Mark Higham

SHOUTING MOVIE in a Fire Station

Blowing Up Hollywood



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Introduction

This book may be a searching examination of the movie industry, the busted dreams along with those realized, of the people seeking their fortune with the odd echo of the quote "Go west young man," filling in a space of unfulfilled desire for fame and fortune. But the sad fact that that other saying, "Know thyself" has also been an ignored dictum going underneath the dialogue concerning the question of how best to pursue the American dream, gives us an industry using the notion of the dream itself as a starting point for how to put illusions and lies in a position to lift people from their ambitions long gone unrealized. Hollywood would serve as soothsayer and Cassandra for the destinies of everyone who ever hoped to hit a ball out of Fenway Park, knowing full well they will never have the opportunity to do so. Such also is the state of the national daydream that the lottery hoped to color in, the sudden dovetailing of desire with an actual pot of gold to call one's own.

But those tasked with structuring dreams into a reality mimicking enterprise haven't relied on idle fantasies of quickly acquired wealth. Rather, they have worked hard to give us an industry to lift we average joes out of ourselves for just a moment, reveling in a form of entertainment looking like an escapist fantasy, when the mosaic of a product tailored to suit its audience, fails to fill in the empty places in our hearts of remaining far under the radar of public recognition.

Thus, whose stories get to be told among the billions available would be subject to a sifting process tagging only those most worthy of wide scale diversion to struggle out of the mire of

anonymity. We all want to be known for something, seeking our recognition within the bounds of what is possible for achievement, but somehow feel left out in the cold when it comes to the resignation of realizing it will not be ours that reaches a wide audience, but only those stories planting a flag in territory where even angels fear to tread.

Hollywood immortalizes those within sight of its industrial spectacles. Anyone who can mimic a sort of aggrandized notion of human behavior gets instantly valorized as an actor when we have to wonder if the talent ever hovers anywhere near a type of ability we ought to honor. But this question into the authenticity of the route of celebrity demeanor does nothing to quiet the hunger for the idea of being special this particular vocation seems to endow upon the heads of those whose only task is to copy an emotion, or otherwise generate a portrayal that gives a little shot of adrenaline to anyone who watches.

It is an autocracy of the visual that we have generated in this get-rich scheme, and yet we find nothing wrong with the attraction of even the basest behaviors displayed. Oliver Wendell Holmes once, in reference to what counts as free speech, said, “You can say anything short of shouting fire in a movie theater.” Unfortunately for us, the movie theater has become a haven for every tawdry depiction, every plot heavy action feature that we excuse for the simple reason that occasionally the odd piece of beauty or ennobling experience also gets its round in the travels across movie screens not just in America, but going round the world way quicker than eighty days. The defeat of innocence only requires one instance of corrupting influence, and we peddle voyeurism with the speed of a director’s ringing “cut,” and then to the editing room, the print, and finally the circulation of something we have valued more than just the award of a salary, but a whole lifestyle pinned to the success of what in the end is snake oil in the form of drops for the eyeball, soaked in the production that may have very little to do with anything beyond the simple telling of a tale with no payoff in morality, but only in its ability for cashing in on spectacles, the kind that happen when we slow our cars to rubberneck an accident.

It would be too easy to indict Hollywood for all the cutthroat deal making, all of the scrambling over little people that gives us the industry we don’t really know that well it turns out. If we had any kind of insight into what we make these people do in order to give

us what at the end of the day is simply entertainment, then we might be inclined to close the whole thing down, hoping our time of dancing with devils hasn't imperiled our immortal souls. But this isn't a book dedicated to that although, what these pieces of unreality have to teach us is a primary concern, put in language meant to be satirical and painting its darkly humored points in the language of philosophy, religion, and social commentary constructed for just the right type of demeaning, the kind a reluctant uncle gives to a family member when he realizes his chastening might have some sort of positive effect.

But the notions of positive and negative themselves face a reappraisal in the relativism of Hollywood gone wrong. When the music winds down, and we are without a chair to sit on, we won't fully realize this has only been a game. And that's because this musical chairs has impressive if not deadly consequences for the players who may not fully realize the playing field is life itself.

Movies have performed a clever kind of magic trick. They have taken abstractions and made of them a business model. Abstractions used to be the stuff of humanities, now a fading flower in the educational system, but once we figured out how to affix a dollar sign to them, it suddenly became a respectable enterprise. It used to be that our best minds from Harvard were going out into the world concerned with social issues, how best to lift a society out of degeneration, but now they all flock to Wall Street to participate in the Casino that only the most privileged will be able to beat the house odds. Hollywood would be a conscious alternate destination where the application of otherwise worthless things learned in classrooms could interpolate into cold, hard cash, the only way we have to measure success with anymore. Bottom lines get padded when things used to be airy notions suddenly receive their importance through existing in the celluloid laboratory proving the staying power of prowess in manipulating public appetites.

No one wants to peer too closely at the man behind the curtain as curtains are drawn for the specific reason of keeping human attributes out of the equation of framing conscious frauds. Following the money is the surest way to track down criminal enterprises, but it seems lately, following the money is more a way to secure a career that will lift the worry of making this month's rent. If we are building a culture of frauds, we won't want to introspect too

closely about that. Instead, we just want to keep the merry-go-round going even if some falter. We don't want to contemplate the nature of human failure when all goes swimmingly and the economic numbers support our support of an industry failing in every area except the financial one. But is there any other area anymore to worry about?

It appears like there isn't. Every social indicator reports on the desire for stability, and when in the clutches of a supremely competitive market system, simply wanting to never be shown the door if it is our job that falters, becomes an everyday preoccupation. The simple wonder of a child seems lost to the casting couch and power lunches that fill our nagging desire to succeed, and when only economic worth is propped as the only way to climb the ladder, any other options fall by the wayside. Only the most idealistic among us will think it's okay to live in precarious circumstances in order to pursue a calling in life. We must all hear the call to make money like a dinner bell being rung on the porch of childhood homes long plowed under to make room for a new mall. How did things get this way? This desire for wealth at the expense of what we might otherwise have talents for? There is the answer that abstractions have dominated us for a long time, like the thought of what happens to us after we die, now buried under a stack of bills we hope to at least be afforded a measure of pleasure while we're taught to hate our worst impulses, the things that make us human. And Hollywood is portraying for us this more sinister side like a traveling preacher promising hedonism in the place of a higher morality, as we can't seem to make the ethics of the man from Galilee perform the same sort of escapism we receive at the hands of filmmakers.

Why rely on a future destination of reward when the here and now is so annoyingly pressing its will upon us in the daily-ness of the reward system present in our world: suffer the pangs of lost expectations or join the rat race for satisfaction this side of the veil. We want to consent to the presence of an actual God reigning over us, as the surveys suggest. But what we don't want is to suffer needlessly. And there seems plenty of that going around. How to maximize pleasure as unreflectively as possible has become the new mantra, despite the assaults hidebound Christians think is emerging. Can they even afford to be that idealistic anymore with the landlord constantly showing up for the rent? Should we not be able to meet his demand, are we then off to pursue the merits of homelessness? This has been the reality of many since the market collapse in 2007, but people shy of handouts just as they

shy of responsibility for their failure to stay in their own home. Someone has to be responsible, only the multiple failures at the institutional and personal levels make locating the villain an insidious search. And yet, Hollywood serves up villains so obviously evil, we can scratch our heads at how producers have managed to turn the problem of evil into such an easily cracked code. It is only illusion that has produced the effect, and we will be left to our head scratching about how elusive the villain of our own circumstances actually is.

Living in a land of illusion has been the preferred method of most Americans for a very long time, so perhaps the rise of the movie industry as the central cultural product has been feeding off this ease of mistaking illusions for reality equally as long. But is there any crime in that? Perhaps not. It is not the duty of every industry to police itself on the assumption that something smells in Denmark. The ghost must retreat to his ethereal habitat, only willing to deliver his one-time message with the hearer hoping to glean something important at the hands of a superstition. But we are only delusional so long as we don't apply the search for wisdom when it's propitious to do so, which isn't very often. So, it's off to the next round of histrionics governing our emotional worlds, almost as if the teenage hormonal imbalance never truly leaves the interiority of the stunted adult. But don't movies teach us that? That it's okay to be on the margins of emotional or (God forbid) spiritual success, so long as the cash keeps flowing and we won't have to wonder if will have a roof over our heads next year or not.

All we have to do is go to the movies, watch the triumph of the human will or the fall into corruption, as the case may be, and realize, we really don't have to do anything, just as our philosophers tell us that we have no free will. With no responsibility for anything to be had anywhere, wouldn't it be okay to get lost in an abstraction that has nothing to teach us beyond the mere satisfaction of an immediate pleasure? I would think so. But I wonder if the angels around us whispering in our ears how best to have a life might be just a little bit angered that we can't hear them so long as we're tuned into fictions. The vaunting of the best possible lie. Not exactly a worthy pursuit put that way. But then again, we aren't putting them that way. We're putting them into productions that only want to entertain, and beyond that, anything goes. It's that latter phrase that may have the angels worried, but then again, they could be just as much a product of superstition as the idea of an incarnate

God. Who's to know? But maybe that's the point. Living in ignorance is just the nature of we human beings who have nothing better to do than to build lives out of the stuff of broken dreams, the compromises we made along the way to have the life we have. If only we'd listened to the voice within us begging to take that chance at just that appropriate time. But we were too busy tuning in to the latest entertainment. Hopefully, it didn't totally derail our imminently appearing destiny. But how can we know? We're as ignorant as pigs in mud. But getting to that little piece of enlightenment that life could be some other way could be just around the corner. But that corner may now have a Starbucks, blocking our spiritual insights from ever forming. But that's just the way things are now. That's the way we must live. Left to ourselves. And Hollywood is happy to reinforce the dream of dreamless sleeps, so that we will visit the theater just in the hope we will learn something beyond the mundane. We will wait forever.

Chapter 1: The Ticking Bomb

There they are, our heroes, hamstrung by the vexing situation of a countdown. The bomb is all too sophisticated, rejecting any attempt at deactivation. In fact, it can't be deactivated. But there it is, the L.E.D. numbers rapidly, faster than a second hand can tick, sliding down the abacus of time, until someone has the bright idea to slice something. Suddenly this faster than normal speeds up even more. So there is only one choice, actually three. Do we cut the red one or the white one? Oh, let's guess. A suddenly appearing green wire pops up as the shaking fingers of our blessed and sweating savior pauses over white then red, until, oops, we have to guess. Here come the pliers with almost a mind of its own floating in its mystical sense of saving the universe with just one cut, and here it comes. The green wire. This impossible to deactivate bomb, on a guess, suddenly stops its L.E.D. brightness on four seconds life. Everyone exhales.

Such is the life of a bomb defuser in a Hollywood movie. All bombs are impossible to deactivate and yet all bombs stop at exactly four seconds. All of the time, and without fail. And all according to a guess.

Sometimes we get variations. An interesting one occurred in *Executive Decision* where our nobleman is a black guy with a neck brace and a pasty kind of fat white guy with no clue about anything, only a nerd, both approaching the bomb with a strategy in mind, but it turns out to be an incredibly complex mechanism. The black guy is the expert. He manages to figure out that there is something hinky going on, requiring all kinds of complex maneuvers needed to negotiate around the otherworldly demon sitting in the center of the puzzle which helps our intrepid hero discover some sort of DVD like countdown thingy and again, oops, something is triggered. Oh no, it's a bomb within a bomb. The outer "bomb" is merely a decoy and the actual thing will need more concentrated tries. To make a long story short, just as the hijacked plane nears Washington, too near in fact, a single straw being chewed on by our peppy nerd inserts in between two metal parts, and whala, the disarming of the impossible bomb disarms.

The fact that this formula never deviates from its own self-created norm, suggests that moviemakers may think there are a lot of dim bulbs out in the audience who just can't live without that bomb deactivation tension without a tension because the formula exhaustively exhausts itself every single time. Why this tension without tension would be so wanted would be something of a mystery but the sad truth is that moviegoers are ensconced in a ritual, the adornments of uniformed agents, sometimes the effect just needing a draping of the character in a suit, acting like a well fitted Catholic Bishop dispensing his holiness with a palm frond water blessing spitting out the end of a gun. The religious intonations of movie going are obvious. The darkened theater is actually a cathedral and the ritual of watching is that very Catholicized say and respond method getting italicized in the mouths of the oohers and ahers giving their worship in the occasional exposed boob, six pack abs, almost derailed train providing the not so special effect of DANGER! DANGER! WILL ROBINSON moment that froths in the pleasure center of the brain in a perfect duet of twin terrors (twin towers?) wreaking their holy wrath on the willing victims salivating over the self flagellating watchers waiting to ejaculate and be whipped all in the same dishonorable emotion.

It is the bomb that drives us, the incredible doubling of reality, the illusory irreality of the real, superreal, surreal, like a figure in a Magritte painting, with things blowing up all over the place where even the meager hand grenade sends soldiers flying in incredible arcs of

damage, with a plume of fire and smoke shooting out behind the fliers as if the grenade were some sort of nuclear bomb.

Why is the bomb such a symbol for us? Perhaps if we examine the role of the explosion in times past, the time before the fall of the towers, where the "bomb" was composed of ordinary people on ordinary planes taking down, implosion style, the entire edifice of capitalism itself. The defense of the rich in the aftermath had never been so glowing.

The more primitive "bombs" were perhaps first found in gunpowder used by the Chinese with an aura of simple entertainment sailing into the sky with these explosions painting beautifully surreal pictures that oohing and ahhing watchers can experience a thrill at this suddenness of using the very space of sky itself as the canvas of a lighted beauty.

The first attempts weren't actually explosions, but big round stones being flung by a catapult, upon impacting the battlements, crumbling stones and bricks with just dust and no plumes of fire.

Then Hollywood got a hold of the idea. In the 19th century setting of *Jonah Hex*, John Malkovich's character discovers a substance that not only could not exist in his time, but could not exist in our time, or at least for another hundred years or so. Perhaps this is meant to be a parody, but, actually, they're being deadly serious. Malkovich uses little glowing globules of an unidentifiable substance, which he hurls onto the streets of towns with a kind of mechanical, hi-tech catapult that sends the orbs, just three or four at a time, the things then, upon exploding, take out whole towns.

The bomb as metaphor seems to keep sifting through the sands of an hourglass pushing the realization of a damn good orgasm, oops! I mean explosion in its backward/forward incarnations in spheres, boxes, and C4 appearings.

Perhaps it is this Catholic guilt inhabiting us now, effervescing us with the holiness of ongoing carnage that we reject and accept all the venom of the violence flowing in our veins that gets projected on the screen we think by a projector when it is our own sadness steeped

in the numerous genocides dancing before our eyes, enclosed within the reports of them, are infotainment urges gorging our eyes that feast on the "latest" revelations of wanted and rejected salaciousness. We want it backwards, like a good bowel movement excreting the shit producers turn out for us just because of the titillation of exploding, perhaps it is the turn on of a sexual savagery that drives us, the ejaculated fluid of napalm until with that screaming feminine climax that we too explode when the bomb explodes.

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Bombs, boobs, bombs, boobs; we have little spherical explosives without the nipples, wanting, in their sudden aliveness, to burst into existence in the form of fire. David Lodge wrote a short story called "Hotel Boobs" where he spends the entire story ogling boobs, tits, aureolas, and nipples, in a fantabulation of fantastical female body part pedestaling. Here is the vaunted breast. The mounds men slaver over for just one touch, just a brief caress, so that when they reach their uprush of pleasure, they are only thinking, perhaps not in words, but in pictures of boobs, bombs, boobs, bombs, bombshells. Why do we refer to what are inevitably blonds as bombshells? Are they pointing their nipples at us ready to gun us down with their beauty just like in the she-bots spitting out bullets from their nipples in the Austin Powers movies?

The nature of an explosion itself does receive this sort of metaphor in a sharing of space with the violence of a blossoming fire trail paired with the blossoming of a beautiful pube.

We have a notion of the boob/bomb in a spherical connection with the metaphor above in the movie, *The Peacemaker*, where the beautiful Nicole Kidman along with the handsome George Clooney are faced with the round version of the movie bomb having to take note of the fact that this one has a plutonium core. So how do they get around this nuclear threat hovering above the scene of the two beautiful actors inside a beautiful cathedral where the bomber had placed it already shot dead and unable to assist in disarming the armament? What they have found out is that, through Kidman's knowledge, there are blasting plates around the orb that hold the plutonium in stasis until the bomber decides to bomb. Really with no connection to the reality of how such a bomb as this works, as it would seem that any detonation would be deadly, our two defusers get the great idea to detonate the blast plates in such a way that the plutonium core will remain unaffected. The risibility of this

plan is obvious since it seems likely that the blast plates are there for the tripping of the plutonium switch. But through movie magic, the detonation of the blast plates happens while just seconds afterwards, the resulting explosion chases our defusers through a door where they jump for their lives just as an incredible explosion happens that is all but just missing the mushrooming cloud. Why the director felt the "minor" explosion of the blast plates should produce such a "major" explosion is just pure movie trickery that has "budgeted" for beautiful explosions whether they are out of place or not. Certainly the sheer size of this one would suggest that the plutonium core has indeed been triggered, but alas we are in the alternate world that Hollywood is and everything that happens happens whether it violates every rule of physics or not. It's kind of like the un-Hollywood, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (by the way having no tigers or dragons), showing people perched on tree limbs where the wind blows them to and fro unaffecting their ability to seemingly levitate at will.

Actually, there is a thought experiment that toys with the limits of human comprehension in its hidden agenda to justify the use of waterboarding. It is known as the Ticking Time Bomb Scenario. Conservatives love it even though every aspect of it would require a mind blowing series of coincidences as to make it not only virtually impossible, but the thought of it being a potentiality at all falls into the Humean unthinkable world where thought stops because this idea, this spatialized concept, just cannot and will not exist no matter how hard we try to make the circumstances fit the ultimately unreal. We have to settle for a kind of science fictional reality where all possibilities, even impossible possibilities, as it is the nature of science fiction to forefront realities that undulate in their creatively minded creators, until snaking into a narrative which can act as a home for problematical fictional characters even when we'd like a more flesh and blood representative.

The Scenario goes like this. Somewhere in the world, there is a doomsday device going to explode in just around five minutes (why not five seconds, no one second?). We have in custody a suicide bomber who is the only person in the world who knows where it is and also the only one in the world who knows how to defuse it. The Conservatives ask us: Wouldn't it be necessary to torture this hapless knowledge possessor until he practically grows gills in defense against the water forcing itself into the very glottis itself? The torture

promoters use this scenario to suggest that there are times when we absolutely, absolutely have to use torture. Actually, if we are a Kantian, we would have to throw up our hands and say, well, it is just time for the world to end. We cannot violate the Categorical Imperative under any circumstances. But the means to ends argument gets totally inverted in this couching of immorality inside a necessity.

The idea gets taken up in the movie *Unthinkable*, where Samuel L. Jackson has the dubious distinction as a person who gets things done even if he has to resort to the basest behaviors. They do indeed have a bomber in custody and there is indeed a bomb about to explode, in fact, several bombs. Jackson gets hold of the bomber's children and uses the obvious menacing to force the bomber to give up locations, which he does for three of the bombs. Jackson will not believe that there isn't a *fourth* bomb, and presses the bomber to give up the information or else…

Now Jackson has the boy and girl of the hapless father in a sealed room, where even the agents have their guns drawn trying to stop Jackson from doing the unthinkable. He is about to and seems totally willing to take the lives of both children as he is almost depositing a syringe into first the boy's arm, when the bomber grabs an agent's gun and shoots himself in order to stop Jackson.

Jackson relents once he had completed his ruse that wanted the suicide all along as there was no fourth bomb of course.

This is of course a form of the morality tale that asks the audience, what would you do if your children were on the cusp of death and, to take the other end, how far would you go to save lives? There is no good answer for any of these rather pretend questions, so pretend in fact that again we are faced with that "unthinkable" world.

But back to a little social commentary that arises with a couple of recent Iraq War movies. Well, actually, *Green Zone*, is kind of a footnote, but, *The Hurt Locker* received so much attention that the first female director in history up for an Academy Award for directing did in fact win, even going as far to beat her ex-husband, James Cameron, who was riding on

his laurels of special effects, nominated for the ultimately silly *Avatar*. The academy just likes to make history, so there was no real drama. But her movie was brilliant after all, and gave a great deal of insight into the multiple traumas of war in a tremendous insight birthing when the vet, our hero, prefers the hell of the war to the hell of being misunderstood at home.

Are war heroes really wanted after all? The nonexistence of being able to pair the word war with hero remains an ambiguity that only the hawkish right will try to quill together a parchment with an eighteenth century pen, pensively, but mercilessly dipping in the ink until the feathered tip quivers with the furious writing. After all, we danced on the graves of the World Trade Center fallen when we rejoiced over the removal of Civil Rights with the Patriot Act. But then, how enamored with freedom have capitalists ever been?

And now there is the group of people, whose representative I take, Norman Podhoretz, hawkishly wanting that immortalized notion of war. He attacks Islam with the thought that almost every one of the billion or so Muslims have some sort of interest in seeing the US go under in a sunken ship of devastation. Actually, there are probably no more than 10,000 radical terrorists who really do want the fall of America, but Podhoretz contends in his book, *World War IV: Islamofascism*, with the title in itself giving the propagandized message already laying the groundwork for what is a silly, dangerous, wholly inaccurate so-called expert look at Islam as a form of fascism.

This man does not know his history very well, if at all, confusing dates and generally getting just about every fact wrong. He contends that not only is every Muslim out to get us, but Islam is hiding its secret governance under the rule of fascism. Just his very use of the word "WWIV" shows an errant view of history in his misconstrued counting of wars. He obviously means to show that our problems with terrorism are now in a fourth state war, counting the Cold War as a real war when it was all silly saber rattling. People were even blaming the CIA for not knowing about the conditions in Russia, and not being able to predict the fall of the Berlin Wall. Of course they knew. They didn't care. The educated on the subject knew that Russia was never ever a threat.

And now we have Podhoretz, the literary luminary expert, proposing, almost predicting the doom of the western world should we not win WWIV. He seems completely unaware of the varieties of sentiments existing on the Arab Street. Not only has most of the Middle East practically forced a new sense of freedom down the throats of their oppressors, but we should also take note of the fact that there were groups of Iranians who were doing candle light vigils in honor of the 9/11 victims. There have always been moderates in the Arab world. Even Ahmadinejab himself is not really a rule following Muslim. Neither was Saddam Hussein. Of course, Iran does submit to Sharia law, so they are hardly moving in the direction of democracy. But there have been protests there too, and if we turn back time a little, we can see that the Iranian hostage Crisis of 1979, was Iranians actually taking hold of their destiny by deposing the highly corrupt, US government backed Shah of Iran. America's immorality in the area of propping up of evil dictatorships is practically known by everyone. This is where the real animus comes from. It has been going on for years and years, and the revelations of corruption in our government came when they finally admitted that the Gulf of Tonkin incident never really happened; they just needed an excuse for entering the war. These are the people who follow what's known as the Law of War model. Those who have this worldview feel like the incidence of our current involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan means that we should handle society with an iron fist, rejecting any form of concern for the rule of law (notice the secret prisons), and lay back and assume that we live in a warring world. After all, when has there not been a war? Wars seem to possess an eternality as we cull through the centuries, finding conflict after conflict almost in serial fashion popping up time and again. For example, in the 11th century, wars were almost like a job. One could join a militia at any time, joining any side without thought of national allegiances, and, since there were so many wars going on all at the same time, warring became a simple handy man's profession. These were the first mercs. And soldiers of fortune continue to find these always-existing pockets of conflict.

Hollywood will certainly be filled with war movies, and perhaps the bomb will go through yet another protean motion. But the mirror of the world as we find it in movies, suggest a cruelty to nature easily exploited. Violence, especially in the pairing of sex and death, is so natural to the human condition that the worn out phrase, "The devil made me do it," has

become completely obsolete as all the evil we need is contained right smack in the middle of the very human all too human heart.

Chapter 2: Revisiting the Matrix, Revisiting the Matrix, Revisiting… You get the point

By now, we all know about the SF Kung Fu movie made in a trilogy, *The Matrix*, *The Matrix Reloaded*, and *Matrix Revolutions*. The nice thing is that they planned the triptych from the beginning so we weren't getting tacked on sequels just because the movie had done well a la *Lethal Weapon*. It's not exactly correct to call these Kung Fu revenge movies of the 70s, or "snap movies" if you prefer, but the focus on fighting, whether it be fists or guns, and there is also some what we might call "fun with swords" going on, but the hefty load of violence makes you wonder what the Wachowski brothers really mean by science fiction, if they even mean it to be a science fiction movie at all. You have to be wary of movies being self-consciously science fiction because if you take a close look at Hollywood, you might see that almost every action blockbuster could be labeled SF just in the kind of hyperreality making going on with the incredibly unreal stunts and baffling abilities of the muscle engorged stars, not to mention the over use of special effects. Jackie Chan was once quoted as saying, "Hollywood doesn't have action movies, they have computers."

Indeed, it seems like Asians are abandoning Hollywood en masse. Chow Yun Fat was rapidly becoming one of the rising stars, but then Hong Kong came calling and I really do believe that the emigration from Hollywood was more or less based on the inability of the western stars to handle their social lives without staying out of prison or ending up in a mug shot. In other words, they were offending this group of people who actually have morals. More about Asians later.

The matrix movies come undone almost from the beginning. At first we get the slower pace of trying to set things up. Mr. Anderson/Neo seems to be a third rate cubicle sitter barely

able to handle a computer programming job, while on the side he is whacking off these masterful trip CD's, revealing his real love as a kind of drug pusher. Now, how to get him from here to the point of saving all of mankind as he enters the machine city and gets showered with obvious Jesus references including laying down his life for his friends, will have to snap the necks of the story plotters who have to plan for a noble demise for an otherwise awful human being. If the issue of spiritual redemption is there, then it is very underground.

Perhaps the most notable scene (getting our heads out of the violence for a while) comes when Neo goes to visit the oracle. Later we find out she is actually a machine program, but here she is a simple, lovable black woman, liking to bake cookies and, at the same time, saving the world. The people waiting with Neo are all worthy candidates for being the One, especially if we notice the little boy who can bend spoons with his mind, sitting as he does in a rather obvious Buddhist tradition. These subtle mixing of thinking, cultures, and races, is the true pivot upon which the Matrix movies turn. But, as in all good moneymakers, somewhere the plot goes off the rails and the desire to blow up everything in sight, the standard formula for all action movies, foregrounds and all of the really interesting philosophy gets thrown in a medieval dungeon where only the most insightful can find it.

The Matrix movies are failures because they have been ruined by the directors' fascination with Eastern martial arts and the whirly gig of gun fighting as a more interesting movie experience in their minds at least, as we can see that the only real drama is a simple love story, so we really have to wonder if the Matrix movies are trying to be a SF movie or only a romantic comedy.

Shakespeare can often have many more SF elements in it than even the most ambitious attempted and aborted intentions of making one. If we take a look at the recent release of *The Tempest*, we have every element we need for a good roam through the alien infested realm that is our universe. With Helen Mirren playing the magician Prospero (though strange they cast a woman for this part), Djimon Hounsou playing the monster, and a whole raft of notable, well accomplished actors filling all the other parts, we have a point of

transcendence in the beauty of a fantastical world given us in Elizabethan language with every moment of the plot giving us wit, wisdom, and real science fiction.

The difficulty of making a truly science fictional movie is found in the almost total ignorance of what truly constitutes a good example of the genre. Science fiction is not really about populating toy store shelves with action figures, but getting to the heart of what makes a human being tick. Without this sense of existential crisis, we really don't have a basis for an instance of SF.

So what do the matrix movies offer us? Well, the first thing we can do is drag out an old philosophical chestnut known as the mind/body problem. In it's modern form, we are brains in a vat being manipulated by evil scientists, but in the Matrix, we are energizer bunnies as a form of food for some evil machines, whose existence by the way, cannot and is not ever explained. At least in the Terminator movies we had an actual origin for the machine intelligence when Skynet went sentient at an exact date and time. Even though there is much to be laughed at in this concept as well, since more ignorance is exposed in a complete self-blinding of 50 years of research on artificial intelligence, at least we have something to hold onto, some kind of sense that makes sense, so to speak, in that the evil machines of the Terminator movies are actually genocidal maniacs hungering for exterminating every last human being on the planet. They won't be successful we know because in the simplistic mind dumpster the Hollywood scene is ensures that good will always triumph and the bad guys always get that comeuppance.
And it is difficult to see the matrix movies departing from the tired old formula of good guy/ bad guy.

And then we have the true moment of revelation once Neo meets the "Architect." He's portrayed as a kind of older, perhaps wiser white man with some bearding and a sanguine look on his face. While Neo starts his conversation with him, we see the architect start spouting off these incredibly complex explanations for the why and the way the matrix is. It took me a couple of viewings to get the hang of what the architect was saying.

Evidently, the matrix is always a deficient reality, as the architect has to continually destroy it and rebuild it time and again. In fact, we find out that the current version of the matrix is the seventh one, and the architect laments the "anomaly" appearing every single time he god-like creates a new version only to experience failure once the anomaly appears inevitably again. Given these descriptions by the architect, we experience yet another mind boggling change of realities which endlessly intersect each other all throughout the trilogy. Just in the fact that someone can learn to ride a motorcycle in five seconds of matrix time when they are actually in some other space perhaps spending months in the needed practice, shows just how reality making gets mangled in an entanglement that never quite unravels.

This confrontation Neo has with the architect is the true ending of the movie. And it occurs in the second one, effectively making the next one either obsolete or some sort of dream fantasy in the mind of yet again another real/fake character, the learners learning at quantum speeds.

Neo is given a choice, really a Hobson's choice, to either walk through one door, and the allusions to *Alice in Wonderland* are quite obvious, to save his true love or another door to save humanity. Here's where the movie completely conflates on itself. Not surprisingly at all, Neo, without hesitation, flies off to the rescue of his fair maiden all the while plumes of flame flare up and speeds up his escape as they seem to finger like reach out to burn him. Of course he survives. And he successfully saves Trinity although he has damned everyone on "earth." The fact that he has actually chosen badly seems totally ignored by the filmmakers since nothing at all happens to the total annihilation that is supposed to happen. In fact, it would have made a great ironic semi-comedic descent into bathos had the movie actually ended this way. But there was money to be made. So the scene with the architect becomes something that never happened.

Perhaps we are not supposed to believe in the nonexistent conversation. It is too baffling to try to get in the minds of the Wachowskis to see what they meant to accomplish with this scene, and if they mean to reality alter in some way, the method is very underground to an

extent that the superfluity of the next movie damages the franchise permanently. All the Humpty-Dumptys should have cracked yet they don't. The red queen is still alive.

Actually, the technology used in the movies is confusing enough. While they can learn complex things in seconds flat, the ships they use to move into the "real" actuality of people in Zion living like refugees, are very low-tech, and their defenses are very inadequate to the also low-tech looking robots that use drills to penetrate a hull that has no trace of a force field at all. How they navigate the dangers of being real almost seems laughable in the twist of a Judas being there, not really adding tension at all. The dangers of the matrix are always fake, and the technologies juxtaposed between machine intelligence and human intelligence always looks betwixt. Should I drink this bottle or eat this cake? seems to be the dilemma which makes the 60s Star Trek cardboard sets look almost brilliant by comparison.

In contrast, the last Shrek movie, at the end, has Shrek being held in the arms of his wife in an alternate reality no less, where he expires and evaporates into a somewhat beautiful glow, disappearing in a wisp of gold dust, with the manipulation of the filmmakers being so successful that the audience really doesn't know if Shrek is dead until the next scene where he has bounced back into the other reality, finding himself smack in the middle of his son's birthday party, a denouement decidedly too mature for a kids movie.

If cartoons are doing a better job at handling alternate realities than the real life portrayals we get in the matrix movies, then the kind of trouble the makers of the matrix movies are in is candidly an almost metaphysical erasure of the rest of their careers. And indeed, they venture into a purely ninja movie, *Ninja Assassin,* with the star being completely ignorant of martial arts.

Finally, finally, we get to *Revolutions*. The Wachowskis are careful to show the exposed nodal points of the disconnected life supports in order to enhance the illusion that our collection of heroes are in actual reality, and in this reality, there is an underground city called Zion that is completely controlled by African Americans. White people, for perhaps the first time in cinema history, are the true tokens. I can't help mentioning with a wry grin the *South Park* character, black of course, simply named "Token."

Cornell West pops up as a council member. He must have been delighted when he saw the script had this black dominion element and totally missed the point. It acts as pure exploitation.

The most telling scene comes when they dance, and blacks dancing are always a stereotype. In fact, the scene becomes quite lurid as the heat in the room becomes very sexual and the celebration looks more like an orgy.

The fact that African Americans are dominating society now probably is meant to show a very satisfying historical irony. The only problem is that the filmmakers show absolutely no sensitivity to the rather iron cross African Americans have been dragging around with them since they first set foot on the continent. The incredible abuses happening throughout history with no terminus point in sight, shows that overturning the white hierarchy would need a lot of a la I love Lucy "esplaining to do," and without these needed fill ins, again the matrix movies reach a new bottom.

Well of course the matrix movies are so very popular but it is a prurient popularity, driven by the masochism wanted and rejected by the audience at the same time. As they look up at that holy fake reality-producing screen, they turn credulous, wiping away any trace of rational thought, and, in their ignorance and with their "new" religion, meet Sisyphus in his unhappy afterlife. There is no life in their dreams, just cardboard cutouts they remain convinced circulate blood. But no, the waking moment deadens senses more than it enlivens, leaving the waking glow to the amnesia of what used to be considered a good story.

Chapter 3: If There is Glass, It Must Break

Hollywood has an absolute fascination with breaking glass. In the first Die Hard movie, the director made a point of keeping shoes off the feet of Bruce Willis' character. Of course, in a gun battle, Willis has to run across a mass of broken shards of glass. Once his escape is

complete, he has to pick out shards of glass from the soles of his feet, where behind him we can see a bright red trail of blood leading to the bathroom where the feet have to be cleansed of their tormented feet ruinions. He may be a former victim of Plantar Fascitis and the memory of ruined feet just pushes the blade in farther, making him have to choose between walking in pain or falling to his knees in propitiation to the toe god who may be inclined to heal him.

In Brandon Lee's first starring role, *Rapid Fire*, for some reason he feels the need to hop aboard a motorcycle and aim it towards a bad guy, who gets impaled on it and then Brandon drives into a glass table, but not any ordinary glass table; this one has four or five panes of glass on it set up vertically (?) and as the impaled henchman flows through pane after pane of glass, the sounds of glass breaking orchestrate as a kind of music, perhaps surpassing the music of the spheres, and, after the scene, we see the satisfying spread of shards.

Potsherds are often the kinds of evidence archeologists study in order to discover the kinds of tool making and level of arts and crafts practiced by the dead culture. So there seems to be something primal about finding things in pieces. Life can seem like a giant jigsaw puzzle that we are eternally unable to piece together as the universe is not keen on leaving breadcrumbs. It seems the gods want us to wallow in an absence of knowledge except as we come closer to reconstructing the image of that cosmic mirror, telling us what exactly we are even if this turns out to be a tautology since the image reflected to us illuminates nothing.

This is the nihilism of glass breaking. Walt Disney used the device of the mirror to damn with faint praise a witch who wants so badly to be beautiful that she wants to do away with the next prettiest girl in the kingdom, only death would be too easy, so here comes the poison apple, and Snow White, now in stasis, is remanded to the custody of a magical power springing from the yes man mirror now able to be more accurate for the witch who not only wants to be pretty, but dives into the superlative and finds herself the prettiest woman in the land. It seems like Disney snuck in a lot of American Narcissism that only wants to beat the Jones' with the constant fake tanning, breast enhancements and plastic surgery. It seems that no one in America thinks they're pretty just the way they are. The urge to

compete, even in spite of the biologically regulated body image, thin down, bulk up, and mess around with their faces until they one day look into a mirror and being unrecognizable to themselves, fulfill the Talking Head's song, "This is not my beautiful house, this is not my beautiful my wife," and "My God, what have I done?"

Think about the mirrors on the ceilings of the smarmiest hotels, revealing the need for voyeurism so that when we want to look into our partner's eyes, we look up into the curvature above us, and revel in the witness that is the mirror, giving us insight into how well we're doing at fucking.

In the movie, *Blade Runner*, the first kill of the genetic anomaly hunter (skin jobs) has a beautiful woman donned in just plastic and a bra and panties, gets shot but as she's dying, she plunges through pane after pane of glass again with no explanation for why the glass has been put there in the first place, and it becomes unclear whether it was the gunshot that killed her, or the running through the numerous windows, perhaps operating as an intentional symbol, placed there by the director, that when we die, we can't enter heaven without breaking the chains of embodiment in a fracturing of the fragility of bodies we never knew were actually glass prisons. In fact, the last mirror Deckard faces happens when he looks into the eyes of the one skin job he absolutely cannot catch or defeat he complete with broken fingers, while meanwhile, in an obvious crucifixion reference, the skin job in glorious short cropped bleach blonde hair, has to push in a giant nail into his palm in order to let the experience of pain keep him alive until the apotheosis.

