



**Free**

# Welcome to the seventh issue of One+One Filmmakers Journal



The roots weave and knot as they entrench in the dirt and the grit. They spread their encampment through ever-reaching toil; an endless search for nothing in particular, except sustenance. Each new convulsion carves itself into the retina of the soil. It searches with no clear direction in an unending beginning that fabricates its own base. As it contorts it fashions the foundations of its being and locks into the ground.

The tree, in contrast, saws upwards. "Progress" is its cry, as it battles against the sun's scorching rays and the rain that ricochets off of its hardened chalky bark. It struggles and reaches skyward, ever grasping for that illuminating light. Its fruit is born, but departs. And it struggles on. Waiting. But reaching.

Where the earth and sky rendezvous we find the centre of its multiplications: One side weaving and grounding; the other striving and reaching, each grasping and redefining its territory.

One+One, which takes its logo from a tree and its roots, seeks to foster growth. It seeks to nurture and nourish filmmaking and film theory through cultivating innovation and experimentation in the cinema and by enriching the debates around film and film history. One+One is a horticultural experiment which seeks to broaden its roots and strive upwards towards the future.

**Bradley Tuck**

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# Somatic Geometry:

## Jacques Tati's anarchist aesthetics

Diarmuid Hester

*"I am not a Communist. I could have been if Communist history were not so sad. It makes me sound old-fashioned but I think I am an anarchist. Great things were done historically by anarchists."*

(Jacques Tati)

Often misunderstood as a byword for chaos, social disorder and the violent destruction of civilisation, perhaps the least bad description of anarchism might rather be an insistent demand for the liberation of the individual from artificially-imposed forms of authority. Critiques advanced by William Godwin, Pierre-Joseph Prudhon, Mikael Bakunin and other leading lights of the anarchist movement, while no doubt disparate in nuance, are all erected upon the fundamental sovereignty of individual will: anarchism thus traditionally perceives systems of authority (the most pernicious of which is the state) as just so many regimes of control, hampering at every turn the expression of this will. Though this vision of anarchy has often surfaced in various art forms (Leo Tolstoy's work, for instance, emphatically endorses the brand of anarchism espoused by Peter Kropotkin), few artists have proceeded beyond the mere thematic representation of anarchism and sought to introduce these principal currents of anarchistic thought into the very fundamentals of the art work itself. Few anarchist



Mon Oncle Poster

artists use the formal composition of their work to proffer a critique of contemporary systems of control and the condition of human life under such systems. It is our contention here, however, that French auteur and comedian Jacques Tati (1907 – 1982) is one such artist.<sup>1</sup> In what follows we will elucidate his anarchist's vision of the fate of man under authority.

### Mon Oncle cet anarchiste

A descendant of Russian émigré aristocrats and a bored picture-framer by profession, Tati (born Jacques Tatischeff) would have seemed an unlikely candidate to become a lauded and much-loved director of France's septième art, much less one who, as we shall see, used his work to articulate a belief in the sovereign will of the individual. However, his gift for physical comedy quickly propelled him from performing mimes for his rugby team after matches to the Paris music-halls and finally to filmmaking, with the production of *Jour de Fête* in 1949. Following its success and that of the subsequent *Les Vacances de M. Hulot* (1953), Tati embarked upon the production of his third feature, *Mon Oncle* [*My Uncle*], which observes the daily life of a young boy (Gérard), his mother and father (the Arpels) and his uncle, M. Hulot (a character Tati had played to great acclaim in his previous film). Set in a curiously bifurcated French town which on one side houses the languid, provincial France of cafés and communal living, and on the other the cold Le Corbusier chic of suburban and industrial modernity, *Mon Oncle* is simultaneously a bittersweet tale of a boy's friendship with his eccentric uncle and an entertaining depiction of a modern family's hilarious attempts to get along at home and at work.

