

# The Projector

## Film and Media Journal

Fall 2010 Issue, Vol.10 , no.2

**Reflections on (Film) genres and on (Women's) Bodies  
in Art and Performance**



Editor: Cynthia Baron

Associate Editor: Rosalind Sibielski

Contributors: Mark Bernard, Sudipto Sanyal, Heidi Nees, and Hope Bernard

Forum Participants: Melinda Lewis, Kevan A. Feshami, Angie Fitzpatrick, Lizabeth Mason, Katie S. Barak, Mallory Jagodzinski, and Justin Philpot

## **Introduction: Reflections on (film) genres and on (women's) bodies in art and performance**

**Cynthia Baron**



The essays in this fall 2010 issue of *The Projector* continue a line of inquiry that winds its way through many of the articles found in previous issues, for like those earlier pieces that reassess deep-rooted positions in scholarship, here we find the authors rethinking accepted ideas about genre conventions and genre criticism and offering counter-evidence to some tacit assumptions about modernist art and opera aesthetics. This issue also continues our practice of following the referred essays with invited contributions, in this case, a collection of brief essays based on the introductions to the films screened during the fall 2010 Tuesdays at the Gish series held on the Bowling Green State University campus.

Mark Bernard's essay, "Balancing Threat and Power: Re-evaluating *Three Kings* as National Security Cinema," makes the case that while the 1999 film by David O. Russell has been seen as an anti-war film, its depiction of U.S. military personnel "as vulnerable and under threat of attack" not only muddies its ostensibly anti-war message but also reveals its connection with a host of Hollywood action and war films that are best understood as examples of what Jean-Michel Valatin has termed national security cinema. While critics like B. Ruby Rich have

found that *Three Kings* “launches a savage analysis of the first Gulf War,” referencing Kathryn Kane’s work on the war film genre, Bernard points out that like other anti-war films that have, as Kane puts it, “a predictable place on the genre continuum,” *Three Kings* can offer a superficial critique of U.S. actions during the first Gulf War but “still support the basic tenants of the United States’s National Security policies.” Bernard’s essay thus invites us to think more carefully about seeing cynical depictions of war as critiques of war, and about the implications of cordoning off the war film genre in ways that mask its connection with action-adventure, science-fiction, and other genre films that sustain and give florid expression to the U.S. national security position that the “‘outside world’ is a constant threat to the ‘American way of life.’”

“A Brief Note on the Possibilities of Genre, or, Whose Genre Is It, Anyway?” by Sudipto Sanyal explores, in more abstract terms, the same considerations Bernard does in his analysis; just as Bernard shows that considering a film like *Three Kings* simply within the war film genre leaves out the film’s visible participation in national security cinema, Sanyal argues persuasively that “There is, almost always, something that’s left over, remaindered, after we’ve considered an artifact in its genre-ness.” Noting that all critical approaches share one goal, namely, “the imposition of order onto the invariable chaos of the film text,” Sanyal uses Jacques Derrida’s work to suggest that in many instances, the analysis of film practice “operates under the central notion of genre” because it invariably involves attempts to classify and organize elements in and surrounding films. Further observing that “there is always something left over . . . even after analyzing [a film] through different methods,” Sanyal makes the important point that the “doubt” surrounding categorization can and should be “extended to the object of study [so that it too can] be acknowledged as a perpetually open text with some sort of excess always remaining to be analyzed.”

The next two essays ask us to reflect on certain assumptions overlooked in some discussions about representations of women in ostensibly avant-garde art and the casting of women in musical performances for audiences ostensibly unaffected by the values of lowbrow consumer society. In “Enslavement by the Male Gaze: Female Depiction in Modernist Art,” Heidi Nees shows that while modernist artists broke with the past by focusing not on idealized, heroic depictions of male figures but instead on sexualized or deformed representations of the female form, it was only a limited, provisional break because, as Pam Meecham and Julie Sheldon explain, the female body in modern art is best understood as “a perpetual carrier of overwhelmingly male signs.” Nees notes that in modern fashion, women’s bodies were freed from corsets but contained once again by clothing that featured “colonial tropes of the Orient.” She points out that the exotic figure of Salome, well known to audiences due to productions ranging from Oscar Wilde’s symbolist play to Maud Allan’s provocative performances of the “dance of the seven veils,” was consistently rendered in terms “emblematic of the objectifying male gaze in modernist art.” Concluding with a look at how Chaplin uses a scene in *City Lights* to expose “disinterested,” gentlemanly gazing at female nudes as actually involving sanctioned leering at naked women, Nees makes the point that women had a new visibility in modernist art but that the depictions are a sign of continued male privilege.

Moving from fin-de-siècle and early-twentieth century examples to a well-publicized moment in the high-art world of the twenty-first century, Hope Bernard’s essay, “Weight, Loss, and Opera: Deborah Voigt and the Little Black Dress,” underscores the reality that even today, when women are visible they are required to conform to a vision of female beauty that is itself a sign of male power and privilege. Focusing on the little black dress incident that led soprano Deborah Voigt to transform herself from a size 30 to a size 14, Bernard finds that while female

opera stars in the past have been allowed and even encouraged to take up considerable space on stage, the emerging demand by critics and directors that they embody conventional visions of femininity puts opera divas in the double bind of being required to have excessive voices that fill auditoriums and soar to the highest ranges but visibly moderate bodies that are increasingly modest, restrained, and slimmed down.

This issue concludes with a collection of brief essays that served as introductions to the films screened during the fall 2010 Tuesdays at the Gish series hosted by The Culture Club at BGSU. Distinguished by its focus on cult cinema and studio era films likely new to audiences whose tastes have been shaped by cult and camp criticism, this fall the series featured screenings of: *Serial Mom* (John Waters, 1994), *Two Thousand Maniacs!* (Herschel Gordon Lewis, 1964), *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* (Russ Meyer, 1965), *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* (Lewis Milestone, 1946), *D.O.A.* (Rudolph Maté, 1950), *The Thin Man* (W. S. Van Dyke, 1934), *His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940), and *Near Dark* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1987). Information about ongoing Tuesdays at the Gish film series can be found at <http://www.battlegroundstates.org/> or <http://www.bgsu.edu/departments/theatrefilm/page25765.html>

## Balancing Threat and Power: Re-evaluating *Three Kings* as National Security Cinema

Mark Bernard



In fall 2004, a year and a half after the United States's March 2003 invasion of Iraq and the beginning of the military conflict that would come to be known as the Iraq War or the Second Gulf War, some people were looking to a cultural artifact in hopes that it could help foster resistance to the war and help defeat incumbent President George W. Bush in the upcoming November election. The artifact in question was David O. Russell's *Three Kings*, a 1999 film about four American soldiers (played by George Clooney, Mark Wahlberg, Ice Cube, and Spike Jonze) who, in the days following the end of the first Iraq War, attempt to steal millions of dollars in gold initially seized by Iraqi soldiers during their invasion of Kuwait. One of the people imbuing this ostensibly antiwar film with the power to sway public opinion was Russell, the film's writer and director who, before directing *Three Kings*, his 75 million dollar budgeted debut with a major distributor, had made a splash with his first film, *Spanking the Monkey* (1994), a low-budget, dark comedy about incest for then-mini-major New Line, and whose

follow-up, *Flirting with Disaster* (1996), was a more light-hearted, but still twisted paternity comedy for Indiewood stalwart Miramax.

Reportedly, Russell approached Warner Bros., the film's original distributor, to suggest a theatrical release and a "fifth anniversary edition" DVD of the film, with both releases accompanied by a documentary by Russell, Tricia Regan, and Juan Carlos Zaldívar about the war in Iraq entitled *Soldiers Pay* (Mottram 273). However, after Russell allegedly pushed to get the movies into theaters and on DVD before the election, Warner Bros. got nervous, and the "studio's lawyers argued that the Federal Election Committee might [deem the releases] 'soft-money' – in other words, unofficial support for a candidate outside of the 'hard money' each party is allowed to receive" (Mottram 274). In light of this controversy, Warner Bros. cancelled their release plans for the film and the documentary.

Warner Bros.'s decision caused howls of indignation from some more "liberal" members of the entertainment community. For instance, Tom Hall, blogger for the respected filmmaking website *indieWIRE*, posted an angry missive about Warner Bros.'s treatment of *Three King*'s releases on 29 October 2004. In his post entitled "Democracy: Inaction," Hall rushes to the defense of *Three Kings* and praises it as a "subversive action comedy . . . one of the best films of the 1990's [sic] . . . a smart and entertaining critique of the American mission in the Middle East" (Hall). Emphasizing its significance to the pre-election moment, Hall continues, "The film is as resonant to American policies in the current Iraq War as it was to the original Gulf War" (Hall).

Hall was not alone in his high opinion of the film. Peter Biskind, in *Down and Dirty Pictures*, his overview of American independent-film-gone-Hollywood in the 1990s, also expresses his admiration for *Three Kings* and champions Russell as "the most successful [of the

‘indie’ directors who eventually worked with the Hollywood studios] in pushing a personal, even subversive vision through the studio Cuisinart” (419). Similarly, Sharon Waxman, in her gossipy *Rebels on the Backlot*, heralds Russell as representing “the best of the young generation [of Hollywood directors] that had emerged in the late 1990s” for helming films like *Three Kings*. Perhaps the most sweeping praise for *Three Kings* comes from James Mottram who proclaims that the film depicts “how politics, big business, and the media have negatively affected contemporary society” (257).

Praise for Russell’s *Three Kings* does not stop with popular critics like Biskind, Waxman, and Mottram, for the film is also admired in academic circles. Russell was not the only person returning to his film in late 2004 in hopes that it would offer a new perspective on the present; in a short piece for the Winter 2004 issue of *Cinema Journal*, B. Ruby Rich mentions Russell’s film as she calls for “a reexamination of films that represent, counter, or analyze earlier moments of national trauma or historical redefinition” in a post-9/11 context (111). In this regard, Rich argues: “*Three Kings* commands our attention for the successful way it launches a savage analysis of the first Gulf War, using the methods of the action genre and music video as countercritique” (111). Here, Rich seems to be responding to Russell’s “MTV aesthetic” that included shooting much of the film on Ekachrome to give the images a gritty, washed-out look similar to photographs taken with an Instamatic camera (Waxman 233). Rich’s assessment of the film as countercritique also seems to reflect the fact that it sometimes portrays American soldiers in a less-than-heroic manner. For instance, an early sequence in the film depicts juvenile US soldiers celebrating the “victory” in Iraq by dancing, drinking, getting into water fights (while Iraqis around them are starving and have no access to water), singing “God Bless the USA,” and bragging to television reporters about how they “liberated Kuwait.”

Indeed, *Three Kings* appears subversive when considered using frameworks established within academia for the study of the war film genre. In an overview of the World War II combat film, Kathryn Kane explains that war films feature a set of “primary dualities” such as “War and Peace, Civilization and Savagery” (87). According to Kane, these primary dualities break down into other dualities that “provide much of the narrative tension” in the combat film (87). These include “honor vs. brutality, duty vs. self-interest, cooperation vs. individual heroism, sacrifice for others vs. personal pain” (87). Kane explains that when war films depict these dualities as “not so black and white, nor so clearly separated into good and evil columns” (87), they are generally referred to as “antiwar films” (87). The assumption is that by breaking down these dualities, the films are protesting the act of war.

Given that assumption, it is not difficult to see why critics, both popular and academic, may be tempted to praise *Three Kings* as a subversive, antiwar film, for the film is, in some regards, irreverent and demolishes many of the dualities noted by Kane. For instance, honor and brutality are irrevocably blurred in the film’s opening scene. The film begins with a card that reads: “March 1991. The war just ended.” This card is followed by a scene in which Sergeant Troy Barlow (Mark Wahlberg) encounters an Iraqi soldier in the desert. After spying the soldier in this distance, Barlow asks his fellow soldiers, “Are we shooting people or what?” Yet, Barlow’s comrades are more concerned with finding a stick of chewing gum and getting sand out of their eyes. This changes, however, when Barlow informs them that the soldier has a weapon. But Barlow neglects to notice, as he draws a bead on the Iraqi, that the soldier is also waving a flag of surrender. Barlow shoots the soldier in the neck, and as he and his fellow soldiers run toward the body for a closer look, the Iraqi soldier chokes and sputters blood and dies. To depict this moment, Russell offers a low angle shot of Barlow that emphasizes both his power and

ambivalence about what has just taken place. His comrades, however, feel no such ambivalence. One of them, Conrad Vig (Spike Jonze) says to Barlow, “Congratulations, my man, you shot yourself a raghead!” Another excitedly scrambles for his camera so he can take a photo of the dead Iraqi whose sign of surrender went unheeded.

Unheroic scenes such as these blur the distinction of honor and brutality and make *Three Kings* seem ostensibly antiwar. However, Kane is quick to point out that the labeling of films in this manner is “ironic” and that so-called antiwar films inhabit “a predictable place on the genre continuum” (87). According to Kane, even in “antiwar” films, the issues of “Why the men fight . . . why they are engaged in . . . war, what the ideological or political issues or causes might be, are not relevant topics of discourse in the films” (87). The film’s absence of commentary about the ideology behind war, coupled with the tendency of critics to see it as antiwar, perhaps point to the need for new analytic frameworks that make it possible to see how these films can offer cynical depictions of war and superficial critiques of the United States’s military actions abroad, but still support the basic tenants of the United States’s National Security policies.

### National Security Cinema

A shift in focus from the battlefield to the ideologies and strategic policies that lead to the battlefield situation – and are, more often than not, reinforced by filmic depictions of the battlefield scenario – can take place if one considers films like *Three Kings* not merely as war or combat films, but as National Security Cinema films, a category established by defense strategy expert Jean-Michel Valantin in his provocative book *Hollywood, The Pentagon and Washington*. According to Valantin, the United States’s national security policies are based on three foundational myths: the Frontier, Manifest Destiny, and the City Upon the Hill. These three myths, which fueled American expansionism throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, and

twentieth centuries, are updated and revitalized by National Security Cinema to justify US military actions around the globe.