Deckard is dangling from the edge of the building, facing certain death from a fall until our glorious clone grabs hold of him and lifts him onto the roof. Now Deckard and the clone have a very philosophical conversation about the human need for time as the clones were genetically programmed to live out a lifespan of only six years. The clone reveals to Deckard that all he wanted us just a little bit more time, time to figure out who he is, if he can have a purpose other than the life of a slave since our blade runner is equally a slave to something he actually doesn't want to do, something he really doesn't figure out until the end of the movie when he takes a very advanced skin job beautiful woman (Sean Young) off to live out the rest of whatever remains of her life. And he discovers his compassion in the mirror that

is the face of the blonde clone who only wanted time, but then dies in an almost lotus position complete with doves appearing and flapping into the sky as the pouring rain drips off the nose of the body. The nature of humanity is exposed as a heaving need for just a little more time, a little more life in order to figure ourselves out even though this is an impossibility as every mirror is a little bit evil by exposing all of our bodily flaws.

In Borges' story, "The Library of Babel," there actually is a mirror in the librarian's cell, something that, if one reads through the story carefully, is completely out of place. The implication of the story is that reality is so entirely dysfunctional that it may be impossible to separate all the various librarians into individual identities because, given the eternal nature of the library, the whole concept of being different becomes an irresolvable dilemma in the idea of infinity smashing together the Same and the Different into one inchoate continuum. Having a mirror becomes so superfluous since the very idea of having a reflection is completely incoherent. There is no such thing as an alternate person living in a mirror although we have to wonder about this because the magic of the mirror is, to quote Michael Jackson, the Man in the Mirror giving the mirror's actual function as a motivator, a thing to get us to see ourselves as we really are and inevitably reflecting back ugliness, for this is the level of esteem most of us have, and perhaps spur the change Michael so badly sermonizes about.

But why the smashing, the breaking? Well, if you watch small children, they will take their building blocks being very careful to arrange them in a perfect pyramid and then, after admiring their handiwork, swing their arm, obliterating the fragile, teetering back and forth tower they have constructed, and laugh at this sudden display of their power over objects.

The notion of smashing things has this primary origin with its beginning point, remember, occurring to us when we were very small and young.

Now, we are trying to pick up the pieces of our now adult lives, forgetting completely how perfect we were at that young age. A child knows how to breathe correctly. They know how to sink the breath into the belly and if you watch a child breathe, it is his or her belly that expands and contracts. We adults have lifted the breath into the chest, cutting off the more

human adapted perfection of a child's breathing we self-blind ourselves to, trying so hard not to be the same as a child, wanting so badly to grow up when "growing up" is the worst thing we can do. Children even move better. Because of their undeveloped legs, they possess a lot of flexibility and as they toddle around, they always without exception fall down, laughing with delight because they have a martial artist's sense of how to fall. And they trundle around on the floor, rolling and rolling, in absolute love with life.

Smashing things may seem like a kind of violence at first, and certainly Hollywood has taken up the idea of breaking glass as a way of punctuating the very violent products they churn out. The violence is so high in almost every major movie that wishes to label itself a kind of thriller or action movie layers we viewers with scene after scene of dead people like a parade during All Souls Day where the spirits of the dead wander among us realizing with the a start that their ancestors were wholly unsuccessful at trying to prevent the photographer from stealing souls.

The violence of breaking glass is the expression of the director's desire for a broader canvass where even the metaphysical erasure of the nihilistic desiring machine a la Angela Carter gets due attention since breaking glass is such a seemingly innocuous and somewhat beautiful expression of the violence latent in all of us. The projector projects the images while we project our own desire to kill and maim in an orgiastic projection onto the characters in the movie in a kind of countertransference. The therapeutic destruction events ring in our ears since breaking glass has the atonality the *Exorcist* exploits in the haunting tones of Michael Oldfield's *Tubular Bells*. Even the constant pounding of a massive choir singing only minor key chords makes *2001: A Space Odyssey* frame its central symbol, the obelisk, the mystery machine that seems to present itself at every turning point in human history. What the thing is and where it came from is less important than the music, the intellectual smashing to pieces of coherence we cannot adequately process except we submit to the irrationality of experience here translating wholeness into a synecdoche. The true measure of a perfect smashing lies in the ability to produce a necessary dose of nihilism been there with us since our childhood now our companion through life we happily encourage by making the blockbuster with its menagerie of the dead into multi-million dollar enterprises.

I should say a little more about nihilism, as this life philosophy masquerading as a plunge into meaninglessness, operates as an exercise in negation. We say we want to find the meaning of life, to know why we're here and where we're going after we die. But in the world of the nihilist, the explanation of nothing, nothing at all, gets routinized in a not so clear picture of the world as a place where only the strong survive and any meaning available gets overlayered with the truly oppressive correlating and dead facts of life reporting on the weird "something" of our being on a planet with the only conclusion coming that the comfort of being somewhat deadened inside by the sheer monstrosity that is living, makes for a life philosophy that erects a pretense of meaning that, if we look closely, reveals the "something" we think we have actually nothing: a complete and vacuous hole swallowing us in the black hole drinkwater of recognized soul killing.

So when we stare up into the movie screen, now morphed into a giant mirror, we become minions of an unknown god who wishes to lacerate us with a holy destruction we can only otherwise find in our dreams.

In *The Lord of the Flies*, the smashing of Piggy's glasses is meant as a symbol of a loss of power, but symbols hardly occupy a movie's main entertainment only focus. All the best moneymakers have nothing to do with any appropriable symbol system, and this reveals the invisible hand of capitalism's overwhelming of art for prurience. The $ sign has always been the true god we worship despite all the howling about the affronts to our "Christian" nation. While blockbusters make obscene amounts of money, there are children starving all over the world and it would seem that a little bit of nihilism or its synonym, cynicism, would be a defensive coping mechanism against the amorality of the horrid pleasure giving of the unreflective movie with a 100,000,000 dollar budget and a 500,000,000 dollar take at the box office. All the resources pouring into the Hollywood machine make the producers look like idiots when something on the order of *The Blair Witch Project*, entirely filmed with a handheld camera and a tiny budget of maybe not even 5,000 dollars, rolls over a huge return into the multi-millions.

The savagery of the human personality is the status quo of our society buried magnificently in the nihilistic universe everyone embraces in their powerless positions as myrmidons of bureaucratic hierarchies blessing the movie machine of Hollywood careful not to endow too much quality lest the spell break and we are all exposed to the ripple effect of actual truth appearing.

Glass is the only symbol Hollywood will use even as the unrecognized demolition of meaning, contrapuntal with a marvelous smashing, breaks the fabric of the universe into uncontrollable bursting insights that don't inform but merely obfuscate. It is the intention, no the collusion, of all the so-called power brokers to keep its populace in thrall through the device of an infantilized audience, shoulders broad with the swell of being grown up when the image drenched mind really needs to return, but where to return to becomes something of a problem. We never had a home in our unearthly fantasies of wealth promised by the American dream and celebrated in the celebrities whose nihilism is clearly revealed in the act of their conspicuous consumption. Whenever glass breaks, a new nebula appears, singing the triumph of its existence in ears clogged with the unhealthy focus on destruction, especially reaching fulgent expression when the sound of crying sounds just like glass fracturing, and we have the glory of an authentic moment, the only time when our nihilistic universe implants a notion of the sublime. We are a destroyed people. And in our ignorance of our already fallen state, foolishly believe that it was Adam and Eve who initiated sin when it has, all along, been us, just us, and our mirror situated to funhouse bend perceptions that make us unrecognizable to ourselves.

Chapter 4: Three Ways to Make Death Funny

It turns out that death is really a hilarious prank. We don't really die, not really. Remember when we were children and, as we played cops and robbers, we simply assumed a different identity in order to keep playing? Actors journey through movie after movie, dying and rebirthing as if the notion of a human were somehow preserved in a cryonic chamber that the movie is. This even became literal in *Vanilla Sky* (starring Tom Cruise) where the

filmmakers try to play with reality but only make their character, who has been horribly mutilated in a car crash, into a self-involved solipsist who spends eternity tumbling around the fake halls of his own mind.

Reality has always been on the skew ever since the earliest writers learned how to bend time and space in an effort to create. But what about the subject of death? Isn't there a finality to it that makes us grieve for the now empty shell, abandoned by the spirit for its fate as worm food?

Michel Foucault wrote on the death of the author as an exercise in interpolating the wanted immortality of the author, propagating his seed with each donation being the gift that keeps on giving book. The appearance of the silent movie was where all the trouble began, and even the stinginess of the studios to reserve a big budget for color movies for only what they thought would be top sellers, hence giving us *Gone with the Wind* in Technicolor while *East of Eden* gets only black and white notice. When the film industry started colorizing their black and white library, the ridicule began. The horrible technology available for the colorizing process, made these classic movies look like newspaper cartoons. Here is Humphrey Bogart trying to look stylish in a suddenly appearing colored shirt with the scenery around him making the Maltese Falcon an object out of the mind of a graphic novelist. Woody Allen even took those responsible to court and won, and soon afterwards the practice died out. But the various ways to preserve the old and decaying showed a mortality to celluloid that perhaps no one really anticipated.

So, with even the medium of the movie frittering away, what happens to the screenwriters, producers, and directors who are invested in churning out the soon to be obsolete stories? They are being made invisible with special effects.

Lucas wouldn't film another Star Wars movie until he could make it look good, and the result was a disconnection from the earlier movies that made them self-parodies. Once the origin story of Darth Vader is told, his end-of-movie revelation coming in his appearance in his heavy breathing and terminally black suit looks so anachronistic in the context of the

series, that any explanation accounting for the return to the original special effect level becomes an exercise in risibility.

And now here comes the incredibly arrogant James Cameron. He holds records for the biggest moneymakers in history, namely *Titanic* and *Avatar*. The fact that *Avatar* got nominated for an Oscar shows that everyone, even those who claim to have a bias towards art, can be bewitched by an otherwise awfully plotted movie simply recommended for viewing because of the alternate world looking so real.

And what is the main point of the plot of *Avatar*? Death.

The whole point of the movie is for the Marine Corp, somehow under the control of a corporation, to assist in recovering a precious metal that, of course, only the already inhabited planet has, and not only that, convincing the natives to abandon their home (of course to them a holy site) becomes the first move of diplomacy which inevitably fails and then the killing starts. Just the fact that this kind of abuse of a minority culture has already blackened American history with their genocide of the American Indians should have given Cameron pause to visually portray yet another horror, but the sexy special effects were wanted and the bodies piling up is a visual salaciously giving us an artist of death in the guise of a filmmaker, making us wonder if Cameron is intentionally blinding himself to the stereotypical element or just callously unconcerned of what becomes a rehashing of the morality tale so tired out that its box office success is either a commentary on the ignorance of the movie going populace or just a marker that special effects have overridden any concern for having a “good” script or plot.

One of the best movies to handle the theme of death comes in *Magnolia*, where interweaving plots seeming to give us disconnected pictures that then kind of mosaically come together once mortality becomes the uniting theme and it looks as if Anderson has culled through the entire Shakespearean canon in order to give us a movie that touches on every major archetype possible to contain within the boundaries of one Hollywood production.

I remember when I saw *48 hours* for the first time and then shifting uncomfortably in my seat when Eddie Murphy made a rather crass joke over the body of the dead villain. I couldn't quite understand what exactly made the death so funny. But then I eventually came to the conclusion that, since dead people in movies are only fake dead, the comedy over a dead body is only revealing the poker hand of the director who already knows that jokes about death are entirely fitting when the killed off actor shows up in his next role. There seems to be a crossover between the reality the movie wants to trap the audience in and the reality of the fact that death in movies only exposes the scaffolding behind the scenes since we know that it's really just fake. So what is the point of killing off people if the whole thing is *meant* to be so fake that death in movies is actually reassuring us that the whole enterprise is a practical joke on the audience who are already in on it? Does a movie want to be a complete suspension of disbelief or has the notion of entertainment become an inside joke, a comic stab at the idea that we never really believed it in the first place, making the perhaps unintentional point that movies themselves are just horribly bad novels unable to touch the soul because they do no convincing at all? What is the point of art if it doesn't persuade us to accept the reality given us? Is there some latent fear in all of us that art could morph into a real reality and erase everything we thought we knew about the world?

The idea that movies want to be conscious frauds shows that there is a perhaps unnoticed telos to the whole historical arc of film history. In Ed Wood, we had the notion that the idea of the movie is just to play fast and loose with the facts so that the whole universe of filmmakers look like stodgy old men with cigars taking themselves way too seriously. When Hollywood made the biopic on Wood, they did it in black and white, and the at first ridiculed Wood, in his modern interpretation, becomes a master of satire.

You may remember *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, complete with space aliens and a vampire played by Bella Lugosi, who unfortunately dies during filmmaking, so, when he is replaced, the actor simply keeps his cape up around his face whenever he appears on screen in order to disguise the fact that the actor had changed. Even Wood's inattention to facts like being consistent about whether it was supposed to be day in one take or night in another, and then we have the action having the actors traveling one moment in daylight and in the next frame, it's night, for no reason.

It makes viewing his films delightful because he does absolutely nothing to try and fool his audience. They completely get it. And what on the surface looks like bad art suddenly becomes genius. We have this same effect in the novels of Philip K. Dick who is often accused of being inattentive, something that serves up a lot of inconsistency in plotting, but his handling of his own technique is so effective that he is now considered one of the best SF writers of all time.

What is perhaps unrecognized by the modern movie machine is its consciousness of its own rotating mutability. How many actors and actresses are unable to make the crossover from being a young star to a mature actor since the personality machine wants to elevate young blood so often? There are so many "new" celebrities that I can't even keep track anymore of who is and who is not a celebrity. And the fade to black on the careers of so many can happen without anyone noticing. Meryl Streep may be the only exception in Hollywood who must be well over 60, but she seems to pop up in movie after movie, a total of 17 Academy Award nominations in tow, having made that hard crossover also difficult for the child star. Growing old seems to be a terminal illness all its own slowly killing off careers.

So, is there some sort of hidden metaphor for the mask of death in the glazed over eyes of the actor that somehow wants to comment on an outer/inner reality distinction? Hollywood is a whole little world on its own, with a collection of personalities almost all of whom are completely dysfunctional with their multiple marriages and trends switching around like re-arising cockroaches, especially venial when everyone began having babies in a seeming attempt to look more stable when one can only wonder about the lives of the children who may not fully be aware that their very existence is the result of a career move. And absolutely everyone is playing beat the clock. Here comes old age, so let's alter our faces and improve our breasts just in case the wheel turns round and we're left without a tagline. Sally Field would win her academy award and be unable to say, "They love me, they really love me." To be loved is perhaps the only driving force in a celebrity's life and without it, they plunge into infinitely sad depressions.

Everyone was absolutely amazed when Owen Wilson admitted he'd made a suicide attempt. How could someone so accomplished contemplate something so awful? Memories are short. Freddie Prinz became so popular so fast that it appeared that he gained a fear of success, and in being unable to handle the pressure, decided that nonexistence was preferable to an existence immersed in the pressure cooker of dealing with all the insincerity surrounding a recent genius where money was to be made.

Heath Ledger too, having put up perhaps the best performance of a villain in movie history, found the ledge of despair and jumped, falling into a pit of self-erasure in the aha! moment of what a suicide is for, not escape from mortality, but promotion into immortality. Richard Jenkins had been nominated for a beautiful movie called *The Visitor* as well, but admitted to David Letterman that death is big in Hollywood and there really was no drama in who was going to win. People don't want tombstones after all, but some sort of marquee eternally touting the accomplishments of their lives, and hopefully, a biography and then of course the movie deal. Every year, at the Oscars, they post a pictorial obituary cluing us in on who we should be honoring as if mere association with the movie industry were an automatic valorizing of people whose really only contribution to history was making unrealities.

So what we have is the movie as a kind of death aversion machine. Every movie has some element of an archetypal theme in it. Since the issue of what is possible in human experience is the real point of making a movie at all, whether we're talking about the sheer exploitation of an action movie or the subtler moods of a dramody, the filmmakers are exploring the regions of human potential without fully realizing the metaphor they create in their moving mélange of images actually becomes a commentary on perhaps the whole universe of meaning making. People look to cinematic productions for a piece of insight into their own souls. Theaters have successfully replaced churches in the eyes of the searchers for the soul of God. It is a return to the 6th century B.C. when the Greeks used plays as a means of touching the divine in a cathartic experience they processed as a holy experience. The modern movie experience has placed the viewer in the position of facing his or her own mortality by intentionally challenging the reality the viewer thinks he or she knows when the truth is the not very ardent attempt to create a fake world, positioning the moviegoer in

between a rock and a hard place. Either they swallow the lie the events on the screen wish to sort of forcefully impose on the viewers who want to be faked out, or they reject the movie's portrayal of reality as really fake, meaning that it only wants to manipulate and can teach us nothing about the world around us. So, which is it? Find fake meaning or get inside the joke. If nothing is real, then death isn't either, and in the end, the movie is teaching us that nihilism is the only possible position since we are no longer listening to our pastor, preacher, or priest, but immerse ourselves in a falsehood all because we cannot bear to look in a mirror and see the dissipation carrying us along the currents of time, now no longer believing in death at all except as the face staring back at us seemingly wanting to propagandize the idea of death as real when the movie reality has already taught us that nothing is real, and hence nothing at all is real because the propaganda has been so successful. Who wants to believe in inevitability if it doesn't need to be inevitable at all? Endings are only rolling credits and we eagerly await the next Genesis beginning in the next celebrity vehicle movie that only wants to reassure us that our narcissistic lives are an end in themselves. Lightning crashes, and a movie star makes 20 million dollars for the next role. Meanwhile, a 2-year-old baby dies of starvation in Ethiopia. Who needs public justice after all?

Chapter 5: The Science Fiction of the Blockbuster

Comic book adaptations absolutely rule the roost in the Hollywood so-called Blockbuster machine. Everyone screams with delight when another *Spiderman* or *Batman* comes out and there are all the other comic book characters in an endless march of superheroes taking over a theater near you. Why we have this sudden fascination with superheroes is probably more a sign of boredom that Hollywood producers have given up on originality and having come up with an easy way to make money by making Marvel or DC do all the work while all the writers have to do is something that will be subtle enough for the special effects to make the movie splashy with its earnest need for visual excitement. Actually, this tremendous desire to feed the public things that really are less important than graphic novels, comic

books, the state of visual story telling nowadays, shows that science fiction is now the dominant genre in Hollywood.

Even the movies that are not self-consciously science fiction still appear like science fiction. Science fiction is the art of the impossible, and when Jason Statham is rotating his Audi to knock the bomb off the bottom of his car in *Transporter 2*, we have a clear example of a movie seemingly invested in portraying a simple action sequence doing something only an alien piloted airship can do. The kinds of things most action movies ask us to believe are completely impossible in real life, so how are we to distinguish between the hyperreality of an action sequence and the overtly science fictional *The Fifth Element?* But science fiction gets a bad wrap when the scenes and costumes the director chooses for his production look completely silly. Even the choice of Bruce Willis as the star is settling for an actor who only plays himself in every single movie he's ever in. It's no wonder that real science fiction movies get short shrift when very little attempt is made to avoid the absurd.

And then there are the portrayals of aliens. Almost every single movie featuring an alien is making it evil. The very alien genre began when the aptly titled *Alien* spawned a franchise of aliens who are all homicidal maniacs. Even with *Independence Day*, the aliens had to be evil. This has become a deterministic quality of the genre that we cannot have aliens in a movie unless they are horribly mutated monsters that only want the destruction of humankind. And then came vampires.

Actually, the first vampire movie ever made was *Nosferatu*, which achieved a great portrayal of a monster that seemed really scary because the vampire looked like some ancient primordial being rather than some slicked up seducer so common now. An update of the movie was made by John Malkovich, *In The Shadow of the Vampire*, where, during the entire picture, there is a subtle hint that Nosferatu is a real vampire. The conclusion of the movie proves the intuition correct, when the director, Malkovich, lets the camera run while the vampire bites through everybody until the director gets his take and with "cut" we have the end of the movie with all the crew and the actors dead all around him.
Now there are so many variations on the vampire myth that it can become practically impossible to keep up with them. Anne Rice's *Interview with a Vampire* has a completely

different way of creating a vampire than say the way it's done in *Twilight*. Scorcese tried to plug into Bram Stoker's original vision of the vampire in *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, even including the idea missing in absolutely every other version and that is that vampires can walk in the daylight, it's just that their powers are attenuated. There is even some science in this movie as the doctor tries desperately to replace the blood of the beautiful but bitten redhead, only to fail because science cannot supersede the supernatural. They eventually have to trace her, after her transformation, to the crypt where she's living her happy vampire life. As she enters the chamber where her sarcophagus is, dangling a baby for her dinner, they stake her and then behead her. Such is the bad end of the vampire in almost every instance of the genre.

Perhaps the first vampire was the 19th century seducer wandering the palace halls of the Czar, Rasputin. He played the role of the playboy, bedding almost every court lady despite the fact that he was ugly as hell and smelled like a toilet most of the time. He was able to ply his Don Juan powers because they believed that there was something transcendent about him, that his powers of observation and prophecy gave him a holiness that is often the modus operandi of the seductions of even modern day preachers. The pairing of sexual attraction with the perception of holiness has been going on for a very long time, and we find, if we look closely, that vampires, especially in the Twilight series, are inevitably sexy because they aren't bad, they're just drawn that way, to quote Jessica Rabbit. The idea of the virtuous vampire has a rather short history but is perhaps based on this idea that holiness and corruption are two sides of the same wisdom coin that really has two heads in a huckster's prestidigitation. Vampires really seem to want to both be the ultimate predators and redeem themselves since they want to remand their perception as sons and daughters of Satan to a closer to reality description of them as simple victims of other vampires.

Enter the zombie. *Night of the Living Dead* started the fascination way back in the 60s, and the theme has been renovated time after time. Perhaps the best example of the genre came in the movie, *13 Days Later,* when a man wakes up from a coma only to find that practically the entire world has been infected with the disease, but he finds pockets of survivors until, after encountering some evil soldiers, our intrepid survivor saves some girls and they finally manage to be rescued. The zombie genre is all about the cleverness the survivors employ to

avoid being eaten or infected, their adventures actually an exercise in hardiness. Some of the zombie movies are better than others, but they all play on the idea that people can change into monsters on a dime, and not only that, but the zombie becomes the ultimate enemy, becoming a being that absolutely must be destroyed or else life cannot go on as before. This idea that former humans have become so blackened by some uncontrollable infection lofts the idea of racism into an inevitable even logical conclusion. The zombie is a particular out-group that must be eradicated, making their inhumanity a coded posturing for the elitist society we live in now making the formation of monsters whom we must label outsiders simply because they have made themselves unrecognizable to polite society. They have become the perfect insurgents into destroying our carefully crafted civilization that marks every member of every group with an identity badge they wear in the dermis itself. The hidden humanity beneath the oozing pustules gets completely, irredeemably suppressed and the only future for them is either a lifetime of cannibalism or a head on collision with a survivor whose only choice is to destroy them. This configuration of a monster is so divorced from any humane sensibility about the disfigured among us, that the whole concept suffers from a revelation of civilization as a place where people simply need to be destroyed. This is a tremendous departure from the horror movie monster that singly operates in his sphere of evil, and makes practically all of humanity into a single organism with no destiny and no means of salvation. The creation of the zombie movie is a low point in cinema history.

But here we run into a problem with science fiction movies, and that is the simple mindedness of what producers think a science fiction movie is. The brilliant *The Day the Earth Stood Still,* made in the 50s, took no pains to have amazing special effects since they didn't exist at the time, but instead, followed the adventures of a humanoid alien come to warn the denizens of earth that if they don't clean up their act, they will be destroyed by the galactic empire of which he is a representative. They are sick of the warring tendencies of humans and have but dispatched the diplomat only if the sickened human civilization can redeem itself. This rendering of an alien that actually wants to save the earth seems to be a construct Hollywood has completely abandoned. Even the L. Ron Hubbard inspired *Battlefield Earth* had aliens come to earth to imprison humans making one wonder what the founder of Scientology means to convey in the way of a social message to the rest of

humanity if he envisages us as only mete to be fodder for a superior civilization, such civilizations he actually believes exist. Are we on a collision course with the million year old galactic empire of the Scientologist's belief in what will ultimately be a bad ending for us?

When Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* was filmed, the obvious dystopia of a book burning society had a decidedly positive ending when our hero enters the forest where the other book lovers are living and finds that every person there has committed a classic book to memory, spending their days telling these stories to each other. It makes a commentary on human society that words in a book are actually organic beings that "live" within the readers of them to the point of an inhabitation. Then begins a symbiotic relationship between the lifeform that is the book and "author" of the book, for that is the true source of the Word, with his appreciator now speaking, giving us the true purpose of the book. When it enters the physiology of the reader, it change them in ways unaccountably by any other yardstick besides the worm-like overtaking of the mind now a universal archetype inscribed on pages perhaps, but lives beyond the mere word cage and translates in the brain as a real living entity.

Such messages are entirely missing from science fiction movies in our modern day movie machine. In fact, even getting a really well done science fiction movie seems practically impossible when the everyday fare of the movie has turned, as I've mentioned, to monsters, vampires and zombies. It seems like we have to go back quite a ways to find some really good examples of the genre. We now worship at the feet of the Harry Potter franchise that has, thankfully, finally, ended. People were even beginning to believe that the books the movies are based on are actually great literature. I found a website that listed J.K. Rowling as the fourth most influential writer of all time. What? If we want to take an example of a modern sort of pulp author as a truly crossover artist, we should look at Stephen King, whose novels have a ring of the literary to them, and his movies although sometimes not well filmed, have become classics, with an especially fond memory I have of watching his *Pet Cemetery* scare the living shit out of me.
So what shall we make of the science fictional tendencies of Hollywood? It's all cartoons now, oh, I mean animation. The tremendously successful Shrek movies have all the elements of great fantasy and whatever mind dreamed up using fairy tale characters should

receive a big pat on the back. I especially liked *Aliens vs. Monsters* and *The Incredibles*, but they too can be consigned to the comic book genre. When *Akira* first came out in the 80s, I thought we had reached a new high in animation when the whole angst of modern Japan got stuffed into a simple cartoon. It was all there. The tremendous doomed feeling of the atomic disaster of WWII sailed as a theme in the movie that rounded out an otherwise clever plot into a cultural artifact. It seems the kinds of Manga the Japanese turn out now have less of this desire to deal with major themes and just want to make sophisticated martial arts movies, but the potential for animation to become the real headquarters for science fiction is there.

Science fiction, to be science fiction, has to deal with the whole despairs and hopelessness of humanity writ large or else they're just blowing up things and killing superbugs. Until Hollywood figures out the true nature of what a science fictional theme is aiming at, we will only have movies that skirt around the true aim of science fiction to portray humankind in all its messiness and bafflement over the true meaning of life. I don't know if we can even call *Inception* a true science fiction movie since the science in it is really based on more intuitive notions of what constitutes an unreal world that really delves into the very low-tech scheme of what is ultimately the most private aspect of our mental domain. Dreams are a very mysterious area of human consciousness. We really don't know why the brain just doesn't shut down at night and just relax. In fact, the need to dream is so profound that should we not do it, we would fall into psychotic states, and yet our understanding of the phenomenon is really very puny. But perhaps the inner world, our most private, intimate part of our selves is where the incipience of the science fiction intuition comes from. It isn't really outer space we're fascinated with, but inner space. *The Abyss* meant to take science fiction down this avenue where we could possibly conceive of an underwater civilization, there beneath our feet, possibly an analogue of Atlantis, composed of beings quite a bit more benign than us and also more advanced.
The notion of the advanced civilization is one of the driving forces of science fiction but our best writers want to show us that technological advancements are not really advancements because technology is a false prophet. It promises better computers and better, more convenient lives, but things keep breaking down, and what we think is high tech keeps needing so much updating that we drown in a sea of difficulties where only the most

technologically adept among us can solve all the attendant problems with maintaining what turns out to be a very deficient product. If things were all that advanced, they would be simple, and yet things keep getting more complex in a complete misunderstanding of what the word “advanced” actually means. Just the very fact that most of the great classics of science fiction are painting pictures of dystopias, not utopias, shows that the demeanor of the advanced thinker is terribly pessimistic about the future of our world. People are more concerned with wiping out gay marriage than they are about finding the secret to peace on earth. A truly advanced society wouldn’t be trying to figure out how to make everyone wealthy but how to make everyone moral. Thomas More’s *Utopia* wants to get at what makes a humane society, and it turns out that the vexations of geopolitical boundaries are the true evil. And yet we have the idea of evil embedded in science fiction movies, like in *I, Robot* where a malignant Artificial Intelligence can’t figure out on its own that human beings need nurturing, not domination. Even *Eagle Eye* tried out this plot line when it seems that every AI seems to conclude human beings are an evil that needs to be eradicated. Even our own machines don’t believe in us. And if they are the reflections of our programmers, what does that say about us? We must be suicidal ultimately because we can’t seem to fashion an artificial life form that doesn’t want to kill us. And can we argue with this? The state of our civilization suggests that we only want to kill each other and the thought that perhaps our “religions” aren’t helping the process of compassion for others along should give us reason to pause. It would seem that the future is a place of darkness and destruction. Perhaps, as a people, we deserve to be humbled, and perhaps this is why Gaia is ramping up the natural disasters. She’s angry, and in her wrath, wishes something transformational to happen. Without this experience, perhaps the future will descend into a batch of confusions about why we’re really here floating around in the universe on this pale blue dot of a world. Our lives transpire so quickly, and not only this, but they are so fragile, and yet we dream. We dream of a flying a car, a utopia of millions of millionaires, and forget, impose it on ourselves, the thought that morality has nothing to do with following rules, but becoming spiritually mature.

Chapter 6: Philip K. Dick Goes to the Movies

There once was a science fiction master who was unrecognized as such for almost the whole of his career. And then he died. We have so many examples of artists being recognized for their genius after their death, but the incidence of Philip K. Dick's death created a whole new discipline to explore, and that was science fiction as a true literary project.

The life and times of Philip K. Dick is almost a SF novel in itself. In fact, in one of his last novels, *Valis*, he subordinates every rule of narrative design in order to insert biographical material into his narrative as if it were more a memoir. He was criticized heavily for producing a failure since the novel seemed to miss the point of not only refusing to be a glittering example of the genre but also for a perceived departure from his earlier work which had everyone praising him for his prophetic commentaries on the bankruptcy of commodified culture. In what has now become known as the Valis trilogy, *Valis, The Divine Invasion, and The Transmigration of Timothy Archer*, we have a writer seemingly invested in transforming his image from pop culture icon to some sort of mystic. But there would be those who think that there was in fact no shift at all, that the whole of the SF canon had been hiding this mystical witchery for the entirety of its history as a separate literature, or at least Samuel R. Delaney thinks so. But once the only SF writer ever to be anthologized in the Library of America caught the attention of the Hollywood scene, the constant permutations of a Dick movie undulated across movie screens with big bucks and big time movie stars.

I have already discussed the now iconic *Blade Runner*, and this would only be the beginning. Arnold Schwarzenegger got into the act with *Total Recall*, which turned out to be loosely based on the Dick short story, "We Can Remember for you Wholesale," as the merely 6 page story launched into a complicated plot that covered everything from secret government agents, mutants, and a rather large trained spy undercover having forgotten his past identity, and then having to save the Martian colony by giving it a breathable atmosphere. How they got all of this out of a man coming out of a machine having recovered a memory of himself as a spy, which ends there, and then twist into the heavily action influenced morbidity as a star vehicle for Arnold is Hollywood showing its dissatisfaction over the simplicity of a clever idea now inflated into a somewhat ridiculous overportrayal of

action sequences as if Dick ever needed Mr. Universe to ever enter any of his divine comedies.

Dick was first and foremost an idea machine, spinning out incredibly original approaches to the outer space settings and inner conflicts of characters forever imperiled and forever unable to reach the real reality we all so much want to embrace. Dick would make the whole idea of the Real so problematic that the reader will almost inevitably wind up dropped in a sea of perplexities the iron bars of the narrative relentlessly making any resolution actually a very unsatisfying nonresolution. So why do we come out of the novel feeling redeemed as if the whole point of the dreaded abyss exposed to us is actually an inverted heaven where permanent imprisonment becomes a norm that is somehow wanted. But with the adaptations, we seem to be missing this angst of the multiple reality dysfunctions acting like a perpetual nightmare when the moviemakers seem so wedded to a very un-Dickian happy ending.

The problem with adapting a Philip K. Dick novel or short story for the big screen is the myriad things they have to leave out in their very feeble mimicry. There are a lot of religious themes in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, but the producers wanted to make a purely action driven movie as if the only reason we could possibly want to film SF at all was to give the viewer some kind of sideshow ride. In fact, in *Total Recall*, once Arnold sheds his woman's disguise, the head actually says, "Get ready for a ride."

The perception among moviemakers that SF fans are only interested in a futuristic action movie makes the search for a truly satisfying excursion into a "real" instance of SF can be frustrating. Once we see Matt Damon in *Adjustment Bureau*, we know beneath all of the running away from the bad guys, we have a really interesting plot. It is a Dick adaptation after all. But we only get these Dickian reality twists in glimpses and the almost romantic comedy quality of the movie descends into a love story that could function very well without the SF elements being there at all.

And then we had Ben Affleck and Uma Thurman in *Paycheck*, which gives us the very clever idea of a future self giving clues to a past self about how to evade the inevitable trouble

coming his way, but again, we get motorcycle chases and action laden scenes that detract from the technological marvels making the time crossovers really interesting. But the actual evil is not the man operating the time machine but the machine itself, something that gets completely buried beneath a need for the formula of the action movie to erase the social commentary on inadequately formed plans for what well inevitably be abused in its god-like power to alter time. The real intention of Dick's narrative is to show the limits of corruption on someone who has teased out evil. Any other lapses of judgment get the boot since the hero always has to be a hero, completely ignoring the anti-hero that surfaces so commonly in a Dick narrative.

Again, in *Minority Report*, this time it's Tom Cruise's turn to ready the funshow ride for the viewer and even though the really interesting and completely uniquely Dickian elements like the psychics needing consensus and yet the anomaly, the minority opinion, seems to be a phenomenon that no one in the power structure wants to recognize, preferring instead to lord their power in a politically popular eradication of crime by punishing the criminal before the crime happens. The absurdity of this approach to civilizing society is normalized in the movie when the Dickian stamp again goes missing when the action overwhelms the Kafkaesque exploration of the absurd.

This tendency to want to transform every Dick adaptation into some kind of action movie should perhaps make the fans of his writing severely concerned that the uninitiated in his writing will come to think that every single Dick novel is just one big chase scene. One would be hard pressed to find one instance of this in any of his works. What then accounts for the fascination with Philip K. Dick the suddenly germinal giant of blockbuster movies?

Perhaps part of the reason has to do with the ultimate cleverness embedded in the plots that then get appropriated into the Hollywood machine. Sure, the producers will say, this is an incredibly clever idea, but how can we sell it? Hollywood is most of all a money machine so any incursion into art, especially when the blossom comes from the SF genre, gets remanded to the cutesy "art" film and even though this may be the proper place for a Dick adaptation, there is an army of writers who think they can just pull a few strings to transform a truly interesting philosophical theme into a mere stampede of stunt men.

This picking and choosing among the ideas spread throughout Dick's work almost seems tragicomic for a writer who desperately wanted to be taken seriously, but kept getting the pulp label thrown in his face. It seems that the farther we move in time, Dick's wish attenuates with the true intentions of his interweaving reality ploys getting shredded into cheese string commodities, gotten that way for ease of consumption. Nobody really wants Dick to be filmed just in the way his stories appear because that would mean a less favorable public now invested in the Dick adaptation as a treasure trove of unlimited plot twists and, most of all, really interesting chases. The constant running away from things has become a bedrock feature of the Dick movie, but so too has the avoidance of the larger picture involved in the fact that plot points are quite subordinate to all the metaphysical implications of what are really almost parables on the deteriorated nature of the universe, but such explorations in a movie are so frowned on, again with that label of SF on it, that Philip K. Dick seems fated to enjoying his popularity in complete opposition to what he really wanted to accomplish in his endless flow of mining the archetypes of humanity's struggles to understand itself with the only conclusion possible being that conclusions are never forthcoming.

Chapter 7: Shakespeare in Adaptation

"To be or not to be, that is the question," Hamlet says as he's holding the skull of an old friend in a graveyard, but almost nobody can say the rest of the soliloquy unless you're a 17th century lit professor or something or trying to say it really fast such as the guy who holds the world record for saying it in like 35 seconds. This difficulty of Elizabethan language has not hindered Hollywood's desire to make Shakespearean movies, well, to say the name, "Shakespeare," may almost be a misprision the adaptations usually come out so poorly, but this need to film him, to imprison the bard in celluloid is there, and we just have to shake our heads at the risibility of the whole thing.

