suspect, and that, as now-ubiquitous video recording has made obvious, memories are almost always edited after the fact; derives a consensus nonetheless from the conflicting reports of many dozens of witnesses; and makes only sparing use of adjectives like "ridiculous," "fantastic," "amazing," "incredible," and "grossly illogical" in dispelling the myth of the grassy knoll and discussing the assorted legends of Dog Man, Umbrella Man, Railroad Man, Badge Man, and Sewer Man. (He does not, so far as I know, comment on the theory that the twisted trajectory of the second bullet was the result of an attempt by Magneto of the X-Men to deflect it, but I admit I haven't read all 402 footnotes.)

In short, though we can expect in the near future that advances in computer simulation will permit a complete virtual-reality recreation of the events in Dealey Plaza (though for obvious reasons it was universally condemned, the 2004 first-person shooter video game *JFK: Reloaded* could be regarded as a crude first draft), and that this will be used to provide a mathematically rigorous assessment of the probabilities involved — were the shots as difficult as skeptics have claimed? should Oswald have been expected to succeed, or was he freakishly lucky? is the physical evidence completely consistent with the scenario Mr. Craig endorses? — the likely answers are known. The physical facts seem well established.

Unfortunately knowing what happened still doesn't tell us why, and the psychological mystery remains. The opaque banality of Oswald, the blankness of the man that made him impossible to read, suggests the *tabula rasa*, the mental empty slate of the British empiricists, and the temptation to suppose someone else was writing upon it is irresistible. But once we begin with such speculation, there is (see Ellroy, Mailer, DeLillo, Oliver Stone) no way to stop.

So here again probability must be our guide. If Oswald was a witless boob and an inconsistent marksman, this is just the proof we need he acted alone: if the Illuminati had wanted Kennedy dead, they would have chosen a more impressive instrument. — Again, though Mr. Craig does not quote Karl Popper explicitly, it is clear that the theme of falsifiability as the hallmark of scientific theory is dear to his heart: assertions which by definition cannot be disproved are meaningless, no matter that they're guaranteed to make the bestseller lists.

Thus we have to accept, as conspiracy theorists cannot, that on some occasions history really is shaped by bad luck, blind chance, and the perverse whims of twisted individual actors, and that this was almost certainly one of them. Achilles, the greatest warrior of antiquity, was killed beneath the walls of Troy by the feckless gigolo Paris with a bow and arrow; pace Homer, that made no sense. John Kennedy, the

most gifted and charismatic of our postwar leaders, was killed in Dallas by Lee Harvey Oswald with a mail-order rifle. And there was no reason.

Today such a catastrophe could not take place without being recorded on thousands of iPhones; the sheer mass of data would demand huge investments in hardware and software to process it all, but there would never be any doubt where the shots came from, or how many there were; Oswald himself would be photographed, rifle still in hand, by dozens of cameras as their owners turned to look back at the repository; all ambiguity would be dispelled. In Dallas in 1963, however, there was only one 8-millimeter enthusiast who, to his lasting regret, found himself in the right place at the wrong time. Somehow the saddest thing I carry away from this rigorous and unfailingly objective dissertation on the grimmest of subjects is Mr. Craig's parenthetical remark that, after the experience that made him famous, Abraham Zapruder never touched a camera again. But then, how could he.