In the updated scenario, the world outside of the US border is the Frontier, dangerous, lawless, and uncivilized and something that must be brought to heel under US military might (Valantin 2). This violence is justified by Manifest Destiny. Once a belief that the United States had the “right” to rule the North American continent from the Atlantic to the Pacific, Manifest Destiny has transformed in the present day into the belief, enforced by the US military, that the United States has the right to rule the globe (Valantin 2). The United States believes it has this right because of the third foundational myth, that of the US as the City Upon a Hill, which holds that Americans are “God’s chosen people,” moral, virtuous, and worthy of global dominion (Valantin 2). Valantin examines the intersection of the United States’s national security policies and Hollywood cinema and how these two institutional entities – the Pentagon and Hollywood – often feed off the images and ideologies of each other. When one acknowledges that, at a fundamental, systemic level, the US, in regards to its foreign policy, adheres to a belief in these myths, a truly “antiwar” film produced by the corporate media entities with strategic ties to the United States government and military is a near impossibility, a *fait accompli* made clear by Valantin’s National Security Cinema framework.

Valantin’s formulation then allows one to look past cynical and superficial critiques on a film’s surface and examine how Hollywood cinema consistently positions “virtuous” Americans in peril from threats from the foreign “frontier.” According to Valantin, the United States is fairly unique in that its foreign affairs and international policies are predicated on the idea of threat: “This near-obsessive perception of threat, where others might simply see differences or natural obstacles, is specific to the US national security system and at the heart of the production

of strategy” (xi). Additionally, Valantin argues that “Hollywood cinema shows these threats and the mobilization of the means with which to overcome them” (xi). In other words, US military strategy is based on constructing the “outside world” as a constant threat to the “American way of life,” and Hollywood cinema often capitalizes on this climate of threat – reinforcing defense strategies and sometimes creating them – by bringing these threats “to life” on the big screen and showing both the worst possible scenarios of what *could* happen and how these disastrous scenarios can be overcome. Ultimately, in foreign policy and Hollywood film, the United States, a country that has never experienced full-scale invasion, bombing strikes, or nuclear holocaust, is often constructed as the “victim” or the “underdog” in geo-political struggles, thus justifying any use – no matter how bellicose – of US military action. This situation has grown worse since the events of 9/11, when an actual attack on American soil was used to justify illegitimate wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Valantin proposes that there has been a dearth of films dealing with the first Gulf War because it was “not perceived by American public opinion as a defence [sic] operation” (41). According to Valantin, “The clearly offensive Nature [sic] of the Gulf War, in the name of power interests, as well as the total asymmetry of military means and will, makes it impossible to [follow the standard process of] creating heroes without clearly denying the reality of the situation” (41). These problems in representing the first Gulf War are clearly evident in *Three Kings*, one of the few “Gulf War” movies. It can be argued that *Three Kings* critiques the United States’s involvement in Iraq as superficial, greedy, and brutal as it unfolds the story of army officers who attempt to steal Kuwaiti gold. However, when the soldiers undergo a crisis of conscience and, instead of stealing the gold, help a group of Iraqi rebels fight against and escape Saddam’s regime, the film also demonizes Iraqi soldiers, asserts the United States’s basic moral

superiority over the Iraqis, and implicitly makes an argument for a full-scale invasion of Iraq, a military action that would eventually take place in March 2003.

### Re-assessing *Three Kings*

Ultimately, viewing *Three Kings* through the lens of National Security Cinema brings into view how the United States is cast as both aggressor and supposed victim. This duality can be seen by briefly tracing the trajectory of two of the film's main characters, Major Archie Gates (George Clooney) and Sergeant Troy Barlow. As mentioned previously, the opening scenes of *Three Kings* are cynical and seem critical of the United States's involvement in Iraq, and this cynicism toward the First Gulf War is exemplified in Major Gates, who, as an introductory subtitle reveals, "retires in two weeks." In an early scene, Colonel Ron Horn (Mykelti Williamson) urges Gates to cooperate with embedded news reporters because they are involved in a "media war." Gates, full of disgust and frustration, yells, "I don't even know what we did here. Just tell me what we did here, Ron!" His outburst implies that the United States was not in the Gulf to defend Kuwait or the anti-Saddam Iraqis, but to augment business and corporate interests. In the next few scenes, it appears as if Gates decides that since greed is the order of the day, he should profit as well and so hatches a scheme, along with three other army soldiers, to steal Kuwaiti gold from Saddam's army. As Gates and his comrades dream of obtaining enough gold to "get [them] out of [their] day jobs," *Three Kings* comes dangerously close to representing and criticizing the Gulf War as, to quote Valantin, "a non-heroic operation of military . . . power and hegemony" (41), a war waged by the United States not to defend itself, but to consolidate and enforce its economic and militaristic dominance.

Valantin argues that representation of United States military power like the one at the opening of *Three Kings* runs the danger of "starting a crisis between Washington and

Hollywood” (41). Thus, we should not be surprised when the film’s plot takes a turn, and the trajectory of Major Gates’s story – and the film’s representation of US armed forces – becomes drastically altered. After Gates and his men trace the gold to an Iraqi village, Gates informs them that “the most important thing in life” is “necessity,” and he assures them that because the Iraqi army’s “necessity” is to put down the rebellion of Iraqi citizens and to maintain peace, the Iraqis will not interfere with the Americans’ acquisition of the gold. However, Gates’s attitude changes when the Americans enter the village and find Iraqi soldiers torturing civilians they claim are part of an uprising. The inevitable turning point comes when an Iraqi soldier executes a woman in front of her husband and child.

In a bravura sequence in which an exchange of gunfire between Gates and his men and the offending soldiers is slowed down to a crawl, Gates and his compatriot Chief Elgin (Ice Cube) are photographed, in two separate shots, from a low angle with the clouds in the sky visible behind them sped up through time-lapse photography. Similar to the earlier low angle shot of Barlow after he killed the Iraqi soldier in the opening scene, these images suggest the power and nobility of American military power. While Barlow’s depiction was tinged with uncertainty, this sequence conveys that these mighty men, through their benevolence, have placed themselves in danger, in a situation that is racing along out of their control. When Barlow asks what happened to necessity and their plan to take the gold, Gates replies, “It just changed.” This plot twist serves two functions: first, to construct United States military service personnel as part of a benevolent, if mighty, force that ultimately has the best interests of the Iraqi people at heart even if policy and some actions do not reflect this, and second, to depict Major Gates and his men, who have traveled deep into Iraq against military orders, as vulnerable and under threat

of attack, a position that squares with the United States's threat-based strategic security policy as outlined by Valantin.

From this point on, the film shows Gates and his men leading a group of Iraqi civilians to safety, and even though the US Army is initially against Gates's action, the military eventually throws its support behind Gates and company to assist them in assuring the safety of the refugees. Along the way, Gates and his men encounter violent Iraqi soldiers and kindly Iraqi citizens. All of these scenes suggest that the United States's involvement in the first Gulf War was much too limited to truly help Iraqi citizens and that what is needed is a full-blown invasion of Iraq that can unseat Saddam Hussein. For instance, when Gates and his men take shelter with the Iraqi refugees in an underground bunker, the Iraqis criticize the United States not for invading their country, but instead for not displaying more military might. One refugee cries out: "Where is America now? Where is the Army now?" The possibility of diplomacy is never broached, and more military action is the only proposed cure for Iraq's trouble. Thus, *Three Kings* ends up being anything but a thorough critique of the United States's involvement in Iraq, unless a call for further military engagement can be considered a critique.

The closest that the latter half of *Three Kings* comes to challenging US policy is in the development of Sergeant Troy Barlow's character. After Gates and company flee the village with Iraqi refugees in tow, they come under fire from Saddam's army. In the ensuing melee, Barlow is captured, interrogated, and tortured by Said (Saïd Taghmaoui), a Captain in Saddam's army who refers to the United States as a "sick fucking country." To the film's credit, Said is far from a stock villain: during his interrogation and torture of Barlow, he reveals that his wife's legs were crushed and his infant son was killed when United States bombers attacked Iraq. When Barlow attempts to establish a connection with Said by telling him that he has a newborn daughter, Said

scoffs and replies, “Very nice for you, bro. She’s safe in Arizona, without the bomb, the concrete and all this shit,” a comment that belies the United States’s possession of a safe position of privilege, despite defense strategy claims to the contrary. Barlow offers Said platitudes about how the United States declared war on Iraq to save the Kuwaiti people and to “stabilize the region,” but Said angrily refutes these claims, responding, “Stability for what? Your pickup truck?” Perhaps the most damning of all Said’s comments are those in which he reveals that he received all of his weapons and military training from the United States during the conflict with Iran. In sum, these scenes with Said are an anomaly in United States war films, for they provide a human dimension to the “threats” that supposedly lurk outside the United States’s borders, and they openly question the corporate and economic motives behind United States’s military policy.

However, the scenes with Barlow and Said also seem to ultimately show that the United States and its military possess some sort of moral superiority to Iraq and its soldiers. During the interrogation scenes, great pains are taken to draw connections between Barlow and Said: they both are young fathers, and they both signed up for military service out of economic necessity. Nevertheless, there is a clear difference between them that is highlighted when Barlow counters Said’s discussion of how the United States indiscriminately bombed civilians in Iraq with stories of Iraqi atrocities toward Kuwaitis. Said concedes that he had done some things that he was “not proud of” in Kuwait. This leads Barlow to comment: “Who’s got the sick country?”

The scene has its corollary later in the film when Major Gates comes to Barlow’s rescue. Gates bursts into the room, wounds Said, shoots the other Iraqis, frees Barlow, and hands him a gun to give Barlow the opportunity to kill his tormentor. However, instead of shooting Said, Barlow, photographed from a low angle, angrily shoots the wall by Said’s head; Said begins to weep, and having spared Said’s life, Barlow self-righteously walks away. This time, the use of

the low angle emphasizes both military might and moral superiority; the implication is that Barlow, unlike Said in Kuwait, has the moral ability to show compassion and mercy, even when his superior officers condone violence. By comparison, Said regrets the heinous acts he committed when he was “following orders.” Here again, while *Three Kings* offers some criticism of United States’s military policy, these critiques have their limit, and the film ultimately depicts the United States as a benevolent force whose major fault was not executing a full-scale invasion of Iraq during the First Gulf War.

In these ways and others, *Three Kings* is typical of many Hollywood narratives in that it says two things at once. Indeed, the double-voiced narrative of *Three Kings* resembles what Robin Wood famously calls “incoherent texts,” films that simply “do not know what they want to say” (42). According to Wood, the incoherence of select films from the late 1970s and early 1980s was a result of a “questioning of the entire social structure that validated” the Vietnam War (44). In some Hollywood films, this questioning led to a crisis in representation, and the “possibility suddenly opened up that the whole world might have to be recreated” (44). However, “this generalized crisis in ideological confidence never issued in revolution” (44), as no coherent alternative to the capitalist patriarchal status quo emerged. The appellation “incoherent text” might also pertain to *Three Kings*: if Russell’s intention was to make an “antiwar” film, how might an “antiwar” film be enunciated in a culture so steeped in the language of National Security Cinema and in notions of the Frontier, Manifest Destiny, and the City Upon a Hill?

At the same time, the label “incoherent text” does not seem to completely fit when it comes to *Three Kings*. While Wood claims that “incoherent texts” from the past strive to make sense but “seem to crack open before our eyes” as if by accident (45), *Three Kings* seems like a willfully incoherent film with its incoherence being completely by design. Frank P. Tomasulo

notes this trend in Hollywood cinema as he explains, “It is a common marketing strategy of the American cinema to attempt to deal with controversial subject matter by having it both ways, so as not to alienate segments of the mass audience who have strong feelings on one side or another of a particular issue” (147). According to Tomasulo, this trend is particularly prevalent in war movies. For instance, a film like Francis Coppola’s infamous Vietnam epic *Apocalypse Now* (1978), as Tomasulo notes, “shows the war not as immoral, only mishandled” (149), a comment that sounds as if it could easily have been written about *Three Kings*. Tomasulo also accuses Coppola of “subordinating content to style and foregrounding aesthetic ambiguity and richness” in *Apocalypse Now*, and he concludes his argument by calling for films about war that “[take] an unambiguous stand on the imperialist involvement and illegal conduct” of the US military (154, 157).

*Three Kings*, with its flashy aesthetic (praised by Rich) and its double-voiced attitude toward the First Gulf War, stands guilty of similar charges. If one wishes to read *Three Kings* as critical of the United States’s involvement in Iraq, there is sufficient evidence to do so; however, the film can also easily be read as a justification for a full-blown invasion of Iraq, a military “option” that came true in early 2003 and continues to come horrifically true every day, despite President Obama’s announcement on 31 August 2010 that the war was “over.” If director Russell intended to make an antiwar film, perhaps the impossibility of representing – and interrogating – the First Gulf War in a Hollywood film forced him to do otherwise. After all, *Three Kings* was, for all intents and purposes, a “prestige” picture, a modestly budgeted (by Hollywood standards) movie by an “indie” director released during Oscar season (the film was released on 1 October 1999) in hopes of garnering nominations and awards.

Yet *Three Kings* was shut out of all major nominations. However, it seems that this outcome had more to do with Russell's rumored bad behavior on the set (Russell allegedly got into a physical fight with star Clooney at one point) than with any radical political content in the film (Waxman 244, 283). If there were any radical content in the film, it would have been shut out of popular discourse long before the Oscar nominations were announced. After all, Hollywood and the Pentagon have, for years, enjoyed a profitable relationship that neither side would want to disrupt. The Pentagon's involvement with the films of Michael Bay exemplifies this relationship; as journalist Scott Brown has noted, Bay, with pro-military blockbuster films like *Armageddon* (1998), *Pearl Harbor* (2001), and *Transformers* (2007), "has built up so much goodwill with the Pentagon that he can call up and order F 16s [sic] the way the rest of us order hot wings" (Brown). Bay's films benefit both Hollywood and the Pentagon. With budgets kept (relatively) low because of military support, his films make massive amounts of money at the box office and big profits in ancillary markets.