I think back to when Mel Gibson tried his hand at *Hamlet* and the lack of proper prosody makes you either want to laugh or cry. Gibson is hardly a gifted enough actor to take on such a daunting task. In England, there is a whole school dedicated to training in the Elizabethan tongue, and to adding authenticity to the way the speech is supposed to sound. They then migrate into BBC productions of Shakespeare, and here is where the really good plays come to life. The English are just that much more predisposed to making Shakespeare a breathing, living entity that every generation, as one scholar once said, has to adapt to their own present circumstances.

They once let Charles Branaugh try his hand at *Henry IV*, but he is English after all, and gave a very rousing rendition of the St. Crispin's Day speech. But these moments in the Shakespeare genre seem unique. There really are no really good movies (exception for 2011's *The Tempest*) but things only get worse and worse, especially if we get Leonardo DiCaprio doing an update of *Romeo and Juliet* that tries, badly, to at least mimic some of the true Elizabethan dialogue, but the modernized script descends into bathos.

Then they started targeting Shakespeare himself when Gwyneth Paltrow showed up in *Shakespeare in Love*, playing a girl disguised as a boy in order to act in a play, as women weren't allowed to appear in plays at that time. Just why the Elizabethans didn't want women, preferring drag, isn't entirely clear, especially if we witness the bawdy audiences at the Globe rolling around with women on their laps, slinging beer around even as it spills copiously, with the occasional hand sliding into a panty or two, but the staid nature of the plays as we see them now was hardly the case in 17th century England. Everyone now misses the actual scatological elements in the plays since the bard now has such a vaunted reputation. Just in Sting giving a nod to a Shakespeare sonnet when he sings "my mistress's eyes are nothing like the sun," we see that Shakespeare survives, however misshapen, in almost every form of media, and people think themselves smart if they're able to quote a few lines. Even in the original *Star Trek*, we were seeing phrases like "bread and circuses" and "the conscience of the king." In fact, William Shatner is a Shakespearean trained actor, despite the parodies of his speaking style, mocking the stilted nature of his overacting. But then Jean Luc Picard came along in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* providing us a captain who spoke in a truly moving and commanding voice with perfect diction and Shakespearean

acting in his background too. You could often see his face popping up in those BBC productions.

But to return to *Shakespeare in Love* for a moment, it becomes funny when Shakespeare would suggest he title his new play something like "Pirates on the Bounty" and then a more learned playwright would suggest a more appropriate title, the "actual" title, "The Taming of the Shrew." This movie tries to make Shakespeare into a kind of a womanizer, portraying him as very handsome although not well learned in his craft. It is impossible to know the real nature of his personality, but the moviemakers are toying with the controversy that there was no Shakespeare, that perhaps Christopher Marlowe or even Francis Bacon actually wrote the plays. Most critics dismiss this, but then a recent movie, *Anonymous*, resurrects the controversy by suggesting there really was a Shakespeare, but he was doomed to writing plays that he would never get credit for. It's a ridiculous take on the idea, not unlike *The Man in the Iron Mask*, trying to present a double for the actual liege. But, if no one really takes seriously that Shakespeare wasn't really Shakespeare then what should filmmakers do but give the scholars the Fig?

Actually, if you take a comparative look at the texts attributed to Shakespeare, the originals, and then the gradual updating of editors who wanted to make the sound of the language prettier, there are quite striking differences. The truth be told, we actually have many Shakespeares, but the ones in use today are the result of editing. This brings up perplexing questions of authorship as well. If the editors were the ones who made the phrasing of the original manuscripts better, then the protean galaxy of Shakespeare quotations takes on a sort of Hydra head that once lopped off, grows back two more. The amount of manuscripts of "originals" and edited ones grows so thick that one can only think of a palimpsest of documents we have to keep culling through in order to get at the "real" Shakespeare. Actually, we have a lot of this in literature since Homer's *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* were based on oral traditions so we can imagine the errata would be high. *Beowulf* is supposed to be Brit Lit but also requires translation. Not to mention the Bible, which was originally written in Koin Greek, the New Testament, and then we have this problem of no one knowing how to speak it anymore, so the requisite level of fluency is not there. Despite that major problem, there are many who take everything in the Bible as literal without realizing

that it took a committee of people to do the translation work under the funding of the King, so the Bible is actually a creation that emanated from a bureaucratic structure. How ironic.

But everyday beliefs often clash with a more superior rendering of a work once people are able to abandon their ignorance of how a text is produced and why we have to be suspicious of everything, including the modern day avant-garde writers, at least those who aren't too seriously interested in the profit motive and stand hoping for a restoration period of actual art appearing. Just because we think something was written in English, for example, doesn't mean that we automatically know what it means. Unfortunately for Cormac McCarthy, his adapted movies, *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*, only hook the filmmakers in with the savagery and are probably totally missing the point of why the book was written at all. This curious adaptation tension between the book and the movie has even driven some Harry Potter book fans away because the franchise is only interested in the special effects and stuff and the more interesting tricks Rowling uses in her plots go missing, something the readers, who have read each book ten times or more, then beg off the movies.

I guess we can get away with using a term like "adaptation tension" since it is a phenomenon that isn't acknowledged really well. There was a movie that made fun of this starring Nicholas Cage, *Adaptation*, where they take the pretense of a movie seeming to be about a journalist, Meryl Streep, who gets involved with an orchid thief when the actual point is to show a movie about a movie making itself, so to speak. The actual plot serpentines and curves like it's floating in outer space, and everyone watching may only think the thing is about Streep and Cooper, the journalist and the orchid thief. Clever disguising of actual intentions sometimes show up like this.

Thus, adapting something as complex as Shakespeare can be mind bending, but, since everyone thinks, "it's just English," the tensions involved get subordinated due to an unrecognized hubris. I doubt that the adapters of Shakespeare into movies are consulting actual scholars in order to get the deliveries right although, among second language teachers, this matter of how you say things, where you put the stress, actually alters meanings.

For instance, if I say, “Have you put your things away yet?” Everybody will get that I’m just asking a simple question. But if I say, “Have you put *your* things away yet?” then I have changed the meaning to imply that there were other things there that belonged to someone else. This matter of where you put the stresses is especially vexing in Shakespeare, but the matter seems to drop like a hot potato because of this notion that “it’s just English.” Intellectuals have even taken to worrying about what the English language will look like after this generation of children have mangled it beyond recognition with their eternal texting, making OMG equally legitimate to actually spelling out “Oh my God.” It may just be, as some have implied, that we are experiencing the death of literature as trying to make pretty pictures out of words descends into mere habits of communication. But if we look at some groundbreaking artists like James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, we can see that the trend has already emerged and it is an unqualified good thing.

Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake* can almost be incomprehensible as some of the words and sentences are not meant to make sense. And his *Ulysses* needs an Encyclopedia Britannica to keep up with all the references and philosophical jokes that keep appearing in the ongoing stream. An attempt was made to film him, called *Mr. Bloom*, but we only get our stream of consciousness Joyce who, unfortunately, had the pretense of a plot, so a movie about a man wandering about town and having adventures guts the book entirely.

Samuel Beckett once admitted to his friend that he would be unable to write in professional English. He just couldn’t do it, and the world should appreciate his disability. He was greatly influenced by Joyce and the best thing is, he cared nothing about plot.

In trying to read through his novel *Murphy*, I first began to circle the words I didn’t know until I finally realized they were either so arcane or just made up that I’d never find their meanings. But this then altered my own writing career forever. The absolute obsolescence of writing rules was already present in Joyce and Beckett clear back to the early twentieth century, but then the realists got hold of the literary world and we saw a return to “normal” literature, as if the point of fiction was only doing mimicry. One slip of point of view or one added scene that veers off course and the narrative is instantly banished. We have never seen a death of creativity like this since people were writing off ideas about Chaos theory so

rooted were they in "normal" science. And if SF books don't make the bestseller list, they go unnoticed. Perhaps it should be in this genre that literature regains its freedom, but then they added an addendum, called "speculative literature," and then again, we see this desire to routinize, to categorize, to make only so-called "good" writing noticed. There doesn't seem to be any easy answers to breaking the iron grip of the realists because they are considered the literary lions. We have brief glimpses of realists shapeshifting occasionally, but unless you're Kazuo Ishiguro, who made his bones off of his much lauded realist novel, *The Remains of the Day*, we can't launch off an experiment as he did with *Never Let Me Go* (also filmed) since we have to make that dive into so-called professional English before we start doing really interesting things.

So the whole problem with adaptations, especially in the Shakespeare genre, lies in this decidedly suppressive course that inhabits the creative world. It isn't that the filmmakers should be totally one-sided in a duty to mimicking the original, but there has to be some recognition of what the ur-text was actually trying to say. No one wants to see *Gravity's Rainbow* with its 300 characters span into a 10 hour movie, but then again, we don't want to see Shakespeare being adapted just because he's the one everyone talks about, all down through the ages, ever since he lifted a pen. If we're going to do a thorough rendering of *The Merchants of Venice*, we have to let the anti-Semitism come through or we are not only dumbing it down, we're missing the point.

Chapter 8: What Dreams May Come: The Invention of the Afterlife

They took a line from a Shakespeare play, "what dreams may come," in order to title the movie, a movie which is all about the afterlife. Everyone needs to go through the necessary process of dying, of course, so the movie begins somewhat pessimistically with everyone dropping like flies. Even the dog has died and it is never a good idea to kill a dog in a movie (*Old Yeller* notwithstanding). But the upshot comes when Robin William's character eventually enters his doom and wakes up in a playland, a place that is actually his favorite

painting of his now dead wife's he mucks around in as his "heaven." He eventually finds his earthly daughter, of course killed off, and discovers her heaven is a merry-go-round set she played with as a child and her new form is an airline stewardess she had always admired as a child, now inhabiting the body in an eternal night of zooming through the skies although she's not really doing that, just taking over the "look" of the stewardess. This would be laughable enough, but the idea that heaven is whatever we dream it would be is clever but perhaps the point should be that heaven is a place on earth, as the Go-Go's girl intuited, and this excursion into something that ought to be clever really becomes quite absurd, if not just plain stupid. If we are going to make realities, we should realize that we are making them now, in life which usually comes out crappy unless we start getting onto the positive side of our horoscope.

The fact of an eternal dialectic of heaven and hell has really become outmoded. The dialectic has already collapsed due to the horrors of our world that has been and continues to be degenerative. The powerlessness we all feel now is just a sign of the times, the idea of a good person actually a myth. There isn't one of us who hasn't done something incorrigible and if the Christians want to take a lash to the back over it then it is up to them. We are meant to live messy lives or how else would we learn? The only possible reason we were fatally made to inevitably fail over and over again is only for the reason that we have bodies which are mere matter, subject to the hard facts of physics, which makes us capable of pain. If anyone tells you that they're happy, then they're living in a self-created heaven so solipsistic that they aren't even aware of themselves standing like the fool on the hill, alone and devastatingly deluded.

There have been some attempts to make the afterlife funny such as in Albert Brooks' take on what happens when we die when he gets hit by a bus, and wakes up in Judgment City, a place where there are lawyers to make your case for going to heaven or else that other place, or perhaps it's reincarnation (?) it isn't entirely clear. Meryl Streep plays a love interest and while he sort of Kafka like, noting this is coming from Kafka's *The Trial*, tries to knuckle down with the prosecutors who keep looking at his miserable life with him just sitting there, answering questions, sweating the whole time. Meanwhile, Streep is getting lauded for her wonderful life and heroically saving people from a fire, etc., etc.

This contrast between the two life reviews is meant to be a parody of course. Especially as we see the in-between place, Judgment City, actually has a sushi bar with all the fixins. But even though the comedy is pretty good, the point it tries to make, and there always seems to be a serious point to make in movies like these, just damns the project to a simple romantic comedy. Brooks' picture of the afterlife is hardly inspiring with the only exception when Streep and Brooks go to a museum of mirrors where people can see some of their past lives. While Brooks asks Streep what she's seeing, she says, "Joan of Arc," and when she returns the question, we cut to Brooks looking at himself as a jungle bunny, a real stereotyped black tribesman running from a lion, and he says, "lunch."

This is a hilarious turnabout of course, as it seems like every psychic you meet will tell you that you were once some sort of king or princess or something in a former life. One told me I had been a Chinese princess once, and I thought I might wince at the thought of the footbinding.

The only problem is, the movie is too heavy handed, making Streep the darling of the afterlife and, while Brooks isn't a villain, he's a scourge who, wouldn't you know it, gets redeemed by love in the end. How sweet.

Ideas about the afterlife are just too multivarious to really hone in on a good portrayal. Of course, everyone wants to stay away from the harps and angels and of course the white man in a white robe with a white beard in what is inevitably the picture of God we get. They did manage to persuade Morgan Freeman, a black god (?), only in a comedy, to play God in *Bruce Almighty* and its follow up, *Evan Almighty*. But we have to think fondly back to the fallen pop singer, John Denver, who played an unwilling dupe of a God played by George Burns, the lovable old guy, in what is quite a good send up of the quisling beards of the theologians who just have to know, must know, by their very proximity to the source of all, that they've got it, they know who God is, or else, who would? The fact that God has come into the life of some average Joe just doesn't sit well, so of course a panel of "holy" men is drawn up, demanding proof, proof that the man who sang "Thank God I'm a Country Boy," is really in contact with God. They lock him in a room with a bunch of papers, and God visits

him (remember it's Burns) who then helps Denver answer the questions until the final reveal when God shows up in a sort of courtroom, giving the final proof to the pudding, yes, he's up there, and yes, he's mad, but, wouldn't you know, he just wants us to love each other.

The only problem with these movies about the afterlife is that there really isn't much beyond the veneer of this palatable outcome always coming to the fore. Even though we know how cruel and absurd life is, we still insist that God loves us enough to "save us" although from what isn't entirely clear because if this isn't hell already, then the dreaded destination doesn't seem all that dreadful after all.

The stridency of those who absolutely refuse a belief in an afterlife would make sense given the nature of their minds locked as they are in the scientific worldview, but absolutely on one knows, cannot know, the actual reality, if there can even be such a thing, introduces us to a kind of certainty both the unchurched and the churched want to cling to. Can we know anything without doubt? It's doubtful.

But we have copious amounts of studies on what we call NDE's, or near death experiences, and they all seem to match each other. There is a floating to a ceiling, hearing the conversations of doctors as they hover, and then flying through a tunnel where they meet a being of bright light. The only problem with these accounts is that they return to life. So we have to wonder about the idea of the archetype or the thing underpinning all of these accounts may be being a revelation of what lies incipient in the human mind which is a metaphor for describing this kind of experience in ways the person can understand what is actually an ineffable, meaning indescribable, experience. Another researcher, in his book *Journey of Souls*, gives us a past life regression hypnotist putting his conclusions also in very definitive language. He thinks that we are all light beings, and that we strip ourselves from the human body where we fly to an in-between realm where we wait for our next incarnation. We can determine the level of the soul by the wavelength of their light (more advanced souls glow blue). But here again, we have to wonder about the plugging into a metaphorical picture of what the author takes as a certainty. He claims his clients are tapping into Superconsciousness with the only problem being that he provides no

explanations about what it is or how we tap into it. It is hard enough to understand consciousness without the super as it is. Michael Gazzaniga once said it's like a protozoan trying to understand a dog.

The Lovely Bones gives us a movie in which a young girl around twelve gets murdered by a sexual predator, and before she leaves the earth, she tries to influence her father, someone she seems incapable of letting go of. The father finally figures out who killed his daughter and chases the man through a cornfield but then runs across two teenagers about to do the nasty, startling the boy so much that he beats the father up (played by Mark Wahlberg). Unaccountably, the father then lets go of his quest even though the dead girl's sister starts to sniff around about the disappearance. There seems to be a race against the clock to find the body evidently locked inside a safe, but the murderer manages to win by having the safe buried in a construction site.

It would be confusing enough that there is really no resolution to this situation, especially the father's vendetta evaporating for no reason, but, in the end, our dead twelve year old joins the other victims of the predator and she eventually goes with them into whatever afterlife awaits them, but to get to this point, she has to realize she is making her father unhealthy by clinging to him even in her ghostly state.

Tensions begin to emerge but then dissolve, so the true message of the movie is entirely unclear. Perhaps it is just a play on the idea of there being earthbound ghosts who apparently have unfinished business and so can't pass on until they've cleared the field. But the myths about this brand of ghost usually require the loved ones to do something to help the poor ethereal prisoner. Remember they're ghosts. Since they're disembodied, they can't do much on their own, so how to reconcile this disconnect of influential force being there doesn't have much sway on the usual ideas surrounding this concept of the earthbound ghost.

A really interesting ghost story done just recently, *The Haunting in Connecticut*, claims to be based on a true story, and if it is, it gives us a really interesting look into the world of the supernatural, some of it we even have documentation for.

A family moves into a house that was first a mortuary, and the son is dying of cancer. This element of him being near death has an important function in the story because it makes him capable of experiencing and seeing things others can't because they're just too healthy, too alive. Matthew is seeing this boy everyday who, it turns out, was a powerful medium that an evil "doctor" was using to attract people to séances. In order to enhance the boy's power, the doctor begins using necromancy, which means he inscribes mysterious letters on dead bodies he has stolen meant to imprison the souls, capped off by cutting off their eyelids, now staring into an eternity they can never go to. Not only is the movie well filmed, but the implications of the "truth" of it are startling.

Of course, weird things happen, like lights flashing on and off, and Matthew seeing things, like blood on the floor while his mother is mopping or pushing his hand through a post, and upon withdrawing it, finds himself staring at squishy innards. But the evidence of what happened previously in the house is Matthew's vision of the boy expelling some sort of substance from his mouth, something labeled ectoplasm that we actually have documentable evidence of. In fact, this kind of phenomenon has been recognized for many, many years, as even the great William James would visit a famous psychic capable of the same kinds of acts.

It seems like we all have life tasks to perform here, that we are destined to be in certain places, do certain things that are, in a way, pre-destined. Why do some babies get born, only to die minutes or days later? Their only task seems to be getting a body for a while and then moving on. Those of us who populate the world seem invested in a synchronistic overlayering of arrivals, or being in just in the right place at just the right time. Certainly coincidence plays an important part in fiction, but then isn't life like that? The determinists of philosophy think we are compelled to act, but perhaps the compulsion comes from some supernal mind guiding us to the completion of our task, until like Jesus, we are able to say, "It is finished."

In *Haunting*, we see that the supernatural may very well have an important place in our lives, going on unnoticed perhaps, but, in the Branaugh movie, *Thor*, Thor says that "today's

magic is tomorrow's science." (Actually, the quote originated with Arthur C. Clarke) There are very old traditions of doing magic, and to blanket them all with the label of the work of charlatans may just be wrongheaded. Again to enter the world of Shakespeare, "There is more in heaven and earth than is dreamt of in your philosophy." All philosophies fail, all science gets updated, all religions get abandoned, and in the end, it's just metaphor, legends, and myths. We aren't really here. We're still up in heaven, controlling our bodies from this height, our spirits looking down through this wispy veil and when our bodies shudder, our spirits shudder, and wonder about the fate of the puppet whose strings aren't exactly severed, but entangled, like the very small scale universe of atoms and their electrons, are we bonded to our other selves with the realization that not only are we one with God, but we are, ourselves, identical to God.

Chapter 9: Walt Disney is Very Dead

Mickey Mouse first flourished onto the scene in 1928, appearing in a cartoon titled "Steamboat Willy," showing a black and white mouse in hot pants whistling happily while he pilots his boat. In fact, the visual of Mickey's happiness would become a moniker for the very large enterprise that Disney, Inc would become. The fact that they now tout Disneyland as the happiest place on earth feeds into an optimism that belies the reality. If anyone has actually visited the theme park, they would notice that the endless lines, stretching into hours, for the rides, makes an all day affair into a kind of waiting game that makes Disneyland the most frustrating place on earth. Everyone inevitably finishes their trip by getting in a boat and gliding into the Small World ride, with the endless tune, "it's a small world after all," repeating over and over again until you emerge out the other end, wanting to reach for a gun in order to put a rather large hole in your head just to erase the constant hammering of a phony optimism that the Disney myth, if we want to call it that, has spread across the nation with an effectiveness measured by the absolute glee of children.

It was at first children that Disney was targeting when his enterprise got off the ground. Who can forget *Bambi* with the horrid sound of his mother being shot, and then the

coming-of-age story following. But the whole Disney message stood symbolized in the little deer, impossibly cute, and the forces of destruction surrounding him created by somewhat either misguided or evil men, especially when the forest burns down.

But as the Disney brand spread to encompass the whole of American society, Disney was no longer a simple children's preoccupation, but a whole neural pathway dispatching pleasurable moments once the next cute cartoon gets dispensed into the minds of the citizenry now programmed with a whole software package in their minds that when they hear the word "Disney" perhaps a hefty raft of serotonin blankets the mind with an instant Samadhi.

Who can forget the wonderful *Fantasia* with the cartoons fading into unimportance with a compendium of music from Tchaikovsky to Schubert that rocks the human body with now a healthy dose of endorphins suffusing the pleasure center of the brain? We really have to wonder if Disney managed to alter the brain chemistry of America forever.

Their advertising is still slanted towards children although, in Disney's present day pursuits, they have ventured into action movies and giving a decidedly un-Disney impression, perhaps dampening that pleasure, or maybe enhancing it?, with a dented charm now exposed in a profit motive, as it is the mantra of big business to adapt to survive. When the highly advanced computer techniques of Pixar gained notice, Disney, Inc immediately stepped in and bought it up. Now, with animated movies assured Academy Award wins on a constant basis, the Disney brand could keep a toe in the children's movie market, while hooking in the adults with productions whose sheer mastery of animation would be enough to stop the yawns of the parents trying to endure yet another matinee of silliness.

Walt Disney really did want to entertain children. He seemed committed to it with each adaptation of a child's fairy tale. But perhaps without realizing it, he was also scaring the be-jeebers out of them since the hidden motive of children's fairy tales was an old technique, perhaps stretching back a few hundred years or more, to scaring children into good behavior. Just in Bambi's mother getting shot right at the beginning of the movie, shows a darkness lurking in children's cinema that can't really be reconciled with a happy ending.

Snow White does eventually get her prince, but the dwarfs suffer her absence terribly while she sits in what is actually a coma, pretty features frozen in time, until the prince does indeed find her. The unlocking of the curse with a kiss also probably has children in the audience recoiling with the idea of cooties rising in their minds.

The sexlessness of Disney productions would eventually get cured with their excursion into adult movies, but by that time, almost every Hollywood production was becoming more and more chaste in order to avoid that R rating, which was the death knell of raking in big box office success since, as we all now know, it is thirteen year olds that almost every movie filmed now is targeting. Indeed, movie critics often lament the loss of adult themed and well-acted movies having absented themselves for perhaps the last 15-20 years now. Everything is geared towards the young, even when you think it isn't, and any mature subject matter, ironically is now showing up on the pay cable channels, with Sookie Stackhouse of *True Blood*, giving us glimpses of boobs, and *Hung*, giving lots of racy sex. But Hollywood, sad to say, has been completely overcome by the profit motive, and unless we go in search of Indie films, we face a de-sexualized entertainment milieu.

The irony is, the whole machine of big budgets, Tom Clancy adaptations and Jerry Bruckheimer thrill rides, all owe a debt to Disney, Inc that were the first ones to hand Hollywood its new identity as teenage sex deniers. I hope the Chastity till Marriage kids don't slip up without a condom around, not to mention the pregnancy pact of the seventeen girls showing a sign of just how little impact such a message as "chastity" is having on society. The conservative right is losing the war against young sex as it ignores the hormonal drive to be sexual occurring right at puberty. Now, "chaperones" are finding condoms and spilled semen on dance floors since the bump and grind dancing of teenagers has the boys and girls actually fucking during their time together in a pure sexualization of what is supposed to be innocent dancing. And then add to this, twelve-year-old girls giving oral sex to dozens of guys a day, and you can begin to see that the whole definition of what sex is has undergone a tremendous reappraisal.

The ignorance of biology by the promoters of chastity has actually led to an opposite outcome. Only a tiny minority of children will make the pledge, and they will inevitably slip up, as the hormones command just too much control. Without a condom around, there will be a lot of negative societal impacts.

And this trend can be entirely attributed to Disney, Inc. Once Donald Duck, Mickey Mouse, and Goofy, had proven to have short life spans as interesting characters, the expansion into other more mature forms of expression would be inevitable.

But the sheer dominance of the Disney Brand, almost by sheer luck of snaking through the decades with this innocent veneer, remember we had Shirley Temple too, about the same time, giving us glimpses into the mind of a child in complete ignorance that sheltering is the worst way to induct a child into maturity. I once wanted to watch a clever animated movie called *Speed Racer* with my five-year-old nephew, but my brother told me it was too adult for him. What? I thought. It's based on a sixties cartoon, and not only that, but my nephew is absolutely infatuated with cars, and the incredible special effects of futuristic cars and inevitable evil drivers, not to mention a great twist at the end, would have been so great for my nephew to see, but alas, the sheltering mindset of my brother's ideas of upbringing made me worry about the rebellious tendencies that would arise in my nephew's future teenagehood. He only gets subjected to "age-appropriate" material and so inducted is he, that, while I'm babysitting, if I turn on a certain channel, he promptly informs me he isn't allowed to watch it, including the Cartoon Network. Oy vey. I don't have children and I still would do a better job than this. But then, I also understand children very well since I understand growth patterns, early brain development, and the need for the occasional incursion of the adult world into the child's worldview lest they develop an ignorance or immature orientation to life since they are now left to their own devices. Without the smothering they are used to, they might not develop into the full independence that is much needed.

The now highly valorized Walt Disney, the man who just wanted to give children a pleasurable movie going experience, something quite unique for its time, by the way, is now quite dead. So dead, that his body "stinketh," to quote the Lazarus tale. He may be pleased

that the rest of Hollywood now has children in mind when they venture into the "adult" themed movies, but then again, he may be saddened by the complete loss of innocence of the magic children have. My niece woke up one morning and reported to her mother that she had dreamed of rainbows and unicorns. Such can be the tremendous innocence of the child. My niece is also quite creative and shows fantastical flights into play activities as I even joined her once as she played with her fairies, actually making up complicated scenarios I easily fitting into her fictional little world, taking up her storyline and picking up the figurines, we two soaring through the sky in act that can be quite literal for a child. Piaget calls this the concrete operations stage, and it suggests that the inability to abstract, as Piaget wrongly labeled the tendency as it is actually the interpolation of the fantastic into an *experience* of it mimicking real life. But I've found that children really do get the mimicry. It' just that, when they're playing, the toys are pantheistically alive, as the world is nothing but unicorns and rainbows for them. This is the Paradise Lost that is the actual intention of Milton's ranging epic poem. We should bemoan the loss of our childishness, the good kind, the kind where we actually experienced the world as a place of wonder at each new exciting taste, each new exciting sight, each new day just a playground for the senses. We were so creative back then, and growing up should only have meant adopting the necessary coping skills to navigate a cruel world. We never should have lost that innocence, and yet we descend into cynicism because we have become enamored of the need to serve Mammon, not Puck. And so when we fall, we break bones, and when the child falls, he or she just laughs after rolling around on the floor with delight. But life is actually a circle. We began as children true, but, if we're (unlucky?) enough to make it into old age, we again return to our childhood. Old people tap back into the childishness they emerged from, and then, unable to help it, they become children again, going gently into that dark night innocent and free, naked and flying, flying, rainbows and unicorns surrounding them as they return to whatever afterlife awaits us, back to the father, how ironic we should identify God so, where we again become sons and daughters, now having to navigate what may very well be the dangerous waters of this new place, again having to relearn everything we forgot once we became mortal. All of us, absolutely all of us, die young.

Chapter 10: Bogarting Bogart

The Golden Age of Hollywood, as it was called, occurring somewhere between the late 1930's to the early 1950's, had the iron fist studio system controlling the actors' salaries and careers. They had their actors purely in star vehicles so no one would experience the disappointment we get now when bad movies proliferate with our favorite celebrity doing something just because it paid well. Back then, pay was actually low, but the level of celebrity worship was actually higher. We had a raft of very accomplished actors putting out products that are now classics. We even refer to them as classics, and their appearance in the Hollywood canon gives us gems we cannot dim the shine of no matter how ugly Hollywood society becomes or how ridiculous the movies are. In the beginning, to quote Genesis, there was the Word, to quote John, and with this beautifully displayed script/directing/acting giving us a period of moviemaking where there was absolutely no concern for the opening weekend, but only the fame of the studios occurring simultaneously with the actors themselves.

The names are now folkloric: Cary Grant, Humphrey Bogart, Audrey Hepburn, Katherine Hepburn, Gary Cooper, Marilyn Monroe, etc. They were the first "Beautiful People," a phrase that has negative connotations now. When we slip in a DVD to play, the classic we experience washes over us with a sudden epiphany that this is what a movie is for.

What after all is the function of a movie? From the first silent films on, most prominently plateauing in Buster Keaton (Charlie Chaplin), we had the intuition of producers that a new form of entertainment would tap into the escapist fantasies of the working class who needed a break from lives of drudgery. It would be perhaps this money motive capitalizing on misery that first drove moviemaking into a rather pungent reappraisal of what the function of a play is, and then interpolate that into a new kind of visual experience, but it is really the rethinking of Greek drama that motivated early cinema.

Way back in early Greece, perhaps some 3,000 years ago, the play was considered a social good, in other words, when people weren't visiting the oracle for everyday advice, they were attending plays, acquiring the same kind of cathartic holy renewal that quickly began

remanding the gods of Olympus into mere mortalizations of the kinds of corruptible influences citizens of Athens were projecting onto their notion of the divine, an act becoming more and more recognizable as a simple projection technique. Why bend the knee to Zeus when all one had to do was go the Agora and get their dose of religion in the masterful plays dispensing much better contact with the human need to feel the forces of sublimity wash over them.

Grecians began the whole cathartic element present as the true purpose of theater-going as it was in contacting visibly displayed stories, a departure from the oral tradition, that gave entertainment its first instantiation as a vehicle for Michelangelo-like touching the finger of God when our identities disappear into the characters then an instance of real people in a fictive portrayal. We still disappear into the characters, but we are no longer reemerging into an altered sense of ourselves, except in the exceptional movie of course.

One such modern example is the movie *Crystal*, using the movie as a vehicle to hinge the viewer to the alternate reality of the South. We instantly begin to see the intention of the director to make the viewer grow into a sympathetic position with the perceived degenerative state of this never-recovered-from-the-Civil-War South we now consider so backward that we sometimes wonder how it could be part of America at all. A short story by Chris Offutt gave me insight into this perception when he described a group of people, known as “Melundgeons” who live in the hills of Kentucky, as an almost separate race so different is their orientation towards life.

In the movie, towards the end, a blind black man, who is an ethnomusicologist, has come to experience the sounds of a very unique musical tradition. He encounters a woman by the name Crystal who has been in a car accident and with the discomfort of chronic pain at her side, also indulges in compulsive sexual activities that the citizens of her town can’t process as brain damage to the impulse control mechanism in her brain. When they are accosted by a group of rowdies who begin physically abusing them, Crystal’s former husband uses his rifle to frighten the rowdies off, but in a later letter by the blind man to Crystal, “there are bad neighborhoods in every town,” we get that he gets the South is no exception to any other place in America just because the people’s concerns there are so apposite from those

of us in the advanced North. The director wants the viewer to understand the South as a differently configured picture of what is actually universal to the human condition, everyone is just trying to get along with what little means they have at their disposal, adjuring us not to judge Southerners just because they're different. This is not a plea to embrace cultural relativity, just a message placed in the movie to capture Difference in the camera lens so people will gain an understanding of what is ultimately a universal: we are products of our environment despite all the crying of the geneticists and brain scientists that the nurture vs. nature debate has been resolved already just because our experts think they have teased out the mechanisms that make us both different and the same all at one and the same time. We are not programmed machines, but messy sacks of meat that must negotiate the social milieu we're born into for whatever reason (divine providence, past-life karma? We really don't know). We come away from a movie like this feeling a great deal of sympathy for the much maligned South due to the brilliance of the portrayal, giving us a successful message not only to think about but to ponder in a dose of sympathy morphing into empathy with this part of America so generally misunderstood. Such is the small segment of moviemakers who wish to alter our sense of the world, and in doing so, alter our sense of ourselves.

So, if the true purpose of a movie is to invade our personalities with a melding of ourselves with the characters on the screen we wrongly think are so different from us just because they're fictional, then we can see that the dominance of entertainment as the truly only successful import across the world, as the movie machine of Hollywood also has the organic purpose of transformation.

This is what makes the Golden Age so compelling. Lifting people out of their misery is a truly noble affair even if the profit motive lies behind the effort. They were willing to tackle even fractious social issues when Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy addressed mixed marriage in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?*, with the incredibly accomplished African American actor, Sydney Poitier (the first black man to win an Academy Award for his movie, *The Lilies of the Field*), playing the perceived troublemaker with a denouement convincing his white fiancee's parents of the feeble perception of such unions being a kind of blasphemy. Here we have Hollywood attempting to alter society's consciousness and whala, we have an instance of identity alteration.

When we see a movie like *Key Largo*, starring Humphrey Bogart, Lauren Bacall and Peter Lorre, we get a tremendous action movie without any explosions or ridiculous stunts. In order to get the better of the gangsters, Bogart has to hatch a ruse to remove them, which he does with such cleverness that we have to wonder if a script like this could ever be duplicated again. Of course, *Cassablanca* is considered one of the great movies of all time, perhaps remanding *Gone with the Wind* to a footnote, and straddling this great movie is the overweening personality of Humphrey Bogart. The story is so laced with interesting characters, social commentary, (the dating is WWII), we see the evidence of a great novel emerging on the screen where changes in the characters are supposed to happen or else the novel fails. "This will the beginning of a beautiful friendship" becomes the last line of the movie, and the iconic line, "We'll always have Paris," fill the movie with moral dilemmas and notions about romance that we will never see again.

But then again, Humphrey Bogart is the master personality of this age. When I first saw *The Maltese Falcon*, I knew I had just experienced my favorite movie of all time. The attempted seductions of the mysterious woman crying for help from the bad men pursuing her fall flat as Bogart intuits everything about the situation. It is a detective story based on Dashiel Hammett's novel, but the sheer cleverness of the plot twists the fairy tale depiction into a rousing romp through the minds of heroes and villains. Bogey (as I will refer to him now) is just a magic presence on the screen, larger-than-life, masterful. By the end of the movie and the band of treasure seekers discover that the falcon is a fake, there is Bogey with his hands on his hips, laughing at the absurdity of the criminal mind trivialized by its fixation on just making a little bit of money. The morality exposed in the rejection of quickly acquired wealth makes our hero a keen and insightful perceiver of the corruption inherent in the pursuit of easy riches, and Bogey, at this point, just recognizes the risibility of moral stratification between the heroes and villains since the villains aren't really evil, just misguided. There's a sort of congeniality appearing between Bogey and the treasure seekers who just commit to finally finding the authentic falcon and with a gesture of a hand, Bogey seems to be saying, have at it. You're ridiculous enough. I have my own highly developed sense of who I am to worry about, and it is far removed from your trivial pursuits. This is perhaps the best portrayal of a hero in movie history because Bogey's character is so

insightful and so strong that temptations roll off his back as if they were mere chimeras any morally acceptable person would easily slough off.

Bogey's career is punctuated with incredible characters he easily manipulates as if he were not playing them, but *being* them in some way. We have never seen an actor with this level of charisma with the minor exception of Carey Grant. Grant moves through roles so easily that we almost think of him as a child on the playground plying his playboy good looks with the aplomb of a man who has mastered life's tasks in a perfect seamlessness. No one will forget *An Affair to Remember*, with Grant and Deborah Carr pulling off one of the greatest love stories ever portrayed on screen. Women today still feel hot tears on their cheeks when Grant enters Carr's apartment, thinking she has involved in skullduggery in not meeting him at the prescribed place, until the grand reveal happens, and there is her shrunken legs, made useless from a car accident. When Grant kneels next to her, we have a moment of acceptance and intimacy perhaps impossible for a modern day couple.

In this way, The Golden Age can never be duplicated because the very fabric of America has so radically shifted into narcissism that the values of what men and women are capable of has fractured American sensibilities into a kind of unhealthy individualism. Certainly we should self-identify as a loosely conjoined community, but by making America so competitive, capitalism has captured the hearts and minds of the people making a return to a moral authentic sense of what life is for forever obscured.

The protean movements of what human beings should be doing with their lives gets portrayed in masterful scripts and directing techniques. Of course, probably most critics will label *Citizen Kane* as the very first movie to usher in the movie age with its many innovations on the way a story can be told, complete with ahead-of-its-time lighting affects and the farce beginning of the movie, having the dead man whisper "Rosebud" and then spending the rest of the movie giving us a portrait of a character who seems to leap off the screen in his authenticity, but then Orson Welles, the director, would become more and more irrelevant after his trilogy as the decades marched on. But he did leave us this contribution that, had it not existed, it would probably have been decades upon decades before cinema developed into a vehicle to be taken seriously.

To return to Carey Grant, Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* gets us a character who kind of accidently falls into a nefarious plot against America, again with Grant's flair giving us sublimity in what is actually supposed to be a thriller, now and again, lapsing into comedy. The scene where Grant has to duck from a plane baring down on him in an open field is an iconic image for the ages. But we have seen this plot before when Hitchcock filmed *Sabotage*, again giving us evil German spies, and in the climactic ending, where should our hero be dispatching a villain except on the Statue of Liberty, this villain falling to his death in a successful smashing of the plot against America symbolic in its occurrence on the symbol of America's true greatness, and that lies in its diversity, not in its ability to create wealth.

Hitchcock wanted to teach America the meaning of fear, first and foremost of all. So he gave us *Psycho*, with Anthony Hopkins knifing to death a beautiful woman in a shower where the erotic element of violence can't be missed even as her screams happen with short cuts to blood flowing down the drain of the shower. The violence, compared to today's depictions, is really quite tame, but at the time, the thought of women victimized while they're nude in showers, was incredibly shocking. The use of music and cutaways, like the knife hefting up, the blood in the drain, the screams of the actress, and her finally dead, open eyes, complete a kind of horror that makes for an almost sublime beauty in darkness, for what is the motivation of the murderer except his mistaken belief that his mother is still alive even as her desiccated body sits in a rocking chair the warped psycho interprets as her speaking to him when they are only voices in his head. Hollywood was unable to leave the movie alone, as Hopkins kept repeating his portrayal in at least three more sequels until we get a great scene at the end of one having Hopkins poison and then hit over the head with the shovel someone who turns out to be his "actual" mother, the actual villain of this movie, and then the great denouement of him falling again into madness. But Hitchcock is now roundly considered the master of horror, perhaps because he was the first, but then there is the platinum blonde (Tippi Hedren) in the nifty sports car having to deal with a Biblical plague of birds virtually eating their way through humans mother nature has decided to eradicate with the use of our winged friends who are usually considered beautiful, now transformed into humankind's worst enemy. The onslaught seems to abate for no reason, suggesting a

hidden nihilism in life that catastrophes usually happen randomly, and it is only in the mind of God that the true purpose of anomalous experiences can be known. Hitchcock knew how to scare America because he had his finger on its pulse, and that is in their experience of themselves as a people who see meaning everywhere in an actually meaningless universe.

Hitchcock strikes again when he uses the amazing star power of Carey Grant and Ingrid Bergman in *Notorious*. Ingrid is undercover in a household of German spies, there they are again, until they discover her ruse, and slowly try to dispose of her through poisoning. Grant, as her handler, manages to rescue her from the evil clutches of the "husband" in a brilliant scene casting suspicion on the spy himself. With the other spymasters looking on, licking their lips at will inevitably be a horrible fate for the husband, Grant just sweeps up Bergman in his arms with the helpless spy looking on from the door, kind of wanting Grant to take him with them, depositing her into a seat where they drive off with this turn of the tables moment a very satisfying form of movie trickery. But then again Hitchcock was a master moviemaker. As discussed, he just knew how to horrify us. Even today, his movies do not seem timebound at all. Their still occurring currency comes in the identification of the viewer with the characters where we, scene by scene, feel what they feel, and the transformation between viewer and viewed is so expertly accomplished, that the moviegoer will perhaps be completely unaware of the displacement of his or her own personality from its lofty sense of its illusion as a single individual in a land of other equally privatized minds when it is the actual state of things that we are all blended in our collective perceptions with the only distinctive difference from myself and another being the mind I take as wholly mine exploded, when we realize with shock, the very fact that I have been caught off guard by inhabiting the mind of the character on the screen; this hidden empathy is the true operational condition of humanity.

You see, given the roots of pictorial story telling, remember the Grecians, we really learn best in groups, in sharing the contents of emotions easily exploited when we visit the holy cathedral of the theater. People are abandoning organized religions en masse because we have nothing to identify with. The stories of the Bible, the Torah, the Koran, are too close, to known to us, to really create this mind meld we need so desperately in order to experience a true change of heart. Movies have displaced religion, which is actually a return to the Greek

tragedy, where we learn to experience the principle of identification, the broadening of the human personality from its enclosed and private walls into a sense of communitarianism we would have no idea was possible should we just be holding pages of a book, compulsively being people of the Book, when it is really pictures, moving pictures, that change us from dupes of common sense to keen investigators of the Real through, ironically, the unreal. But fiction easily morphs into fact when we realize the fictional characters on the screen are actually stand-ins for the immortalized notion of the fact actually an illusion itself since all is illusion. In looking at an illusion, we see the world as it really is, a carefully crafted illusion, beautiful in its voidness, in its divine fiat as a Nothingness we will never escape even as the movie never leaves the confines of our emotions. This is the true purpose of a movie.

Chapter 11: The Never Ending Story

Rehashing of old plots never gets tiresome for Hollywood. In fact, remakes pop up all over the place. Just as the supposed to be final movie of the Freddy Krueger series made its trip around theaters, we suddenly had *Wes Craven's New Nightmare*, assembling together the original cast and giving us a sequel with the added twist that Freddy isn't really Freddy, but some ancient, primordial being that makes his recurrence inevitable. And then, inevitably, the franchise refused to fold its tent. A remake simply titled, *Nightmare on Elm Street*, assembled a completely different cast in a mucky, actually horrific mangling of the original, making one wonder if there can even be such a thing as an original. Somebody even filmed *Psycho* in a frame-by-frame "remake" not actually a remake at all but an exact copy without the Hitchcock. Homages have been done to Hitchcock before, such as the Harrison Ford driven *Frenzy*, not bad actually, even as the filmmakers tried to imitate the plodding nature of some scenes. My mind goes back to the approximately 15 minutes in *Vertigo* showing Jimmy Stewart driving around trying to crane his head and strain his eyes in an obvious attempt to drive home his overmastering obsession, but it slows things down quite a bit, and as the movie crawls on, we see Hitchcock trying to recapture the tensions that are supposed to be the whole point of the movie.

But the idea machine seems to peter out from time to time and these spates of remakes dominate. Even when they decided to reboot the Spiderman franchise, they simply remade the first one, following it almost exactly, and just because we had a different star, everyone was supposed to be excited about it. Everyone was not.

But the idea that the idea machine would run out from time to time, as originality isn't really wanted after all, just (again) finding the right switch for lighting the scene of a good moneymaker, which is the whole point of even having a "Hollywood" moniker at all.

But this idea of the remake ensures that Hollywood will never run out of ideas because all they have to do is mine the 20,000 foot deep well of the archives, and whala, we have a "new" movie. It seems like the whole purpose of keeping the idea machine going is simply to adapt popular novels and remake, remake, remake, a mantra that keeps the never-ending story mill going on into infinity.

Even the supposed movies that have not been adapted are just fitting in old plots, overused storylines, and dumbed down dialogue in an effort to make something not only a remake, but an update, putting in modern technology and other anachronisms to whet the appetite of a public who can't seem to experience the "new" version unless our current century invade the mind in what ends up being a practical immolation of the former intention of the original. Perhaps people don't want originality after all, just wanting to march in place for the subconscious desire for the recognizable.

Just in the remake of *The Taking of Pelham 123*, we see this too oft trend used to mangle the storyline in what becomes an appropriation of an idea. The heroism of the radio operator in the original was entirely based on his status as a common man rising to the occasion. It had been obvious the filmmakers recruited an actual Subway Superintendent as the authenticity, the New York accent and savvy, and the complete unconcern with danger (since everyone knows that New Yorkers can be quite flippant with it), made the movie all the more realistic and compelling. But in the remake, we had computers and a common

man, unusually Denzel Washington, who morphs into an action hero fit to be immortalized in plastic for sale in a toy store near you.

And then we had the incomparable Walter Mathau in the original, whose detective instincts fill the movie with his deadpan sense of humor until the apotheosis when they discover the hideout of the one remaining fugitive, and with a sneeze, we have his capture just because Mathau had remembered this singular detail giving us, suddenly, a comic ending, exposing us to a perhaps buried satirical element, even as the band of thieves had already imploded, a commentary on the risibility of the best laid plan failing precisely because the planners had no idea about human nature, and we had none of this in the remake.

One remake that actually improved the original was *Anna and The King*, with the slight caveat that a lot of the magic of the original went missing with the overconcern with historical accuracy.

The King and I was actually a Rodgers and Hammerstein musical starring Deborah Kerr and Yul Brinner. So the whole movie seems more like a Broadway Play with not much happening beyond the stage design where even the "King" has his death scene. In this version, Anna Leonowens, is impossibly draped in a period costume, a decidedly western dress complete with a ball gown where she spends all of her time crooning the songs in complete absence of any eastern themes. Brinner likes to stand with his hands constantly on his hips with an exposed chest trying to woo the women in the audience with the mysterious Asian beauty of a king who desperately wanted to be benevolent but seemed constrained by his traditional culture. In this version, the heretical book, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, actually gets staged for the king. The performances by all the pretty wives are meant to be cheeky and alluring. And then there is the scene with the slave girl, who is supposed to be executed for an illicit love affair, but Anna remonstrates the king who only raises his hand to slap her but she is spared. The whole problem with this spectacle lies in its pandering to western audiences who would be hopelessly ignorant of Thai culture and hence be successfully bamboozled by the quaint quality of the portrayal. The director desperately wants the audience to feel the inherent goodness of the king, but it only manages to accomplish a pathetic depiction of an actual tyrant, perhaps capable of unusual feats of benevolence, who

falls flat, with no round edges that would make him at least seem like an actual person. Fiction with only flat and no round characters is always, always a failure. So all we have is the music, and the barely noticeable erotic tension between Anna and the king, which ultimately remands it more to the fairy tale genre because the arc of the storyline eventually foregrounds the musical score and any attempt at a believable world fails.

When Jody Foster and Chow Yun Fat got together to make *Anna and the King*, the filmmakers decided to make something more "real." Once Anna Leonowens arrives on the shores of Siam, remember this is the 19th century, she has to contend with court politics, and some raw emotions as well. Fat's favorite daughter dies while Anna is doing her level best to tutor the wives and the children, not attempting to hide her disgust of the concubines milling around and the numerous children who've come from them. The successor to the king turns out to be quite a bright student who shows interest in the ways of western culture to help him improve his country's international standing. She tries to deliver the ever controversial *Uncle Tom's Cabin* into the boy's hands, but the king intercepts it, remonstrating Anna by holding up the book he's confiscated, telling her westernization is Okay, but not by undermining the culture he's a product of himself. Thus we don't get the quaint staging of the book in a play for the king. And the slave girl, with the illicit affair, including her lover, are summarily executed.

After some internecine conflict between the king and his brother who wishes to betray the king militarily, but gets brilliantly outmaneuvered by the king, we finally have the king's death himself. Almost immediately we have his now westernized successor, instead of mourning his father's passing, rising to his feet and announcing a whole new set of edicts attempting to reform everything bad about the way his father ruled. Anna can at least count this as a victory, and indeed, during the closing credits we're informed that the successor would bring Thailand into a new age with a boy ruler who used perhaps the overblown influence of his governess to transform his society into a more American like benevolence.

The whole novel the two movies are based on perhaps wanted to give feminism a little lift with this presence of an English woman, perhaps implying that women have been behind the scenes prompting social change throughout human history, but just a quick glance at

the patriarchal structure of almost every culture in the world gives the lie to this idea. In fact, Harriet Beecher Stowe, the vaunted writer of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, would be fated to being ridiculed by the very people she was attempting to elevate when they took to calling people too close to acting like white's "Toms." Malcolm X first exploited this tendency to collude with the overseers when he made a famous comparison between the behavior of house slaves and field slaves. It had been a dynamic that was probably operating underground ever since the Emancipation Proclamation, but Malcolm's analysis proves illuminating even today. Harriet Beecher Stowe had not been really contributing to the debate on the equality of African American's, but almost acting as an apologist when the book, as a cultural artifact, was supposed to have a revolutionary aspect to it, but only succeeded in revealing a benignity that really could never exist.

Thus, the whole story of Anna Leonowens is only feminists hoping that women could have some guiding hand in history, when it has almost never been so. Perhaps if we examine the history of the English Queens, we can see some justification to women as social revolutionaries, but in the movie, *Lady Jane Grey*, we see that as soon as a woman, potentate or not, gets the upper hand, she is summarily dismissed. Even Margaret Thatcher's biopic, *The Iron Lady*, we see that women really have to act like men to be accepted on equal footing. Just take a look at Hilary Clinton and how roundly ridiculed she was for her pant's suit, giving the lineaments of the problem. Women are bitches when they act tough, while men are simply being masculine, and until femininity gains its own definition as a form of strength sans the testosterone, there will be only surface acceptance of female leaders.

Although, this idea of the strong woman was successfully foregrounded in the movie, *The Messenger*, the (somewhat) true story of Joan of Arc, again we have Joan dressing like a man complete with short-cropped hair. Her manic ire against the English even scares the men sometimes. In the movie, she is dispatched by being forced to dress like a man again, something she was forbidden to do, implying of course, that this was where her true heroism sprang.

This short diatribe on the failure of feminism except it masquerade as a form of masculinity may be forcing an unexamined fact underground, and that is that, even in the movie industry, we see strict gender separations. I often wonder if a fantastic novel like *Middle Sex*, by Geoffrey Eugenides, could ever get filmed because the ambiguities involved in teasing out the "actual" identity of a hermaphrodite are just too perplexing for the average person. Hollywood has no interest in advancing social messages unless you're Oliver Stone, who tried twice with *Platoon* and *JFK*, but then he had a sudden reversal of fortunes when he made *World Trade Center*, a decidedly hurray for America movie, and I realized that he may have become worried about his shelf life if all he did was point out the evil in the human personality. Then my thoughts turned toward perhaps the greatest Vietnam War movie ever made, *Apocalypse Now*. I watched a documentary on how the film was made in which the director, Francis Ford Coppola, made the statement that movies will never be made this way again. I saw his point. Once, when a take ended, the director noticed that Martin Sheen had stayed in character, allowing the camera to keep rolling. Sheen then went into a kind of trance, seeming to touch something authentic within him when he broke a bottle, actually cutting himself. The camera didn't stop rolling until Martin assured them he had accomplished with the scene what he wanted. Other attempts to go into a movie without a script in order to let the actors completely improvise their interactions with each other have happened, but they haven't happened recently, and the focus on perfection, the perfect take, the perfectly delivered dialogue, has simply taken over as art has taken a long fall into a deep well that will remain off the radar screens of the well dredgers trying to bring back into existence that already well tested idea that will keep occurring, recurring, while the attempt at authenticity, or even the more wished for originality will always lie at the bottom, sucked tight to the mud that will only release the storylines we want to resurface because they are battle ready. They worked once before, therefore, they'll work again. After all, we have the tremendous salaries of the stars to pay for and we have the reputation of Hollywood, once a haven for well crafted tales, now just a propaganda machine meant to loop storylines like an infinitely long movie reel, forever spinning in its slipping wheels, really unable to move forward at all. But perhaps Hollywood no longer believes in its power to prompt social change, instead, descending into the sense of powerlessness we all feel now, without exception, since the Great Chain of Being is no longer an organic attachment to nature, but a pair of handcuffs on the criminal in all of us, and hence we languish in our

everyday jails, perhaps waiting for that chariot of fire, where we will be in thrall again, this time to the dictatorial Christian insight that we can only have a utopia so long as an actual God reigns over us. And again the powerlessness. Where before we were the minions of Satan, now, we are the minions of Jesus, and should we contravene his orders, are fates are just as purely determined. Heresy is always purgatorial. We can never be free because freedom just really isn't wanted. Just wanting to be told what to do.

Chapter 12: A Short Note On Tim Burton

Tim Burton is known as one of the quirkiest directors in film history. He even looks quirky. Perhaps this is an affectation to build an image in an industry where appearances are everything, but Tim Burton's reputation is unreflectively secured, even when he appears to make bad judgments. Well, at least there will be those who perceive these as lapses when the actual truth is that Tim Burton has a mind wired into the creative genius of his generation and that is the flouting of convention for the purer delivery of entertainment not just as a sweetmeat for the prurient, but as a corpse flower meant to fascinate us with its once in a lifetime blossoming luring us into experiencing a kind of beauty that stinks.

When Jesus came to Lazarus' tomb, everyone adjured him not to enter, telling him that the corpse "stinketh." We often use the olfactory sense when we say things like, "I smell a rat," or "something doesn't smell right." These phrases are there in our language because we, like Toucan Sam, have a "fifth" sense that gives us insight into what we think the nose knows better than us. In fact, so vaunted is the sense of smell that without it, we would not be able to taste our food. The whole reason dogs began being domesticated was for their very advanced, seventeen times more than us advanced, sense of smell. Even memories are most easily triggered by the sense of smell since it seems to be the one sense that proves most useful not just for gustatory satisfaction, but for day to day reminders of who we now are as a direct result of this even better than the eyes adaptation helping us locate our very identities and making the whole of life an experience of pleasurable being.

So when we notice that superiority is often marked by how well we use the olfactory bulb, we have to admit that there will be those among us who get that tricking the eyes is too easy. Any street magician can do that. But tricking the whole sensory apparatus itself has to begin with the plunge into the metaphor of fooling the nose that the rot we smell is not a sign of degradation, but a moment of betwixting the mind with a reversal. The terrible odor is actually a sign of imminent pleasure, even as we gaze at the corpse flower' s bloom, willing to endure the assault to the nose because it isn't always sweetness that attracts, but the bizarre as well.

It seemed very early on when Burton began to notice that the way to build a persona was out of the repetitions of "something wrong" colliding with structural images that would identify the movie's creator through the law of five, as early cinema studies critics were calling it. In engaging the senses in a combinant kaleidoscope range of tomfoolery, filmmakers began to realize that cinematic art, like any other art, was the crafting of a style that would mark their works as uniquely there's. It really isn't hard to tell that you're watching a Tim Burton movie anymore, especially when we began to see his use of color, the darker tones, even the black/white striping offsets that signed each of his scenes with his crude, almost stick figure blotching of filmmaking that would otherwise seem silly or second rate, yet as a tool in his belt, only transforms the bizarre into a meditation on the limits of what's possible to label as beautiful.

I start with *Edward Scissorhands* because it's here where we see the Gothic influence in its most developed form. It could have descended into a mere Frankenstein parable, and at times, it does skirt around that rather over used bromide. But then we have the color contrasts, with the primary colors of the suburbanites completely dimmed, if I can get away with the term, by the stark black clothes of Edward, appearing almost like a wiry, 80's hair band inspired dominatrix once the little old lady from Pasadena complete with her 50's hat who discovers him in his abandoned state, just deciding to take him home. Certainly she has noticed his "creator" has outfitted him with scissors for hands, but at this point in the movie, no problem seems to really arise over this. This is because Burton has made Edward (Johnny Depp) actually look like a kind of an innocent waif who just needs saving.

Indeed, when Edward is brought into the suburban setting, Burton portrays it as a kind of blight, especially when we have the appearance of the bully trying to undermine his girlfriend's obvious fondness for him. Burton is beginning to reveal his intuition that the so-called middle class morality of the city deniers is actually more corrupt than the inner city dwellers with all of their gangs and drug pushers. This is especially evident when one of the hornier housewives tries to seduce Edward into a sexual experience. But Edward refuses to give in to the corruption constantly surrounding him even as he uses his scissored hands to make beautiful sculptures out of the hedges that the townspeople begin oohing and ahhing over.

But all throughout his experience in the suburbs, we see that Burton is toying with his audience over the removal of an essential sense, and that is the sense of touch. Edward has been forever robbed of this pleasure of touching, replaced as it is with a dangerous weapon. The theme of the movie will spark reflection on what the nature of pleasure really is. Is someone who can never have a tactile sensation incapable of being fully human? And to go farther, is the impulse towards hedonism only based on sensuality?

A turning point in the movie happens when Edward tries to save a little boy who has been struck by a car. The people wrongly think Edward is trying to hurt the boy because he is inadvertently cutting him even as he tries to extend a "helping hand." Again, this is an idiom that becomes important to the movie. Had Edward had no hands, his disability would have become more a matter of pity than anything else, but since his absent hands are cleavered with sharpened edges, we can begin to see a subtle pairing between sex and danger emerging. The women are initially blind to his menacing hands because they find him sexually attractive, but with the incident with the boy, and the growing realization that Edward must be deemed a freak just because of being different (here we have to understand the movie as more than just a Frankenstein parable, but social commentary on the unease with the disabled), to finally be rid of his inability to fit in, he eventually flees back to his castle even as the narrator concludes that it was his innocence that squared the circle because Edward has a peculiar facility for creating snow, a divine attribute. But, with this movie, we see that Burton has succeeded in making the ugly beautiful with the ultimate

conclusion that society, being what it is, can only reject the different just because they are different. We are all too selfish to make accommodations for those among us who are so morally beneficent but can't take on the regular rigors of being a human when the stigmatized reflect back the corruption inherent in the normal and hence the ultimate retreat into the ivory tower, now a moniker for a home for innocence incarnate, which is probably the holy function for the disabled in society at all.

Burton will take his favorites along with him as directors often do, and so we will see Michael Keaton again in *Batman* after Burton finishes making a commentary on the afterlife with *Beatle Juice*. This is a simple ghost story, but, in Burton's world, nothing operates simply. A husband and wife have died in a car accident in a Volvo (there's that reference to polite society again), and now they are haunting their recently acquired house when new owners move in. They are absolutely barred from leaving the house by black and white striped snakes, and once they discover how to get help by going to a kind of bureaucratic ghost information place, they just can't get rid of the interlopers even in the entirely brilliant scene where the Banana Boat Song sung by Harry Belafonte is entirely frightening, but the people are only entertained since they are just too smug to really understand other-worldly phenomenon as meaning to do harm. It is as if society has suddenly understood the notion of a good scare as really only an amusement ride, since they can't be convinced that harm is imminent, as it actually isn't. It isn't until Beatle Juice, the Michael Keaton ghost, who is supposed to be evil but really seems to function more as a Shakespearean Puck figure, gets unleashed as he threatens to marry the Goth girl daughter in order to take her back to hell with him. In the resolution of the movie, we get that good and evil really have nothing to do with anything, only trickery and the sad fact that we stay eternally in the condition we die in, especially made funny by the presence of a being at the ghost information bureau wearing a pith helmet on his shrunken head. It always seems that for Burton, the true evil is the inability to see the "sad clown," the inverted figure supposed to be making us laugh when his downturned pancaked smile is reporting to us the rotten core of our souls.

And then came the tremendous outcry over *Batman*. It seemed that when this version of the franchise began, the producers, Burton included, totally misread the public, but then this

rather phallic desire to have a Batman franchise continues and didn't really work out until they finally got Christopher Nolan to figure it out. People were absolutely outraged over the choice of Michael Keaton to play the ninja trained superhero. Who ever heard of a former comedian being a ninja? But then Burton was more tuned into the absurdities of the Batman storyline, not the mythical superhero, actually more like superman, persona they so desperately wanted. In the first installment, all of the other casting choices seemed perfect. And I'm sure the producers had decided on Burton, the king of Goth, precisely because Batman is supposed to be gothic. Just look at the name of the city, "Gotham." What seemed like a no-brainer failed though. Burton wasn't interested in the gee-whiz technology of Batman's bag of tricks as a form of advanced crime fighting, but, as Nicholson's Joker finally queries, "Where does he get all of those wonderful toys?" shows us Burton trying to toy with the whole idea of Batman, not as a brooding knight of justice, but as a kind of court jester who can never completely save his city because, if he ever succeeded, he would erase his own existence. So the movie is pure parody, with the crazy purple suit of the joker with wonderful toys of his own, and the threat to the city perfectly parodied in the sight of the anchorman and woman reporting the news looking pimply and mussed because the Joker has poisoned all self-care products. Burton does take Batman's romantic problems seriously though, as we see the struggle between revealing and concealing himself to his love interest portrayed directly enough. But the question no one making the movie ever asked was, is this the real Batman? And for some reason, this was a more important question for this superhero franchise than any other one ever attempted. Once Danny De Vito is recruited to play the Penguin in the second installment, and again, we get Burton's interest in dark themed portrayals and darker still nemeses whose disfigurements invert into overt public success but inevitably fail for the very intuition on the corruption inherent in all of us, and that is the unacceptability of the different.

Burton's Batman fails because the character itself is a failure. What is the whole point of Batman's existence if he can never clean up Gotham? Burton seems to correctly intuit that Batman is actually the Myth of Sisyphus in disguise, as Batman eternally rounds up villains only to see his beloved city go to shit again with the next nemesis figure occurring. Batman can never quite succeed, is not ever meant to succeed, just push along with the little Pyrrhic victories of occasionally rousting one syndicate only to realize that the cockroaches of the

world are just like the actual insects who are evolutionary heroes in that they have been around millions of years before us, and will survive millions of years after us because their level of hardiness would make them invulnerable to even nuclear annihilation. Burton would like us to see ourselves as the cockroaches since they are perhaps our closest evolutionary cousins, not the chimpanzees.

And to wrap up this chapter, I have to make a commentary on his animations. I'm sure no one thought that *The Nightmare Before Christmas* would ever achieve the cult status it did, as it now somewhat outstrips Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* as a Christmas holiday classic. Were people getting tired of the Christian/Santa Claus contradiction? I think they were, and I think Burton made the movie to prove that they were. After all, what do people look forward to more than any other event at Christmas time? Black Friday. The one day in the year when we are assured of trampling deaths in the chase after a cheap Sony TV. The endurance of *The Nightmare Before Christmas* is proof that Burton knows how to read his public after all, and that is that Christmas is actually horrible, stripped as it is of all its sunnier sides, and its wake, commodification.

There are several other animations deserving mention, but to keep this short note from becoming a tome, let me just mention, with a wry smile as I write, the incredibly ingenious, *Mars Attacks!* Of course the Martians would be ridiculed by having plastic domed brains because this sets up the ending of the movie, something that sums up Burton's whole personality to a T. The Martians are clearly winning the attack, and we have some very funny moments like when Pierce Brosnan's head is attached to a dog's body, but someone finally figures out that country music will turn the tide of the war since it makes the Martians' heads explode, which we can see happening within the confines of their plastic domes. Wouldn't you know that the Goth guy would take a swipe at his redneck brethren eventually, as it is the broken toed pickup guy who is the usual subject of the country song who becomes the saving grace of the world? I'm sure Burton meant to imply that had we played The Cure for the Martians, it would only have fed their advanced brains, now able to overrun us for foolishly thinking that darkness comes in only one form. The over done country diet of dark themes is always about the destitution of being primitively locked in a world where the wife always cheats and the universe is just wired to make rednecks blush

white whenever the factory closes or the drinking gets too bad. I'm sure there wasn't one country singer at the time that was put off by the climax, but George Strait and Dolly Parton tipping their ten-gallon hats at the master of darkness being broadminded enough to realize the multiplicity of the thing. I can hardly wait until *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* (at least at the time of this writing) comes out, and we can hear the jeers and cheers for our modern master make their way around the country yet one more time.

Chapter 13: On Clever Plots and Dialogues

I feel like going into an expensive restaurant and going around in circles saying, "Has anyone seen my clever plots and dialogues, my clever plots and dialogues? Anyone? Anyone?" And then they will lift their heads, looking at me as if I had just declared "God is dead," wondering about the anachronism when they heard this before if just in a former life. With one more quizzical look around the room, I will see them shake their heads until they return to their pate and wonder who let the madman in. I suppose I'll just have to photoshop a picture and put it on a milk carton.

Such is the gone-missing nature of what passes for a good movie nowadays. Perhaps we'll have to settle for the "Do you feel lucky, punk? Well, do ya?" It's all taglines now, isn't it? "I'll be back" immortalized in a foreign accent, having a funny echo with MacArthur's claim to the Koreans. What passes for wisdom nowadays is the all too obvious statement meant to be deep when any 3-year-old could have thought of the thing. But, can there even be such a thing as a clever plot or dialogue when all is formula now?

People should perhaps remind themselves of what good dialogue is when they read "The Hills Like White Elephants" composed almost entirely of dialogue that never mentions the actual subject at hand and yet we still get the point, since the tension is the boy/girl conflict coming in the boy wanting the abortion when the girl doesn't. Do we need to resurrect Hemingway just to get a good stab at a really tense exchange between characters after all?

Well, actually, when *Fargo* came out, we were still missing the tension, but the Mid-Western twang coming out of the characters' mouths provided something to hang our hats on, especially when the pregnant police officer has an encounter with a high school classmate, who happens to be Asian, and he's spouting the same accent as her. *Fargo* wasn't just clever in the Mid-Western speech, but the plot too had its moments. With Steve Buscemi growing frustrated with his partner's lack of small talk as they drive down the road, we have foreshadowing that perhaps things won't go as planned between these two. One clever plot twist comes when the two hapless kidnappers actually go retrieve their mark, but it appears she has disappeared out the window, but because the "mute" has been bitten and feels a compulsive need to find some Neosporin for his bite, he discovers the victim has hidden in the shower, and comedically, we get her capture because the sociopath is worried about an infection to his finger. And then at the end, we discover our kidnapping partners have become so unnerved by each other that the Blonde beast not only kills Buscemi but also feels the need to put him in the wood chipper, giving us a great image of a pair of feet sticking out of the machine when the lady cop finally gets her man.

Fargo is meant to be black comedy and we get a lot of this, especially when we have the frustrated husband played by William H. Macy, trying desperately to extort money from his rich father-in-law, and in his brilliant scheme, expects them to just hand over 750,000 dollars to him, but decides maybe 10% as a finders fee just won't cut it. He's completely outmaneuvered having not considered the possibility that this might happen. The comedy of errors that *Fargo* is shows the Coen Brothers at their best. We get some more craziness when they do an under the radar movie, *Barton Fink*. We have to eternally wonder what's in the box he's received from his psychopath roommate, John Goodman, which could be a severed head but he just won't open it for us. The Coen Brothers consistently churn out little gems like this, even as my mind turns to the George Clooney vehicle, *Oh, Brother, Where art Thou?*, I think this may be my favorite movie of theirs because they took the black out and left in just the comedy. Well, there is a black man in it, in the middle of a Ku Klux Klan rally with his pale cousins. Well, it's just plain funny. It's supposed to be an adaptation of Homer's *Odyssey*, but the only feature they've retained from the original is the idea of a journey, of going somewhere only what exactly the destination is isn't entirely clear, but it

hardly seems to matter since the pure wittiness of the movie, with Clooney eternally needing his own brand of pomade, and the worry over their friend having turned into a frog, the list goes on. But where else are we going to find originality except we experiment. But this has become a dirty word. Jeff Bridges even does and incredible job as "The Dude" in *The Big Lebowski*, but as soon as he won his Academy Award for *Crazy Heart*, he did a Disney update of *Tron: Legacy* and we saw even he was willing to just cash a paycheck.

The keyword now is formula. Now from the outset, I should say that every writer uses a formula of some kind. After all, the audience has to understand what they're reading. We could be fated to be like William Blake, who refused to follow any recognizable form of poetic convention, and ultimately be labeled a madman. Scholars would remain perplexed by him all the way into the eighties when they weren't sure to give him full status as a Romantic poet, but perhaps a Pre-Romantic? A designation invented just for him. But the flight into the creative just doesn't seem wanted anymore. It wouldn't be until recently that Blake was promoted to full Romantic period status but then they began making all kinds of odd statements that in order to fully understand him, we had to understand the way he read the Bible. Oh of course, Urizen must be Yahweh in disguise, mustn't he? And Orc the devil too? We were even being told that to truly understand Tyger, we had to understand its rooting in the Book of Job. Of course Blake was enamored of the Judeo-Christian tradition, but this too tightly fastens a Rosetta Stone to his works that is just an outright blinding to his keen insight into the philosophical traditions of his time, especially when we see Northrop Frye engaging him in an argument with John Locke. William Blake was the only writer in history to understand himself as a completely unique representative of his genre, and yet the need to classify him continues unabated. Erik Rabkin, though, sees through the routines of categorization when he suggests all writing is romantic writing, the underdusting of the Ego put into everyman terms. But this brings up an important point. What exactly is an everyman? Just any guy with a six pack of Budweiser in his refrigerator counting the days until he can watch his favorite football team play on Sunday afternoon?

That's the trouble, isn't it? When Siskel and Ebert were doing their famous Sunday afternoon movie review show, they suggested that you vote for the kind of movie that gets made every time you buy a ticket. But since Indies sneak into art houses when they get

released, the nearest Cinerom is the only voting booth available, and they only show the really big movies. I can't remember how many times I wanted to see a really interesting movie but just couldn't because my art house just didn't have it.

I'll never forget though, my favorite Woody Allen movie, *Hannah and Her Sisters*, with their Vaudevillian parents having a fight and the mother saying, "How can you really act when there's nothing inside to come out?" The notion that you actually have to have a personality to truly pull off a successful scene just seems lost when 90% of actors just play themselves in every role. We have glimpses of brilliance, actually a brilliant risk of a career, when Charlize Theron does an amazing transformation of herself in *Monster*, and the model looks movie star turns out looking nothing like herself, not for one instance stepping out of character through every scene in the movie. Now we even have a name for this. It's called method acting. People secretly snicker at those who do this. There are some people dedicated to art. Some will attempt it from time to time, but there will be the inevitable return to the big budget moneymakers and thus has the term "Street Cred" been coined. Perhaps there is just this universal need to be rich and famous that drives all of us, and no matter how hard we try to convince ourselves we don't really care, we all really do.

Just take a look at Johnny Depp. He was often criticized for doing un-Hollywood movies. He lives in France for God's sake. But then Disney knocked on the door, and here came *The Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise, and now we have a decidedly Hollywoodized Depp who can't seem to stay away from the big movies anymore. I kind of assumed he would retreat back into the Indies eventually, especially after *Neverland*, but then came *Public Enemy*, and his cartoon, *Rango*, even won an Academy Award. The lure of being in the mainstream gocart of the really big money is obviously a pressure cooker no one can resist. When Robert Downey, Jr. made the talk show rounds for the blockbuster, *Iron Man*, he immediately announced, "I'm rich" and I'm not entirely sure he was joking. This from the man who put up an incredible performance in *Chaplin* where he exposed more than just acting chops, but talents, like some ballet training, that probably no one thought he had. It's just too bad that the Bible had it right. Money is the root of all evil. It alters every destiny for good or ill in some way or another.

Well, there's still Al Pacino, isn't there? I think my favorite performance of his out of his many iconic roles was in *The Devil's Advocate*. Here we had some really interesting plotting and dialogue. I'm not sure we're supposed to understand the movie as just pure fantasy. The speech he gives Keeanu Reeves' character just before Keeanu foils the devil's future for him, is such genius that we begin to see that perhaps Pacino has that rare quality Hannah's mother was bemoaning. The ending was almost sappy, but the director saved it when, after Keeanu gets his second chance at a new future, a "reporter" convinces him to go nationwide with his sudden stab of lawerly conscience. The reporter morphs into Al Pacino, given the closing line of the movie, "Vanity, definitely my favorite sin."

Al Pacino's career has been nothing but stellar. And he's proven his staying power. Perhaps he singlehandedly saved "Scarface" from being just another gangster movie with his incredible acting. But then, Robert De Niro, perhaps a longtime friend has been doing the same for just as long as Pacino. Producers got them into the same movie finally with *Righteous Kill*. Actually, the acting skill required from them wasn't that onerous, but the nice twist at the end will give moviegoers a happy memory when they did a pretty good job of making you believe it was De Niro who was the bad guy all along when it had actually been Pacino the whole time. I really wished they had gotten them into a more serious movie in their finally being paired together, but alas, for all the formula of the movie otherwise, we at least got to see two of the great actors of all time share the screen finally.