They also make the massive military force of the United States look attractive, mighty, and benevolent, just as *Three Kings* ultimately ends up doing. Now that the Iraq War is "over," people might again turn to *Three Kings* for answers about how the United States got into this conflict in the Middle East; if viewed through the lens of National Security Cinema, perhaps they will find answers, even if they are not the answers they had hoped to find.

## Works Cited

- Apocalypse Now*. Dir. Francis Coppola. United Artists, 1978. Film.
- Armageddon*. Dir. Michael Bay. Touchstone, 1998. Film.
- Biskind, Peter. *Down and Dirty Pictures: Miramax, Sundance, and the Rise of Independent Film*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004. Print.
- Brown, Scott. "The Rebirth of Optimus Prime: Behind the Scenes with Director Michael Bay." *Wired.com*. Condé Nast Digital, 26 June 2007. Web. 5 November 2010.
- Flirting with Disaster*. Dir. David O. Russell. Miramax, 1996. Film.
- Hall, Tom. "Democracy: Inaction." *indieWIRE*. SnagFilms, 29 October 2004. Web. 13 November 2010.
- Kane, Kathryn. "The World War II Combat Film." *Handbook of American Film Genres*. Ed. Wes Gehring. New York: Greenwood, 1988. 85-102. Print.
- Mottram, James. *The Sundance Kids: How the Mavericks Took Back Hollywood*. New York: Faber and Faber, 2006. Print.
- Pearl Harbor*. Dir. Michael Bay. Touchstone, 2001. Film.
- Rich, B. Ruby. "After the Fall: Cinema Studies Post-9/11." *Cinema Journal* 43.2 (2004): 109-14. Print.
- Spanking the Monkey*. Dir. David O. Russell. New Line, 1994. Film.
- Three Kings*. Dir. David O. Russell. Perf. George Clooney and Mark Walberg. Warner Bros., 1999. Film.
- Tomasulo, Frank P. "The Politics of Ambivalence: *Apocalypse Now* as Prowar and Antiwar Film." *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*. Eds. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1990. 145-58. Print.

*Transformers*. Dir. Michael Bay. Paramount, 2007. Film.

Valantin, Jean-Michel. *Hollywood, the Pentagon and Washington: The Movies and National*

*Security from World War II to the Present Day*. London: Anthem, 2005. Print.

Waxman, Sharon. *Rebels on the Backlot: Six Maverick Directors and How They Conquered the*

*Hollywood Studio System*. New York: HarperCollins, 2005. Print.

Wood, Robin. *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan . . . and Beyond*. New York: Columbia UP,

2003. Print.

## A Brief Note on the Possibilities of Genre, or, Whose Genre Is it, anyway?

Sudipto Sanyal



There are various ways of discussing film. Timothy Corrigan points out “Six Approaches to Writing about Film” – a film history approach (which in itself can be approached in three different ways: by looking at films in historical relationship to each other, by relating films to their conditions of production, and by analyzing the reception of films by their audiences); a consideration of film within the framework of a national cinema; talking about genres; approaching film from a discussion of its auteur; adopting a formalist perspective; and analyzing film ideologically (79-105). Like the Haussmannization of Paris in the middle of the nineteenth century, all these approaches attempt to order the space of the filmic text into carefully regularized vistas of expression and discourse, seeking to repress the organic anarchy inherent in film, or for that matter any cultural text, be it the winding narrow alleys of pre-Haussmann Paris (so ripe for roadblock and revolution!) or the many paradoxes of Carol Reed’s *The Third Man* (how static and dynamic at the same time!). It is the goal of this essay to note, therefore, how all of these different approaches to film criticism share the same goal – the imposition of order onto the invariable chaos of the film text – and to point out that, frequently, these different approaches all operate under the central notion of genre in the abstract. Here, genre is conceptualized as a

Derridean “structure” that accrues meaning/s from constant reiteration, or what Judith Butler calls a “contingent repetition” (13). The point of this essay is to demonstrate the validity of Ken Gelder’s claim that “popular fiction is, essentially, genre fiction” (1), and to show how, in one particular mode of popular fiction – cinema – the idea of genre needs to be broadened to include all the different modes of analysis the analysis of genre automatically tends towards, implies, or subsumes.<sup>1</sup>

A *genre* is a contentious thing, in film and otherwise. In its various uses, it can imply various modes of thought and expression, within one or many discourses. It can operate from a direction of creation outwards, and therefore be disseminating in nature, or it might be a receptive technique, operating in the audience’s discourse rather than the filmmaker’s. It can be descriptive, proscriptive, culture-specific, transcultural, ephemeral, timeless, and various other dialectical categories. Genre, ultimately, is a way to organize different layers of discourse into coherent components. It classifies, organizes, excludes.

Genre is, therefore, anti-anarchic.

Jacques Derrida speaks of genre in terms of spatiality. “As soon as the word ‘genre’ is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn” (56). This leads to thinking about a conceptual “map” of genre, with lines of demarcation and, at the risk of “impurity,” oceanic spaces of tentative blurring where genres become indistinct – “As soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly, or monstrosity” (57).

With regard to the act of viewing film, genre functions to a great extent on the principle of expectation. In this sense, “a genre is ultimately an abstract conception rather than something that exists empirically in the world,” notes Jane Feuer (108). Perhaps because it is in many ways

this “abstract conception,” the fluidity of genre/s is worth considering, especially when writing about film.

Genre in film is usually thought of as a categorizing phenomenon for “classifying films in terms of common patterns of form and content” (Corrigan 84). But it is important here to make a distinction between – or acknowledge the complicated presence of – the existence of different classes of things, and classes of classes of things, and classes of classes of classes of things, like numerous Chinese boxes. What patterns of form and content should be chosen? More importantly, where do we draw the line between different patterns? “Night” might seem to be the defining color of film noir, for instance, but as James Naremore points out, film noir is *More Than Night*. There is, almost always, something that’s left over, remaindered, after we’ve considered an artifact in its genre-ness. *Some* sort of meaning is constantly deferred, often to be reactivated in other contexts. So, for example, *The Big Lebowski* might be seen as both a noir film and not, because it exists in a sort of deterritorializing relation with noir. The purifying anti-anarchic drive of genre mentioned above impels film noir to attempt to inscribe *The Big Lebowski* within its schema of encoding and decoding. The film itself, however, attempts to defer/differ meaning eternally. By this, I mean that it plays with the notion of the spatiality of genre by *differentiating* – it exists in a generic space that is *not* noir, but is conceivable only in terms of noir – as well as its temporality by *deferring* (meaning and its imposition) – it keeps *becoming* noir, but never really *becomes* noir. In this way, it could perhaps be seen as a deconstructing process that (contradictorily, but obviously) never arrives at an end.<sup>2</sup>

*The Big Lebowski* is anomalous, but it is not exceptional, because it is merely a radical example of how all artworks tend towards a surplus of meaning that is not included in the advertised menu. This is why the notion of genre is so ambivalent, with competing theories about

what it exactly involves – the semantics of the text? Its syntax? What about its mood? The circumstances of its production? Genres therefore relate not only to the internal dynamics of form and content within a film, but also to external aspects like economics and politics (blockbusters, for example, are defined usually by their big budgets, audience reception, etc.). Extending this perspective to its logical end, one can therefore argue that all categories are subsumed by genre. When it comes to writing about film and the study of genre in cinema, then, can a case be made for the overarching presence of generic valuation regardless of which of Corrigan’s six common approaches to film criticism one takes?

We make sense of genre/s intertextually, in relation to other texts within a genre rather than to lived experience. The mimetic potential of a generic text therefore exists always in dialogue with the similarities and differences of other texts within the genre. Indeed, it is no coincidence that Derrida insists on the universality of genre when he says

[A] text cannot belong to no genre, it cannot be without or less a genre. Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging. And not because of an abundant overflowing or a free, anarchic, and unclassifiable productivity, but because of the trait of participation itself, because of the effect of the code and of the generic mark. Making genre its mark, a text demarcates itself.  
(65)

If, indeed, there is no genreless text – and it seems increasingly likely there isn’t – then what are the implications that genre builds up in the analysis of film, even when it is not necessarily an analysis of genre? After all, David Bordwell himself keeps “confusing” genre with thematics, aesthetics, ideology, structure and reception, when he lists an inventory of generic categories,

Grouping by period or country (American films of the 1930s), by director or star or producer or writer or studio, by technical process (CinemaScope films), by cycle (the “fallen women” films), by series (the 007 movies), by style (German

Expressionism), by structure (narrative), by ideology (Reaganite cinema), by venue (“drive-in movies”), by purpose (home movies), by audience (“teenpix”), by subject or theme (family film, paranoid-politics movies). (148)

Can we, then, consider *any* kind of approach to writing on film an approach to writing about genre? If, for instance, auteur theory is analyzed as a way to transform the impulse of genre analysis from a study of the style and content of a film and its relation to the style and content of other, “similar” films, into the study of the aesthetic choices and ideological imperatives governing the film in relation to those present in other films by the same *auteur*, then can auteur theory be called merely an offshoot of genre theory? (And this creates a classificatory impulse in itself, of course, by the condition of having to choose similarity based on certain arbitrarily-decided grounds). A more specific component of genre is being analyzed, perhaps? An Internet Movie Database reviewer, for instance, condemns Alfred Hitchcock’s *Family Plot* for being only somewhat Hitchcockian (MickeyTo). Interestingly, the basis for this condemnation consists of elements that might easily have been included in a review tentatively titled, “Bad suspense, bad dark humor in the collapsed plot of Hitchcock’s *Family Plot*.” Indeed, most of the reviews of this film analyze it as a bad example of a Hitchcock film, whereas, at the same time, they are actually analyzing it as a bad example of the funny suspense film genre. Which, then, prompts a reevaluation of the status of the auteur in film analysis – is the auteur even analyzable on his or her own terms? Is it a valid scheme of study to separate hitherto discrete theoretical approaches from the seemingly overarching presence of genre?

It is certainly valid to *use* concepts like “national cinema,” “auteur,” and “ideological cinema” when analyzing modes of cinematic discourse. An identifiable roadmap is essential to the fruitful analysis of any sort of text, and it is far easier to engage with a subject on terms of

specific nomenclatural familiarity. What, then, is the utility of thinking about genre as anything more than just the style and content of a film?

Often, in film studies, there is a tendency to talk about different analytical methodologies in irreconcilable terms. So, for instance, there is sometimes the privileging of the study of the material history/culture of film – ephemera, legal rulings, technological changes, censorship and film, etc. – over a more in-depth theorizing on film based on, for instance, *mise en scène*, performance choices, narrative structure, etc., and vice versa. It should be evident, but often, surprisingly, isn't, that neither a purely theoretical study of film in and of itself, nor a solely historicizing approach, can sufficiently grasp the complexities of any cinema without engaging intertextually with the other. It is here that a broader and more inclusive sense of genre can be applied to film studies so that it creates a visible link among disparate cultural or methodological hierarchizations. Studying genre as an analytical chain to connect various approaches of writing about film may well be a particularly useful way to construct a careful study of all the aspects of cinema, as an art form, as an historical process, a technological continuation, and as possibly the most significant cultural artifact of the long twentieth century.

### Coda

This synoptic nature of genre can, however, be paradoxical. To talk of textuality for a moment: Pierre Macherey speaks of the ambiguities of “the literary thing,” pointing out how the use of the word “thing” calls literature into question – the literary thing is “a profanation,” because it reduces literature to the material status of a mere thing; but it is also an acknowledgement of the depths of literature, of the secrets it hides, because we so often use

“thing” when we have no other, more descriptive word (21-30). Macherey equates the word “thing” with an “impossible what-do-you-call-it,” and this, I think, is the function genre, being a contentious *thing*, performs as an analytic concept – it allows one to grasp the *text* as a thing, but it also renders the text a what-do-you-call-it. It is thus a constant reminder of its own status as method and of the impossibility of achieving any one “right” or “most valid” approach to writing about film, a reminder that all kinds of approaches need to be incorporated because there is always something left over, with each different approach, as well as ultimately, in the filmic text itself, even after analyzing it through different methods. It is probably a good thing, this contentiousness of genre, because it avoids the reassurance of a fixed center. The epistemic violence arising out of certain forms of knowledge is bypassed – the conceptual tool of genre being so filled with doubt, this doubt is invariably extended to the object of study, which can then be acknowledged as a perpetually open text with some sort of excess always remaining to be analyzed (note, for instance, the almost always existing exceptions to the so-called rules of film noir – the bleak snowbound country that provides the setting for Nicholas Ray’s *On Dangerous Ground* is a far cry from the nighttime cityscape usually identified with noir; Hitchcock’s *Rope*, undeniably noir in sentiment, takes place entirely in a warmly lit room; etc.). To acknowledge genre in all its doubts, and to use this as a method of analysis, is to acknowledge our inability to provide a complete reading of any text, to be aware that all structures rely on constant reiteration in an attempt to efface the historical and appear natural.

This brings us (finally) to what has been the poorly articulated concern of this piece all along. Contemporary textual theory from the sixties onwards has attempted to be especially sensitive to the polysemous nature of the text, as well as to the role of the “reader” – the interactions between reader and polysemous text, therefore. Genre, functioning both as a set of

conventions, stylistics, thematics, etc. internal to the filmic text and as an analytic concept imposed from without by the “reader” of this text, provides an effective field of play for the establishment of such correspondences. The genre text thus exemplifies the spirit of a (post)modern age (this explains the rise of genre fiction, for example, as a distinctly twentieth century development), negating the Crocean ideal of art as communicated directly from the artist’s mind to the audience’s.<sup>3</sup> “The apparently radical difference in character between modern and traditional art,” as David Robey calls it in his introduction to Umberto Eco’s *The Open Work*, is uniquely encoded in film, a purely modern technology/art form (ix). For Eco, modern forms of art call for a previously unrecognized degree of collaboration between artist and public, and so the use of genre as an analytic category is perhaps what he might call a more “honest” or ideologically sound mode of analysis, in that it allows the critic to acknowledge the complex and problematic nature of the text (and, by extension, of the historical conditions the text is born of). Since this essay has dealt with genre primarily as a conceptual tool for analysis that interacts with some so-called “essential characteristics” of texts, we might extend Eco’s notion of the open work to the practice of analysis – just as the “open work” leaves open certain configurations and constituents of itself to the public and to chance, so too does genre, which can be called an “open approach,” perhaps, allowing one to leave space open for all that exceeds the interpretative act. This room for ambiguity that genre leaves behind often enables us to recognize the essential incompleteness of interpretation, perhaps more so than any of the other approaches to writing about film mentioned above – as Brother William of Baskerville mentions in *The Name of the Rose*, it may be that “the only truth lies in learning to free ourselves from insane passion for the truth” (491).