But here we've returned to the idea of the formula. Must the good guys always win? Must the bad guy always get his comeuppance? Are we the dumpster like minds that Hollywood just throws its trash in? I had a conversation once with one of my friends about Nolan's *Inception,* and I should say he is the most knowledgeable man on films and film history I have ever met. I might just have to give him a publishing credit for this book for all the schooling he's given me on cinema. But when I mentioned the incredible originality of *Inception*, he looked down on me unimpressed. Don't you know? he said. They stole it from a Disney Cartoon. Scrooge McDuck discovered how to steal money from dreams years ago. Okay, so it turns out Nolan ripped off Disney, who hasn't? But Dicaprio is a great actor after all, and his body of work is almost as notable as anyone's, Pacino and De Niro included. Well, we spend most of the movie going through the "usual suspects" of a merely action

oriented movie, but he does have that final great piece of dialogue with his memory imprisoned actually dead wife, where he gives a really great performance when he finally releases her from the basement of his subconscious. Nolan shows his directing prowess so that by the time we get to this scene, we feel all kinds of tension because the character has finally found it within himself to do something he hasn't been able to do for years, which is to finally let go of the woman he loves so much, he's imprisoned her soul(?) memory(?) in his mind. It is this knowledge of everything that's gone before that gives us a seemingly authentic instance of catharsis. But perhaps it actually hasn't happened, this catharsis, and perhaps he knows it, since when he finally gets to return home, the token he uses for reality testing that is supposed to fall over in the canonical reality keeps spinning, giving us to understand that realities are always multiple, and finding our way back to the waking one just isn't that easy, since it may be impossible to really "tell" if you're alive or dead, asleep or awake. When does the aha! moment of being real occur? And if it did it occur, wouldn't we just become more convinced of the irreality of everything? This is the whole point of the Buddhist enlightenment, to understand that nothing is real, and now even the hard science is starting to agree with us with advances in quantum physics. So, shouldn't we at least try to be clever while we're still inhabited by the illusion of solidity? Once we finally have our awakening, we'll be like Kyle in "South Park" who can only see shit everywhere, even when he looks at a dish of ice cream. Woe to the man who truly sees things as they are because what he sees will not be pretty. But, unfortunately, that's the reality.

Chapter 14: The Running Man

Stephen King is a prolific author as I think we all know now. So prolific, in fact, that in the beginning of his career, he was churning out novels so fast, that he decided to get around his publishers, who were constantly telling him slow down, slow down, but King invented the name Richard Bachman, and we now have a Janus-faced King. The one with his own name on his still voluminous output, and the body of work he produced in his inability to contain his frenzied stream of consciousness. But the one Bachman novel that got filmed, namely

The Running Man, is what I want to discuss now because it has elements in it that "run" throughout so many Hollywood productions, the chase scene.

The Running Man takes place in a futuristic American society, but the movie and the novel part company right there. The film even recruited Richard Dawson to be the host of a game show with freakish hunters pulverizing people whose only chance of survival is running away from the bad guys. Running away is the whole point of the movie, except of course, for the hero who, while he's running, takes out the hunters in clever ways. They decided to use Arnold Schwarzenegger, with all of his muscle mightiness turning the tables on the game show craziness, until he shows up at the end of the movie, virtually beginning a revolution when they take down the TV show, now a sort of emblem of what their society has been doing to its citizens for all of this time.

But this idea of running away is now a staple of Hollywood. One instance of two people chasing each other on foot came recently with *Casino Royale* when James Bond is chasing an incredibly agile bad guy. The kinds of obstacles they have to maneuver through make it one of the best foot chase scenes in cinematic history, with the bad guy diving through things, over walls, and jumping from incredible heights with Bond in the background barely able to keep up. Of course, Jackie Chan has proven himself the master of the getaway as he's always fleeing his tormentors, using monkey like skills to hop around and scale walls, almost always using things in his environment to foil his chaser until they just simply give up out of exhaustion.

But the notion of running away from bad people is so basic to any action plot, isn't it? In the horror-oriented movie, *Wrong Turn*, all the captives of the genetically maimed cannibals eventually get out into the open, and so our getaways are trying to snake through forest scenery in order to make their escape. Of course there would be the casualties, just as one of the boys (there are an inevitable mix of hot chicks and guys in these movies) who takes an arrow to the back, and we see, alas, running away is always hindered by the fact that the terrain is usually more amenable to the people chasing than to the people chased. It would seem easy to outwit people who all probably have IQ's of eighty, but they're practiced in their sport, and practice does make perfect.

And then we have the Van Damme movie, *Hard Target*, which is about an organization that recruits worthy opponents to be hunted by rich people who want the thrill of chasing down and killing another human. We're given the impression that they've been doing this all over the world for a very long time, so they're in their milieu. They get this black Vietnam Vet to put a money belt around his waist, telling him that if he can make it to the river, then he can have the 10,000 dollars stored there. He tries very hard, but the plot isn't sophisticated enough to give us any real successful "points" for him, as he's easily dispatched. Of course, they eventually run into Van Damme who gives them a real good run for their money until the climax when he takes the other side of the chase idea and only runs away enough so he can begin picking off the bad guys one-by-one, which he does, but of course there is the boss, and when they face off, we have a little more of an actual fight go on, until Van Damme pulls the pin off a hand grenade when (Lance Henrickson actually) thinks he has pulled off a good combat move and poof, we have the explosion and bits and pieces of flesh floating around in our warehouse, which is the home turf for the good guys this time.

Running away from bad people is a recurring dream for a lot of people, who spend some nights fleeing from some unnamable horror until waking up in a cold sweat so real had it been for them. These kinds of dreams are a recognition of our own impotence before forces larger than us, and that force hunting us down nightly is a subconscious truth emerging in the dream reality. The forces in the world are really so much larger than us that we have to realize how puny we really are in the universe. If it seems like someone is out to get us every day we spend some time ruminating on why we aren't millionaire tycoons yet, it's probably because it's true. We all have life tasks to perform while we're seeming to live normal lives, when the truth is much different. True, we are just one person among billions on the planet, just one planet among billions in the universe, just one universe among millions in the multiverse, but for some reason perhaps occluded from us, we matter. But the thought that we might not matter, not matter so much that rending any meaning from the chaos of the world becomes pointless, haunts us all with the archetype of the need to escape, only from what becomes the huge question that torments us unceasingly. We feel doomed almost all of the time but what about those little synchronistic events? The finally getting the job we get that gives us the self-esteem we've always wanted; meeting a soul mate and staying married

for thirty years; a chance encounter with a person who has the ability to change our lives, and does; meeting the one editor in the world who recognizes our genius for writing after countless rejections. Is there or isn't there someone watching over us? We all like to think that God is stroking his white beard, just waiting to walk someone into our lives to change it for the better, but what then accounts for the other side of the equation? Is it the devil? to quote Dana Carvey's Church Lady.

Actually, the chase scene has simply become yet another addition in the catalog of formulas Hollywood regularly draws from. It is exciting to watch people maneuvering through streets in souped up cars with the caravan of bad guys skreeing along behind them, and then the cleverness of elusion, the various ways our savvy driver uses to lose the people behind them. Perhaps Hollywood, now thinking unconsciously, has realized that this primal desire to escape can be really fun, so that when we "cut to the chase," we are really on the edge of our seats wondering what the outcome will be. You see, our lives are ruled by physics like an iron fist. The only reason we suffer physical pain is because we are subject to Newton's laws of motion, and, as merely objects of the physical universe ourselves, we are fated to spending probably half of our lives with some form of physical injury. Even now, I can feel a slightly painful sensation coming from my knee that never properly healed when I somehow fell down a flight of stairs some two years ago. But the flight from others is seriously overshadowed by the idea that we spend most of our lives fleeing from ourselves.

So occasionally we get the movie of the amnesiac trying to recover who he used to be, often, in a tired try at a twist, a worse person then than he has turned out to be now. We saw this before when I discussed *Total Recall* and it turns out Arnold was the architect of his own demise. It's revealed that the character has put himself undercover, but unfortunately for the viewer, the plot as it unfolds in the beginning is too heavy handed to give us any clue this can in anyway be real. If he really is the man behind the curtain, then it seems like no one else seems to know it to such an extent that his sudden demise always seems imminent. It's also too unlikely our undercover man would be so confident in his own survival skills that he would have no safety nets at all in his return to his former identity. But when we discover that Arnold is the true bad guy, he's still believing in his actual goodness, which, because the "better man" will always win, stays good and saves Mars as he was never meant

to do. This is bad filmmaking perhaps but the theme of forgetting who you are only to reappear later in a recovered state has its many instantiations.

The Jason Bourne movies give us the amnesiac hero who, it turns out, is really a government trained assassin, but is constantly on the run, "being chased," as he seeks to recover what happened to him and who he actually is. As we meet him in the beginning of the franchise, we have a man that seems to have forgotten practically everything about himself, but he gets his little reveals when he sprouts amazing martial arts abilities and, as he's running away from the government that created him, he's trying to run into the arms of some new version of himself. He's running away from actual people who actually want to hurt him, but is he running away from himself, the person he simply just doesn't want to be in his quest for the truth about himself? Would it be so horrible to find out that you really are horrible? Maybe we're just not all meant to be saints. Billy Joel does sing that he laughs with the sinners and cries with the saints, while in the same breath mentioning that Catholic girls start much too late, perhaps a dig at the goody two-shoes image that raises the ire of the high school mean girls punishing the weaker ones just because they don't want the corruption that comes with being popular. Perhaps there are those among us who are satisfied with who they are, but almost every Hollywood production that ever touched on this subject always has the geeks ultimately getting their revenge. Is accepting who we really are actually such a huge existential angst? We all seem to think so.

We have this same kind of thing in the Liam Neeson film, *Unknown*, about an assassin who, of course, gets a bump on his head and buys his cover identity. Throughout the movie, we see him absolutely convinced that he's this Dr. Martin Harris person when the whole thing has been fabricated for an assassination plot. Liam has to believe that he's actually the good person who takes himself for because don't all of us have to believe it? The only problem with this thinking is that it's hard to account for how memory is such an overmastering principle as to erase even our deepest intuitions about how we operate in the world. You'd think you'd know whether you like to kill people or not whether or not you've forgotten your name because this seems to be a character trait that memory alone cannot absolve us from. Do we really think that the entire core of our identities is so permanently imprinted in our memories that, should we lose them, we would have no idea of our moral proclivities at all?

The level of erasure required to sink the notion of our lifetime of actions beneath the level of conscious awareness is actually science fictional.

But then we have the movie *Momento*, where our hero is only able to hold a memory for about 17 seconds. All he knows is that someone invaded his house, threw his body against a mirror where he hurt his head, and that now, he has to obsessively find the person who killed his wife, his only clue being John J., and he will keep finding the proper person because aren't there an infinite number of persons who would fit this profile, murdering his wife's killer over and over again in a revenge fantasy that can never end because his disability can never heal. It seems to pair the notion of closure with the notion of a looping tendency in the mind to forever reopen the wound, again because of memory.

Memory does have some important facets to its reporting to us who we actually are as it is through life's experiences that we learn about ourselves. But we can't ignore the other innately implanted tendencies we're simply born with as another stoker for the flame of identity that we simply can't change through the device of forgetting. The level of amnesia required in the above mentioned movies would require cutting through so many substrates of brain structures that other impairments would be inevitable also. Every first year psychology student knows the story of Phineas Gage, who was a workman that had an unfortunate industrial accident when a large pipe went sideways through his brain. The previously affable Gage turned surly and unpredictable and eventually had to be supervised because his personality turned on a dime. It is perhaps this case of brain damage that gave Hollywood the idea of memory as the twist in the plot that would then provide for this good guy/bad guy mixture, but the oversimplification of the idea comes when the Gage case shows that the metal bar penetrating his brain probably should have killed him, and in the fact that it didn't, tells us about how locations of functions in various parts of the brain, when affected, then can lead to total personality changes. The complexity of making a Jason Bourne is just too fantastical to count as anything like a real world possibility when the amount of brain changes are just too staggering to make the transformation successful. The facile acceptance of a simple case of amnesia really creating this much identity confusion just doesn't work, but we aren't all brain scientists after all, so if the plot fits, wear it? Right? Only the plot is fitting this very formulaic approach to what is actually Camusian absurdity

way too often. Perhaps time to move on to a little better effort at what makes us run away from ourselves. Perhaps better to mine the interior of the human soul to discover this need to feel like a good person even if you're not. And if you're not, what's so bad about that anyway? Wouldn't the world be boring without a few villains running around? We can't all be good, and perhaps this isn't even wanted.

Chapter 15: Horrible Horrors

It only made sense that people would want to feel scared sometimes, feeling the thrill of an adrenaline rush at the thought of an imminently appearing danger. After all, as children, we all enjoyed the cloaking of night in which to tell our campfire stories, perhaps with the most popular one the story of the girl waiting for her boyfriend alone now in the car until there is a scratching on the roof, and, upon peering out, sees the upside down body swinging to and fro with a bloody dead hand being the cause of the noise. We like ghost stories because we think they may be true at some level, that the supernatural monster under the bed ever since we were old enough to experience dread, could actually appear in our bedroom, making us scream bloody murder, running for our parents' bedroom sure that the thing was in hot pursuit. But the curious thing was, whenever we dove into the sleeping arms of our parents, the tryst broke, and our bargain with the monster seems to have been that if I make it to the safety of the protective shield that the adult bedroom door is, it would dissipate under the weight of what can actually be labeled a strength coming from unbelief.

And now it isn't too hard to distinguish between how kids process the fear of the unknown and adults, as their reactions to horror movies may seem quite different from each other. When an adult watches something on the level of *Hostel* and its even more horrific sequel, we may see that children would be busily hiding their faces were they allowed to watch the movie at all, while the adults enjoy it as a kind of torture porn. Indeed, especially in *Hostel II*, we get the scene of a nubile young girl, stripped entirely naked and hanging upside down, every inch of her beautiful young body revealed, while an older woman, equally beautiful with perhaps fuller breasts but equally naked, hacks the young beauty in a way that gives

the torturer a face full of blood, not to mention the rutting around in the young woman's spurting blood in a bathtub, making for a perversion perhaps too bizarre to believe.

And of course we have the better torture porn movies, the Saw movies, where Jigsaw happily places people in traps that seem escapable although they actually aren't. But there are the survivors who have to make a dastardly moral decision to play a game rigged for the most selfish to win, as it has been this serial killer's M.O. to select only the dregs of society to toy with. Since each person comes into the game already overloaded with plenty of moral faults, we find ourselves without a hero, only people in survival mode, and we find ourselves enjoying the movie on a level that perhaps we shouldn't since the director has cleverly trapped the watcher into, if only subconsciously, enjoying the bloodbath on a level that should have them chasing down therapists. It is here in the Saw movies that we see ourselves exposed as enjoying a portrayal of violence that goes beyond the normal satisfaction at the underground justice message going on in action movies when it is really just the prurience of watching people die horribly that has found a way to morph into entertainment. The rational faculty of the brain has been successfully bypassed, and we suddenly find ourselves communing with our own dark side, embracing it, feeding it messages of approval, until with the closing credits, we can try to snap out of it, and try to pray normally on Sunday again.

The direction of the modern horror movie has been heading towards more and more graphic depictions. Gone are the days of the howl at the moon and then we only get snapshots of what the violent end of the victim might have been like. Today's audiences are treated to such highly gruesome images, that should they watch *The Creature from the Black Lagoon,* would only sigh with boredom. It used to be that the psychological effect of the darkness invading our reality was the truly haunting thing meant to chill us, but now, we need severed heads, chainsaw massacres, and people receiving axes to their heads.

To turn to Stephen King again, we have a writer who had his movie adaptations seem kind of bland at times because King is very much tuned into psychological horror. And thus, when we had *Carrie*, we weren't being brow beaten by incredibly showy demonstrations of carnage, but told an actually well thought out tale that has within its climax the destruction

of the people who had tortured her, but it's all just a fire consuming a gym that no one can escape. We aren't seeing people running on fire or horribly mutilated bodies, just Carrie striding out into the night having delivered a revenge as a dish served piping hot.

We had the same kinds of things going on in King movies until Stanley Kubrik decided to film *The Shining*. I should mention that a later attempt was made to include more of the material of the book in a mini series, but we had the razor sharp Kubrik version, trimmed down for just the right amount of cold bloodedness that may lack the more rounded supernatural elements, like telekinesis, etc., but provided for a kind of horror movie more interested in the psychology of dementia than gore.

The iconic scene happens when Jack Nicholson's character finally blows it, and swings a hatchet through the door. He pushes his head through the opening, announcing to his cowering family within, "Here's Johnny!" The humor is a little disarming, but Kubrik seems to want his version of King's tale to punctuate with little oddities that slowly, in some minds too slowly, gives us the meltdown of a haunted individual twinned with the haunted hotel. When Nicholson is finally defeated by getting lost in a maze made from bushes, the little boy, his son, escapes while Johnny just sinks to the ground, freezing to death.

Getting Stanley Kubrik to do a Stephen King adaptation perhaps uncovers the difference in what we used to consider scary and what a horror thrill ride will look like now. Where before, we believed there might be a certain level of artistry possible in the genre, now we just hunt down the movies that give us the most entertaining kill scenes. The change from the dominant motif of psychological horror to overt gore almost has an origin point in *The Exorcist*. We had *Rosemary's Baby* too, but it would be the idea of demon possession not demon birth that put the stamp on what would become the whole raison d'etre of the horror movie genre, portray evil as a interested in wholesale destruction, complete with the trail of awfully mutilated corpses to prove it.

When *The Exorcist* first premiered, we had people actually vomiting or fleeing the theater because of the spinning head of the little girl and the vomiting of green goo. We probably hadn't had a reaction to a movie like this since Hitchcock's *Psycho*. Now we really had

something to hang our hats on as the theme of the corruption of innocence along with the visual effects that, again with hindsight, would make today's audiences laugh, but at the time, the thought of a primordial demon actually inhabiting the body of a little girl and being able to hurl a priest out of a window became an exercise in masochism in order to watch. Now producers had a baseline to work from, try to top the last successful horror flick with even more indulgence into the function of evil. That's really what horror movies are about, the function of evil. As long as it can't get inside us, pull us limb from limb, or instantiate into a bogeyman whose face remains hidden while he wields his bladed weapon of mass destruction, we can just experience the really evil people safely tucked away in third world countries where we can remain ignorant of their horrible abuses and only wonder at the minor lusts and dastardly deeds of our own that makes the horror movie an exercise in voyeurism, hence the *"porn"* in torture porn.

But what is the real function of evil? When the *Friday 13th* movies first started appearing, we saw that Jason was often pushing his machete into the heads of young teenagers lustily humping, and we had the same kind of thing in *Halloween*, where the only babysitter in town not boinking a nearby boyfriend is the one who survives. Sometimes, we characterize evil as a form of divine retribution for sin. What better sin to punish than sexual sins?

So, in a sense, we often think of evil as doing God's work, divine wrath on those unable to resist the temptations of the flesh. But then again, this doesn't explain the existence of the monster, the being whose only purpose in the world is to wreak havoc, in fact singly created for this purpose. Is the monster just a mistake in creation, that there would be these horrible mutations with murder on their minds, severing heads and stabbing people to death only because God couldn't prevent their appearance? This brings us back to the original monster, Frankenstein.

There hasn't been one movie adaptation of Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* that didn't horribly mangle the novel in some way or another. Perhaps producers couldn't process the idea inherent in the original, and that was that Frankenstein was a creation, not of a mad scientist who wanted to push the envelope on existing reanimation techniques, but the inadequacy of a thinker to realize he couldn't control all the variables in what he actually

wanted to do, and that was to clone himself in some way, create a being who would be human in all respects, but failed without realizing that to pull this off, he would need more than just a heterodox rejection of (in Mary Shelly's time) natural philosophy. He would need to interject the idea of what being human really means, meaning satisfying individual desire in a way that isn't rigged to make him inevitably fail. Shelly's Frankenstein seems to turn evil only on the basis of being rejected for how he looks. The mirror doesn't torture him, but society itself becomes his mirror. Especially as the monster hides among the logs, using a seemingly moral and good family as a model to learn for himself how to navigate his new world, his first contact is with the blind grandfather. It isn't until the others in the family see him in all his horribly mutated ugliness that he becomes Narcissus in reverse, reviling his body image, morally outraged that his creator has designed him too imperfectly to have a livable life. After the monster implores his maker to make him a mate as well, a request that goes unheeded, does the monster then go on a revenge scheme, until we have Dr. Frankenstein chasing him all over the world. Frankenstein eventually dies of exhaustion on a ship, and with the death of the maker, we have the admission of the created that he can now go euthanize himself, having completed his "mission," the blasphemous companion to one who would be God, and once the mortality of this shabby creator has been proven, the monster has to succumb to the forces of his own inevitability, his own death at his own hands.

We can be puzzled that Frankenstein's monster would descend into a murderous disposition just because of the way he appears to others, but this is an interpolation of the meaning of being fully human. His appearance is so disastrous that he can never have a "normal" purpose in life apart from his creator, so he becomes the torturer, victimizing what should have been divine for him, but he has teased out the corruption of his god, and having superior power, uses it to humble the would-be god. Wouldn't it be something of a fantasy for all of us who can't seem to get ahead in life to actually becoming God's personal tormentor instead of the reverse?

But with the Frankenstein movies, we have the body a simple compilation of stolen corpses with the bolts jutting from each side of the neck, brought to life with a bolt of lightning, complete with the obligatory villagers marching on the castle with their dozens of torches.

And almost every other attempt would just be a knock-off of this formula. There was an attempt at a TV movie using Robert De Niro as the monster, but there was still no attempt to get at the real intentions of Shelly's novel. In this version, the monster and Frankenstein die together in a drowning event just off the prow of the ship, but even this kind of lends credence to the idea that still reverses the original theme: the monster is the true evil that science's imperfections brought into existence, but as we carefully read Shelly, we understand it was the monster's duty to destroy the madman who believed in an imperfect model of godhood. It was he that deserved destroying.

Which brings us to the ultimate question about that function of evil I mentioned. It's to remind us we are very far from being gods, so far in fact that our flaws prevent any sense of divinity emerging because we are too bridled with self interested actions to truly break the heavenly ceiling despite the people we brand saints when they have their ignorances too. Gandhi used to sleep with two young girls in his bed just to see if he could tame his lust. We know he must have slipped occasionally because he had already admitted he couldn't practice Brachymacharya, or abstaining from sex while married. Martin Luther King was known to have affairs. In the eighties, an underground tunnel led between a convent and a monastery in Italy where they actually found the skeletons of babies placed there from the orgiastic thrills. We only need to move back in history a little to view the popes who kept concubines. So, if even the holy among us can't expurgate evil entirely, what hope have we for ourselves? Do we just give up, deciding that being generally dismissive of those less fortunate while indulging our perversions in order to get ahead in life by being takers even when we absolutely know it will hurt someone else? Well, these are all individual decisions about what we can do within the confines of our self-perceived moral fortitude. We aren't even entirely sure what constitutes a proper model of morality anymore when material success seems to be the only standard of personal accomplishment. There will always be the tiny minority of people who truly go on that spiritual quest for the meaning of life, the discovery of the ultimate Good, but with so many organized religions running around telling the flock that who they are now is good enough so long as they continuously proclaim their allegiance to the church, Jesus, whatever, then how are people supposed to feel the need to spurn already codified measures of being a successful human for something more? Who needs something more, after all? Perhaps all the corruption in our souls, major and minor,

are there to tell us something that we haven't realized; the distance between the human and divine may only require a measuring tape to measure the distance between Michelangelo's Adam and the God he attempts to touch. The fingers are just about to meet, and if we could videotape in time-lapse format, perhaps watch the fingers actually join. Who knows? Maybe this is as good as it gets? Frightening.

Chapter 16: Movie Fu

Back when I was in high school, around 1980, my brother and I used to spend our Sunday afternoons watching a show called *Black Belt Theater*, which would give us a Chinese made Kung Fu movie every week. They dubbed them in English, and we found ourselves going around saying, "Your Kung Fu is pretty good," even trying to mimic the diction of the dubber when we made a joke about it. This was my first exposure to movie martial arts. I didn't know at the time the tremendous variety of styles that had proliferated throughout the ages. All I knew was that these martial artists made fighting an art form. And I got the entertainment value element in the rush of watching someone kick someone else's ass without using a gun.

One particularly clever movie, now in a classic in the annals, was about an evil martial artist who had learned to use a metal box that he flung at his opponent that when he caught a head inside, simply yanked the chain, making his enemy's head pop off. This was gruesome great stuff. Most of the other movies we watched showed incredibly accomplished "champions" using their skills to take down whole groups of people surrounding them, as if they were impervious to any technique by those whose Kung Fu just couldn't measure up. A young Jackie Chan would pop up every now and then, especially memorable in *Drunken Master*, where he would feign the movements of someone under the influence, apparently using the fluidity of relaxation to conquer opponents. Once I began to see that the word "Kung Fu" contained within it a tremendous diversity of styles, I began to get incredibly

interested in the genre until things started changing with the pulling off of impossible stunts by really muscled athletes making me realize that there were problems with the filming of martial arts since the choreographers were leaning in the direction of showy depictions of flying kicks, gymnastics, and other practically impossible stunts in what would terminate in giving the public an opinion that martial arts was all about defying the laws of physics and putting on a good show rather than the incredible patience required to truly master a martial art. The martial arts world outside of the movies, at the time, was invested in treating their schools like religions, absolutely having to believe that their style was superior to the next guy's. Actually, Kung Fu is the mother martial art, first developed by 14th century Shaolin monks, but the practices spread everywhere, reaching Japan whose practitioners had a completely different interpretation than the original intention of martial skill. It led to a division in martial arts, hard and soft styles. The Japanese were just invested in using hardened bodies, hard kicks, and force against force. It made for a quicker learning process, since all one had to do was spend three years in a Dojo to get a black belt and believe himself an expert just by possessing this symbol of accomplishment. Forget whether the person had actually attained the level his color grade reported.

And then we had Bruce Lee. His first art was Wing Chun, a soft martial art that treats offense and defense as essentially the same thing. Wing Chun was invented for a woman who approached a Chinese Kung Fu master because, in order for her to get out of marrying a man she didn't love, she had to defeat him in battle. Given that the man was much bigger and stronger than her, the Chinese master had to invent a martial art that weaker people could do effectively without the focus on overt strength. And so he invented a system of fighting that relied mostly on hand strikes and linear attacks designed to be relentless and also clever. In the end, the woman got her victory, and the world got Wing Chun (translated, "Glorious Spring"), a martial art that proves to be formidable even to this day.

Bruce Lee took his master's level knowledge of Wing Chun to a next level when he produced Jeet Kune Do. It's all about breaking down conventional ways of looking at a fight situation which he amply demonstrates in his fight with Chuck Norris in *Return of the Dragon*. Norris' art actually comes from Korea, Tang Soo Do, a close relative of Tae Kwon Do, both interested in that hard style of fighting, so Bruce used Norris, who was also a student of

Bruce Lee, to make a comparison. In the fight in the Roman Coliseum where Bruce has to face Chuck, the difference becomes apparent, but only in stages. Bruce decided to show that Chuck's fighting acumen was actually superior to his own, so he keeps getting knocked down, and it looks like he won't be able to defeat him. But then Bruce gathers himself and decides to expose the world to the principles of Jeet Kune Do. Now Bruce starts relaxing his body, becoming very fluid in his movements and dancing around, using feints and chaotic hand movements to keep his opponent off guard. Now Chuck is completely baffled since he is a prisoner of his own style, only able to keep producing the attacks that have worked for him time and time again. As Bruce learns to fluidly "fit in" to Chuck's fighting style, he begins to easily dominate the fight since making his body softer and more flexible actually made it more powerful. When Bruce throws a punch or kick, his muscles are in a state of complete relaxation until the contact comes and every muscle in his body flexes in a tremendous burst of power. It's kind of like a whip that is harmless until the winding motion of the leather actually makes contact with the skin, leaving an excruciating pain. Bruce does eventually beat Chuck by switching from meeting strength with strength to using his arms like leather straps, harmless in a resting state, but, at the moment of contact, bam! Instant pain. Bruce was asked once what was the difference between Kung Fu and Karate and he said that Karate techniques are geared to outmuscling your opponent with pure athletic strength that will leave a surface wound that hurts, whereas Kung Fu uses internal energy in techniques meant to actually do harm to internal organs. This may require some explaining.

Karate interprets martial skill as the ability to be stronger, faster, and face an opponent in direct linear attacks. There's nothing wrong with linearity, as I've mentioned its effectiveness in Wing Chun, but it has its limits. Since there are such a variety of Kung Fu styles, I'll simply describe for the reader the style of my teacher who was raised to the level of Grandmaster some five years ago. Our Kung Fu style was officially named "Five Formed Fist" and David Everett, my Grandmaster, wanted it to be a complete martial art. Since our style is based on Five Animals Shaolin Kung Fu, he wanted us to appreciate the effectiveness of the soft style. One of the first principles of our style was the circle. But we got to the higher ability of combat domination in a very classical way. We started off using formal stances: horse stance, cross stance, cat stance, backward leaning stance, bow stance,

and one legged crane stance. The purpose of learning stances was a lesson in how to ground your feet and legs, so that when you moved, you were practically impossible to topple over. Later, in our sparring sessions, we were told to use our knowledge of stance work in a merging with footwork as we glided around the floor now fully aware of how one should move in a fight. Becoming grounded was one of the foundational principles of our school.

The other was breathing, completely overlooked by the hard styles. We believed that the breath was the bearer of chi, a sort of universal energy that instantly put more power into your techniques once you learned to channel this energy. We even had an exercise introduced by Bodhidarma himself, a 9th century Zen master, called "Marrow Washing." In this exercise, the whole point was to tense every muscle in the body while doing a technique using snake breathing, focusing the breath so that you make a kind of shushing sound as you pushed the breath out, and then in the in-breath, completely relax. You would be surprised at how much this develops the muscles without lifting a single weight. Speed and power became the yin/yang of our relaxing/tensing practices in the area of breathing.

I mentioned our stance work, the focus on how to move effectively. We also included things like angling, sidestepping a technique, and deflecting a punch rather than blocking it head on just so you could more easily get into the body of your opponent. All of the focus on breathing and the forms teaching us animal energies, made it easier to interpret the energies in others. Add to this Chi Na, or grappling, and we suddenly had every tool we needed to control another human being. There is a downside to this method of martial arts training. It takes a long time to master. I've been doing it for twenty-two years, and I'm still nowhere near my Grandmaster's level. But meet a Karateka who's studied for three years and he will have a completely different attitude about his skill. While I'm just learning to take out squads of people using energy alone, the Karate expert will assume his strength and power will always be sufficient. But there will always be that one opponent who will be better than you, and the only way to defeat that person is by being cleverer, something someone cannot do if they have only strength in their toolbox and also a hidebound belief in the superiority of their style. People do specialize in hard techniques in Kung Fu too, especially in Iron Fist Kung, where the hand becomes like a piece of iron upon contact, so to say that a soft orientation is always wanted in Kung Fu would be misleading. People would

specialize as I cross-trained in Tai Chi, and now I combine Tai Chi with Kung Fu in a realization that my strength as a martial artist lies in energy transfer, not pure strength. But just like every other martial artist, I believe that my home art Kung Fu is superior to Karate, but if you look at masters from both sides of the fence, you will begin to become unsettled by the fact that, over the years, the differences between their martial arts aren't so different after all. Accomplished martial artists kind of regress to a mean of effectiveness that is the pragmatic goal of Bruce Lee's rewriting the book on how to study martial arts. A Japanese master may look incredibly similar to a Chinese master if they both have been studying for a great deal of time. Bruce Lee was just the first to get the uninitiated to a higher level faster.

But Bruce Lee is and probably always will be considered the iconic martial artist of all time. He might have left a very small body of work, but it is as impressive as any in history, especially since the modern martial arts movie has undermined everything Bruce Lee hoped to accomplish with his excursion into filming Movie Fu.

Enter the Dragon was the world's introduction to Bruce Lee. Actually, it kind of piggybacked on the James Bond genre with an evil nemesis with only one hand, but used his other arm with a bladed weapon to overcome enemies. This freakish villain we see so commonly in the Bond movies, not to mention that Bruce's character has to infiltrate the villain's island fortress as a secret agent, showed that the producers didn't want to reinvent the wheel for Bruce. So, against this familiar backdrop of a sort of Asian style "In Her Majesty's Secret Service," we have Bruce prepared to take down the drug ring that is the actual nefarious plot of this movie's super villain (I guess the producers were concerned they couldn't sell the idea of an Asian wanting world domination to a western audience). But the background, plot, or anything else about the movie wouldn't have mattered a jot or tittle because it was Bruce's legendary martial arts prowess that the filmmakers knew was the whole point of the project, and indeed, after the world was exposed to the full mastery of Bruce Lee absolutely clobbering people with perfectly executed techniques (he was an extreme perfectionist), the world responded in kind and loved Bruce, who, had he lived, would have become the most famous figure on the planet. In fact, it might be safe to say that death has yet to silence his influence, as we can almost hear, if only in our dreams, Bruce's famous words, "Be like water, my friend." The whole pinwheel of his philosophy relied on

the liquidity of movement, and the legend of Bruce Lee still drifts into the vacuum of the future, filling it with his story, a story they decided to bring to the big screen in a biopic, *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story*, based on the memoir his widow, Linda Lee Cadwell had written. I should say that the biopic showed no concern for accuracy, and those of us who know his story can accuse the filmmakers of mythmaking with this movie, as it actually has slid down the ladder of Bruce Lee lore quite a bit, perhaps prompting yet another documentary to be released later this year.

Everyone knew that Bruce loved dancing, actually an accomplished Cha Cha dancer. We only get a glimpse of this when the opening scene of the movie shows Bruce going to a dance hall and only getting into a fight with some Australian sailors, whom he handles easily and also flashily, something that gives us the tension between Movie Fu and an actual Kung Fu master's understanding of how to defeat an enemy. It should be mentioned that they decided to go with a young actor named Jason Scott Lee, who had to spend a year even learning how to do martial arts before filming, something we need to focus on for a moment to show the modern day difficulties with martial arts movies.

We can count as one of the first problems the filmmaker's of *Dragon* had to confront was that Bruce Lee was not only a Kung Fu master, but also a very charismatic actor. Not to mention that trying to find an authentic martial artist who could pull off the speed and power of Bruce would become a horribly long process, something that would begin to lay a pattern for the future of martial arts movies. Now, instead of getting into the game of culling martial arts schools for individuals who would be able to both act and perform stunts, they just deferred to the idea that having a recognizable actor athletic enough to do what would only appear authentic since tweaking the scenes with imaginary prowess would be infinitely easier than getting the two skills in one package. Thus we would get *Kill Bill* with Uma Thurman who reported on talk shows that she had been taught no less than three Kung Fu styles over the course of about a year or so, the seeming magic number for "selling" the techniques. And of course, we had Keanu Reaves looking like a real martial artist in *The Matrix* when it would be movie magic that made the skills appear real along with, of course, a talented martial arts choreographer who have become the truly authentic commodity sought after now (Wo Ping comes to mind on this front). Now it is apparent that we are

seeing the “exit of the dragon” since real martial arts in movies will perhaps never resurface. Of course, those of us who know what real martial arts looks like will now forever be unable to watch these phony portrayals without wincing at the artifice, but then again, the people who do enjoy Movie Fu perhaps are only turned on by the violence, and won’t ever learn to plug into the deeper implications about control and self-control that are embedded in authentic martial arts training.

The Beijing Opera was the training ground for our now recognizable artists, Jackie Chan and Jet Li. In a documentary, Jackie and another star, more known in Hong Kong than here, Sammo Hung, described the incredibly cruel treatment they had to suffer under the tutelage of their masters. I could kind of relate when I would think back to a mistake I was punished for and have to do 500 half moons, something that took me like half an hour to complete, as it is just the nature of real masters to be severe. The unfortunate thing in Jackie and Sammo’s experience was the use of fear as a motivator, probably not the best idea to inculcate the love of an art in someone. But it is true that without discipline, a martial artist will never ascend to the wanted level of mastery. We can hardly see a trace of this abusive past in the now Charlie Chaplin inspired antics of Jackie Chan who turned to a more monkey style inspired technique to entertain his audiences with tremendously athletic escapes and evasions instead of outright ass kicking which was Bruce Lee’s method. Learning to turn anything in your environment into a weapon was something my master discussed too, but with Jackie Chan we get the entire setting itself as a tool in his martial arts.

Jackie Chan’s own rise to western stardom would require a few steps and missteps as well. They tried to bring him over to Hollywood in a movie called *The Protector* in the early 80s, but it didn’t go over well because the movie they meant as a star vehicle for him left out the absolute sunny sky of Jackie’s personality in what quickly degenerated into a revenge movie, and we got a diluted Jackie Chan, an unintentional dumbing down of the actual locus of his skill set lying in comedic stagings. They would then try again a few years later with *Rumble in the Bronx*, which was a better attempt, but it wasn’t until we got to *Rush Hour* and its two sequels, putting him into a buddy movie, with the tremendously stereotyped black side kick as comic relief, namely Chris Tucker, that really gave him the

higher profile they wanted. But it would be just a few years later that the media announced Jackie Chan signed a five-movie contract in Hong Kong, that we didn't see him much except opposite Owen Wilson in *Shanghai Noon and Shanghai Knights*, and now he only seems to want to keep a toe in Hollywood with an occasional movie here while he is a superstar in Asia, and has been most of his life.

Jet Li followed a route to stardom that wasn't so dissimilar from that of Bruce Lee's. Jet Li is a marvel as a martial artist. But there is a perhaps unrecognized problem with Asians in Hollywood Movies, and that is in finding roles that are specifically designated for Asian actors simply don't exist. And so, in many movies, it looks like the actor is kind of forcing himself to be a kind of hybrid, trying to match the stereotype that every Asian knows martial arts and also trying to prove himself capable of carrying a movie. I mean, the incredibly talented Michelle Yeoh would be reduced to a Bond girl, until she recently surfaced playing An Sung Soo Kyi in her biopic. But Jet Li persevered until we have what might be labeled the last real martial arts action scene.

Evidently someone decided to do a kind of Matrix-like movie called *The One*, about a serial killer deftly combing through the multiverse of worlds, killing off each of his alternate selves, until with the last one, he would become just that, The One, the only one in the multiverse with no other alternates and hence ultimately powerful. So, in the movie, we get to Yu Law, the serial killer, entering our universe where Gabriel Law is the last needing picking off. They obviously meant to overload the martial arts onto Jet Li because they had Jason Statham in the movie too (also an accomplished martial artist), but he was reduced to only using a gun as a member of the intergalactic police force charged with bringing Yu Law in. There are a lot of the "usual suspects" going on in the plot, but I want to focus on the last fight scene, where Jet Li has to fight himself because, as I just mentioned, we can almost consider this the last fight scene of its kind we'll ever see, not to mention the obvious echoes with Bruce Lee's fight with Chuck Norris in the Roman Coliseum.

Typically, we have final fight scenes in some kind of industrial setting, with molten steel bubbling in steel cauldrons behind them, and the presence of machinery that inevitably turns on in order to let off steam or set off amber alarm sirens. Indeed, Jet Li as both Yu and

Gabriel finds himself in a factory and there is some chasing around until they reach the place the director has chosen for the final showdown. Yu and Gabriel find themselves on a catwalk suspended about twenty feet off of the ground, so we can immediately intuit that the filmmakers want this to be a close quarters fight, where the two have to confine their techniques to what's possible in a restrictive space, and I suppose there is a reason for this choice although it seems a little puzzling at first because such confinement just doesn't lend itself to showy, flashy, flying-through-the-air stuff. It's really hard to know the reason behind this choice of setting because it does seem to be a departure from what's been going on in the Movie Fu genre up to this time. It seems like the impossible has happened, that the filmmakers actually wanted to make it look like two actual masters fighting, an actual example of authenticity popping up in evidently targeting an audience of people like me who have some knowledge of martial arts and are kind of sick of watching an A-lister's practice made perfect. Could it be? Could it be? Do they really want to give us a real live show, as if the audience, by the way having had to spend the entire hour and a half before this scene enduring attempts at mind blowing fantasy, really want to see how real martial artists would behave?

Well, kind of, yeah. It appears like the director wants to finish the movie with a showcase of "actual" martial skill after spending the whole previous time engorging us on the highly unlikely if not impossible.

When they filmed the scene, they had an actual person, who was in a skinsuit with a green screen, fight Jet Li so they could project Jet's actual figure onto the actor later; this, an apparent desire to again build more credibility. Before I get to what actually happens in the fight scene, I should say that the movie becomes a monstrous failure just because this particular fight scene erases the previous fantasy wow factor superhuman weirdness in what actually comes to be a mundane letdown for what an average moviegoer would have expected in this obviously inevitable encounter. But no, sorry Movie Fu lovers, the fight scene is for those of us who don't even usually watch movies like these, so it would only be in the grapevine that a later viewing, probably not in the theaters, that the appreciation of the fight scene would find its proper target. Such can be the obtuseness of filmmakers who

may have entered into a project without a full knowledge of the genre they're filming in. Oh yeah, and of course there's that, the, uh, well, shamelessly ripping off of Bruce Lee thing.

But here we are, Jet Li as Yu, has his coveralls pulled down around his waist, showing us his grey shirt, and as Gabriel, coveralls still all intact, obviously so we can identify who is who. Well, the fists do start flying, and it becomes quickly evident that both martial artists are indeed using a style adapted to what we sometimes call phone booth Kung Fu. They try to sweep legs, and they are, at first, so caught up in their own savagery that they at first haven't realized that they've both fallen into identical styles to match each other: it's really mostly tiger style, force against force, and we see Yu and Gabriel shuffling back and forth with one getting in an occasional zinger only to be matched by the other until it becomes obvious that the two are hopelessly stalemated. Neither one can dominate the other so long as they both employ this tiger-oriented aggressiveness against each other. But here comes the epiphany from Gabriel.

With frustration in both of their eyes, they both take a momentary breather, while Gabriel retreats to a more open area, going into a partial split where he then does something unexpected. Gabriel swoops up into a crane stance, now flowing his arms into a softer guard position. Now, I should take a moment to nod in admiration of Jet because I notice how even his fingers are linked next to each other in a level of mastery unusual for the detail. Martial artists aren't usually checking to make sure their fingers have the same perfect alignment as the other parts of their posture, so it's a thrill for someone like me to witness this level of attention to detail, something that could in no way show up in a rapidly trained actor. But there it is, the tell to the real audience, people like me, this is a real martial artist, and by the way, his Kung Fu is way more than pretty good, it's masterful.

But to finish the fight scene. Now Gabriel is easily parrying and inserting winning hits just because Yu has been too used to overpowering his opponents and Gabriel knows this other way, like the out of the way girl from Ipanema, the softer style of Crane/Snake to penetrate the defenses of someone overly focused on overt aggression. Well, it's Bruce Lee all over again, this time with a guy who didn't discover it like a precious addition to the jewels of the martial arts annals, but a definitely master level artist who wanted to show the world the

power of the "soft fist." Of course after that there's the sappy ending, Yu being thrown off to a penal colony world, and Gabriel off to an alternate where his wife is still alive (did I mention she was killed? Oh, sorry), and everything pans out just right. Well, like I said, the movie doesn't really cull in the right audience with the sort of reverseness of the martial arts portrayals, but, suffice it to say that the "accident" will never happen again, as it hasn't yet and I'm sure will never surface. No, we'll continue to have actual thespians being given a black belt after a mere year, and the rest of us will just be happy with the underground nature of what we practice every day: The Tao of the infinitely difficult, the true translation of Kung Fu.

Chapter 17: A Not So Careful Study of Quentin Tarantino

This chapter is titled "A Not So Careful Study of Quentin Tarantino" because Quentin Tarantino is often not so careful. Maybe he has his status precisely because we think his carelessness is the result of his genius, and it is often the case for geniuses to reveal eccentricities we more easily forgive than others who run the same scenarios in equally inattentive ways but lack the panache of someone we think really is all about pushing the envelope. Tarantino does seem to make movies that get lots of notice and some that just sound like someone just tried to hit a lead cymbal during a drum solo.

No one really groaned about *Jackie Brown*, his "jungle fever" movie involving the Foxy Brown bombshell, Pam Grier, paired with Robert Forster, not exactly A-listers, but nobody raved either. He put quite a screw to Elmore Leonard's novel, *Rum Punch*, with the work of foiling the omnipresent Samuel L. Jackson nemesis figure by dispatching him via the gun of an FBI agent so Jackie could avoid her own collusion. The seduction scene between her and Forster make the movie a real love story, something he seemed to want to foreground and the obsession Forster grows with listening to the Delfonics gives us a satisfying excursion into the apparent theme, which we could say is the attractive properties of two people enmeshed in the same funk, whether black or white or not, might just reach across the

universe that divides them. But the movie will not go down as being among his best work, not just because the movie failed in its intention, but because it showed that sometimes Tarantino's approach to casting and his fascination with wordy dialogue just doesn't always come together in a satisfactory way. The chink in his armor, we might say, is attention to the wrong kinds of details.

For instance, from a global view, we can notice the great rift between *Kill Bill Vol. I* and *Kill Bill Vol. II*. People, I'm sure, are ready to crank up the DVD player over and over again for the first Bill but may hesitate quite a bit when they reach for the second installment, something I think almost everyone does. This is because Tarantino doesn't just fill in gaps, he moves from the cliff notes to the unabridged version seamlessly, making for an audience frustrated over his unwillingness to understand the saying, "Brevity is the soul of wit." So why is Tarantino so chatty?

To take just a brief example, in his half of *Grind House, Death Race*, we get a horribly layered beginning with a nuanced conversation between girls that gets erased once they're taken out in a poor attempt at audience empathy as the first victims of the evil driver (played by Kurt Russell). Some horror movies do want the viewer to make a connection with the victims on a visceral level so they'll be all the more bothered once they're butchered, but the addition of so many details in the conversation before their deaths makes Act II into a kind of void where all the interesting stuff he puts into the dialogue previously we know had no other purpose than to exploit his characters. Well, perhaps this kind of horror formula just isn't the right device for Tarantino since he seems to need space to meander, as usually the circumlocutions serve functions we can more easily see in his better efforts. But, these notions aside, let's take a look at what makes Tarantino's movies succeed despite their tendency to make us go grabbing for earmuffs until the action kicks in.

I did mention casting choices. Well, he couldn't have been more spot on with *Pulp Fiction*, perhaps the movie he made he'll never be able to top. People will study the screenplay (written with the help of Roger Avery) in film courses for years. To pull it off, he knew he had to put a mythic sensibility into each character, which he does brilliantly, and

furthermore, he needed to use his knowledge of how urban myths get motivated by making them both real and imaginary at both one and the same time.

So here comes John Travolta, rescued from the Sweat Hog greasy purgatory he was almost consigned to. I'm sure no one knows better than Travolta that the rest of his career was made possible by his habitual potty going hitman character. The opening dialogue sets the tone for the rest of the movie beautifully when Vincent goes on about being in France and can't stop talking about that famous French food, the Royale with Cheese, courtesy McDonald's. And of course his partner, the Bible quoting Samuel L. Jackson, looking like a throwback with the partial fro and lamb chops when they reach their destination, and whala, the miracle when a frightened teenager unloads his clip, missing them both completely, bullet holes aligned perfectly, suggesting their survival by a miracle from God himself. So we have in place the first part of the myth. God himself will save you by redirecting nervous bullets if he has a plan for you, and we get to that plan, but not really until the end of the movie. But the movie ends where it began, so having a linear timeline becomes impossible anyway, something Tarantino has never been fond of, now really apparent in the cutting and splicing he does in *Pulp Fiction*.

We can actually compile a list of the winning elements that may make this movie part of cinematic history: characterization, i.e., each and every character has a precise function in driving the pieces of the movie into a collective, almost like a dysfunctional village where everyone performs just that one task when it's needed until they're deleted like an obsolete computer program in favor of a totality that can never reveal the real reason of its existence. John Travolta might look like a real person, but fades into unimportance when he visits a nostalgia bar with his date, Uma Thurman, and we get them onto the dance floor. Get it? John Travolta in a nostalgia bar dancing, but at the same time, he's a character in a movie that has other things to do until his time expires. He's so fictional that it's a wonder we can breathe life into him at all. The fact that Travolta isn't consigned to a David Lynch transmogrification is due only to Tarantino's inability to notice he's created an impossible reality for his character, both having an identity outside and inside the movie, as if he were indeed mere pulp, just squashed goo from some leftover marginalia. No, Tarantino hasn't noticed that he's erased Travolta from the picture because he just ignores the double, no

triple, perhaps multiple (?) ironies and we have the presencing of a sort of hero figure, as almost everyone in the movie has something heroic to do, including the really bad black guy, Ving Rhames, in the incredibly bizarre kidnapping scene including himself and rednecks bent on sodomy. The next is the really interesting dialogue often going on between odd couples. We eventually have Sam Jackson saying he wants to wander the earth like Kane in Kung Fu, a notion that I'm sure a lot of people have had since the series ended. But the way Jackson defuses the diner robbery is the work of a suddenly sprouted genius for psychology with the centerpiece being the briefcase that has glowing contents absolutely everyone winds up saying, "Is that…" and yes, and then the close of the cover and the eternal mystery of the briefcase keeping film buffs guessing for eons. Some have suggested that they're a collection of souls being transported or perhaps an energy source so new or so rare that we actually don't have the ability to explain it, making it into a divine object placed in the realm of the mystic's ineffable reality. But that's it, that's the next thing, the minor details that harmonize into a symphony of synchronistic moments that make for a deterministic world: the idea that the presence of these "tokens" makes everything happen just the way they're supposed to happen.

Further speculation will attend the band-aid on the back of Rhames' neck. Perhaps hiding an attempt to remove the number of the beast, the 666, that would otherwise give him full status as a minion of evil. And the watch that Bruce Willis' character has to return to his house for because his father held it up his anus during his whole three-year imprisonment in a Viet Cong prison camp. The value of objects get assigned metaphysical importance and here we have the mysticism of the movie in the cross-sectioning of happenings occurring in the control these details have over the characters whose obsession with their own value now paired with the value of these minor details driving the movie into mind boggling coincidences that just can't be coincidences. Travolta meets his death because of his fascination with toilets, and Willis' character gets his heroic moment because of the watch. So just why this movie doesn't get consigned to just an exploration of the absurd lands in Tarantino's early fascination with the role of how objects garner ruling planet status over us just because of there being an emotional charge to them.

It seems that the kind of movie Tarantino decided to make would be something he would explore in future projects from time to time, and that is the reappraisal of what constitutes an example of good art. His title, *Pulp Fiction*, directly refers to a genre that most people just dismiss as a home for hacks, those who spin stories in the shadows of merely melodramatic portrayals that simply entertain and can never move beyond their imprisonment in a shunned position. But, thanks to a literary school called postmodernism, what we now consider "art" has transformed into a new paradigm where works previously considered bad writing now receive serious attention because the intuition of the postmodernists is that those we find in pulp fiction genres might actually have worthwhile facets hidden in their works if we skew our vision a little and understand the multiplicity of what literary importance may mean. In other words, attending only to the lauded artists who mimic all the right functions of artistic construction, can actually blind us to the higher insight that genius will oft times refuse a pigeon hole, and in knowing this, can we be better prepared to locate art in its multivarious forms, meaning that matters of taste too often blind us to what we can count as a true definition of art, something we may, in the end, just have to throw out the window. For example, Elmore Leonard, whose novel *Rum Punch*, was adapted for Tarantino's *Jackie Brown*, has usually lurked in the corner as a mere popular writer (as opposed to literary), but I read his *Maximum Bob* as an assignment in a writer's workshop, the seeming implication that he has enough literary merit to improve anyone's understanding of what good writing is.

And so by the time Tarantino got around to making his two-volume *Kill Bill* saga, we see him diving into Kung Fu revenge movies of the 70s. The formula is all too simple. Somebody wrongs someone in a highly personal, usually family related attack that then sends the victim on a quest to finally avenge his fallen favorite. This is the same basic artistic impulse from where *Pulp Fiction* came from. And we're supposed to get that the heavy attention to graphic violence is just a function of over-the-top filmmaking Tarantino wishes to again push the envelope in order to see if he can seduce the audience into an ovation of what would otherwise be complete crap.

That will be why David Carridine shows up in the movie, another curious casting choice, Lucy Liu, of Chinese extraction playing a Japanese woman, Uma Thurman, haunting us

with the ghost of Christmas pulp past, Darryl Hannah, until then careerless, and of last mention, Sonny Chiba, who was an actual martial artist doing actual martial arts movies during the time frame I mentioned. The eclecticism in Tarantino's casting tastes, in anyone else's hands, would probably lead to utter failure, but Tarantino is the ultimate pulp artist; able to twist the most mind boggling uncertainties into that threshold where art and the merely functional meet. Having the right cast is usually one of the driving motives of the more vaunted directors, but for Tarantino, the people who play parts in the movie also have this meta-function of having a reference point outside the movie, making his rendering of the "pulp" genre a commentary on the whole history of filmmaking with each entrance into the experiment, something that would seem too ambitious, but a quick glance at the movie will tell a different story: success will flow from how closely the audience identifies with mythical characters, whose importance comes in who they are both inside and outside the movie.

Kill Bill 1, as we might imagine, is not a linear story. In fact, Tarantino seems to intentionally interweave each of the characters' personal bios into the plot as his method of driving the story. For instance, we first meet Uma Thurman's character in a hospital where an unscrupulous orderly has been making money letting perverts rape her while she coma sleeps, until she eventually comes out of it, and, after biting off the tongue of a would-be rapist, gets her revenge on the orderly by cracking his skull open with a heavy dose of door slamming against his head. Then we suffer the loss of her baby (she had been pregnant) when she wakes up without the baby bump, but now she's on her way, first compiling a list to take out the secret assassination squad that wanted her death, but delivered purgatory instead. Now it will take some four hours of film time to get her to her promised land, a timeline we follow with her as she scratches off names of her revenge list, almost like a pamphlet for a guided tour through the mind of a filmmaker who wants nothing more than to serpentine the storyline, symbolized in each member of the assassination squad codenamed after a snake: Black Mambo, Copperhead, etc. So, while Uma sits in the pack of the Pussy Wagon, the name of the truck of the ill fated orderly she has already dispatched, contemplating her toes, we ready ourselves for the inevitable fight scenes, and I might say they are well choreographed. But by the time we get to Japan to finish off Lucy Liu, the gore plateaus with the hacking off of limbs with Uma's commentary on her maiming behavior

showing her foes the "pulp" element when she tells them the symbolism of her violence, and this coming from a Gaijin who shouldn't know such things, hence the narration difficulty that Tarantino pays no attention to because for him it's pure parody, but for us, it's accept the fairy tale element or give up on the movie. Tarantino's constantly taking risks like this in the Bill movies when he makes dramatic leaps of faith about the believability of his world. For one, all of the members of the assassination squad are given heavy training in Chinese Kung Fu by a blind Chinese master (of course, cue white bushy beard and eyebrows), but they're all wielding Japanese katana swords, wholly divorced from Kung Fu weapons where the sword of choice is the Dan Dao, or saber. There's a complete disconnect in blending the two martial arts when we're given lots of scenes in the Chinese training, but none appear on how to use a sword, so obviously, Tarantino may just be wishing to add some Akira Kurosawa lore (enter "Seven Samurais") that unfortunately pushes the movie farther in the direction of make believe. Certainly, as we watch Uma balancing on a stair rail as she fights, we get Tarantino's not being wholly legitimate about our heroine's fighting acumen, something that kind of unhinges the movie a bit since we're not so sure suddenly if we should be understanding this as a fantasy piece. Well, even if we're allowed to accept this as our in-movie reality, we get jostled a bit in vol. 2 when the chattiness emerges, and with it, a real desire on Tarantino's part to put down some real verities: Bill is the father of Uma's baby, in the opening scene labeled "the bride," the baby will grow up to await her reunion with her mother, everyone in the squad needs dispatching because of this origin event of the motivation for the revenge at her wedding to some nobody, Lucy Liu has indeed conquered the Japanese crime underworld, making the viewers have to decide if the semi-impossible events, like Uma unburying herself when she had been buried alive, are things we can process as equal to the other verities of the movie Tarantino, I think, unapologetically problematizes every chance he gets. But such is the risk of trying to make fantasy and reality meet in a movie that can't seem to settle the question of its own inner logic despite the fact that, should the movie continue to challenge itself this way, we might get an unsatisfying ending because we're weary of believing in some strand of actual reality penetrating the ultimately fantastical world.

And this seems to be the way people reacted to the movies, either give Tarantino his necessarily lengthy tether and enjoy the thrill ride as a kind of barbaric but beautiful

madness, or yawn and stretch at the point during the movie when the house of cards has come down, thus deciding not to like it. There are, in fact, a lot of fans of the movie, charmed by the eclectic nature of it while perhaps not wanting to penetrate too deeply into the fantasy element they may have simply facilely accepted, I think the entire point of Tarantino's inattention. But before we get into a judgment on whether or not Tarantino is actually a director worthy of the notice he's gotten, we have to examine one of his latest offerings, which I think gives us the Tarantino we like while laying bare his methods in what would become an Academy Award winning movie, although not for him, not yet (although he would get a Golden Globe for his latest installment, *Django Unchained).*

Inglorious Basterds takes a notion of exploring the cruelty of war by using French cinema as the vantage point to explore a bizarre rendering of how to make a revenge movie practically universally felt like an electric pulse operating ever since WWII revealed a face of evil perhaps too unbelievable to believe. We will have our somewhat corny scene of Hitler getting shot to death so grossly that the bullets actually peel away his skin at the end of it, but Tarantino wanted yet another villain to dispatch in a more clever way befitting his oeuvre. It would lead to an Academy Award for Christolph Waltz as the Jew hunting commander, richly deserved by the way, and also putting him on the A-list by the way. It had an A-list actor in Brad Pitt as the sergeant in charge of a squad of Jewish soldiers whose sole purpose is Nazi hunting in a brilliant turnabout. Brad's southern drawl proves perfect for his character, evidently a man on a mission who doesn't seem bothered that his crew is a band of the usually rejected Jews, but sees the greater evil of the Nazis as a scourge he wishes to make permanent by carving a swastika into the foreheads of the survivors of their encounters with them, even as they manage to eradicate hundreds of Nazis.

Tarantino would have his mythical character as well when the Basterds spread the myth of the Jew Bear, known for taking out a resistant soldier via a baseball bat. It seems to always work on the other survivor who easily gives up the locations of the German platoons only to receive his scarlet letter emblazoned across his forehead, pushing the viewers' imagination so far forward that we can imagine his life in the future having to either try to scar himself further to hide the swastika or else just endure a lifetime of stigma. Of course, the presence of an assassination squad has echoes with the Bill movies, but we have an actual historical

setting reining in Tarantino's more twisted inclinations. But we have to ask the question, why do we have this intersection of French cinema (most of the movie is subtitled) with a wandering band of Nazi hunters? What, if anything, does one have to do with the other? Well, here we have Tarantino's meandering tendency to deal with.

The plot is actually quite complicated since we need to have the two stories cross paths with each other at some point. So the meeting of a French woman, also a Jew, with a soldier who's sniping dozens of enemies gets merited with a movie. It's obvious the soldier is completely enamored with the French beauty, but we don't get a lot of erotic tension perhaps because Tarantino is just too harried about getting to the revenge stuff. Frederick Zoller is the accomplished sniper who falls for the beautiful Shosanna, the keeper of a cinema where the viewing of Zoller's movie comes to be. So, like a swinging door, we get Shosanna rubbing shoulders with all kinds of Nazi bigwigs, and we can almost see her blood boiling with each contact. It's then that she hatches her scheme with the help of her black assistant to set fire to the theater, hence the revenge she makes all the more dramatic by splicing in a video of her laughing insanely just as the celluloid torches. And here is where the overkill sets in. Not only does Shosanna shoot and kill Zoller who has come to have a tryst with her in the projection room, but he also manages to get off a shot that kills her as well, perhaps an echo of just about every femme fatale French movie ever made. Now while the movie theater is going up in flames, bombs go off set by the basterds, and they're even in Hitler's box giving us that gory kill scene I mentioned before. If Tarantino means to mine the essence of what makes a human being a creature worth saving, he isn't stating it in so many words, as he just seems to want this climax to have that over-the-top quality he values so much. But the brilliance of the way he brings the stories together can't be missed either, so we may be able to forgive him not exploring larger questions about human worth when the savagery of war foregrounds and the stabs at ambiguity in relationships doesn't come off, but perhaps Tarantino is just too much like Melville's Ahab to do anything less then his self-created norm that pushes the cleverness of plotting over the more vaunted themes he could easily explore if he'd just slow down and smell the strong fragrance of his strength in meandering providing the space for metaphysical realizations he just can't seem to muster interest in. Perhaps the veneer of a singly focused revenge movie is just what the doctor has ordered for his career, but, as time goes on, he seems to move farther and farther away from

the mystical tendencies he revealed in *Pulp Fiction*. And he doesn't seem to want this tendency to turn as he's already mentioned in interviews that he'd like to stop making movies soon and just turn to writing novels. My cinophile friend and I just turned at looked at each other, bursting into laughter at the thought of what a Tarantino novel would look like. It would probably be a cross of *Running with Scissors* and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and somewhere the two storylines would come together with the two main characters staring at each other over a piece of Elvis trivia in a Graceland setting. I really think Tarantino would like to join all of the fallen folk heroes on the Dark Side of the Moon once he finishes his tenure on earth. But he has such an itch for the meaty conversation, he may have to come to this afterlife bearing a disclaimer: Enter into conversation at your own risk.

Chapter 18: All the Directors with the Biggest Ding-A-Lings

It can sometimes be kind of confusing when we watch the opening credits with all the mentions of producers, executive producers, associate producers, and finally, the director. For those of us who don't understand the inner workings of making a movie, we might remain confused about just what role each rank fulfills. Are movies really the communitarian productions they seem? Well, sometimes we have to read between the lines such as Steven Spielberg's name showing up as an executive producer, but we have a different director, whose name we don't recognize, so we can more easily understand whose film this is. Spielberg will certainly be calling most of the shots perhaps to the annoyance of the director whom we usually assume is in total control of the film. A lot of directors even wish to appear in their movies, and not just in cameo insertions a la Alfred Hitchcock. The most astounding presence of the director as actor comes in the films of Woody Allen.

Now, we quickly get that Woody Allen is going to be the Big Boss of every movie he directs, but it hasn't been until recently that Woody has not been close to if not the central character. So, in movie after movie, we get a lot of Woody Allen's acting displayed in himself directing himself in almost every production. You would think this would become wearing

after a while, but Woody doesn't seem to miss a step. Perhaps the most ghoulish movie he made was *Husbands and Wives*, which was filmed while he was having marital problems with his soon to be estranged wife, Mia Farrow. He used "confessional" scenes interspliced with the scenes of the narrative where we get a Mia Farrow showing signs of great perplexity and pain that, as it turns out, was not wholly feigned. And in *Manhattan* (filmed in black and white by the way) we see the May/December romance theme played out in a perfect mimic of his own personal life. Woody Allen would march through his career trying to produce his gift for comedy displayed both in his directing skill and his acting talent. Lately, he has deferred from appearing in his own movies, and we got *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* where he allows Javier Bardem to steal the show. And lately, we only get a hint of the Woody Allen neurotic New Yorker in the California based character experiencing supernatural nights in *Midnight in Paris*, starring Owen Wilson, a choice that would seem curious, but Owen pulls it off quite well, a real testament to Woody's directing acumen, something for which he would get an Academy Award for Best Director, given to him even though he absolutely never shows up to these award shows to actually collect the hardware. My mind goes back to when Marlon Brando received an Academy Award, but dispatched an American Indian to accept it for him. We will be getting to these digs at the Academy in a future chapter.

M. Night Shyamalan also likes to play an actual role in his movies. He didn't do it in *Sixth Sense*, perhaps the movie that got him the notice, but he did in *Signs* and also *The Village*. Now Shyamalan, we get, has a lot of control over his movies, now considered the master of the twist ending, something he receives teasing over because he overuses the idea. But, the question becomes, what makes a director into more than just a guy who makes the actors act and gives us the whole enchilada in a way that marks him as one of Hollywood's best?

Sometimes it just becomes a matter of a grand beginning. Once Spielberg set a record with *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*, we discovered a filmmaker who knew how to get us to see things through the mind of a child. And Spielberg would remain fascinated with getting us to see the world through the eyes of a child. But then he would make excursions into other less genre based films, such as *Empire of the Sun*, getting kind of panned by the critics until resurfacing pairing with George Lucas for the Indiana Jones movies, giving him back his

props. And then he hunkered down for a movie he felt a keen sense of mission about, and that was *Schindler's List*.

There was hype about this movie since its inception in the chambers of the side of the Hollywood scene that wants to reinforce its self-perception of occasionally having important things to say. Spielberg wanted to make a period piece directly plugging into his own Jewish identity in order to keep Hollywood honest with these occasional incursions into important themes. When the movie came out though, wiser Jews were already worried about Spielberg's self-importance oozing into the mere existence of the project at all. An episode of the TV show, *Seinfeld*, made fun of Jerry being caught making out with a girl while watching this supposedly important movie, suggesting of course, that it ought to rank in the annals as one of the most important movies ever made for and about Jews. I really had a hard time approaching a viewing of *Schindler's List* because my wife is a victim of another genocide, the Cambodian Khmer Rouge Regime. But by the time I fired up the VCR, I found I couldn't get out of the first twenty minutes of the movie because of the slow pacing and the unengaging nature of the scenes. I found it so hard to keep up with the plodding on of the movie that I eventually lost interest without an ounce of guilt because I figure that a movie is not automatically important just because it's *supposed* to be important. To this day, I've never sat through the whole movie.

If we think back to the earlier days of cinema delivering us the masterstrokes of such directors as Ingmar Bergman, Orson Welles, or Frank Capra, we perhaps had an instance of visionaries ruling the roost that had to innovate so much because Hollywood was still as yet an ideal, not yet fully aware of itself as the centerpiece of American culture. So now when we vaunt our directors, we sometimes see a return to this sensibility when someone like Robert Redford stepped behind the camera and gave us a very engaging, beautiful movie, *A River Runs Through It*, pushing the uneven collection of parts played by Brad Pitt into more artistic ranges. Redford had emerged from a milieu that allowed classics like *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and *The Sting* where an emphasis on quality was still ascendant over box office success.

And this is our modern situation. James Cameron, for instance, only produced melodrama with *Titanic*, but it did exceptionally well, thus the throwing of laurel wreaths, and even though *Avatar* would top *Titanic's* money mark, it doesn't save him from simply pushing over a special effects movie that really isn't all that entertaining at the end of the day. George Lucas' *Star Wars* really changed the way movies would be made, perhaps deservedly so, but it spawned a company, *Industrial Light and Magic*, that made him his billions, so we have to wonder about the money motive spoiling the illusion of the great director, perhaps now only a mythological valorizing of the individual who's able to read the culture well and really isn't the modern master we wish he would be. Indeed, he waited for the technology to improve to make his prequels of the Star Wars movies, and in watching them, we have to wonder if he lost some of his directing skill either for being out of practice or simply because "looking good" was beginning to overwhelm more sedate approaches. To digress for a moment, it reminds me when Foo Fighters, a rock band, used a low-tech method for recording an album, something that came off well, but at the Grammy's, they had them perform outside the amphitheater in a seeming attempt to show their disdain for modernism only to turn around and march into the building in order to receive their award. Are we this easily fooled? This kind of desire to be perceived as both an outsider and an insider has broken across Hollywood, and made the rebel figure into an incredible display of phoniness.

And then we have the somewhat neglected directors. It would take Martin Scorcese over 40 years of absolutely stellar work, including such classics as *Taxi Driver* and *Raging Bull*, to win an academy award for Best Director for a movie that kind of mimicked his past work in the Mob movie genre, *The Departed*. Now, if we compare the quality of *Goodfellas* and this almost adaptation of it in *The Departed* that had critics calling it *Goodfellas* with cell phones, we might wonder about a political motive behind the Academy's exclusion from what probably should be a multiple Academy Award Winning director, and I think we can frame the problem if we examine his return to the mob movie in his 1995 production, *Casino*. What we have in this movie is again a lens into the crime underworld in a movie with a great cast, Sharon Stone, Robert De Niro, Joe Pesci, and James Woods, that however, shows Scorcese's penchant for the anti-hero, something that makes moviegoers shy about identifying too closely with the characters because *The God Father* had been long

abandoned as has much of the mob movie genre, making Scorcese appear like he just wants to offend every Italian on earth, making him perhaps unconcerned with popular opinion. In other words, Scorcese doesn't mind being behind the times perhaps because he doesn't feel a duty to frame his own culture in positive terms which makes the ethnic themed artist (those who tend to identify themselves as representative of their ethnicity and create the perception among others that they have become standard bearers of that culture) in constant peril because repeated attempts to make a dig at his or her own "people" will tend to come off as a form of self hate or just plain blind inattention.

Of course, to delve into examples from literature, we all get that Toni Morison means to become the very public mouthpiece for African American renditions in fictional form, something for which she would receive a Nobel Prize, and perhaps the prize was given because she managed to authentically frame the Black Experience in forms palatable to the communities who vaunt her so much, aside from the issue of literary achievement. But Philip Roth, the only living writer to be anthologized in the *Library of America*, once wrote a novel called *Ghost Writer,* which has a main character writing a story about Jews that almost hands his audience a depiction of the stereotyped Jew, complete with characters who are kind of moneygrubbers, causing the levy of community outrage to break. First his parents lay into him, and then they recruit their local Rabbi to actually write a point-by-point letter outlining the ways he should rewrite the story to reflect a more positive image. The whole novel is a searching examination of the writer's responsibility to the ethnic group which is his subject and also his own identity. Should every writer make it his personal mission to portray his ethnic group positively, whether his artistic impulses tend in that direction or not?

What this subject addresses is the issue of artistic freedom. And I think it is in this area that Scorsese's film *Casino* is particularly illustrative upon this tendency to hold the artist responsible for departures from a perceived duty to improve the reputation of his ethnic group when he makes fictions, so when a trend emerges in the artist revisiting material his community keeps hoping he'll move beyond will only mean a wagging finger coming his way, shaming him into a minor position among the really accomplished artists just because he appears to refuse the mantle of apropos cultural expression. Scorcese is guilty of hitting

his stride in a genre he keeps masterfully expanding with a ball and chain accompanying his ascendancy due to his refusal to conform. Once he got to *The Departed*, we still find him mining the depths of the mob movie but this time, the emergent theme is the seduction of darkness and does not become irretrievably culturally derivative. And the thing is, I don't think he cares as he just kept repeating "You know, you just do the work," an actual instance of sincerity revealed that he's hardly tuned into the perhaps unconscious shunning of him in the Academy.

There are also those who gained their reputations as actors first, such as Ron Howard as the squeaky-clean sitcom kid, slipping behind the camera and showing a real artistic sensibility in his directing chops. His best might just be *Frost/Nixon*, the confrontation between a gotcha journalist and the irrepressible ex-president Richard Nixon, played by the recently matured acting of Frank Langella, a movie that manages the difficulty of a simple interview setting for the movie tending towards the mundane, but the way that Ron films it, makes it actually quite piquant with dramatic sequences that take skill to pull off in order to abort almost inevitable yawns.

The other one to keep in mind is Clint Eastwood. He also likes to appear in his movies, which he does quite effectively in *Gran Torino*, playing a grumpy old man who gets in the middle of a blood feud between the Hmong people of Laos happening to live next door to him in Middle America. But he just kept making better and better films, until getting a Japanese man an Academy Award nomination with his *Letters from Iwo Jima*, a movie filmed entirely in Japanese and the script problems, translation difficulties and all, are now legendary. But he just keeps posting up amazing contributions, especially when we get him as a character yet again alongside Morgan Freeman and Hilary Swank (*Million Dollar Baby*), with an ending so morally tangled that a Surgeon General's warning should almost be affixed that this movie could haunt you for quite a long while after viewing it. Just before he's decided to end the life of his paralyzed boxer, he had been informed by his priest that should he go down this road, he might create a burden on his conscience he may never slough off. But he enters into his dreaded action anyway, and we get that his level of self-sacrifice, though morally debatable, will be a millstone we just know he'll carry with him into whatever afterlife decides to accept his divinely beleaguered soul.

But then we have to kind of take notice that there is a class of director who get all the best projects and those who just consistently create these pearly opportunities for themselves. I guess Christopher Nolan had done such a good job with directing Pacino and Robin Williams in *Insomnia*, not to mention the cleverness of *Momento* that it would only seem natural the Batman Trilogy would fall in his lap. Sam Raimi might have given up on the Spiderman franchise, but not before he'd climbed out of the B-movies and now when we see his name, we're instantly interested because he's actually a kind of self-made man.

But we should take quite a bit of notice that I've not mentioned one female director on this list. Not only does directing seem to be a very male club, but we really don't get wind of famous female directors except in romantic comedy attempts such as Nora Ephron giving us decidedly feminine points of view in what would be a natural pairing between movies about romantic love and the actresses, like the recently off-the-radar Meg Ryan. Betty Thomas also seems consigned to fluff, once an alum of the TV series *Hill Street Blues*, she now finds herself doing *Alvin and the Chipmunks: The Squeakuel*, *The Brady Bunch,* and *Dr. Dolittle*, until getting some "relief (comic ?)" with Howard Sterns' biopic *Private Parts*, and *28 Days*, two movies that are a little more serious-minded but still verge on the absurd. Jane Campion is perhaps the only director you've never heard of but you've heard of her work, especially *The Piano*, for which she was nominated for an Academy Award, but it would take, as I've mentioned, Kathryn Bigelow, to win Best Director for her *Hurt Locker*, and we shouldn't leave out Sofia Coppola who won Best Screenplay for *Lost in Translation*, but female directors tend to do small projects and, by the way, are entirely without Ding-a-Lings.