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that the word “fiction” is used here metaphysically, as the creation, sustenance and unraveling of the narratives we employ in our everyday lives as a way of “making sense of it all.”

<sup>2</sup> For this notion of meaning being differing/deferred/dispersed, see Derrida, Jacques. “‘Differance’.” *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs* Trans. David Allison. Evanston: North Western University Press, 1973. 129-60.

<sup>3</sup> See Benedetto Croce’s *The Essence of Aesthetic*.

## Works Cited

Bordwell, David. *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989. Print.

Butler, Judith. “Further Reflections on Conversations of our Times.” *diacritics* 27.1 (1997): 13-15. Print.

Corrigan, Timothy. *A Short Guide to Writing about Film*. New York: Pearson Longman, 2004. Print.

Derrida, Jacques. “The Law of Genre.” Trans. Avital Ronell. *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 7, No. 1, ‘On Narrative’ (Autumn, 1980). 55-82. Print.

Eco, Umberto. *The Open Work*. Trans. Anna Cancogni. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989. Print.

- *The Name of the Rose*. Trans. William Weaver. London and New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983. Print.

Feuer, Jane. “Genre Study and Television.” *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled: Television and Contemporary Criticism*. Ed. Robert C Allen. London: Routledge, 1992. 104-120. Print.

Gelder, Ken. *Popular Fiction: The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field*. London and New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.

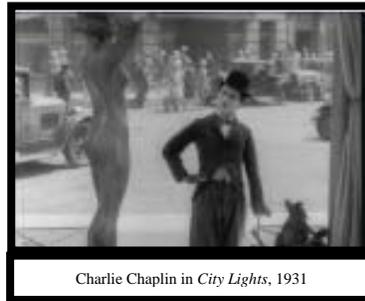
Macherey, Pierre. “The Literary Thing.” *diacritics* 37.4 (winter 2007): 21-30. Print.

MickeyTo. "Historically relevant only by association!" The Internet Movie Database, 26 December 1999. Web. 17 October 2010.

<<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0074512/usercomments?start=60>>

## Enslavement by the “Male” Gaze: Female Depiction in Modernist Art

Heidi L. Nees



In their analysis of “The Female Nude as the Site of Modernity,” Pam Meecham and Julie Sheldon propose that the female nude is a “crucial element” in modern art (85). Using their discussion as a foundation, this essay looks briefly at Paul Poiret’s “Oriental” fashion designs for women, selected depictions of the title character in Oscar Wilde’s symbolist play *Salome*, and the social commentary that emerges from Charlie Chaplin’s performance in a scene in *City Lights* to show how the female figure is often shaped by an imperial or deceptively disinterested gaze in modern art. By looking at fashion, theatre, and film one can see the extent to which the “male” gaze permeated modernist expression; the three case studies allow us to consider representations of women in different mediums and at different points in the modernist period. As the examples will show, depictions of women designed to satisfy “male” desire persisted well into the modernist period. The discussion of fashions for women, certain stage and silent screen depictions of Salome, and the act of “disinterestedly” gazing at a female nude parodied by Chaplin’s performance should suggest that Meecham and Sheldon make a useful point

when they argue, “Naked or nude, semi-clothed or fully clothed, the female body [in modern art is not] an innocent category [but is instead] a perpetual carrier of overwhelmingly male signs” (88).

Meecham and Sheldon outline the ways in which male artists’ depictions of the female figure signal the transition into modernism. Prior to the nineteenth century most nudes were depictions of the male body. Moreover, they were representations that emphasized a heroic figure. To break with the past, modernist artists focused on representations of the female form. However, what is significant is that while the statues and paintings of the male figure were “accurate, if idealizing representation(s),” the female figure featured in modern art is often distorted; examples include Matisse and Picasso’s treatment of the female nude (84). While artists such as Matisse and Picasso manipulated the female form in non-realistic depictions of the female body, modern designers like Poiret altered perceptions of the female form in ways that replaced one conventional vision of female beauty with another conventional, equally confining vision.

In *Raiding the Icebox: Reflections on Twentieth-Century Culture*, Peter Wollen discusses an instance of the modernist choice to de-form and re-form the patriarchal and imperial version of the female figure. Wollen sees fashion designer Paul Poiret as a modernist who broke with previous depictions of the female form. While corsets that created an idealized hourglass shape for a woman had been *en vogue* before the modernist era, Poiret’s designs deviated from this idealized image, rejecting the corset and later taking “a crucial further step implied by the abolition of the petticoat and the wide skirt” (3). Poiret replaced the traditional idealized female form with a look that “stressed bright colours, physical movement, [and] a reduced and unified body image,

with clothes that hung from the shoulders” (2). The silhouette of his designs erased the curves that the corset had so painfully aimed to create. While his sculpting of a new silhouette for females may have liberated the actual body from the unnatural curves created by the corset, his designs continued to trap the female form into depictions of cultural fantasies that pleased “male” desire. His fashions illustrate that the bending and even perversion of earlier idealized (male) visions of the female form is a central feature of (male) modernist art.

Poiret’s designs did not abolish or deter the “male” gaze of the female, they merely altered the associations. Describing the debut of Poiret’s new designs at the 1911 soiree in celebration of a new translation of *The Thousand and One Nights* Wollen writes:

Poiret himself was dressed as a sultan, lounging on cushions under a canopy, wearing a fur-edged caftan, a white silk turban, a green sash and jeweled velvet slippers. In one hand he held an *ivory-handled whip* and in the other a scimitar. Nearby was a huge *golden cage* in which his wife, Denise Poiret, his ‘favourite’, was confined with her woman attendants. When all the guests were assembled, dressed in costumes from tales of the Orient . . . Poiret released the women. . . .

The whole party revolved around this pantomime of slavery and liberation set in a phantasmagoric fabled East. (1, emphasis added)

Poiret’s performance at the party is the imperial male gaze materialized. For his designs that distorted the previously-favored female figure might have liberated the female body from the corset, but given their association with regimes of domination they effectively served to re-enslave the female figure. The symbolic strength of Poiret’s imperial power is conveyed by the implication that he could send women back into the cage, both the

golden cage of the party and the cage of the corset. As the sultan wielding an “ivory-handled whip” and confining his wife in a cage as if she were a bird, Poiret presents the female as the little more than object of male fantasy. And though they are released from the cage, the women are still contained in “Oriental” fashions and are therefore subjected to an imperial, patriarchal gaze. The entrapment of women into forms that appealed to the “male” gaze continues, of course, far into the twentieth century; one needs only to think of the brassieres that created the 1950s “sweater girl” look to recall the persistent engineering of the female form to conform to an era’s conventional visions of beauty.

During the modernist period, the “Orient” continued to be identified with the “feminine,” especially when juxtaposed with Western notions of the “masculine.” Discussing those connections in *Gender in Modernism: New Geographies, Complex Intersections*, Bonne Kime Scott proposes that “gender, colonialism, and modernism [are] inextricable” (5). Referencing the work of Sonita Sarker, Scott explains that modernism in art is best understood as “the face of modernity at the turn of twentieth century – the late colonialism – the political infrastructure of modernism that provides material resources as well as particular forms of the racialized, sexualized and gendered ‘other’” (5). In this context, then, by using colonial tropes of the Orient in fashion designs for women, Poiret effectively shackled the female form in a new exoticism that invited and sustained a modern, imperial male gaze.

In a photograph of his wife taken at the Plaza Hotel, Denise Poiret reclines on a low couch covered with pillows that suggests an Arabic inspiration for the décor. Dressed in his “Oriental” fashions, she wears a turban-esque head dressing as she relaxes with her legs daintily crossed at the ankles, her hand lightly upturned, and her gaze demurely

looking down. The picture is at once exotic, inviting, and feminine for modern male viewers. An image such as this gives credence to the view that modern visions of the female form involve the stylization of the female body to invite a gaze that is not only gendered but also imperial.

The power of an imperial male gaze on the exoticized female form is also found in Oscar Wilde's *Salome*. Written in 1891, this symbolist play proved controversial for myriad reasons, from its treatment and presentation of a Biblical story to the sexually-charged dance performed by the title character. The idea of gazing is explicit in the play. It opens with the Young Syrian exclaiming how beautiful Salome is, but his comments are met with a warning. The Young Syrian declares, "How pale the princess is! Never have I seen her so pale. She is like the shadow of a white rose in a mirror of silver"; admonishing him the Page of Herodias states, "You must not look at her. You look too much at her" (Act I, scene 1). Herod, however, does not heed warnings. Relishing the prospect of seeing Salome dance, he cries out, "Ah, thou art to dance with naked feet. 'Tis well! 'Tis well. Thy little feet will be like white doves. They will be like little white flowers that dance upon the trees" (Act I, scene 1).

Echoing the Young Syrian's equation between Salome and "the shadow of a white rose in a mirror of silver," Herod's description of Salome's "naked feet" as "white doves" and "little white flowers" underscores the degree to which they see her as a non-sentient object that exists only in relation to their pleasure. However, while she is powerless to turn back the modern, imperial, male gaze, Salome finds power in being subjected to the gaze, for it is by dancing at the request of Herod that Salome gets what she most desires, the head of Jokanaan. Yet it is, of course, a very qualified power, for

although she is momentarily “liberated” through the power her dance has over Herod, she is still enslaved by male privilege because it is only in her entrapment within male fantasy that she finds any agency. As with the scenario played out by Poiret, in Wilde’s depiction, the female becomes visible as a reflection of male and imperial privilege.

This depiction of Salome extended beyond Wilde’s play. Fascination with the character filled pages of literature, canvases of paintings, and screens of early films. Megan Becker-Leckrone notes that Salome signified “European Decadence as a representative myth of eroticism, taboo, and transgression” (239). The figure of Salome was well-known and widely disseminated during the early years of modernist art and came to represent the exoticized object of the male gaze. Salome’s “Dance of the Seven Veils” was at once enigmatic, erotic, and exotic to the characters of the play and the members of the audience. In the play, Wilde does not need to describe the dance and instead merely states in the stage directions, “*Slaves bring perfumes and the seven veils, and take off the sandals of SALOME*” (Act I, scene 1).

When performed by Maud Allan in her 1908 dance piece *The Vision of Salome*, Salome is presented to audiences attired in an intricately-beaded, yet minimal costume that is distinctly non-Western. The costume suggests the same type of exoticism featured in Poiret’s designs for women. In one publicity photo of Allen reprinted in William Tydeman’s and Steven Price’s *Wilde Salome*, Allan can be seen from behind, her back slightly arched, arms raised with hands daintily lingering above her head, and her bare foot exposed beneath the skirt of beads. She glances slightly behind her shoulder, suggesting a coquettish awareness of the gaze imposed upon her. The image depicts the

enigmatic, erotic, and exotic nature of Salome, a female figure emblematic of the objectifying imperial, male gaze in modernist art.

Allan's minimalistic costuming, especially the transparent quality of her skirt, verges on nudity, and the pose of her body exudes a sexuality connected with that nudity. This depiction reflects modern art's reliance on a tension and slippage between representations of the female nude that are influenced on the one hand by the previous era's conventions for representing heroic male figures and on the other patterns found in pornographic depictions of naked women. Meecham and Sheldon point out that in the modernist era, ideas of nude versus naked become complicated. Modernist depictions of women require people to ask: what makes a female figure nude, what makes her naked? Is it the visibility of pubic hair in the image? Is it the spatial position of the model, or the social environment in which she is shown? Noting that art has traditionally equated the nude with a "disinterested" connoisseurial gaze," they suggest that depictions that invite a brazen gaze belong to representations of the naked woman (92).

John Berger takes up this issue in *Ways of Seeing*. He recognizes the conventional association between "nude" and art, but suggests that the relation between the two arises actually from the objectification of the female in artistic works. For Berger, nakedness is "to be oneself," whereas nudity is an act of display, usually sexualized display (54). Like Meecham and Sheldon, Berger would likely see Maud Allan's embodiment of Salome as a representation that is near-*nude*. While there are slight differences between Meecham's and Sheldon's and Berger's use of the terms "nude" and "naked," they agree that the modernist display of unclothed female figures consistently invites a brazen "male" gaze.

Cynthia Baron and Sharon Marie Carnicke's observations about *City Lights* (Charles Chaplin, 1931) suggest ways to think about the modernist male gaze and its relation to representations of female nudity and nakedness. In the film, there is a scene in which Chaplin's character stops outside a store to look at a statue of the female statue in the window display. Baron and Carnicke discuss the play of gestures that alternate between Chaplin's use of conventional gesture-signs that reveal his awareness of social conventions, and his individual gesture expressions that disclose the tramp's sexual arousal that is sparked by seeing the statue. At first, Chaplin tries to use a "disinterested" gaze to follow social decorum; he "scratches the left side of his head so that he has a legitimate reason to turn his head and look over at the nude sculpture. Carrying the act of good breeding one step farther, Chaplin stands erect, his chin down, his hand pressing down on the top of his cane as he leans on it to assess the nude statue" (105). Chaplin also alternates his gaze from the nude to a nearby horse sculpture to display his "disinterest." His performance, however, also reveals the anti-social physical desire that is aroused by the sight of a "naked" female, for he gets so wrapped up in eyeing her that he does not even see the danger nearby; just behind him there is a hole in the sidewalk for an underground lift. Baron and Carnicke describe the change as his enthusiasm takes over: "Tilted back with his right leg held up off the ground and his hand on his hip, the Tramp's sexual excitement starts to dominate the dignified mood of the gesture-signs he has been using to assess the art" (106). Chaplin's performance represents one of Berger's points, namely, that "Women are there to feed an appetite, not to have any of their own" (55). Here again we see an example in which modernist art serves to satisfy the "male" gaze. Treated with a parodic humor, however, the scene pokes fun at the conventions of

social decorum that legitimize the gaze of those in power. Chaplin's performance echoes and comments on the modernist shift to depictions of the naked woman, a move that Meecham and Sheldon explain served largely as "an act of male artistic rebellion" against existing social norms (91).