Chapter 19: Welcome to the Academy

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences was first formed in 1927 when Louis B. Mayer, Metro Goldwyn-Mayer, and a cast of 34 other people met at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, California, naming Douglas Fairbanks as the first captain of the ship meant

to steer the young industry of movie making into an era of respectability for the fledgling motion picture industry. Mayer and Mayer really meant the organization to be a mediating body for disputes, but it quickly became evident what the real purpose was. By 1928, the first Academy Awards were held, making this loose confederation of labor conglomerates, directors, actors, writers, etc., into a forum for self-lauding. The Oscar award would appear as a little androgynous man dipped in gold, henceforward the very symbol for what was supposed to be critical achievement, but whether or not we can locate the actual stamp of superiority in the work would remain a problematic that has yet to abate. Perhaps we have here a case of "good intentions" meandering onto that primrose path to hell, an unintentional consequence for what the award seemed to signify, that being popularity eventually outstripping artistic achievement, because some awards that were given just seem either token gestures or, as time wore on, simply an opportunity to make history since, while there were those eternally skeptical of this way of giving praise, the public loved it. Oscar night came to be a real cultural phenomenon even in the choice of the host of the show, something that would itself devolve into a controversial topic only because Hollywood was a compilation of elites, a group of people we know have egos easily bruised.

One of the most whorish examples of an easily bruised ego came when Richard Gere and Julia Roberts pulled together a ridiculous take on the Cinderella fable with their *Pretty Woman*. The fact that the movie contains an actual whore, Julia's character, makes the ego bruising going on in the movie all the more paternalistic, as it caters to a view of two sides of the rejected in society, prostitutes and robber baron industrialists, as golden hearted dreamers who manage to break the chains of their own stigmatization in order to eventually come together.

Julia's portrayal of a whore is so blatantly disconnected from the personality type we would actually find among this population that the movie immediately becomes suspect. If it meant to draw on the frontier myth of the hooker with a heart of gold, it fails in so many ways.

Julia's working girl comes off as more of a college student working her way through school with this initial career choice, presented almost as an internship opportunity, since she

shows almost no street smarts not to mention a skin way too thin to take the kind of abuse she would necessarily be subjected to. We do get to an abuse scene, but her response to it shows the feelings of hurt, innocent waifishness making us perhaps locate her age at 13 so inept is her handling of the "disrespect" of her, something that should hardly rank in the consciousness of a prostitute at all. In the scene, Jason Alexander becomes the sleazebag John that "treats" her just as she is when she shows up at a hoity-toity benefit event for the rich. Just why she feels so uncomfortable by his advance becomes an incredible break in reality when she ought to have confronted this kind of thing on a daily basis. The lack of ready comebacks is simply baffling and makes our "pretty woman" pretty inauthentic. He eventually invades his friend, Gere's, apartment in order to force Julia into sex only Gere magically appears to deliver a punch to the face, cementing the knight in shining armor ardor the filmmakers were looking for in complete ignorance of how phony all of this looks.

I mention this Julia Robert's movie first, because it would be an almost reprisal of this role in *Erin Brokovich* that would win her an Academy Award. The strand uniting the two movies is the sex factor, dumbed down as it is in *Pretty Woman*, now in *Erin Brokovich*, a tool to manipulate just about every man she meets just in the constant baring of cleavage throughout the entire movie, making her boobs more effective than her brain, or such is the impression the viewer immediately gets. The sense that Erin achieved anything outside of sexual prowess is not ameliorated by the success over the lawyers she gained, as this trope just won't struggle free from the image of cleavage so forcefully reinforced. And then we have to address the fact of Julia Roberts getting an Academy Award at all as a polemic on the bankruptcy of the Oscars writ large.

To begin this indictment of the Academy Awards, we should mention the most prolific performer in motion picture Oscar history, Merryl Streep, with 17 nominations and 3 wins. But it can be practically impossible to find a role that she wasn't stellar in. When I decided to watch a movie I first didn't care about, *Julie and Julia*, I found myself completely carried away by Streep's performance as Julia Child. This woman just knows how to act, even when she's accepted a role in a rather fluffy movie such as this, her performance looks nothing like an impersonation but an actual inhabitance of the character she's portraying, leaving me to wonder if they shouldn't have nominated her yet again. But this is the problem with

Merryl Streep. She could easily rack up Oscar wins in almost every movie she does, so I guess the Academy has to kind of choose their battles with her. She is the classic example of the accomplished actress, a relatively short list, but to return to my original goal, Julia Roberts does not appear anywhere near it.

The night when Julia Roberts received her Oscar, oh she was so excited, thinking herself now ranking as an elite among the elites. Her reaction carried me back when they had Halle Barry "make history" as the first black woman to receive an Oscar in the lead actress category, something somewhat obviating Whoopi Goldberg's achievement as supporting actress in the silly movie, *Ghost*. But Halle, of course, shed copious tears with the honor only to see her career actually fade immediately afterward. It took me watching the winning role in the movie, *Monster's Ball*, to understand that Halle had been the victim of receiving a novelty award. The movie itself was crass and ham handed, bearing hardly a speck of subtly, especially in the interracial sex scene that almost indulges in stereotyping. It isn't clear to me at all why they chose this movie to make history with except for perhaps the fact that Halle Barry was riding a wave of popularity, and perhaps this excursion into a small budget art piece was all they needed to motivate the voters to do something that challenges the legitimacy of having an Academy Award at all. After Halle won, she seemed to simply fade away, only getting notice in the X-men movies. And Whoopi Goldberg fell so far down the ladder that she found herself actually inhabiting the center square of that Tic-Tac-Toe game show, "Hollywood Squares" until "The View" came calling and rescued her from obscurity. This fact that an Oscar win would not automatically elevate your career was becoming a painfully obvious reality.

This giving of novelty awards was happening far before Whoopi and Halle were elevated just to see their careers either fade or just collapse. They gave a Cambodian man, Dr. Haing Ngor, an Oscar for his performance in *The Killing Fields*, but movie roles didn't exactly role off of an assembly line for him afterwards. It did, however, give him the power to help his own people with a foundation he was able to start using the engine of his celebrity to power it. I actually got to witness a number of the schools he built when I went with him on a humanitarian visit to Cambodia in 1991, as he was a close friend of my wife's. We were oh so saddened by his shooting death in 1996. I found him to be a very genuine person, living in

Long Beach, California, then considered a cultural haven for Cambodian refugees. Though he was wealthy, he chose to live very simply in a moderately priced apartment completely absent the garishness of most people of his status. We'll never know if his murder was a political one or not, but I can eulogize him here in this paragraph as a very deserving person who happened to get caught in a Hollywood time warp that may not have benefited his career as an actor, but he did have other fish to fry, namely, contributing to the betterment of his devastatingly battered society.

If the Academy Awards don't really perform the function of furthering an actor's career when they win, then wouldn't people call them on it? There would be those who would. There's a short list of people who actually snub the Academy for reasons that may be either overt or more puzzling, but not everyone was convinced the Academy was doing what it was tasked to do. Recognition, after all, ought to lead to building a kind of pantheon of great performances viewers would then want to revisit, but perhaps these snubbers were too keenly aware of the friend of Hollywood mentality that seemed to emerge. Before we get to the specific people who actually did not show up to collect the hardware, we should point out two particular cases where the critical acclaim did not match the performance we're supposed to vaunt.

Tom Hanks came out of obscurity when he forsook his "Bosom Buddy" sitcom, about two men passing as women until later in the series' expansion, they have to inevitably reveal their identities. TV shows usually peter when they get to climatic moments like these. Indeed, once the bosoms were revealed as the flat chests to the women they were duping, the "buddies" then had to go in search of other career choices. So Hanks appeared in a movie opposite Darryl Hannah, an ultimately silly barely funny portrait of a land lubbing mermaid, *Splash*. Hanks would remain in the realm of the absurd until he got the role he really wanted, *Forrest Gump*. As entertaining as it was, I believe that perhaps the only reason he got the Oscar was for his Southern-slanged affective speech put in the mouth of a character that could barely function intellectually. I think the voters were comparing the cleverness of the plot of Forrest showing up alongside famous figures as he bumbles through his life in a fantasy setting, as his real location was a bus stop narrating aimlessly to

whoever sat next to him. It was a well-done movie, but stops short of greatness, especially in considering that copying an accent well might have been the only reason for Hanks' win.

But then came *Philadelphia*, which was in fact a masterpiece unusually pairing Hanks with Denzel Washington who will be my other case study. This movie was released just the next year after *Forrest Gump*, meaning that Hanks was a front-runner for history, back-to-back Academy Award wins, something that did happen. Now this movie would rank in importance alongside other socially conscious productions. *Milk* comes to mind on this front. But exploring the issue of AIDS discrimination framed in the social context of its setting, especially in the persona of a very well accomplished person with indisputable credentials as a top flight litigator getting the shaft because of a stigma that had everything to do with homosexuality. And the choice of an African American lawyer whose portrayed as quite a bit lower on the totem pole of lawyerly reputation tasked to represent him makes for a slightly obvious comparison parable between who exactly the true "niggers" are. This Oscar for Hanks was earned, but the timing of the releases of the movies we're made to believe to be random didn't look that way.

After all, Denzel was putting up a notable performance as well, but it was only Hanks who got the nod, suggesting a kind of agenda of the Academy to do what it began doing with breakneck speed and that was make history. After Halle Berry, we had the first posthumous award in Heath Ledger, the oldest man to win in Christopher Plumber, and the first female director in Katherine Bigelow. Whenever an opportunity to make history arises, the Academy jumps on it, suggesting a darker motive of self-importance for the organization that simply wanted to prove the worth of its existence with a pretense to legitimacy belied, especially in the case of Mira Soriano, the daughter of a deaf actor perhaps only winning for the reaction shot of her father, and Marissa Tomei winning for *My Cousin Vinny* again probably because of the mastery of an accent, a New York accent, and perhaps the personality swagger to go with it. Well, if we take a look at Angelina Jolie winning for *Girl Interrupted*, and then notice how she almost consciously only does fluff currently, we have to wonder about the attitude the actors have towards the idea of quality. They want to maintain their celebrity status most of all, perpetuate their wealth and fame as the seemingly ascendant life value they hold, so cashing paychecks becomes more important

than doing important topics. Which inevitably leads to the question does the Academy itself really only want reputation props more than the honoring of actual art appearing in their invented and very solipsistic world?

Now, as for Denzel Washington, he would get his Academy moment with an important historical piece about the buffalo soldiers who were actually emancipated slaves fighting for the North in the Civil War (*Glory*). That single tear sliding down his cheek as he's whipped for insubordination will rank as an iconic scene in film history. But then came a debacle that probably no one realized happened. In a year of great performances that were slanted in an artistic direction, Denzel Washington would get a second win for *Training Day*. Really? I thought, *Training Day* (?) He's done far better work than that that got no notice, but a little bit of racism crept into the hall that night. It was like it was just the black man's turn to win. I turned off the TV in disgust right after he gave his acceptance speech, vowing to swear off the Oscars for good, but I got over it. The commitment to quality just isn't there, perhaps never has been even as we see Denzel's part choices getting ever more erratic as well. And here I now turn to the Academy Award snubbers, who may have been seeing through the veil the guardians of taste had erected the entire time.

Woody Allen had become the most prolific performer in Academy history with a record breaking 22 nominations for directing and screenplay, but the fact they're keeping score shows a mentality that Academy history was now somehow dovetailing with American history, a sense of self-importance that perhaps underscores their emerging sense as America's central cultural product. But Woody Allen, who led the revolt against the movie colorizers, really seems invested in the artistic potential of the industry. But now with the addition of Academy Awards for people who come up with scientific advances in getting movies made shores up this coming perception that the Academy is getting too enamored of its own significance. Since, this slanting toward giving awards for novelty pieces, body of work awards, and making history whenever they can, perhaps shows an emerging consensus among the artsy fartsy crowd that perhaps giving the obligatory "Thank you, Academy" was just too high a price to pay for what they may have been relegating to a diffused popularity club that was almost becoming predictable so trendy had their award giving become. To show just how diffuse the Academy is, they boast 6,000 members and

among those, actual people who continue to work in the industry directly are becoming a minority. So if the voting process can be suspect then we can maybe sympathize with Woody who never showed up to receive his awards or even bear witness the nights he was nominated. Okay, he did go once. But only because they asked and it happened to be the very year after 9/11, almost turning him into a man with a hat in his hand asking for handouts to please film in New York once again. But it does seem odd that he would continue his profligacy in the face of winning an Oscar yet again for his recent *Midnight in Paris*. But after all of these years, stretching back to *Annie Hall*, which he made in 1977, he still refuses to bask in the limelight of his Academy success, suggesting he maybe doesn't look at it in the same way someone like Julia Roberts does who reacts so giddily. In his eyes, we see only the neurosis of a Jewish atheist he kept reprising in nearly every role, perhaps seeping into his actual personality, as I've mentioned, to such an extent that building a profile of his perhaps multiple pathologies a dissertation could be done on, perhaps already has.

But there would be others. Katherine Hepburn racked up 12 nominations and won 4 times, all of which never motivated her attendance either. But for her, we might think of a different motive, a perhaps elitist motive. Since she comes from a very entrenched New England family, her blood is quite blue, as prominent old money families in New England inevitably get tangled up in the elite, literary culture that hallows the right kind of schools, and hence the right kind of people, Katherine, we might surmise, might have been a little embarrassed by her involvement in Hollywood. She was, after all, the one who started the commuting from the East Coast to the West Coast, again inferring that this comes as a wish to represent herself not as a Hollywood elite, but as a New England elite. It's not clear, but I think there were probably members of her own family that kind of frowned on her association with those "thespian" people, as I'm sure they thought of them being a New Englander myself. I know the level of snootiness these people are capable of, and if this thinking did not trickle down to Katherine, I would indeed be surprised. (I never acquired the attitude myself since I was a transplant from the west and my family never had money).

In 1971, George C. Scott proved to be one of the artsy fartsy people when he was quoted as calling the Awards Show a "two hour meat parade" only done for economic reasons.

Needless to say, he did not put himself on a meat hook, and was not playing the clown in his disdain of the show in not showing up for his win for *Patton*. But, does Scott's comment reflect a dissatisfaction with the spectacle of the show or unveil a darker reason for the snubbers who inevitably accept the award, just hate participating in something they consider a kind of sham. But the roots of their discontent really don't seem to join into a noticeable thread of similarity between them, so we ultimately speculate on their latent hatred although perhaps privately reveling in the honor it actually is, or is it? I already mentioned Marlon Brando's protest of the treatment of Native Americans by sending a woman named Sacheen Littlefeather to actually turn down the award. I suppose we need a way of regarding the Academy for what may come closer to a more authentic representation of its value. We already know that the self-lauding was an early motivator, and the cultural importance it would assume is perhaps where we have to start a commentary on a better regard of its usefulness to society.

People all over the world watch Hollywood movies, and I mean all over the world. So we can see a Hollywood production getting international release being given an ambassadorial role, a view into the creativity of the world's most salacious money machine that America actually is. If it weren't for the market crash of 2008, perhaps perceptions would still remain high of America as the place for unfettered progress, both personally and professionally. The escapist quality of going to the movies put the lie that DVD's would kill Hollywood because they see any incursion into their really conspicuous consumption habits an affront to the maximizing of profits that makes for a determinism in capitalism that refuses to lower expectations in the interest of empathy, as it doesn't just seem to arise. Now with illegal downloading on the Internet, we again have given the profit monger Hollywood people (now grafting in the music industry as well) crying foul even though it would be hard to find how their bottom lines have dented when they aren't exactly going into foreclosure over it. South Park did a parody on this instinct to attack any sign of profit loss when a sad faced FBI agent points to Jay-Z who's crying over not being able to afford a gold-plated shark tank. Trey Parker and Matthew Stone use this episode to show the absurdity of already well healed, fantastically rich film and music stars worried about illegal downloading again brings out the need to point out how DVD's did not kill the industry either. Piracy can be a real problem since I was a victim once too, when a Young Adult novel I'd written as a free

ebook download showed up on Amazon for sale with my name still attached. Just prior to discovering the theft, I'd read about a famous author, Anne Patchett, absolutely laying into Amazon for wrecking the corner bookstore, and diminishing the culture of reading and the value of browsing, all things that I could relate to, as these were parts of my value system too. But when my own book got pirated, the rage I felt was uncontainable and I'm still adding zero's to the suit that's coming there way since it's apparently known they don't check where their material is coming from, and I wish to have a very public dragout fight with them for a level of negligence that should probably have people going to jail. I'm not even in print, so any piracy affecting me is like stealing the last piece of bread out of the hobo's hand. I just want readership. Maybe mainstream success will come later, but I'm really about just having a place to showcase what I write. So we'll see if my suit makes the media or not. Stay tuned.

Chapter 20: Searching for Bobby Fischer: The Biopic

Just how to distill the elements of a person's life within the borders of a 120- minute production can seem a daunting task. Among the range of individuals that can become the subject of a biopic, we'll usually see a preference for a very famous person such as Idi Amin in the slightly weirdly titled *The Last King of Scotland* or more recently, getting Morgan Freeman to portray Nelson Mandela in *Invictus*. But with this movie especially, we see quite clearly the need to choose a place to pick up the strand of the person's life the director wants to highlight, giving privilege to what will constitute a good story over trying to stuff the entirety of an individual's experiential history within an acceptable movie reality time frame. Thus the biopic will more often than not use the historical figure of the celebrity's life they're portraying more as a platform for what the filmmaker thinks will actually constitute an interesting story.

When Spike Lee chose to do Malcolm X, we saw a filmmaker wanting to valorize someone he thinks is a somewhat transcendent figure, so his movie becomes something of an epic

with disputable accuracy just in this wish to paint a more saintly picture. *Ghandi* seemed to trend this way as well. If the movie is to be believed, Ghandi singlehandedly stopped a civil war just by stopping his hands from bringing food near his mouth. But in *Lawrence of Arabia*, we get a more complex man, perhaps because the director viewed his contradictions just as important as his contributions. Where to draw the line between a portrayal that is overly invested in trumpeting superior character and one that overly fictionalizes in the interest of a good story I think may be a tension in the biopic that largely goes unnoticed.

For example, the portrayal of John Nash in *A Beautiful Mind* tried very hard to involve the viewer with the complexities of his schizophrenic fantasies in a try at a twist in the sense that we were supposed to believe everything we witness until the apotheosis when we realize none of it actually happened. This approach proved ineffective for me because it seemed to bend the genre of the biopic by making it have some kind of action movie embedded within it that we're then supposed to integrate once we understand the truth of his condition. It is a kind of character identification that does more to alienate us from the character when we might shock ourselves with the recognition of resentment at the character for putting us through that. The psychology of the biopic has to be aware that the person on the screen has to closely resemble the person the public knows, or else they may unintentionally produce a mind game that defeats the narrative purpose of the movie.

The Aviator became the title for Scorcese's depiction of Howard Hughes, something that we're meant to believe was so central to Hughes' identification of himself. Indeed, Scorcese does seem careful to keep foregrounding Hughes' fascination with airplanes throughout the movie. Even as he's trying to seduce Katherine Hepburn, we see him using his plane as a romantic ploy when he lets her steer for a while. The deviations into dating children and his well known obsessive-compulsive tendencies laid alongside a sort of agoraphobia might have played the crazy card too heavily, and I heard some complaining about the movie spending too much time on scenes exposing his mental illness, but for me, it didn't detract because I felt the occasional lapses into madness seeming to magically fade when he would abandon his hermitage almost the next day for a trip to argue with Congressmen, gave a very vibrant portrait of a very forcefully willed man. Complexity can sometimes be confused with exploitation. In the hands of the right director, and certainly Scorcese is that, what may

seem a lack of balance on the surface is actually the felt need of the filmmaker to round out his character in the many angles that a person's life can be viewed. And that is just another problem with biopics; the fact that the "real" person is also a character in a story, and the story just happens to be his own life. So as to whether we're actually getting a mimicking of reality is just not a sustainable concept. The biopic is not a factual, documentary sort of movie, but a dramatization of what this writer's view of the person is. Even *The Ten Commandments* is self-consciously the biopic of Moses, so where we limn the borders of fiction and fact can be a difficult problematic that only really sensitive storytellers will truly understand the implications of.

This fact/fiction borderline will constantly fluctuate in the biopic. In the recent *My Week with Marilyn*, we're only getting mythology in what is a portrayal based on what Marilyn Monroe might have been like just as seen through the eyes of the character actually telling the story. We sometimes get sideways biopic movies that are only barely aware that there are genre issues in what they're doing, and what they're doing is backing into a biopic sort of haphazardly.

Also, movies about serial killers want to both be horror genre films and excursions into the criminal mind of the serial killer as well. I already mentioned the Charlize Theron driven *Monster* that shows scenes of her actually killing people and then the latent homosexuality hoping to give insight into her character, something done quite well, but one wonders if we can call movies like this biopics or simply horror movies that happen to feature a real person as their topic. *Summer of Sam* is more about the social situation during the criminal rampage than the wish to give us a biography of Michael Berkowitz. We only get a glimpse of his personality when he's finally captured where, as he's riding in the back of the police car, he says, "I'm going to be famous now, aren't I?" And in *Zodiac*, we of course never see the true subject of the movie, the Zodiac killer, but again, we're getting scene after scene of the attempt to catch hm. It seems that serial killer movies that portray fictional characters, such as in *Taking Lives* and *Silence of the Lambs*, we get a more compelling picture, perhaps because the dedication to character development goes on in absence of an actual historical personality the director might find a need to position his narrative within the bounds of a life actually lived.

But the biopic is a kind of movie that gets a lot of attention, as a healthy number will get noticed by the Academy. Ben Kingsley won Best Actor for *Ghandi* as did Charlize Theron for *Monster*, Peter O'toole was nominated for *Lawrence of Arabia,* Merryl Streep won for *The Iron Lady,* Helen Mirren won for *The Queen*, and the aforementioned *The Killing Fields* was Dr. Haing Ngor winning for portraying the story of Dith Pran, a New York Times journalist. The list continues in successful Academy wins for biopics, and the Academy Award usually goes to the portrayal of the subject of the movie, but perhaps what motivates this genre most of all is the idea that "truth is stranger than fiction" often proves to be true, so a built-in hard to believe factor comes forward since the filmmaker can tell a story that would be unbelievable except for the fact that it actually happened.

A parody was made on this idea called *Stranger than Fiction* starring Will Ferrell. It's about an ordinary man who suddenly hears voices, but instead of assuming himself insane, comes to the apparently correct conclusion that he is a fictional character in someone's novel, thus seeking out a literature professor for advice about his problematic ontology instead of a psychiatrist. The author herself, played by Emma Thompson, is equally amazed that her character has come to life. Eventually, the lit professor played by Dustin Hoffman (notice the strong cast), informs the "actually" fictional character that he has to die in order to fulfill the calculus of the novel. Instead of resisting the idea, he simply resigns himself after a long and probing journey into self-discovery and personal growth.

The fact that Ferrell's character achieves something autonomously from the intentions of the author of him, ends up a redemptive moment for the author, Thompson, who uses the final scene of the novel to save Ferrell instead of the death scene that seemed needed for the novel to succeed. This idea comes from an old school of literary criticism that suggests all of the events in a novel build a case for a certain kind of determinism to emerge; the right ending from the right set of assumptions. Indeed, Hoffman informs the author that, in saving her character, she has written a failed novel to which she just answers, Ferrell has been a rebel puppet character whose defiance of her narratology for him has actually made him the kind of person one would want to save. Despite the fact that we desire more chaos in a modern novel that belies the lit prof's judgment, we see what might have started off as a

parody on the biopic, actually turns into a serious statement on the notion of existential angst and the struggle between classical fictional structure and the mostly postmodern design of a novel that would be written now. Based on Hoffman's judgment that the novel requires Ferrell to die, we see a movie ostensibly about the avant-garde notion that fictional characters could in theory come to life clashing with this classical notion of literary criticism judging a novel's ending based on the assumptions the author, in order to achieve true art, must then follow every element of some posited underlying single principle to its logical conclusion is actually a reliance on the idea that novels are true on one level and lives are true on another, but the amount of order the lit prof demands, actually weakens the very notion of creativity itself. This rebellion against order in literature has been going on for a very long time, and we don't usually assume our best authors are scouring their narratives for departures from a coldly logical assumption (unless your Ayn Rand). The director may or may not have been aware of this tension in the literary world or just assuming popular assumptions about aesthetics that often trickle down to this kind of thinking ending up in the popular mind of the actually uninformed. Regardless, the movie winds up being quite a bit more than a parody on the biopic and succeeds, even in the face of an unrecognized ignorance I just wrote about, in giving us a celebration of the human ability to defy its own dreary human condition, handled in an unbelievable way, but overloads its conclusions in a very satisfying package; a movie that entertains us and makes us think at the same time.

Perhaps *Stranger than Fiction* is trying to be an artistic movie, and even if it isn't, it does function well on that level. But to a certain degree, all biopics are skirting around the artistic moniker. It would be inevitable that, to truly do justice to a historically important person, the best actors, actresses, writers, and directors would be called upon. So, if we find a flowering of quality in the biopic, then it would be entirely understandable. Perhaps this attention to making good movies when filmmakers venture into the biopic genre is a sign that, if Hollywood is to find its importance anywhere, it ought to be in the area of building scintillating portrayals of important historical people, so when we do scan the Hollywood canon for signs of its mission to sometimes do important things, we would be happy to find this sense of mission lurking in the area of what turns out to be the preservation of our collective cultural memory, the true attention to quality manifesting in a catalog of lives we want to preserve in the well designed movie, the kind of movie that gives us a barrage of

insights in what makes humanity great, and that is in the appearance of exceptional persons doing exceptionally important things. This is perhaps the best aspiration for Hollywood.

Chapter 21: The Short Unhappy Life of a Comedy

Comedies are perhaps the most valued and most denigrated genre of movie in Hollywood. They make them with breakneck speed, giving us everything from slapstick to odd couples, straight men with sidekicks, and every possible scatological excursion into the human psyche that will deliver even just the slightest hint of a good joke. But comedies to be truly effective would have to carry a lead character capable of making us laugh. The problem isn't just that comedies have to have people in them with proper timing and acting skill to boot, but that comedies fail to be taken seriously as a marketable genre even if we note that the ultimate arbiter, the academy, has hardly been promoting these sunny products by shunning them when it comes to actually recognizing them as worthy of Oscars. The comedy is doomed to a short stint in the theater where the "take" at the box office is hurriedly scooped up and then pocketed before someone notices that people aren't beating down the doors for another installment.

Sure, someone will look at the Marx brothers doing *A Day at the Races* as a really funny riff on what makes the trio the poster children for why we should be laughing at movies, but we aren't really hot in anticipation for the next adventure precisely because we don't really find them all of that adventurous. It really requires a particularly well-established comedian to give us the belly laugh we need to endure inevitably bad scripts. So when Eddie Murphy did *Beverly Hills Cop*, we thought we found a guy who would fit the bill in a way that would pay the bills.

The plot suffers from the beginning when a supposedly street smart cop is booted from his Detroit precinct, ending up in Beverly Hills where the crime is supposed to be laughably trivial in comparison. So we get a laughably trivial police force for Eddie to do his adventuring with. But then come the stupid jokes like putting a banana in the tail pipe of

the car of the cops who are supposed to be keeping tabs on the inner city interloper. And Eddie's incredibly contrived laugh makes you just want to throw a tomato at the screen. And, of course, the whole thing turns too serious in becoming an actual action movie. But this didn't stop the success of the movie since Eddie is an accomplished comic and would go on to become an actor whose movies made the most money. Eddie Murphy has turned out to be our most vaunted comedian, but this had to be done in movies that were successful not because they were good, but because they happened to have a charming star.

The dirty little secret about comedies is that they rarely have competence in the writing, but only in the skill of the actor to deliver a proper punch line.

Perhaps the comedy that will go down in history as the best example of a "good" comedy is *Caddy Shack*. They used some unknowns that weren't trying to be funny at all really, with especially bad old jokes thrown in. But with Chevy Chase, Rodney Dangerfield, Ted Knight, and Bill Murray, we had some actual innovation that really pulled off a winner. Even as Murray gives us crazy slurred speech while he's mimicking the announcer, that phrase "a real Cinderella Story" will stick in the mind forever, he's monomaniacally chasing down a gopher he just can't quite get, setting the stage for the use of animal shaped plastic explosives that detonate at just the right time to round off a pretty good plot putting a golf ball in the hole to defeat the demonized Ted Knight character, who's really quite awful in the movie by the way. My fondest memory is the story of the Catholic priest having the game of his life even as a storm kicks in, but with Murray caddying all the way, they get to the final hole until lightning strikes, giving us a scene with the priest at the clubhouse sadly holding a drink, complaining, "There is no God."

There would be other notables like *Ghostbusters* (not the sequel), again with Bill Murray and adding Dan Ackroyd in what turns out to be a pretty good parody on top of a comic movie, especially when the demon spirit pulls out the Marshmallow Man as the evil creature designated to destroy New York out of Ackroyd's undefended mind.

But if we look at the mainstays of the comedy world, like the John Hughes inventions, we see a sudden descent into crap. We could maybe get some jollies from John Waters, but he's just too campy for most people. And then came Ben Stiller.

It would be bad enough that he'd done *Dodge Ball*, playing the straight man with tremendous overacting, but when the *Meet the Parents* franchise came along, the total lack of good writing in almost every comedy was becoming painfully obvious.

It was becoming almost impossible to find good comedies unless we turned to the more cerebral comedy stylings of Albert Brooks, Woody Allen, and Billy Crystal, but they would have their raspberry moments too. It seemed like the best we could hope for was funny moments in otherwise serious movies, like Tom Hanks using his friends to mock the emotional effect on women by the movie, *An Affair to Remember*, when they grow teary eyed over the scene of Jim Brown throwing hand grenades down vents in *The Dirty Dozen*, in the romantic update of that movie, *Sleepless in Seattle*.

Then they got the idea to put black men in drag, decked out like old fat black women, like Tyler Perry did in his Medea movies. Even Martin Short would get into the act with the Big Momma movies until we got a twist when the Wayon Brothers did *White Chicks*.

But we would finally find our modern master when Jim Carrey came out of the TV screen from the sketch show, *In Living Color*, in his first installment, *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*. His plastic face and his perfect comedic timing gave us a genius who would go on to rack up success after success in silly, yet highly effective movies, but only successful because we had a very capable star at the center of the thing. It seemed like the really only way to have a successful comedy was to have an actually funny person driving the thing, just so we wouldn't notice that much of the plot and most of the writing really still failed a standard litmus test of actually presencing comedy on the screen.

Jim Carrey pulled off an incredibly dynamic performance in *The Mask* that made us wonder how many people live in his head. And then when he enlisted Zooey Deschanel to do *Yes Man* with him, we saw his character having to balance the consequences of so many

variations on a life going on in what looked like a seamless blend until his world comes crashing down and he has to win back the girl…yawn. But we can more overlook the deficiencies in his movies because he's just so delightful to watch. Perhaps the problem in general with comedies is their seeming deterministic need to posit an oversimplified premise that will win audiences over with the funny scenes in a hope that they'll miss the overt caricature and inattention to originality. If we go back a little, we can see some really great Walter Mathau moments, Bob Hope, especially in the *Road to…* series, or even Marilyn Monroe and Catherine Hepburn showing their ability for comedy. But we don't have a culture capable of creating these kinds of celebrities anymore. I even write off Steve Martin, except perhaps for *The Loser*, which he did pull off well, especially when he's decided to leave the home of his black family once he's discovered he's attracted to white people's music, so he stands in front of the house for what seems like days trying to thumb a ride. When the crazy sniper targets him at the gas station, I thought I'd never stop laughing when the shooter kept missing him, but Martin notices the oil squirting from a rack of oil cans and Martin concludes, "Somebody doesn't like these cans."

So what is the problem with being able to tell a good joke in the context of a plot needing a premise and a direction to go in? Any stand up comedian will tell you how hard it is to do that job. When they get the audience laughing, they used words like "I killed tonight," or else it's "I died out there." Getting people to cry is infinitely easier than getting them to laugh. Perhaps, as a species, we're just that much more predisposed to tragedy, notice *Titanic* getting the top spot on the money making chart (until *Avatar*). But that's just the irony because almost every successful comic you meet will tell you about the horrible life they had. Chris Rock even brought his horrible childhood to the small screen with the TV show, *Everybody hates Chris*, so there seems to be this dark underbelly to happiness. When stand up comedy was really finding its sea legs in the 80s, people like Bill Cosby were criticizing the younger comics, and this included Eddie Murphy, for using so much profanity in their acts. There was an inexpressible rage going on in the emotions of these performers that seemed to want out in the language of inappropriateness. The most lauded comics of that time were the irreverent ones, giving us a mythical figure in George Carlin, and Cheech and Chong were not doing badly either. George Carlin wouldn't ever appear on the big screen until he somehow ended up in *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* near the

end of his career, and here he was playing the straight man. But now he is roundly considered one of the most insightful comedians to have ever lived. I'll always fondly remember his comparison of American football to baseball, when he says that in football, you have to penetrate the front line in order to reach the end zone. Baseball players just want to go home. We'll be on the lookout for another figure like him, but he'll probably go down in history as unique as *The Beatles* were for their genre.

I suppose there should be a big scandal about why our comedies are usually so shitty. But the propaganda that the actors who have reputations for being funny just seems so effective that people seem to laugh at movies that actually have nothing funny about them. Perhaps it is this fact that has brought TV back to respectability because shows like *How I Met Your Mother* and *Psyche* really do give us good comedy, perhaps because they're situational premises provide for a casting universe that can innovate the characters in all kinds of original ways because they do seem so original on their face. Perhaps comedies just need more discursive space to meander in rather than the get in and get out mentality of a quick hitting movie that abbreviates the encounter giving us the bad kind of absurd, the not making sense kind, instead of the good kind of absurd, the practical impossibility of this situation making for a reality that can't possibly exist but gets iterated anyway, and the result is hilarious, something that unfortunately doesn't usually happen. But before I leave behind this subject, there are two other comedians that deserve special mention for trying to do things that scrub the bad odor off the genre.

Will Ferrell came out of the *Saturday Night Live* casting vortex that just seemed to, throughout the decades, produce a veritable galaxy of superstar performers. And the same goes for Adam Sandler.

Will Ferrell seemed to have that kind of face that just looking at might provoke a chuckle. His comedy was unpretentious, sometimes underplayed, but often gave us reasons to laugh even in the discovery of a klunky plot somewhere along the line. The car racing story of *Talladega Nights* did try to do what comedies often do and that was try to sell you on a storyline whose arc goes from success to failure, an actual disguising of a drama in the form of a comedy. A lot of comedies go this route, especially in Ben Stiller's *Night at the Museum*,

where the coming-to-life event of the museum at night is supposedly for the purpose of making Ben's character into a great man, a line put in the mouth of Robin Williams' character, happening to be a reanimated Teddy Roosevelt. And this is not the only serious plotline in the story. Eventually, Ben's security guard character has to prevent the unreal people from really dying when the light comes, so the audience is supposed to sorrow over the cavemen who get obliterated by daylight. Somehow, the need for an interesting plot always overcomes the comedic elements, as it's exposed the former retired night watchmen have a nefarious plan to capture the Egyptian tablet responsible for the magic. Having this much drama in the sense of wanting serious things to happen alongside the hilarity the filmmakers otherwise foreground just depletes the story of comic energy and we suddenly have a hero figure fronting the story when the comic hero is usually thought of as a screwup, something more and more rejected as the grounds for a plot. But that's why I brought up Will Ferrell.

Talladega Nights, despite the off-putting seriousness of a rise and fall story, gets to some funny stuff, especially in the beginning of the movie where Will's character is determined to pray to the "baby Jesus" as he can only envisage him that way. And of course, running around in his underwear yelling, "Help me, Tom Cruise, Help me, Paul Newman" while he thinks he's on fire (he's actually not), will give the viewer a good reason to laugh. And throughout the story, we're given some equally cleverly delivered lines. He singlehandedly delivers a successful movie because we're stuck with the crappy plotting, the desire to subtly twist in a dramatic movie that just happens to have a comedian in it. Ferrell will gather up his comic chops again for *Step Brothers*, playing alongside John C. Reilly in a corny but effective play on the loser child living with his parents into his forties. In this one, there doesn't seem like much effort to get beyond the parody itself, so the audience is allowed to focus on the much-used physical comedy going on with the witty dialogue. By the time Will got to *Blades of Glory*, we're again stuck with a serious point, but getting there becomes a series of funny events, especially with the sex addiction of Will's character, the mania to win in the midst of an ongoing incestuous relationship between Amy Pohler and her real-life husband, Will Forte. Alas, there is that need to overlay a serious plot in kidnapping and doing anything to win going on, but the movie manages to succeed because of Will's ability

to carry a movie, which he continues to do, even with occasional excursions into serious roles, like with *Stranger than Fiction*.

Adam Sandler seems to have discovered a formula that works for him, perhaps based on this seriousness comedies take on getting swept under the premise that then allows the rest of the movie to just deliver funny situations. In *Don't Mess with the Zohan*, Sandler plays with the very serious idea of the hatred between Jews and Palestinians (Sandler is Jewish himself). So he comes up with a character that happens to be a superhero Israeli agent secretly wanting to be a hairdresser. Once he makes it to New York City, he finds his niche. While working with a Palestinian woman who keeps refusing to sell out to a land developer, the Zohan is making the woman's business tremendously successful by giving a complimentary boinking to every woman he attends to. With another plot of a group of Palestinians, headed by Rob Schneider, who think they're investing in C4 and wind up with blocks of butter, we get a tremendously funny movie. Sandler seems to have discovered that by making the serious point a background enough issue, an infinite variety of comic scenes can be both satirical and straight out comedy at the same time.

Sandler does this again with *I Now Pronounce you Chuck and Larry*. Here, the serious theme is gay rights. Because of City law barring Kevin James' character being able to collect his pension as a firefighter unless he's married despite the loss of his recently deceased wife, he convinces his best friend, Sandler, also a firefighter, to stage a fake gay marriage. The serious message keeps getting underscored with Sandler cold cocking a gay bashing bully, and also the portrayal of Chuck and Larry's relationship oft times resembling an old married couples' complaints of each other give us an ersatz recognition of the dumbness of gay bashing when the straight couple would be indistinguishable in their relationship dynamics from the gay couple. Add to this mix, Jessica Biel, their attorney and playmate of Sandler's gay identity while his straight self wants a sexual relationship with her, but he successfully disguises his real identity, even getting a payoff when she lets him play with her breasts. But the fact that, by the end of the movie, Chuck and Larry have become heroes in the gay community shows the serious point has gotten through after a thoroughly enjoyable, nuanced, and also funny set of scenes makes the movie fun to watch. It is a formula Sandler

seems to have recently latched onto if we notice how an earlier movie, *Billy Madison*, has since fallen into the dustbin of the unfunny comedy we're so used to.

Comedies may be so difficult to pull off because their creative impulse comes straight out of the stand up tangle of difficulties. Comedians almost always have a certain trauma they can draw on to use themselves as a mirror the people watching the routine can see themselves, in their own inner screwiness, reflected back through the particular lens the comedian offers them. The more direct identification with the standup routine perhaps is the better method for delivering punch lines, but the barren landscape of failed comic movies makes one wonder if the translation from the stage to the screen can ever be effectively bridged. Positing social messages as Sandler does, or the effective use of wit by Ferrell, may come to be a needed study on how to make truly effective comedies. Otherwise, we may be stuck with a producer's ideal never translating effectively on the screen. Perhaps substituting marionettes for actors would be the next logical step, maybe not an improvement, but if flesh and blood comedic physics just isn't working, experimenting with other ways to deliver a laugh may be needed. Otherwise, Hollywood will just insulate themselves in a self-congratulatory bubble that will only pad pockets, and give us nothing evanescent beyond the sound of crickets chirping in a vanishing genre. Maybe John Waters' cinema terrorists could come rushing in and execute the much-needed revolution in what a truly funny movie is. Or it's back to old jokes. What is a Polish firing squad? They stand in a circle. That level of bad taste is still the gold standard for the millions who go to comedies and think they're being entertained. Cinema Verite, where are you?

Chapter 22: The Risks of Risk Taking

Filmmakers who actually take elaborate measures to pull off a vision seem quite few and far between. An early example can be found in the 1990 movie, *Dick Tracy*, where a particular style was being honed in the movie in using just three colors, yellow, green, and red. The rest of the coloration looked either grayed or bleached. Neither Warren Beatty nor Madonna seemed particularly invested in crafting their acting portrayals in a '30s style, perhaps

because they were treating the movie as a mainstream comic genre piece, but it appeared that the director never intended it to be just another superhero adaptation. Despite the strong cast that also included Dustin Hoffman and Al Pacino, the movie, I thought, never executed its experimental mission to explore a new visual, as to accomplish this, the script, acting, and cinematography would have to follow suit, but nothing remarkable emerged from the experiment. The problem with experimenting is that making a clear departure from mainstream tastes has to be a primary concern. If any of the cogs in the machine fail their intended mission, then the whole becomes torn apart by its parts.

A more recent experiment with style and form came in the movie *Hugo*, about a young boy stranded in a train station after his clock caretaking father dies, leaving the boy to foster the appearance of continued maintenance in order to move freely about the train station although this instantly becomes a problem when the guard, also a war vet, begins targeting him as a vagrant. But the movie accomplishes much more than just visuals of 1930s Paris, but becomes a commentary on the notion of fate, in a close viewing, reveals the director experimenting with a fictional dose of this reality alongside a more real life exposition of the idea. There is a sense of determinism as we would expect in a novel, but also a move beyond coincidence in certain real life dilemmas that come up for the characters, especially when Ben Kingsley has to decide whether or not to take Hugo, an orphan, into his home. This is a subtle form of philosophizing that often takes place on the plane of fiction, but there is a great deal more at work in the story.

Themes like the role of a son following in his father's footsteps, or fateful encounters between people who seem to need to meet get juxtaposed in a meta-aesthetic pairing of a movie about making movies that then gets schematized in this fiction/fact pairing with an ultimate triumph of the determinism of fictional narration privileging the imagination over brute matter. This may seem like a lot to stuff into a longish three hour movie, but the experiment paid off for Scorcese, as I think it may just be one of his finest films outside of the mob genre for which he will always be fondly remembered. But what perhaps makes this experiment succeed where *Dick Tracy* failed lies in the sheer ambition that can be seen oozing from the opening description of this paragraph. It requires a rather grandiose vision

to pull an experiment off, especially when the artist knows that experiments rarely get lauded, even when they are smashing successes like *Hugo*.

Experiments, by definition, are departures from the formulaic world of the usual fare we normally see spreading out in wide release movies. Thus, we would expect this body of work to remain circumscribed within fairly nominal borders. Why a director or actor would wish to undertake an experiment may link to a broader degeneracy perceived emerging in Hollywood trends. If movies like Robert Rodriguez's *Machete* and Stallone's two *The Expendables* movies seem like they're taking over the box office receipts, then more creatively minded filmmakers may feel like a market correction may be needed in proving audience tastes don't need this constant catering to prurient interests. If a filmmaker decides to mimic more Renaissance realms of orbital genius, then this may well be a marker that the industry is failing its more grandiose mission to find the upper limits of imagination.

This may be an explanation of why a French production that made the movie *The Artist* was not treated as a foreign film, but was showered with awards including Best Actor and Best Film. I would think that in an examination of the history of the Academy Awards, one would be hard pressed to find a non- Hollywood production receiving this level of parity with made in America movies. This industry tends to treat its native filmmakers as the gold standard for the world, as we can see that Kurosawa's *Ran* was treated as a foreign film, but there just may be an edge of racism in that. There has only been one experiment with an all-Asian sitcom, Margaret Cho's *American Girl* that was yanked after just a few shows. No one will forget the theft of Bruce Lee's idea for an Asian drama when David Carridine showed up as a white man playing a Chinaman in the now iconic series, *Kung Fu*. But these nationalistic biases aside, it has been becoming increasingly obvious that Hollywood is not the headquarters for innovation it has always perceived itself to be.

This, of course, would explain the rise of Indie filmmaking that is, however, quietly still shunned. They find the best of them surfacing for recognition at the Cannes film festival, but it seems that neither Redford's Sundance Festival nor De Niro's Tribeca can seem to produce pieces that have noticeable affects on the mainstream release patterns. It used to be

that Indie's were classified as such by the movie's budget, but that has changed since they'll now pay top dollar for a pricey star, even though this really won't guarantee box office success. And they seem to follow noticeable trends in the types of topics they'll address. They hardly have the rebel image, but seem to just be more raw, perhaps more honest approaches like *Elephant*, loosely based on the Columbine massacre, or just using nudity, mostly frowned on in the broader Hollywood culture.

When Matthew McConaughey did *Killer Joe*, he seemed to be calculating a redesign of his career, especially based on the preceding movie, *The Lincoln Lawyer*, where he put up a performance we hadn't seen from him since his Grisham movie, *A Time to Kill*. It seems like he's wanting to distance himself from the guy who can't seem to keep his shirt on when photographed, especially with a string of fluffy movies behind him, a rather long string in fact, not to mention a disastrous appearance on the Oprah Winfrey Show where he made himself out as a kind of country bumpkin. This move into more serious roles is either a sign of willingness to experiment or desperation. But *Killer Joe*, despite the strong cast, is beyond the purview of the mainstream with its nudity, and the scene where he takes a young abused woman from behind, not to mention showing his bare naked ass. But we're in a time when Hollywood still possesses the entertainment fluff mindset, so Matthew's willingness to pull away from the syrupy taste of his past may be a sign that niches are becoming less comfortable for actors that suggests perhaps the era of typecasting is passing.

Margin Call, for instance, found our new Spock, Zachary Quinto, taking time out to join the recently rising Paul Bettany, the unusual casting choice of Simon Baker of *The Mentalist*, not to mention Kevin Spacey, Jeremy Irons, Demi Moore, and Stanley Tucci, working a brilliant script that would be considered a "small movie," but given the cast, bloats out from an ostensibly artsy movie to a "message" movie somebody obviously called in a lot of favors in order to make. Demi Moore, by the way, is another name that has recently resurfaced after what seems like decades in the wilderness, now showing up in interesting things.

One of those projects Demi Moore appeared in carried the unusual name, *Bunraku,* a movie named after a 400-year-old form of Japanese puppet theater. This was movie experimentation at its most ambitious. There managed to be a Japanese component in the

movie with Gackt, a Japanese actor and some supporting family members appearing, but this only seemed a nod to the genre as the other parts were inhabited by white actors like Josh Hartnett, Woody Harrelson, Kevin McKidd, and Ron Perlman. It was a cross genre affair using actual comic-book like labels, the western in Hartnett's cowboy equipoise, fantasy in Perlman's somewhat wizardish character, and McKidd's swordplay, along with Gackt's martial arts. The settings have an artifice about them as if it were more a play than a movie, but there is a focus on sets that presence a sort of science fictional feel. Legends and myths cement in place a rather Asian oriented storyline that ends with the savior figure in Hartnett getting the upper hand, in a way, restoring balance, a clear reference to the principle of yin/yang. The movie works on several levels, especially effective in the filming, but the plot kind of feels flat when the heavy emphasis on martial arts makes it seem a mere representative of that genre, a kind of movie not much filmed anymore. I laud the movie for its ambition, but fault it in its heavy focus of cutting to the chase through the arc of a sword. But even though it fails to be a glittering example of a fantastical experiment, it still ranks as entertaining.

But what standard of quality shall we assign to the experimental movie? *Donnie Darko* can seem somewhat opaque in the constant spinning of scientific theories, but the constant guessing at the meaning of the thing can become a pleasant occupation that may lead to recurrent viewings.

I stayed up late one night, and caught *Eraserhead*, and upon this perhaps fourth viewing, thought I'd actually understood the thing. I may have been tripping on sleep deprivation since it's hard to imagine that David Lynch would leave enough clues in the movie to make a rational interpretation possible. But I thought of the industrial dystopia that was the obvious setting, and then of course the eternal mystery of the mutant baby, not to mention the applause when he destroyed it, meeting the squirrel cheek lady, faced eternally painted into a smile. It had a game show element to me, as if the approval of society would flow naturally from killing a freak in a society perhaps overflowing with them. The contrast between innocence and morbidity affected me, giving me the idea that abominations are always present, even in abominable societies. If we apply a game theory to the plot, we can see that the task for the bad hairdo guy was to perceive the baby as a piece on a game board

that through removing, he had narrowed the choices the worm gods could implant in an already damaged milieu, thus improving his odds to find favor in a society where no advantages could be had, suggesting he had accomplished an impossible task simply by refusing the destiny of a man saddled with a lifetime burden. But the question arises, has he really done anything that couldn't simply be remanded to an illusory experience? It may just be that he had hallucinated the condition of the baby and in killing it, plunged him further into the mounting absurdities of his reality. Certainly, the existentialism of Albert Camus seems to be a philosophical influence on the piece. But also we might find evidence of the novel *We*, not to mention a borrowing from Kierkegaard, but only in terms of style, not content. Elliptical sentences in a piece of philosophy could easily be lifted to create a directionless space in social reality. But these were just my musings, and may have no connection to what Lynch really intended.

Certainly *Lost Highway* wants to challenge our notions of stable identity and the ultimate usefulness of the concept of law and order. Who is guilty and who is innocent again connects to the existential situation of self-judgment. If David Lynch is playing with existential philosophy, which I suspect he is, then we have to understand that mistaking appearances for reality can be more than just a dream reality but an excursion into the unconscious made external by the imaginative enterprise of storytelling. Jorge Luis Borges, who I've mentioned before once said that nothing is therefore nothing exists. He labeled reality as a muddle we're perpetually unable to figure out because there's nothing we actually can do, just sit in an experience of lostness, hoping our damnation won't be eternal. This may be a slightly slanted reading of Borges, as he actually agreed with the mystics that humans are one with God, albeit a being he could not verify nor believe in. But his level of complexity just seems proportional to the kind of reality mangling Lynch enjoys.

But should we only consider fringe excursions into implacable storylines the core of experimental filmmaking? In what other way could we consider a filmmaker exiting his safe harbor for the uncharted?

For good or for ill, we have to discuss the two Jesus movies that reached incredible heights of outcry. First came *The Last Temptation of Christ*, a movie Christians actually formed

picket lines in front of theaters to protest. It was based on a novel by Nikos Kazantzakis, thus purely a work of fiction unwilling to follow the gospels although it appropriated the major players. Willem Dafoe was tasked with presenting a Jesus perhaps more historically real, with a fierce Judas bent on keeping Jesus from straying from his mission. The portrayal of a time bound Jesus, perhaps one more easily discoverable in an actual historical circumstance, would be bad enough. But then the last temptation appears. Satan, in the form of a little girl, appears to Jesus while he's crying out on the cross, slowly removing the stakes from his hands and feet, telling him this doesn't need to be the final scene of his life, he can have another one, one that includes his love interest, in this version, the highly sexual, prostituting Mary Magdelen. Jesus embraces his reprieve, and wouldn't you know it, we soon have a scene of him fucking Mary in a hut. This was the true source of the outrage, Jesus the pornstar. They might have excused the humanization of Jesus in the preceding scenes, but seeing the Lord and Savior humping a girl, that's just going too far. *Jesus Christ Superstar* had preceded this but it was an earlier time, when social situations were more confusing and fluid. Things were crystalline clear to the haters of this movie. Someone defiled God. And nowadays we wonder at the outcry over the Anti-Islam movie when we had our deadly encounter over the goring of a sacred cow in 1988. The filmmakers probably underestimated just how outrageous their dive into controversy would be, and it happened to be Scorcese behind the project. Sometimes you wonder if such movies are made just to generate controversy among certain groups, to expose their own fanaticism to themselves. But given it was Scorcese, I imagine he truly just wanted to join the fray of historical Jesus research and thought this added fantasy element would just lend more mystery to the possibilities already inherent in a death narrative so densely populated with prophecies that speculation on what may have actually happened, however fantastical, would be an exercise getting a rise out of just about everyone, pun intended.

The second outcry came out when Mel Gibson used Jim Cavezil for his Jesus in the incredibly gory *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). Responses were divided over this one. Immediately, we had the orthodox Catholic actor, Jon Voight, condemning the movie for departing from scriptural accounts of what is known among Christians as the Passion. He had previously depicted Pope John Paul II in a TV movie, but he wasn't the best of family men, long estranged from his daughter, Angelina Jolie. But he had a point. I've seen both

movies, and hands down, Gibson's piece is the most offensive. Not only does it border on torture porn, but it also makes it appear that the Jews stage-managed the entire event. But there were teary-eyed Christians on camera testifying to how the movie boosted their faith. But the incredible violence wrecked it for others. In one scene, Jesus is being whipped by flexible sticks, but after sinking to one knee, musters courage and takes to his feet once again. That's when the Romans bring out the metal barbed whips, flaying Jesus' skin so completely that the amount of blood on the ground looks like a rather large puddle. I was almost rooting for him to get on the cross just to avoid the constant battering. I have to admit I don't believe Jesus was God, so I was somewhat indifferent to the outcry, but I was offended by the obvious anti-Semitism. And sure enough, not long after, a drunk Mel Gibson was stopped for DUI, and then caught on an anti-Semitic rant by the dash cam. But the man wouldn't leave it alone. He made another version of the movie where he toned down the violence. I'm sure he felt he was on a holy mission, but my cynicism makes me think he just wanted to take a swipe at the Jews.

So we have a range of those experimenting with the limits of imagination alongside those taking the pulse of social consciousness. But it really is in teasing out the mood of American cinemagoers that we need challenges to sense making as well as challenges to our ability for civil dialogue that lends to the phrase "artistic freedom" a legitimacy we may only be able to mint at the outer limits of what's possible to create. Even the basest productions touch the horizon at the edge of the visibly realizable. Since cinema is such a visual enterprise, the copying of reality is so complete that we're not only going to mistake reality for fiction but are meant to. Once we disappear into a puzzling identification, a confusion created out of the stuff of reaching for the dividing line between my self and the self of the fictional character, we will eventually emerge into a newly defined space where this sense making function we're wired with can take over. No matter how far down the proverbial rabbit hole a meaning may squirm, there's always that urge to follow, and perhaps discover the wonder of a child confronting his own dream character in a sudden realization that the method of inspection has just been a mirror, and the projection of myself into another humanizes all those I meet on my travels, as I can recognize them as me. This is the smashing of prejudice in the ability to see myself in another, perhaps a worthy aspiration for the point of art at all.

Chapter 23: The Show Must Go On

Actually, there is only business in show business lately. In Linda Obst's new book, *Sleepless in Hollywood*, she gives us a very incisive look from an insider's point of view of the decline of originality and interesting ideas siphoning away in a situation she calls "The New Abnormal." I will get to the details of how her commentary gives a very vexing and alarming new state of the art in Hollywood, but first, we have to take a look at the economic implications that affect every industry, leading me to a short look at the literary world suffering from the same sort of disabilities.

Michael Moore, the rather infamous documentary filmmaker, went on a hunt to see if capitalism really was ever *meant* to benefit everyone participating in the seemingly empty promises that come along with the pitch into a free market, unfettered and too easily manipulated by those who have the most resources. In *Capitalism: A Love Story*, he finds people who have been directly victims of the economic system supposed to be the salvation of humankind in its hoped-for mission as raising the standard of living in every country disposed to have this economic system as the mainstay of their exchange activities. Apropos of nothing, Europe, so heavily invested in a socialistic slanting of society, seem to be better equipped to take care of its citizens with safety nets that elsewhere only fail those they are meant to protect.

Historically, the wealthy in America were quite content to pay more than their share of taxes because despite the cut to their overall cache, they still lived large. They were quite capable of stuffing their pockets let alone their mouths, with the runoff from an economic system that was always a current in a river directly padding the lifestyles they wanted. If we take a look at the 1920's, we see a mentality to simply load up on all the goodies because there was nothing in sight to calm the bubbling cauldron of excess except of course until the music wound down and the market crashed in 1929. We had people launching themselves out of windows, and the entire country hearing a sucking sound as the very idea of a standard of living would vanish for a decade. This should have been an early clue that perhaps having no measures of control would become so dire a penalty that we simply had to ride the wave of destruction we felt unable to stop because we had so clearly vaunted the

idea of wealth creation as if the idea of a profit motive were a deterministic quality of human existence no one could or should interfere with. Placing blame on the government, and people were carrying placards that read “In Hoover were busted,” became a new realization of the powerlessness the pursuit of wealth was actually instilling.

Economies are always closed systems. There are only so many resources and opportunities within it. Thus, winners and losers are deterministic qualities of the rotating cycles existing within this tumbler, creating peaks and troughs as if it were some sort of natural law God himself had created. We have taken to calling Reagan’s reign as the go-go 80s, a time when more millionaires were created in American history than any other, but the rising tide did not raise all ships as the gap between rich and poor widened beyond natural bounds, a situation that has never been rectified.

Michael Moore actually caught Catholic priests saying that capitalism is inherently immoral. Actually, the first chronicler of the rise of capitalism, Adam Smith, in his *The Wealth of Nations*, gave that very same gloomy prediction that we would not find beneficence at the heart of this economic system, but rather a ruthless drive into industrial production that could not and would not take into consideration the subjectivity of humanity, nor the narrow ring of opportunities that only benefited those willing to look beyond the denigration of the disadvantaged in a sort of Darwinian power scheme of the least fit falling into poverty almost necessarily as the limits to what is possible within a closed system narrows its range exponentially. The fact that not everyone can ever, ever benefit equally in a landscape doling out opportunities in a milieu slanted toward the most competitive has fallout both in the direction benefits flow, and also in the kind of society that arises out of an environment where winners crow and losers are vilified for the propagandized reason that they’re either crazy of lazy, giving us an unsympathetic upper class, a society without compassion or empathy because these are outmoded values in a condition of conquer or die.

Perhaps this paints too gloomy a picture of what’s possible in a society that touts itself as the freest on earth, but the sad truth is, without the moniker of the big salaried mogul, the rest aren’t considered saving to the point that the structure of our laws even flow in the

direction of protecting the haves at the expense of the have-nots. Notice the warehousing of criminals in overcrowded prison systems unable to reflect on the 80% being minorities, perhaps the result of an inability to express a rage at the absence of opportunities that makes the avenues of crime and drug dealing no longer processed as moral wrongs.

And then came the 2008 presidential campaign with economic indicators flashing siren red markers of doom with the presence of another crash looming even as the country began to herald entering a new era with the first black candidate, Barack Obama, about to become president. It would be a euphoria that quickly faded with the recognition we would be about to be screwed by our beloved economic system again, giving us depression era attitudes and benchmarks, giving us another glimpse into the built in failure of unfettered capitalism, a situation that to this day we still won't acknowledge as the true evil in the social mix, with that old bugaboo word "socialism" gaining currency as if it were somehow equal to that other "ism," communism, even as Hollywood seemed to grow tired of the War on Terror, giving us Russian bad guys in just about every production. The Cold War was back, and there are perhaps darker reasons for this evocation than we could possibly admit to ourselves.

An easy reason for why the Cold War is back in business in Hollywood might come about with the idea that themes have been exhausted, and the Russians are an easy target as they're an old enemy we've gotten a lot of mileage out of in the past, so a retread is in order, all because somehow wars only feel cold now, the blinding sands of Iraq and Afghanistan nowhere colder than the chilling effect of a boiling point cooling under the recognition of accomplishing only hate in a part of the world whose love we courted, but only gave the world a reason to distrust us, while Putin poked us in the eye over every issue he could find a reason to undermine America. The reason the Cold War is back is that Russia remains the main barrier to reining in tin pan dictators they side with we suspect for the reason that it just pisses us off. But then again, there are a lot of pissed off people in America too, and it's not just the much-marginalized Republicans, but everyone who ever had a racist thought in their head suddenly found an ability to express it. Now we are the country of underground racism, showing off our black president, while the rest of the country quietly snickers with the word "tockenism" still gracing their lips. The gap in our classes is severely matched with

the gap in our racial relations, seemingly cordial on the outside while the civil war brewing in the in-between spaces has led us directly into a Cold War mimicking the one that tore apart our nation in 1861, the actual consonance of economic interests intersecting with a group of people who would never live down their long night, as the ghettoes still swell, the prisons still brim, and the war in our society has never been colder.

Here is just a short list of movies using Russians as bad guys: *X-Men: First Class*, *Salt*, *Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol*, *A Good Day to Die Hard*, *Jack Reacher*, *Safe*, *Contraband*, *The Tourist, The Double, Hitman, Iron Man 2, Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skulls*, and the trend isn't slacking off.

Since Russians in movies are invading even more swiftly than alien oriented movies, we can see that the use of heavies in movies still wants to paint a particular nationality in a bad light, one tried and true, one that echoes a time when a more black and white picture of the world reigned, giving us something more genuine to be afraid of, the annihilation of the world in a nuclear event, now being more and more recognized as the best existential sort of dread to capitalize on as a way of horrifying us in our entertainment.

This would create another evocation, the black man as the dark demon skinned reason we would be afraid to walk down a street at night, and with the outcry over the Zimmerman case ruled in favor of the white guy who killed a black guy, seemingly for no other reason than a suspicion that has existed in the back of people's mind for over a century, namely the black skin as a signal that bad things are afoot.

Would this make sense in a country that had just elected its first African American president? Historical animus has a funny way of enduring. It also gets amplified when belts tighten over tough economic times, bringing us back around to the market fall of 2008, almost the origin point of a new reality for artists whether they be working in the motion picture industry or laboring away in what was increasingly seen to be perpetual obscurity with industries becoming more than risk-averse. They were getting downright paranoid about the prospect of losing revenues if they gambled on something new, a fear instilled by capitalism's ugly tendency to run amok when left alone.

At the time of the 2008 collapse, there were several things going on at once. After the firm, Lehman Brothers was allowed to collapse, only Goldman Sachs lay astride Wall Street, also just happening to have its boardroom securely entrenched in President Bush's Treasury Department. The bailout money did nothing to loosen lending tendencies, as most of the money went to bonuses, garish corporate junkets, and raises for the fat cats. Meanwhile, a writer's strike had broken out across Hollywood, laying the foundation for a new business model to rise out of the ashes.

As in most strikes, the people lower on the rungs, like the crew guys, lost the most, but the strike itself was based on an incorrect understanding of the stakes involved in Internet income, something absolutely no one could even affix a number to, causing posturing between writers' representatives and the studio heads, who just hoped to wait out the unrealistic expectations of the writers' union, who were basing their whole strategy on a chimera, an absolute illusion. Hollywood was used to illusions, an industry based on people needing to cull through the liars to get at a doable deal. But the problem with this hall of mirrors they currently based an entire protest on, there was barely any leverage to use since anyone really bothering to look at the claim would quickly realize there was no data to base realistic demands on. And so, when the strike ended, we had a situation where Hollywood realized its strength was in big, flashy blockbuster movies, remanding anything not a spawn of some franchise to a dustbin that only recently shows glimmers of returning.

One of the turning points Hollywood was following, happened when CGI or computer graphic imaging technology had reached a threshold for wide use right around 2001, laying a blueprint for the kind of movies producers would think people wanted to see. Now we have a situation where, what Linda calls "tentpoles," movies with big budget special effects are just about the only kind of movie the studios will make. At the end of the writers' strike came a pot of gold, and that was international sales.

The two biggest purchasers of Hollywood movies are Russia (ironically) and China, and they only wanted movies with flashy special effects only in 3D and IMAX. American moviegoers were becoming weary of 3D, but because international sales had replaced faded DVD

revenues, Hollywood had to move into a very conservative position, meaning only seeking projects that were tentpoles, next installments of franchises like *The Fast and the Furious* or comic book adaptations. One-offs, the name Linda gives to movies not going to provide this golden payday, had become an endangered species, leaving originality to the Indie market, and also pushing many of the feature picture workers into Television.

The good news for those caught out in the cold with this major shift to only big deal movies was the fact that Television had now been pitched into a Golden Age. Many of the best writers and producers, including Linda, would find their salvation on the small screen. Big name movie stars were also shifting into television, showing that market corrections can create strange bedfellows.

There were those anomalies popping up occasionally. *Bridesmaids* and the Hangover movies did big business, suggesting a rescue event for the now marginalized chick flick and comedy genres. They aren't making dramas either, but there has been a loosening effect on the iron glove of conservative big payoff movie making mentality with movies like *Lincoln*, *Ted, Identity Thief, Here Comes the Boom, Eat, Pray, Love*, and a few others that showed profits could be had on movies that, in the current environment, the studios are not predisposed to make. But then again, the economy is improving, suggesting a darker motive that perhaps the ups and downs of a capitalistic society actually guide what enters the marketplace in the form of visual or written art.

The publishing industry had entered its dark era as well. In 2008, a contraction in their profits happened too, a day come to be known as Black Thursday, a day when margins slimmed 4%, nothing for Exxon, but for the likes of Houghton Mifflin, Random House, et al, it was nothing short of a near collapse. Reading has always been a marginalized activity, with the popular writers raking in most of the cash, leaving the literary artists to obtain teaching jobs to supplement their incomes. This deadly gap between popular, fluffy writing and the literary variety has long been recognized. But, in the past, a publisher would live with a writer maybe selling 2,500 copies as long as the writing was accomplished, but now, sans being an established writer, breaking into the publishing business with a realist's literary bent of mind had become something of an impossibility. People had done it,

especially notable with Juno Diaz, but then again, his novel won the Pulitzer Prize, suggesting one had to be that good to break through in this new market reality.

There has always been tension in the writing community about how to get published with the literary journals wanting the writer to tailor their output to the editorial bent of mind of any one publication. I've always struggled with this because I can no more force my story ideas and style to follow a particular convention than James Patterson could transform himself into Robert Olen Butler. I just write, submit, and then pray that there will be some dovetailing of my creation with the expectations of the editor, something that has never happened. I'll occasionally get the odd editor, like happened recently with *Black Warrior Review*, where they rejected my story, but added "But we were interested in it." Cold comfort because I didn't get the credit, but I had experience with this before.

About two years ago, I had submitted three novels to an independent publisher in Britain. After not hearing from them for some three months, I timidly emailed the editor, expecting either no reply or a "No thank you." Unfortunately, and this is a cautionary tale for editors most of all, I got back this reply: "You are being carefully considered, but because of the economy, we are being cautious. I'll get back to you after the editorial meeting." Carefully considered? Should I be jumping up and down, thinking I just landed an editor? I knew better. It wasn't a yes, just another one of those "near miss" moments, and indeed, about two months later, I received a form rejection letter. Should I be blaming their decision against my work on the economy? Perhaps in better times, they would have been more eager to give me the green light. But it is never a good thing to give a writer false hope. We don't care if you liked it, only if you liked it enough to publish it. The rest is just maybe some encouragement that perhaps you're on the right track; you really aren't wasting your time, but forego the politeness. Give it to us straight. The hard truth is that economics or editorial bias will always guide decisions of what to publish, so we, as authors, just have to decide how to compromise, adjust, or maybe just outright sell out, just to join the ranks of the writers who didn't have to turn to self-publishing (something I expect is its own kind of hell) to get their work out there.

Economics just matter unless we have a return to patrons of art like we had in the Middle Ages, but that wasn't a time for the written word anyway. Who exactly gets to label work as worthy of being widely read (or widely viewed) will always be a tension when market forces seem to dictate what kind of vocation one can have in life, always doggedly pursue the day job, or go out in search of that dream often started in childhood. But there are better ways to go about getting past the gatekeepers, and it will be in that kind of creativity, negotiating the oppressive forces of the profit motive, that the artist will find his outlet. It may be worth the struggle or not. How many near misses before I decide to give up? Well, maybe just one more. And one more after that? And yet one more? It's an infinite regress after all. Never giving up may be a fool's errand, but the fool can speak above his station, and humble even the most dictatorial of monarchs. Let those of us who struggle in the trenches be heard, and should a life conclude before the breakthrough, remember Kafka. Maybe I won't be around to see my work come to life. But the cruelties of nature seem to be mirrored in the economic system we adore. My fate seems addressed in both, for good or ill, and perhaps forever.

Chapter 24: All in all, we are entertained, aren't we?

A lot of questions can be asked about the nature and variety of the entertainment we enjoy in our modern world. In this particular moment in history, we seem peculiarly exposed to more varieties of media than has ever existed. Just imagine being a resident of Athens, Greece, reveling in the oratory of the storyteller specially charged with not only delivering the narrative, but also with continuing a link from the stories of the past to a present wishing to preserve its uniquely cultural transmission of important myths. It is a mistake to think of myths as merely false stories, fabricated untruths that superstitions created. Rather, the purpose of a myth is to preserve a sign system that will tell a people who they have been and are becoming in a desire to preserve one's own cultural identity. We have turned from the gods of Mt. Olympus to the monotheism of our three world religions, a rather clever turn toward an unavailable God, useful in an increasingly more secularizing society. But it is in myth that the power of creation becomes a reality. Without the ability to

transmit truth symbolically, we would become like Dante's devil, frozen in a lake of ice where fecundity can no longer be generated.

If we truly want to prompt the denizens of Hollywood to make things that have this depth of resonance, this poetic feel that fuels more than just a drive to move from an incipient idea to a vehicle only useful for entertainment value, but prompt an instance of art to appear, then we need to keep our boots on the necks of the cowardly who only crane their heads for the nearest dollar source. If Hollywood wasn't a get rich quick scheme before, it is now, with the loads of people deplaning with empty pockets thinking their only salvation is that one shot in the dark, their head bobbing in a sea of extras, and then, perhaps the A-list. But so few people with those stars in their eyes actually reach a similar orbit of a Brad Pitt or an Angelina Jolie, but the nice thing is, none of them are born into it. There is no blue blood class in Hollywood with the minor exception of sons or daughters following famous parents, and of course the genetic accident of Drew Barrymore, hailing from that aristocratic Barrymore line. No, those who've made it know what it's like to just barely get the rent in on time, taking up bartending or waitressing until they've gotten their head shot pasted around town enough to get the break. And how well do many of them know they may actually need a retooling, a second chance.

This can be the beauty of Hollywood if we get beyond the phoniness. These are people who've had to prove their creative ability, and as talent as the crib of reeds that some Pharaoh's daughter scooped up, they've become our chosen ones perhaps for the ennobling reason that the gods guarding Hollywood's gates found them worthy of entrance. We all have our favorite stars. It's nice when our regard of them matches their apparent worthiness to be benefitting from this tremendously lucky break that might not be so lucky after all. They may have received their charge from the fates busily spinning their webs of destiny, even as we too get carried along upon our own path to greatness in the creation of the legend of our own lives. How was it that Oprah Winfrey, who showed her acting chops in *The Color Purple*, and seemed to approach the wisdom of Maya Angelou in her willingness to profit from her pain, privileging connection with others with her rhetorical gifts over more selfish pursuits. There is greatness in the stuff of Hollywood's collected personalities, perhaps an operational immaturity revealed in how they handle their social lives, but

shouldn't we forgive them this, that perhaps with the gene for creativity came the tendency to be childish?

This immaturity surrounding the creative person's aura suggests a need for more level headed parents, friends, fans, people important to them, to help shepherd them, for we can be a personal Jesus to each other, using the idea of community as an entirely extended thing where we trust our own connections to truth will be strong enough to dance upon the bonfire of vanity (irony intentional, a book and a movie), perhaps stripping down to our skivvies to cry out in the night, the nudity of a soul is its best protection against the cankers of corruption.

The nice thing about a movie production is its self-containment, the fact that we can get that production logo up front, and know we will head into an ending, even if it's just the cliffhanger moment to set up the next installment because they all, even the longest of series, come to an end. There is a comfort to beginnings and endings, as they report to us the frame within which we live our lives. The moving images aren't really moving, though. They seem dynamic and penetrating with the constant motion, but they are frozen in time, allowing us the ability to ritualistically participate in the actual reality, we digest them as wholes, and won't experience the parts of the things except as we pull up memories that seem barely distinguishable from real life. Memories are easily falsified you know.

One thinker made the point that when we have a moment of recall, we just yank together the strands of what happened to rearticulate a new story, made of the old one now just a fossil embedded in our brains, to weave together an entirely new point of view on what went before since we didn't really know it then. We just thought we did.

In fact, all memory is cultural memory. We stitch together the elements of the memory from all the sources that impact us, in our modern world so multiple, that we are contributing to the greater narrative of humanity even in our false belief that this retelling event of a memory has come from an entirely privatized mind.

We ensconce ourselves in the darkness of the theater, so much like Plato's allegory of the cave, watching in dim shadow the play of light before us, so that when we emerge from the cavern of archetypes, we awaken, barely aware that something else has followed us into the enlightening light of the sun's strafing illuminations. Is the presence Jesus, Buddha, Confucius, Mohammed, or perhaps all of them at once, coordinating with each other to tap the head of his personage open to the influence? Todd Rundgren once sang that we're born alone, we die alone, we might as well spend every moment in between alone, but what if this is just his way of saying that the fleshy boundaries of our bodies are just imitations of our true selves, somewhere both within us and outside of us, treating the mirror of the other as an insight into the ascendant ruling principle, that we get out of ourselves through a fictional transformation by exchanging our thoughts with the characters on the screen, then making us literally transformed through becoming awake. It's when we're open to the possibility that the sun's radiation has the meta function of enlivening our deepest hopes that we become what we were meant to become, appreciators of the Word, using the capital W because our language events do more than just impart information but spark revelations upon the true reason we're here on this pale blue dot of a world. Just to get out of ourselves for a while. There will be an inevitable retreat. But we leave behind the police state of separation by continuing to fictionalize, a perfect antidote for factionalizing when we recognize ourselves in the prism of our other. This empathic position may just do more for humanity than all of the flesh and blood representatives of long dead heroes, prophets, oracles, giving us the momentary flash of being people of knowledge, though faded later, its one sequenced appearance in our mind prompted by the awakening. And in emerging from the hole of isolation, we connect like a bird in flight recording everything it sees. We were here. We were witnesses to creation. We mattered.

End

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