As these brief examples perhaps suggest, the imperial, "male" gaze and objectified depictions of the female figure have played a part in (male) modern art. Meecham and Sheldon describe modernist representations of women as a paradox of modernism, for there is a simultaneous representation of liberation of and enslavement by the modernist vision of women. I would argue that the continued misrepresentation of women's experience and subjectivity long into the modernist period is a consequence of the representations being designed in one way or another to suit the gaze of power. As modernism gives way to post-modernism, perhaps the centrality of the "male" gaze in the representation of women is more contested. Works such as Suzan-Lori Parks' *Venus* participates in this negotiation, questioning the privilege of male gaze cast upon an exoticized, displayed, nude female. Furthermore, the characters of her play, notably the lead character, Saartjie Baartman, are based on actual figures. In the play and in the actual past, the Hottentot Venus (Baartman) signifies a female figure subjected to the "male" gaze in life and death. Parks' work, however, aims to reclaim agency for Baartman and turn back the modernist imperial, "male" gaze on the female form. Given the depictions of women in modernist (male) art, it seems clear there is value in representations that make visible or circumvent the objectification of women by the modernist "male" gaze.

## Works Cited

- Baron, Cynthia and Sharon Marie Carnicke. *Reframing Screen Performance*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008. Print.
- Becker-Leckrone, Megan. "Salome (c): The Fetishization of a Textual Corpus." *New Literary History*. Vol. 26, No. 2 (Spring 1995) pp. 239-260. Print.
- Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin Books & BBC, 1972. Print.
- City Lights*. Dir. Charles Chaplin. United Artists, 1931. Film.
- Kime Scott, Bonnie. *Gender in Modernism: New Geographies, Complex Intersections*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007. Print.
- Meecham, Pam and Julie Sheldon. *Modern Art: A Critical Introduction*. London: Routledge, 2000. Print.
- Tydemann, William and Steven Price. *Wilde Salome*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Print.
- Wilde, Oscar. *Salome in Five Plays by Oscar Wilde*. Introduction by Hesketh Pearson. New York: Bantam Books, 1969. Print.
- Wollen, Peter. *Raiding the Icebox: Reflections on Twentieth-Century Culture*. London: Verso, 2008. Print.

## Weight, Loss, and Opera: Deborah Voigt and the Little Black Dress

Hope Bernard



On the stage, opera revels in excess; scenery soars to the sky, costumes glitter and shine, and the voices reach heights sometimes unimaginable for the human voice. In addition, some might argue that in opera body size, specifically female body size, thrives on excess as well. The oft-quoted phrase “It ain’t over ‘till the fat lady sings” conjures up the image of a heavy woman hitting high notes with strength, passion, and vitality, and it suggests that in opera fatness is accepted and perhaps even required. The sanctioned place for the ample opera diva calls into question dominant cultural ideals of femininity and female beauty. However, that might be changing, for in this last decade a large female opera performer lost almost half of her weight and transformed into a much more slender body. The case of Deborah Voigt, an American soprano born in 1960, recognized internationally because of her performances on the operatic stage, reveals that the opera star who loses weight, and thus takes up less space on the stage, complicates the idea of operatic excess and calls attention to the unrelenting and rising pressure to conform to ideal (that is, thin) female appearance. Observations about Voigt’s voice after her weight loss also show that perceptions of the female voice and body are inextricably linked.

Because of the highly aural and visual nature of opera, one finds that both elements play a role in audience responses to the performances (of the voice and of the body) of female opera stars.

Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon explore “the physical dimensions of the art form—singers’ bodies, spectators’ bodies, but also dramatized representations of bodies” in their book *Bodily Charm: Living Opera* (xiii). The authors consider how the performing body on the stage must continually negotiate the aural and visual expectations of the audience. Exploring this discrepancy of expectations, they note that “directors today are sometimes as likely to cast for body type as voice type in an attempt to bring the realism of television and film to the operatic stage” (137). Turning to contemporary opera history, the Hutcheons consider perceptions of opera performers’ physical and vocal attributes. As in the case of mid-twentieth century soprano Maria Callas, audience opinions on not just the voice of the singer but the appearance prove widely varied and equally as passionate. According to Linda and Michael Hutcheon, after Callas’s highly public weight loss “public opinion was utterly polarized—and still is” (137). As the Hutcheons explain, some critics praised Callas’s new body and claimed she gained new power and freedom with her new figure. Others felt she lost power of voice and presence. The Hutcheons observe that “ears, it would seem, are amazingly subjective organs and are more connected to the eyes than we might think” (140). What is clear is that reception of the female opera voice is inextricably linked with the female opera body.

Though the aural and the visual are linked, audiences will usually find that one matters more. In a telling interview, John Simon, former long-time critic for *New York Magazine* who is this year retiring from the *Bloomberg News*, reveals: “The first qualification in women for me is that they should be lookable at. If they’re unsightly beyond belief, I don’t care if they sing with the tongues of angels” (Sheehy). Simon is less than tactful, but his statement sheds light on the

perhaps surprising significance that conventional markers of female beauty have on (male) critics' assessment of opera divas. More specifically for Simon, fatness is equated with a deficiency of femininity and female beauty. He states: "Huge fatness in a woman bespeaks the opposite of femininity" (Sheehy), further clarifying his view of female beauty. For a critic like Simon, femininity depends on the containment of flesh. Restricting the fleshy materiality of the female form leads to female beauty. Susan Bordo notes this cultural trend in her book *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, and she points out the gradual change in ideal beauty to not just a thin body but a "solid" and "tightly managed" body that does not "wobble" (191). With the directive to rid the body of any loose and "wiggly" flesh, a female opera singer, to reach the ideal of feminine beauty, must hem in her bodily limits; this places her in a double bind on the stage. First, she is expected to cultivate a taut, smooth body free of excess fat, but second, she is confined by tight, corseted, and elaborate costumes when on the stage. Twice as restricted, the female opera star's voice must still reach and travel outwards to soar, to fill, and to go beyond the predetermined limits set for women in order to touch a whole theatre full of people; it is only through the immaterial voice that she may claim a space. Though visually and physically she is confined, the immateriality of the voice is required to fill space, for in opera it is the voice that lingers in the minds and hearts of the audience.

Writing in 2000, Linda and Michael Hutcheon observe that "Despite a society that values thinness almost to excess, opera culture today remains stubbornly recalcitrant" (144). Noting the careers of "stout" opera singers such as Jane Eaglen, Sharon Sweet, Alessandra Marc, Deborah Voigt, and Margaret Price, they propose that "The heavy singer's body will likely not disappear from the opera stage, even in this culture of slimness, and the audience watching and listening may well continue to be caught between the allowances of operatic artifice and the demands of

theatrical realism” (151). Their point is still largely valid at the moment of this publication. The list contains opera singers who are, by society’s standards, overweight. However, one of the listed examples no longer fits the description of a “stout singer.” Much like Maria Callas in the 1950s, after the 2004 debacle of the little black dress Deborah Voigt underwent a dramatic bodily transformation that stirred the opera world. No longer on the list of large singers bucking the ideals of female beauty, Voigt has made the journey from stereotypically large opera singer to svelte performer.

Voigt is one of opera’s foremost dramatic sopranos singing today. She has performed in a myriad of roles across the globe and recorded several albums for the public to enjoy. She is famous for several reasons, but especially for singing Strauss and Wagner roles. As Clyde T. McCants explains, Voigt “is the realization of the great Richard Strauss heroines and the long-awaited hope for the dramatic soprano roles in the operas of Wagner” (355). As an overweight person, Voigt’s figure had not prevented her from obtaining roles and rising to stardom. At her highest weight, she wore a dress size 28/30. Fans loved the ample beauty for her voice regardless of her size. But in 2004, a Royal Opera House director fired Voigt for the specific reason that she was too fat. Voigt had a contract with the Royal Opera House to play the role of Ariadne in Strauss’s *Ariadne auf Naxos* at Covent Garden. Director Christof Loy wanted her to wear a “sleek black cocktail dress” that he imagined as part of his directorial vision for the production. He decided to let Voigt go because he felt she could not tastefully wear the little black dress (Ginsberg).

Voigt decided to make a change. The decision was not entirely sparked by the Royal Opera House incident. As she explains, “I didn’t feel good. My knees were starting to hurt... I knew it would be only a matter of time before diabetic or hypertension problems” (*Guardian*).

She underwent gastric bypass surgery, which limits stomach intake; with fewer calories absorbed and less food consumed, she lost over 150 pounds and went back to the stage. After her significant weight loss, in October of 2006, Voigt added the role of Salome to her extensive resume. This character, a very seductive young woman who tempts and tricks Herod with her smoldering sexuality, was important to Voigt because it showed she could embody an important marker of conventional female beauty: thinness. In 2008, the same opera house that let her go called back and offered her the role once of Ariadne once again. Voigt and her publicity team used the invitation as an opportunity to spoof the whole incident. They released a short video on YouTube entitled “Deborah Voigt: The Return of the Little Black Dress.” In this video, an actual little black dress floating on a hanger “knocks” on Voigt’s door and attempts to lure her back to the stage by apologizing about the way it acted. Laced with puns on weight, the dialogue pokes fun at the original incident as well as the decision for the company to ask her back now that she has slimmed down. Voigt has shown that she is a good sport about the whole thing, but the incident reveals an undeniable fact: the thin female body triumphs over the fat, even on what Linda and Michael Hutcheon once saw as the “seemingly recalcitrant” operatic stage.

Due to a significant change in body size, there is a difference in both Voigt’s experience of singing and in the public’s reception of her singing. She now deals with singing in a new and different body. Voigt has discussed the fact that her weight loss required adjustments relating to breathing and breath control when singing. She states, “I don’t think my voice has changed, but I am only hearing it from inside, so I can only speak about the sensation of singing. Every 20 lbs. I lost, I felt less rounded and less able to support the sound... At 150 lbs. heavier, you take a breath and those muscles are already engaged, you don’t have to think about it. Now, I have to think about it, about how things line up” (*Guardian*). Since the body houses the voice, a change

in body will most likely impact the voice and alter the audience reception of that voice. First, Voigt starts with her experience of producing sound. From that point of entry, she gives the opinion that she felt a loss of breath support. This loss of support forced her to relearn how to sustain breath for singing. As she shrank, she continually reconfigured her inner and outer foci to create the desired sound from her new body. For Voigt, moving through life as a smaller being required a new perspective. The outer shell changed, as well as the inner content.

Voigt's speculation on the new timbre of her voice again lets others in to her point of view of her singing. As she thinks about how her voice feels to her, she also thinks about how it looks: "In terms of the timbre, the size? I don't think the size of my voice had changed. Maybe it's a little brighter, more silvery rather than gold" (*Guardian*). Picturing her voice as a color, she offers that it has shifted from gold to silver. Voigt feels the size of her voice has not changed and suggests that the voice, far from intangible and ephemeral, can be conceived of in terms of quantifiable matter. However Voigt experiences and describes her new voice, experiences and descriptions of her new body will likely be close behind.

Moving to the audience reception of Voigt's new voice, as mentioned before the eyes and ears can become inextricably linked for opera spectators. Audiences hear and see, and the resulting weight and size metaphors combine both senses. As audiences and critics visually take in her slimmer body, they cannot help but juxtapose this (visual) image with her (aural) voice. When commenting upon Maria Callas's vocal performances after her significant weight loss, some critics declared her voice no longer possessed a "weight of tone" and claimed that it was "thinner" (Hutcheons 142). Her mother famously "lamented the loss of her 'rich and round' tones" (142). Likewise, critics used bodily metaphors to describe Voigt's new voice. Critic Leon Dominguez, commenting on Voigt's performance in the production of *La Forza del Destino* at

the Metropolitan Opera in March of 2006 proposed that her “voice has shed some of its ‘fat’ (for lack of a better word), and while there’s still an abundance of richness and cream, it’s considerably more supple than before” (Dominguez). Audiences hear with both senses, and cannot help but conflate the aural and the visual in both the experience of the performance and in later descriptions of the performance.

Dominguez’s comments on audience reception of the voice expose the link between the visual and the aural. But his comments also expose a much more formidable take on the ideal female form. In the same review of Voigt’s 2006 performance, Dominguez argues that “by shedding her body’s excesses (via gastric bypass), she has become more exposed and vulnerable, more sensitive to the romantic sensibilities of women, and is therefore more game, both vocally and theatrically, to languish in the depths of the tragedy of a scorned lady (Dominguez).

Dominguez evokes an image is of a slimmed-down voice as well as a slimmed-down body. He sees the new Voigt as more feminine, and therefore more exposed and sensitive. For him, Voigt’s former figure was excessive and thus unable to embody “the romantic sensibilities of women.” Proposing that thinness makes a woman, Dominguez assumes that excessive weight pushes a woman into a gender-less realm. Without sensitivity to “romantic sensibilities,” the overweight woman here is supposedly numb and unable to experience or even represent the tragedy of being a scorned woman. Conventional views of femininity suggest that as the borders of the body move inward, a woman moves closer to the ideal of female beauty. The female opera star is not just a voice but also a body that is required to support the dominant visions of the female form.

As Linda and Michael Hutcheon note, “With our ears accustomed to the technologically perfected voice, our expectations for actual live performances are raised beyond the humanly

possible. Disappointment can result from comparing what we are used to hearing on recordings with what we actually hear in performance” (14). Can this be said of the visual element as well? Have audiences become so accustomed to the perfected images of women’s bodies on screens and in print advertisement that they expect that same perfection from women’s bodies onstage? Not long ago, the operatic stage was a space “stubbornly recalcitrant” to society’s demands for a thin body. But the case of Deborah Voigt and the little black dress proves that the space once sacred for the “fat lady” to sing continues to shrink before our very eyes.

## Works Cited

- Abbate, Carolyn. *In Search of Opera*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001. Print.
- Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. 2nd ed. Berkeley: University of California P, 1993. Print.
- Bret, David. *Maria Callas: The Tigress and the Lamb*. London: Robson Books, 1997. Print.
- Charlton, David, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Grand Opera*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003. Print.
- "Deborah Voigt: The Return on the Little Black Dress." Youtube.com. 22 May 2008.  
21cmediagroup. Web. 5 December 2010.
- Dominguez, Leon. "Debbie Does Callas." *Sieglinde's Diaries*. 9 Mar. 2006. Web. 24 May 2007.
- Ginsberg, Daniel. "Persevering Through Thick and Thin." *The Washington Post*. 14 Jan. 2007.  
Web. 22 May 2007.
- Hutcheon, Linda, and Michael Hutcheon. *Bodily Charm: Living Opera*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska P, 2000. Print.
- McCants, Clyde T. *American Opera Singers and Their Recordings: Critical Commentaries and Discographies*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004. Print.
- Meneghini, G. B., and Renzo Allegri. *My Wife Maria Callas*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1982. Print.
- Sheehy, Helen. "The Man Who Loves to Be Hated." *Opera News Online*. Opera News. 23 May 2007.
- "The Fat Lady Slims." *Guardian Unlimited*. 26 Sept. 2006. 22 May 2007.

## Fall 2010 Forum

### Tuesdays at the Gish: Intros to Cult and Classic Films in the Fall 2010 Series

#### **Forum Editors:**

Cynthia Baron and Rosalind Sibielski

This forum brings together a series of reflections on the films screened as part of the Tuesdays at the Gish Film Series at Bowling Green State University in Fall 2010. Sponsored by The Culture Club: Cultural Studies Scholars Association and the BGSU Department of Theatre and Film, Tuesdays at the Gish is dedicated to screening public domain, obscure, or independent films. Programming for the Fall 2010 series was comprised of a mix of prominent cult films, such as Russ Meyer's *Faster Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* and Herschell Gordon Lewis's *Two Thousand Maniacs!*, and lesser-known classics from the studio-era like Lewis Milestone's *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* and W.S. Van Dyke's *The Thin Man*. Originally presented as introductions to the screenings at the Gish, the essays collected here invite us to reflect on the cultural, historical and industrial contexts in which these films were originally produced and viewed, as well as the categorization along the lines of production budgets, subject matter, and taste that are conventionally used to differentiate cult films from mainstream Hollywood films.

#### **Forum Essays:**

Melinda Lewis, "*Serial Mom: Perverse Pleasure, a Suburban Murderess, and the Prince of Puke*"

Kevan A. Feshami, "*Two Thousand Maniacs!* in Cultural Context"

Angie Fitzpatrick, "Sweet Kittens and Sharp Claws: Gender Politics in *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!*"

Lizabeth Mason, "*The Strange Love of Martha Ivers: Love and the Film Noir*"

Melinda Lewis, "*D.O.A.: Poisoning the Film Noir Hero and Middle Class Values as Antidote*"

Katie S. Barak, "*The Thin Man: The Mixology of Class and Classiness*"

Mallory Jagodzinski, "*His Girl Friday: Hildy and Happily-Ever-After*"

Justin Philpot, "*Near Dark and the Vampire Western*"

## Melinda Lewis, “*Serial Mom*: Perverse Pleasure, a Suburban Murderess, and the Prince of Puke”

We kick off our own trash trilogy with the Prince of Puke himself, John Waters, and *Serial Mom* (1994). Baltimore’s own son has made films that have flown under the radar, challenged social mores, and indulged in bad taste since the mid-1960s when he and his friends would shoot no-budget films in Lutherville, Maryland. Since then Waters has risen to cult status, with films like *Pink Flamingos* (1972), *Female Trouble* (1974), and *Desperate Living* (1977) cementing his position as one of the most innovative and perverse independent directors. Considering his major influences are Russ Meyer, Herschell Gordon Lewis and William Castle, to call Waters perverse is more of a compliment than anything. Despite his films being classified as “trash,” in retrospect Waters has been accepted as one of the great independent and cult film directors. Shown in art houses and museums, John Waters’s films have walked the line between trash, art, and pornography.

Whether his films are rated X, R, or PG-13, his brand of comedy, as all good comedy should be, is transgressive. It is not just about gratuitous shock value or bad taste, but about pushing the boundaries that hold us to social conventions or compel us to perform certain social roles. Values concerning sex, violence, gender roles, and race are amongst the many issues that are always pushed and prodded in ways that either offend us, make us laugh, or, if a Waters film is truly successful, puke.

*Serial Mom* may not be in the same shock category as Waters’s early work, but it is still able to catch us off guard and leave a mark on our psyche. Serial killing is not the usual comic material, and Waters uses our own morbid fascination with figures like Ted Bundy, Richard Speck, and Charles Manson to show the pleasure we find in following their exploits.

Part of the fun of this film is the way in which violence is couched in the supposed serenity of suburban life. The credits roll as a wave of violins play over bright blue sky. Birds chirp in the background as the camera pans to a beautiful suburban home and envelopes us in a false and parodic sense of security. Throughout the film we are continually brought back to this sense of calm, which gradually becomes shorter and more absurd, because Beverly Sutphin is the only one who gets the performance. It’s clear throughout the film that she understands the expectations and rules of being a woman in the suburbs. We can actually see her thinking through her negotiation between serial killer and ideal wife/mother.

This film tackles the illusion of the model family and the extent one must go in order to maintain the perfect and unattainable image of the perfect family. The main character, Beverly Sutphin, who becomes “serial mom,” is Harriet Nelson, June Cleaver, and all the other iconic TV mothers who helped shape what we consider the perfect mom. Throughout the beginning of the film, Sutphin is reaffirmed by others as totally normal, but what Waters does best is show that the more somebody or something is “normal,” the more perverse he/she must be in order to keep up appearances.

Sutphin murders people for reasons that seem fairly banal, but as framed by the film (and maybe this says more about me), are justifiable. The real transgressive nature of the film is that enjoyment comes while watching her kill each of her victims. The depiction of her immense pleasure in murdering her victims becomes our pleasure. The fact that serial killing is treated comedically is pushing a boundary. To have a woman committing murder is further crossing such a line, and to actually depict a woman deriving pleasure from such acts is sublimely obscene.

By the end it is understandable why people travel to watch Beverly's trial, why television and film studios compete for the rights to her story, and, finally, why people would pay for a t-shirt or a trading card with her name and face attached. This is the true nature of the film: a mirror to our own national obsession with murders and those who commit them. While true crime books like *Helter Skelter* (Bugliosi, 1974) are used as evidence against Sutphin, the question as to why those books exist in the first place is never examined because we already know why there is such a steady supply of such texts: we love the grisly details. We want to quickly flip to the middle of the books and see the pictures, as I did when I would sneak into my parents' bedroom and look for the pictures in my mother's books about those normal people hiding a deadly secret. We will agree murder is wrong and yet buy into it or support the state's endorsement of capital punishment. We will follow the trials of Ted Bundy, tune into the made-for-TV movie of Charles Manson, or even follow the stories of lesser known murderers scattered across the news or in Tru Tv's programming.

These are the type of contradictions explored throughout this film using the smallest of details and references. Fluctuating between normality and absurdity, the film takes us on a strange journey through an important time in the life of Beverly Sutphin, *Serial Mom*, and hopefully by the end you will love her as much as I do.

#### Works Cited

Bugliosi, Vincent. *Helter Skelter: The True Story of the Manson Murders*. New York: Norton, 1974 (print).

*Serial Mom*. Dir. John Waters. Savoy Pictures, 1994 (film).

#### **Kevan A. Feshami, "Two Thousand Maniacs! in Cultural Context"**

In the summer of 1963, exploitation director Herschell Gordon Lewis and his partner and producer David F. Friedman quietly released their newest feature at a drive-in outside of Peoria, Illinois. For two filmmakers whose body of work consisted primarily of soft core pornography and "nudist camp" movies, this current picture was a significant departure. Believing that they could reap greater profits by doing something radically new and different, the duo abandoned nudity for this latest film, opting for a fresh theme that they felt would garner them greater profits. The result was *Blood Feast*, which, as you might guess from its title, was a bloody movie. In fact, in 1963, it was quite conceivably the goriest film made to that point. Shot in a little under a week on a budget of twenty-four thousand dollars, *Blood Feast's* debut in Peoria proved far more successful than either Lewis or Friedman had imagined. Presumably on the strength of its graphically violent content, the film's success continued when it was released across the United States, where it returned a gross of four million dollars. Despite its financial achievements, however, *Blood Feast* was, in technical terms, a "bad" movie. Lambasted by critics, it was declared a "totally inept horror shocker," so awful it was "an insult even to the most puerile and salacious of audiences" (*Variety*). (I would like to note here, though, that while the critics may have been unkind, *Blood Feast* is certainly a movie that is so bad it's great.)

Impressed by *Blood Feast*'s excellent returns and well aware that their movie was a far cry from a cinematic masterpiece, Lewis and Friedman determined they could be even more successful with graphic violence if they made a "decent picture" (qtd. in Palmer 66). This effort at competency translated into a whopping six thousand dollar increase in budget over *Blood Feast* and a slightly lengthened shooting schedule (Palmer 66), the result of which is tonight's feature *Two Thousand Maniacs!*. Possessing greater narrative coherence alongside relatively (and I stress relatively) better acting and production value than its predecessor, *Maniacs* nevertheless grossed only half of what *Blood Feast* made. While the precise reason for this drop in box office revenue is impossible to determine, Lewis has noted later in interviews that this experience reminded him that "there's no relationship between a good picture and making money" (qtd. in Palmer 81). In addition, Lewis has contended that *Blood Feast* broke new ground with its excessive depictions of gore and that *Two Thousand Maniacs*, whose violence is significantly less graphic, lacked the novelty that drove its predecessor to box office success. There is a certain plausibility to this argument, especially given that none of Lewis's and Friedman's other gore films grossed as much as *Blood Feast*. Regardless, *Two Thousand Maniacs* is still a fun little movie, resplendent with campy goofiness despite Lewis's and Friedman's best efforts at cinematic competency.

But *Two Thousand Maniacs* is also more than just a goofy old movie; when considered in its historic context, it offers several opportunities for interesting readings. I feel it is important to note that Lewis would be the first person to say that his films lack any kind of hidden commentary or meaning. Indeed, this is a person who has stressed in a number of interviews that he "see[s] filmmaking as a business and pit[ies] anyone who regards it as an art form" (Wisniewski). Yet, whether or not Lewis deliberately wrote the script of *Two Thousand Maniacs* as a social commentary is immaterial; as a film set and produced in the southern United States in the 1960s, a region grappling with desegregation in the wake of the civil rights movement, it inevitably invites certain kinds of readings. Images of nooses and torch-bearing mobs, combined with the film's ending (which I won't ruin for you), evoke the ghostly legacy of racial violence that was all too real in *Two Thousand Maniacs*' contemporary era, and, consequently, that still haunts the United States today. Moreover, the film's treatment of poor, rural, white southerners invites its own reading of race and class, especially in light of the claim by some that the "hillbilly" or "redneck" is one of the last conventionally acceptable stereotypes in American culture.

It is also important, I think, to not lose sight of the fact that *Two Thousand Maniacs* is an exploitation film, or is at least considered one. The definition of exploitation as it applies to filmmaking is rather convoluted and a subject of some debate, but it is generally accepted that the term refers to a type of picture that promotes through advertising some aspect of its content over other aspects like acting, production values, or plot. Sometimes this content can be what is considered salacious—usually sex, nudity, or violence—but can also be just about anything, including action, current events (be they scandalous or not), popular music, or whatever else an exploiter believes can be successfully promoted. "Now hold on a minute," some of you might ask, "how is this any different from so-called blockbusters like *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) or *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009) that promote their special effects above everything else?" Well, I can only tell you that there really isn't a difference, and perhaps the better question is why a movie like *Two Thousand Maniacs* is regarded as an exploitation movie when movies like *Jurassic Park*, *Avatar*, or even *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997) are not.

It should also be stressed that many of Lewis's and Friedman's films, including *Two Thousand Maniacs*, influenced a number of filmmakers, musicians, and other figures of popular culture. Fans of the Misfits may remember the song "Blood Feast," which was written as a tribute to the Lewis and Friedman production. Even Michael Moore used the spoken admonition that played before the original trailer for *Blood Feast* in *Capitalism: A Love Story* (2009). Lewis and Friedman were perhaps most influential, however, on John Waters, whose film *Serial Mom* (1994), which screened here at the Gish last week, contains a scene of its characters watching *Blood Feast*. Waters even went so far as to name one of his films *Multiple Maniacs* (1970) in honor of *Two Thousand Maniacs*. So, people who were here last week should keep an eye out for similarities you might notice between tonight's film and *Serial Mom*, or any of Waters' other films for that matter.

Finally, a quick note on the violence in the film. As I have already mentioned, the graphic violence and gore of *Two Thousand Maniacs* is significantly less than that of *Blood Feast*. By today's standards, the bulk of it is actually quite tame. Still, there are a few scenes that are unpleasant, so let this serve as a heads up.

### Works Cited

Palmer, Randy. *Herschell Gordon Lewis, Godfather of Gore: The Films*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2000 (print).

*Two Thousand Maniacs*. Dir. Herschell Gordon Lewis. Box Office Spectaculars, 1964 (film).

Variety. *Variety Film Reviews*. Volume 11. New York, NY: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1983 (print).

Wisniewski, John. "The Wizard of Gore: Herschell Gordon Lewis Speaks!" *Bright Lights Film Journal*. 1/19/10 <<http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/34/lewis.php>>.

### **Angie Fitzpatrick, "Sweet Kittens and Sharp Claws: Gender Politics in *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!*"**

*Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* (1965) is a campy, titillating tale of renegade women in pursuit of power. Written and directed by Russ Meyer, the film is a classic example of the exploitation genre, as it explores the relationship between sex and violence when a gang of go-go dancing drag racers become killers on the run. By the time *Faster Pussycat* hit the theaters in 1965, Meyer had become the "King of the Nudies" and was well-known for films that often resembled little more than soft-core pornography, such as *The Immoral Mr. Teas* (1959) and *Mudhoney* (1965). He is well-known for directing *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* (1970), which portrayed the decadence of rock and roll subculture in the late 1960s. Meyer's position as a cult icon was solidified when Malcolm McLaren approached Myer and his friend Roger Ebert, who wrote the screenplay for *Beyond the Valley*, to make a film about British punk band The Sex

Pistols called *Who Killed Bambi?*. (Unfortunately, they never completed this project.) Still, Meyer continued making exploitation films well into the 1970s, and by the end of his career, he was credited with launching the sex-film industry and making nudity part of mainstream Hollywood (Briggs 22).

Among his two dozen plus films, *Faster Pussycat* has become one of Meyer's most popular. Initially the film was not well-received. However, in the years since it has become a camp classic, beloved by both men and women, including camp king John Waters who has said that *Faster Pussycat* was "beyond doubt, the best movie ever made" (Briggs 24). One of the things about the film that makes it so appealing is its portrayal of 1960s subculture – the deviant rock 'n' roll go-go dancers and drag-racers – pitted against preppy beach culture, exemplified by Linda and her boyfriend, and against (dying) conservative, rural American culture, exemplified by the old man and his two sons who live on a dilapidated ranch.

Yet another reason why *Faster Pussycat* has become a culturally significant film is its portrayal of uncharacteristically powerful women – both physically and sexually – at a time when women were socialized to be pretty and demure so that they could attract a nice husband and raise a happy family. One of the most compelling characters in the film is the Amazonian hell cat Varla, portrayed by Tura Satana, a go-go dancer and martial artist turned actor. When I watch this film, I cannot help but think of how startling and exciting it would have been for audiences in 1966 to see a woman such as Varla kicking ass and taking names.

The 1960s have been memorialized within the American cultural memory as a complicated decade, characterized by radical social changes. For women, in particular, this decade represented both overt patriarchal oppression and overt resistance to such oppression, in the form of the burgeoning second wave feminist movement. In 1963, two years prior to the release of *Faster Pussycat*, Betty Freidan published *The Feminine Mystique*, a book that exposed the discontentment of white middle-class housewives in the suburbs. Freidan's readers received this book as call to arms: no longer satisfied with baking pies for their families, these women demanded a piece of the pie for themselves. In 1966, one year after *Faster Pussycat* was released, Freidan and others founded the National Organization for Women, an organization devoted to securing women's rights in the workplace, in the home, in the educational system, and in the political arena. We might ask ourselves then, to what extent does a film like *Faster Pussycat* speak to women's demands for equal rights?

Hailed by some as a feminist film and denounced by others as sexist trash, *Faster Pussycat* is a complicated text that invites a wide variety of readings. Of course Meyer has said that he did not set out to make anything more than a fun and sexy film and in fact, he said in one interview that he wanted to make *Faster Pussycat* a film that would turn men on (Briggs 25). Still, it is important for us to keep in mind that cultural texts, such as film, are not created in a vacuum but instead are located within specific social contexts. In other words, popular culture is indeed informed by cultural events. Besides, *Faster Pussycat* was not the only film of its kind at this time. In 1968 Herschel Gordon Lewis released *She Devils on Wheels*, an exploitation film about a violent all-female motorcycle gang called Maneaters, not that unlike *Faster Pussycat*. Clearly, there was something about the social climate of the 1960s that inspired films depicting powerful and seductive but ultimately dangerous women. Thus we might ask ourselves: how does Meyer's *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* speak to the gender politics of this era?

The answer to this question lies in the various representations of gender that are present in the film, from the insatiable psychopath Varla to the naïve teeny-bopper Linda, from the disabled patriarch to his exceptionally strong, but ultimately impotent son. The politics of the

film are further complicated by the ways in which these different manifestations of gender inform the power dynamics between characters. What happens when women cross the boundaries of traditional femininity and take on more masculine characteristics? Is it effective for women to use their sexuality to manipulate men? What happens to women who want it all and will stop at nothing to get it? In short, is *Faster Pussycat* a celebration of empowered women or a cautionary tale of what happens when women have access to power?

### Works Cited

Briggs, Joe Bob. "Big Bosoms and Square Jaws: Russ Meyer, King of the Sex Film." *Cineaste*, Winter 2005. pp. 20 – 26.

*Faster Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* Dir. Russ Meyer. Eve Productions, 1965 (film).

Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Norton, 1963 (print).

### **Lizabeth Mason, "The Strange Love of Martha Ivers: Love and the Film Noir"**

Is the strange object of Martha Ivers's desire her childhood sweetheart Sam Masterson, the hard-boiled boy from the wrong side of the tracks? Or is it her husband, Walter O'Neil, who claims to be "sick inside?" Perhaps Martha does not love any man; could her strange affection be an obsession with the power she commands as the C.E.O. of the local manufacturing company? Personally, after several viewings of this film, I can't help but wonder if something darker and sinister could be the object of Martha's strange desire. Either way, this is a film that is investigating love, in all its varied incarnations. Traditional conceptions of the film noir genre would tend to diminish this element of the narrative, but a brief investigation into the role of love within this example of film noir suggests that further consideration of romance within these films is warranted.

Literally translated from the French as "black" or "dark film," the title of the genre didn't just come from the frequent use of black and white film stock. The constant confrontation with the corruption, greed, and moral ambiguity characteristic of post-World War Two American culture within the classic films noir of the 40s and 50s seemed to fit the color schema of the films. These narratives pit a "tough guy" with a rigid sense of right and wrong against the world. Frequently, his fight isn't just for survival; he must help save other disempowered people from injustice. The film noir hero is dependent upon wealthy clients who hire him to investigate the secrets of their elite world. Ultimately, his investigative work reveals a horrible misuse of power which the hero, because of his middle or lower class identification, feels obligated to equalize. While the element of class conflict invades every element of classic films noir, it is arguably most evident in the noir hero's romantic relationships. Films noir depend on the femme fatale for the purpose of their romantic plot lines. Known for her manipulations of the men around her to garner wealth and power, the femme fatale is irresistible to the noir protagonist. Her attractive qualities depend upon her excessive performance of femininity which is constructed through the combination of several markers of wealth. It is this class construction that makes the femme

fatale both a love interest and antagonist for the film noir hero, who is equally drawn to and repelled by the high society he enters during the course of the plot.

Because traditional readings of the genre do not focus on the issue of love, it may seem bizarre that *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* would focus so strongly on romance. Yet the film serves as an excellent example for the way in which love factors into the genre overall. Although it may be an unusual reading of the genre, it is arguable that all noir films could be characterized as romances. The only problem is they're realistic love stories, the kind of love stories that don't gloss over the unappealing elements that characterize so many romantic relationships. Rather than the traditionally idealized Hollywood representations of romance, these films expose the power dynamics inherent within many real-life performances of romantic interaction.

It is the prominence of this constant negotiation of power dynamics that causes many viewers to diminish the role of love within the films. For this tension amongst the lovers in these films reveals greater sources of class and gender conflict in American society. Frequently this cultural commentary comes in the guise of a choice between two women. The noir hero finds himself interested in two, both equally seductive, women who are separated by their performances of their gender and class. This choice is essentially between a "good girl" (or at worst, a girl whose motivations are misunderstood by the other characters) and the deadly femme fatale. The former character archetype is forced by unfortunate circumstances related to her lower class standing to do bad things in an attempt to survive in a society that is stacked against her. The latter character tends to be bad just for the fun of it. Generally the femme fatale, with her obvious class distinctions, is constructed as either a social climber or a member of the elite world the protagonist is investigating. Ultimately, the negotiations of power that characterize these bizarre love triangles reveal the societal disempowerment of women during the time period. The fact that many of the women attempting to achieve equality within their romantic relationship (despite how deviously they may go about it) are narratively punished by death, incarceration, or other restrictions to their freedom seems to undermine the romantic elements within the films.

So what does *any* of this have to do with love? Traditionally when we think of a love story, we don't come running to representations of the corrupt systems of oppression that are so common in film noir. But the fact of the matter is that romance, like any relationship, is a power struggle. The cultural minimization of this key element within the experience and performance of love only hinders the ability to realistically negotiate this tension. Ideally, romance is characterized by a balanced process of a "give and take" exchange of power. But as film noir likes to point out, we don't live in an ideal world.

This brings us back to the film because the Iverstown of 1946 is anything but an ideal world. It is a corrupt place where immoral politicians, dirty cops, and power hungry heiresses run amok. In the midst of all this vice our good-hearted protagonist finds himself with a difficult decision between the girl of his dreams and "the one who got away." The product of a troubled childhood, Sam Masterson has spent most of his life on the run. From his wise-cracks, swift punches, and his excellent gambling skills the audience can tell he is tough. But look a little deeper and we see that he is just as vulnerable as the rest of humanity. This is why he takes the first opportunity possible to rescue a damsel in distress. Enter Toni Maracheck, portrayed by Lizabeth Scott, who is a woman who has been dealt a bad hand one too many times. Her character is a woman who has been recently released from jail after being wrongly accused of a crime, the result of her being given a (potentially) stolen fur coat. This background seems to be the cause of Scott's sultry performance. Maracheck's sexuality seems to burn from a deeper

anger at the injustices that she encounters as a woman without money. Just like Sam, she can see past the appearances of respectability that the authority figures of Iverstown assume. And Toni wants nothing to do with it.

On the other hand Martha is not such an honorable woman. Like Toni, Martha is convinced that she is the victim of bad luck. Orphaned at a young age and forced to live with an aunt who gives any dictator a run for their money, Martha's character seems to be just as trapped by circumstances as Toni. Barbara Stanwyck also gives a very seductive performance that makes being bad look so good. But in the end, that is ultimately what Martha is – just plain bad. Ivers is not smoldering with indignation at her misfortune. Instead, there is something much more sinister warming her heart. This is best evident in the emotions Stanwyck reveals in her eyes. There are moments, such as the one where she tries to kill Sam with a burning log, in which Martha is transformed from a beautiful seductress into a horrific monster solely through a psychopathic gleam in her eyes.

It is between these two women that Sam Masterson must choose. Ultimately his decision is made through the slow process of getting to know the two women he is romantically attached to. This is the only way he can find the right girl to fit his impeccable sense of integrity. And isn't this the key element of any good love story: the promise that anyone can find the one person who completes them? During the course of the story we learn some pretty disturbing and twisted things about several of the main characters. But, in the end, we can all rest assured that just like any traditional love story, each member of this bizarre love quadrangle finds the love he or she deserves. Thus, the two characters that have been manipulated by the wealthy elite of Iverstown end the film driving out West, and Martha ultimately attains her true love, however ambiguously it is defined.

### Works Cited

*The Strange Love of Martha Ivers*. Dir. Lewis Milestone. Paramount Pictures, 1946 (film).

### **Melinda Lewis, "D.O.A.: Poisoning the Film Noir Hero and Middle Class Values as Antidote"**

When we think of introductions, or have others introduce the films for the series, we like to provide a bit of context, some thinking points that offer an intellectual rationale as to why the film is featured as part of the series and what its cultural significance is. Upon reflection, the film noir *D.O.A.* (Rudolph Maté, 1950) is, simply put, a strange film. It is strange in the fact that it is not strange, which actually makes it more strange. Confusing, perhaps, but the contradictory nature of the film's genre, alongside the film's heavy-handed message, provides a puzzling and at times contradictory text.

*D.O.A.* is textbook film noir, which, given the fact that the term was not heavily used until much later, is quite impressive. Director Rudolph Maté was no stranger to the visual styles that mark the genre. Having acted as cinematographer for such films as Charles Vidor's *Gilda* (1946) and Orson Welles's *The Lady From Shanghai* (1947), the dark visualization of *D.O.A.* conveys the panic of dealing with one's own death. If one of the hallmarks of film noir is male

anxiety, the film's main character, Frank Bigelow is a prime example. He is the man in the gray flannel suit, who finds it difficult to commit to his girlfriend and secretary, Paula, and seeks excitement. Though he believes himself to have complete control over his actions, once he discovers his own poisoning, he becomes hysterical and irrational. Rather than attempt to accept his fate, he decides to pursue a mystery.

At times, the film reveals the filmmaker's awareness of what is expected of this type of film. Indeed, there are points throughout the film that seem to intentionally highlight some of the absurdities of the film noir genre. The relationship between male protagonists and women, for example, are caricatured through nondiegetic whistles/kazoos that are used on the soundtrack to accentuate moments when Bigelow ogles a woman. Extended and often complicated plots are highlighted with a lengthy explanation as to the type of poison used to kill Bigelow. With such a short film, the long explanation appears to be used in order to clarify any concerns the audience may have about the possibility of a convoluted plot. Finally, even if Hollywood noir films of the period reaffirmed American values on the surface, their darker messages emerged in implications. *D.O.A.*, however, is more explicit with the heavy-handed nature of the film's overall message: accept your fate and play a part in building the American dream. In other words, strive for mediocrity.

As exciting as it is to watch a dying accountant find out who killed him and why, the film itself is steadily conservative, for if only Frank Bigelow would have stayed Banning, California with his confidante and possible wife, Paula, and not taken his vacation in the exciting and dangerous San Francisco, he would still be alive. Paula becomes representative of safety. She is what grounds him and she embodies what he has actually lost at the film's end (beyond merely his life): wife, family, order, the social expectations and conventions of the time. While films of the period always contain a type of moral lesson to this effect, *D.O.A.* does not even attempt to disguise it, which is what marks this film as unique. The images of happy couples and parents become Bigelow's focus after he finds out that he has been poisoned, reminding him of what he will never have. These scenes coupled with his final words (the name of the woman who offered him domestic life), blatantly point to a prioritization of family life and domesticity. The end is heavy-handed in its moral. Bigelow had plenty of opportunities to settle for the family life Paula incessantly offers him, but he comes to his senses far too late.

And this is, in turn, what makes the film such an oddity. At least the other films of this genre try to be a little more slippery or ambiguous with their moral coding, whereas *D.O.A.* does not hide its message beneath its dark aesthetic, sexually frenzied jazz scenes, and roundabout plot. The ways in which the film handles the character of Bigelow, who follows the role of the cool noir protagonist (adventurous, looking for truth, seeking danger, falling into the traps that only alcohol and womanizing can offer, looks good in a suit), are all negated in the final scenes as fairly fruitless qualities as Bigelow approaches his own mortality. The qualities that he should have strived for, and what the audience is encouraged to admire, is his reckoning with the fact that what he really wanted all along was the stability that only middle class family life can offer. Whether or not this was Maté's intent or an instance of genre play remains debatable. But I still encourage you to watch for who or what is actually dying within the film and what we are left with when the final stamp marks the end Frank Bigelow's life.

### Works Cited

*D.O.A.* Dir. Rudolph Maté. United Artists, 1950 (film).

## Katie S. Barak “*The Thin Man*: The Mixology of Class and Classiness”

The thing with introductions, especially introductions before a film you have not seen, is that they can sometimes spoil the plot. Not wanting to veer away from tradition, here are three spoilers from *The Thin Man* (W.S. Van Dyke 1934): a crime will be solved; the main characters are charming and audiences in the 1930s fell in love with their witty repartee; so much alcohol is consumed that cocktails are a character in themselves. Now that I have paid my debt to tradition, we can focus on a few elements that contribute to this film.

*The Thin Man* is a mystery, but despite the body count, there is not much physical action. The movement is in the dialogue; the words are witty and come quick. The rapid banter spills with ease from the lips of both Nick and Nora Charles, as well as their motley associates. Your ears will need to be nimble because much of the humor is stashed in double entendres and asides. Solving the crime may be the impetus for the plot, but the driving forces are comedy and the relationships between Nick, Nora, Asta, their dog, and the characters they encounter.

As I mentioned, alcohol is an uncredited star in *The Thin Man*; it makes an appearance in almost every scene. Another character punctuating the plot is Asta (Skippy), the Charles’ wire-haired fox terrier. He serves as a cue for audience understanding. In response to drunken guests singing off key and crying in the living room, Asta covers his ears. When things get too romantic for the Hays Code, Asta covers his eyes. He clears out when things get tough and hides from danger multiple times. Asta tells the audience how to feel while providing a little canine comic relief. Skippy, whose name was later changed to Asta officially, starred in several films during the 1930s, including two of the sequels to *The Thin Man*, as well as *The Awful Truth* (Leo McCarey 1937), *Bringing up Baby* (Howard Hawks 1938), and *Topper Takes a Trip* (Norman Z. McLeod 1938). This presence in American cinema performance left quite an impression on American audiences and Asta inspired a nationwide craze for wire-haired terriers that possibly contributed to the over-breeding of wire-haired fox terriers at that time (Woolf).

In addition to changing the course of dog breeding, this film also popularized the notion of a husband and wife mystery solving team. Nick and Nora, played by William Powell and Myrna Loy, are by far the chicest crime-solving alcoholics in Hollywood. And in the same way that the AMC series *Mad Men* (2007-present) makes non-smokers ready to pick up the habit, *The Thin Man* makes drinking look like the best idea in the world. Alcohol is not viewed as a reprehensible vice and drunkenness is not a shortcut to behaving irresponsibly as it is in so many movies today. Rather, alcohol serves as the root of humorous situations and a ravenously pursued hobby of the elegant couple. Yes, they drink copious amounts, but their drunkenness is portrayed as stylish, and an aid to keeping the one-liners flowing and propelling Nick and Nora toward the suspects.

Adding to the stylishness of these characters is the phenomenal costuming. Smoking jackets, silk pajamas, satin gowns, and an onslaught of ridiculous sleeves - Nick is the definition of dapper and Nora’s glamorous designs are truly inspired. Take note of the marked difference between clothing based in ostentatious, rich fabrics that reflect light, versus the more practical wools that absorb light. The costuming choices subtly portray the class status of characters.

Beyond the clothes, notice the differentiations within a class, particularly the wealthy. Nick comes in to Nora’s money when he marries her, and they are depicted as urbane, flirtatious, and very much in love. The money isn’t something they sought, so much as something that just happened to fall into their laps. Based on Nick’s commentary, he lives a life of leisure and does

not need to work as a detective anymore. His job, as he jokingly puts it, is to keep his eyes on Nora so she “doesn’t lose any of the money he married her for.”

This situation is not much different from the other rich characters. Mimi Wynant and her boy-toy Chris Jorgenson are also accustomed to an elite lifestyle and their funds come from her ex-husband, the inventor, Mr. Wynant, through alimony and allowances. However, rather than coming across like the Charleses, both Mimi and Chris seem nervous, suspicious, and consumed by the desire to get money. How does this instruct us as viewers to feel about those who have money versus those who seek money? Considering this film came out when the nation was in the throes of the Great Depression, what does this portrayal say about appropriate channels for expressing want? And how has this changed? Currently, America is mired in the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. With films like *Get Rich or Die Trying* (Jim Sheridan 2005), *Fun with Dick and Jane* (Dean Parisot 2005), *Hustle and Flow* (Craig Brewer 2005), and *Boiler Room* (Ben Younger 2000) coming out in the past decade, I have to wonder how issues of class, money, and the pursuit of wealth are meant to be understood by economically diverse audiences. Why are certain classed characters permitted to seek out moneymaking initiatives while in others this objective is deemed unsavory? How do films instruct us to express want or need? And how might *The Thin Man* have functioned similarly for audiences during the Depression?

### Works Cited

*The Thin Man*. Dir. W.S. Van Dyke. MGM, 1934 (film).

Woolf, Norma Bennett. "Dog Owner's Guide Profile: The Fox Terrier." *Dog Owner's Guide*. Web. 02 Oct. 2010. <<http://www.canismajor.com/dog/foxterr.html>>.

### **Mallory Jagodzinski, “*His Girl Friday: Hildy and Happily-Ever-After*”**

With its witty repartee and fast-paced plot and dialogue, *His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940) serves as one of the best examples of screwball comedy, as we watch Walter Burns, the editor of a newspaper, attempt to stop his star reporter and ex-wife, Hildy Johnson, from leaving the paper to settle down to a life of domesticity with insurance salesman Bruce Baldwin. Directed by Howard Hawks, this film also poses interesting questions about the ethics of journalism and the messy job of reporting the “truth.” But, as a romance scholar trained in literary analysis and feminist theory, I’d like to highlight some of the complexities of our heroine Hildy Johnson, especially in regards to the historical context of the film. Released in 1940, *His Girl Friday* brought to light an unease felt by many middle-class white women beginning in the early 1920s: the pull between career, societal ideals of gender roles, and love. Keeping in mind that the character of Hildy was a male in the stage version of this film, we can recognize Hildy as a sort of anomaly in the workplace. She is different from the other women we see in the movie. Hildy *moves*: she is a force that moves with purpose, whether that purpose is getting the attention of her ex-husband, Walter, or scoring the lead on a red-hot story. Hildy is determined, vivacious, cunning, and most of all, *good at what she does*. These qualities that make her the best reporter

at *The Morning Post*—we hear everyone from Walter to the girls at the switchboards to the reporters in the press room proclaim such—are often coded as qualities belonging to a man. At the same time, we see that she is also different from her male co-workers and coded as feminine. She is kind, attuned to the ways in which others react, and compassionate—when it aids her in getting the scoop. This combination of qualities is what makes Hildy a dynamic and wonderful protagonist to watch as we see her struggle with conflicting desires.

On one hand, Hildy is drawn to the comfortable and stable Bruce Baldwin. While Bruce may represent the banality of suburban life and conformity to gender ideals, there is obviously something that makes him attractive to Hildy. For a woman who breaks the mold in so many ways, she longs for the kind of life Bruce can give her: a life of comfort, stability, and attention; all things that were lacking in her marriage to Walter. Hildy is intrigued by the opportunity to perform her gender role by being Bruce's wife and not being a byline. She wants to see what a life of normalcy could bring her by being a doting wife and mother. In addition to a "normal" life, Hildy would get a "normal" husband. Bruce is nothing like Walter. He is sweet and kind and someone who is morally good at the core. Unfortunately, he's not the brightest star in the sky. His view of the world colors those he meets. Indeed, he is convinced that Walter Burns is a "really nice guy" when Walter is quite obviously anything but.

Walter Burns is the man Hildy can't seem to leave, and one of the biggest reasons for that is that he is inextricably tied to her career and her success as a reporter. Walter and Hildy have such a comfortable working relationship that it must have been inevitable that they would end up married to each other. They thrive on each other's passion, and Walter clearly holds Hildy and her abilities in the highest esteem. He understands her drive and the side of her that is calculating and cunning, a side to which Bruce remains willfully blind. Walter is both the best and the worst thing for Hildy. He never stops to listen to her or pay attention to her when she isn't working on a story; he continually dangles temptation in front of her in order to keep her in her job at *The Morning Post* and with him; he has few, if any, moral qualms about what it takes to sell more papers than anyone else. He is, in short, a jerk. But he is also the one person in the movie quick enough and smart enough to keep up with Hildy. He supports her career endeavors wholeheartedly, constantly praising the work she does. He tempts Hildy in all sorts of ways, but she remains wary because she knows that he can never offer her the stability and attention she craves. If she chooses Walter, she will always remain second to the story.

And herein rests the complexities of desire: does Hildy, our ever-capable heroine, get what she wants? What does Hildy want, and what sacrifices is she prepared to make in order to have the life she wants? Will marrying Bruce bring her fulfillment if she has to constantly suppress her ruthless reporter personality? Will going back to Walter make her happy if he never makes her "feel like a woman" and blurs the boundaries between their personal and professional lives? If Walter is clearly Hildy's equal, why is she the one making the sacrifices for their relationship? Does Hildy walk back into the offices of *The Morning Post* because she can't leave Walter or because she can't leave behind the job?

I'll leave it up to you decide. Whichever way you look at it, though, Hildy is the one compromising to be with either man, which brings up the question of whether or not a woman can have it all, especially in the historical context of the film. Keep in mind that middle-class women at this point typically entered the workforce during their late teens and early twenties and then quit upon receiving an offer of marriage. Hildy's struggle to balance her personal and professional lives is still relevant today as women all over the world struggle with judgment from all sides. Working mothers are pitted against stay-at-home moms in the battle over family values

and feminism, and we are no closer to accepting the fact that maybe one size doesn't fit all and that perhaps men should be part of this conversation as working fathers and stay-at-home dads. Like Hildy, we struggle to make the decision that is right for us and will give us our happily ever after.

### Works Cited

*His Girl Friday*. Dir. Howard Hawks. Columbia Pictures, 1940 (film).

### **Justin Philpot, “*Near Dark* and the Vampire Western”**

*Near Dark* is the quintessential vampire western, which would be a silly idea if we didn't already accept both the fluidity and the constraints of Hollywood film genres. If pressed, we'd probably have to admit that the western is the dominant form, with conventional notions of the vampire film layered over. But what makes the film horrifying, what is intended to scare us, transcends this simple act of addition. We're never told Mae, Jesse, Severn, Homer and Diamondback are vampires – it's terribly obvious. We're given very little background about who they were before they turned, because it doesn't matter. They exist – that's scary enough. The general uneasiness of the film, however, rests someplace else – in our expectations. We're shown everything we'd expect to see in a western, except the west. The expansiveness of the frontier has been cut through with roads, bars and motels. The potential and promise of the open plains has been achieved, consolidated around small towns and industry, leaving only dark spaces in between. The members of the vampire clan are not stand-ins for John Ford's Indians, or even real ones, they're simply from out of town.

People die badly in this film. The quiet sadism of the vampire clan is less a collection of personal quirks than a family tradition. Victims are toyed with, tricked, left to think about what is about to happen to them, all of it bad. For individuals who can live forever, taking their time means something altogether different than it does for the unfortunate mortals who happen to cross their path. And the sad reality is they only have to meet you once. They are ambush predators, not hunters, relying on numbers, human behavior and somebody else's bad luck to survive.

Bigelow's west is very small, reflected in close ups and always marked by civilization. This is in sharp contrast to someone who Bigelow has often been unjustly compared, ex-husband and best picture challenger James Cameron. Cameron, who can make the interior of a sinking cruise ship seem expansive, is after something altogether different than Bigelow, a director capable of rendering a sniper duel in the Iraqi desert in the most intimate terms. Driven to expose motivation rather than create spectacle, Bigelow's characters are often framed as if we were studying them under glass. The world they inhabit is just as constraining, writ just as small and just as tidy as we would expect of a small town, a police station, a bar, a pick-up truck. Jesse's clan represents something romantic, something of the freedom of the west, but inverted, so we can see precisely how much we'd have to give up to get it. Of course, they never could give it up themselves: the very freedom they represent would be impossible to sustain without the modern life they seem so willing to disavow. This speaks less to the contradictions of American life

expressed in the western film than the very real tension between our perceived place in American society as people, with our goals and sense of self, and our daily, lived existence.

Or not.

This is Bigelow's first independently directed film, and there are some rough edges. As Caleb makes his way back to Mae after trying unsuccessfully to go home, there is an odd montage sequence marked by several wipes. Not sure what's up with that. More than anything, the soundtrack dates this film, something to be expected given the intended audience for the film, that is to say, teenagers. Caleb's duel with Severn towards the end of the film is a little muddled. These are very minor issues, and I mention them only to show that as a "first" effort it is really quite good, especially when we consider Bigelow's willingness to embrace randomness, chance and coincidence as key narrative elements, and not just plot devices. This is taken up again in her 1989 action thriller *Blue Steel*. This film has also served to influence a number of other vampire films. The motel shootout is referenced in *From Dusk 'til Dawn* (Robert Rodriguez, 1996) and the idea of putting vampires in a western setting has been taken up in a number of films, including John Carpenter's delightfully mediocre *Vampires* (1998). But *Near Dark* also points to a number of themes for addressing Bigelow's work, including the flexibility of genre, as shown in *Point Break* (1991) and *Strange Days* (1995), and an overwhelming interest in exploring the motivations of character, in films like *K-11* (2002) and of course, *The Hurt Locker* (2009).

As a final note to *Twilight* fans, I say this: these vampires don't sparkle.

#### Works Cited

*Near Dark*. Dir. Kathryn Bigelow. Near Dark Joint Venture, 1987 (film).