Yet the film also sketches a virulent anarchist critique of modernity's accelerated subtraction of personal agency and an emphatic indictment of the role played by increased technologisation in aggravating this subtraction. This critique manifests itself in the persistent organisation, circumscription and conduction of movement in suburban and industrial zones: in Tati's vision of the modern town, agency withdraws behind a veil of conscription

and free individual movement is confined to prescribed routes, pathways and lanes. Consequently, when the camera lingers over the modernised district, the film of *Mon Oncle* appears cross-hatched with the outlines of these channels. In one of the film's extended opening scenes, for instance, an orderly procession of cars diligently follows, with conveyor-belt consistency, the signs and road-markings which direct them to the school and then to the factory and then back home again. The grounds of M. Arpel's "Plastac" factory and its corridors are likewise replete with lines and arrows demanding uniform movement and delimiting all deviation.

In addition (recalling Tolstoy's contention that authority corrupts and induces man to "commit acts contrary to [his] conscience"),<sup>2</sup> constraints placed upon individual agency in the public sphere seem to have become internalised such that modern man compulsively etches impressions of outside routes upon even his private space. Thus, the Arpel's so-called garden is itself composed of numerous, mutually exclusive, artificial paths: one exclusively connects the gate to the front door; another leads only from the front door to the terrace; a circuitous one connects just the back door and the patio. "It's practical!" "It's modern!" Mme Arpel exclaims, "It all communicates," but these paths neither connect nor communicate, their function is entirely impractical, and Tati is quick to capitalise upon the irony of Mme Arpel's exclamation. In one scene, the family and their unfortunate guests hilariously pick their way through the labyrinth of pathways, grotesquely contorting as they try to adhere to arbitrarily designated routes. In another M. Arpel takes Hulot aside and, while pacing up and down an absurdly complicated route of stepping stones,

condemns Hulot's lack of direction and offers him a job in the rubber factory as a solution. The impressive gymnastics demanded of Hulot as he attempts to follow Arpel's path will, we are led to infer, also be demanded of him once his life is directed into the home – school – work conduit so familiar to the modern labourer.

Exacerbating the withdrawal of agency from human subjects is modernity's growing fascination with every new form of technology. The Arpels' house, for instance, is a perfect example of the modern technological obsession made manifest: pull a lever and the garden gate opens; approach the cupboard and its door opens automatically; press a button and a steak flips over on the frying pan... Yet while these devices make domestic chores easier, they are ultimately just so many instances of the progressive erosion of individual autonomy: the Arpels never

**“ The submission of one's sovereign agency to a multitude of technological devices such as these is, to an anarchist like Tati, an insidious development indeed ”**

do anything. In a world which demands that individual will be routinely sacrificed to a universal trajectory and where that sacrifice is so normalised that, even in their private lives, individuals strive for self-control and self-regulation, the submission of one's sovereign agency to a multitude of technological devices such as these is, to an anarchist like Tati, an insidious development indeed.

**No exit!**

This, then, is the outline of modern life's

somatic geometry – the absurd gymnastics demanded of the human body as it struggles to survive in spaces scored with abstract, artificial regimes of control. Yet the modern world's constrictions are frequently thrown into relief by the distinct lack of organisation which persists in the older part of town, where markings upon the road direct only children's games of hopscotch. The openness of the town square allows bodies to meander, encouraging them to follow no strict orientation save their own, to deviate, cross each other's paths, stop altogether to converse... The haphazard arrangement of Hulot's apartment building, meanwhile, offers a compelling antithesis to houses in the suburbs. Its organic construction facilitates the needs of the individual, while still allowing for shared space, and its rooms, foyers, and stairwells appear cobbled together as endogenous expressions of human will (and necessity) rather than abstract forms, applied from without to which human will must bend.

Hulot himself is also injured to modernity's insistence upon proper order and strict teleology, sliding mutely between and around its forms of prescription and control in a kind of improvised ballet of his own design. For instance, he and the female interviewer at the “Coal By-Products” company circle a spectral (and voyeuristic) third party, inadvertently ushered into the room when Hulot steps in a pile of lime, removes his shoe, then accidentally leaves a trail of white shoeprints on the chair and desk.<sup>3</sup> A vector of chaos (read: anarchy), Hulot draws transverse loci across the drab, desiccated passages of modern life and its forms: charged with producing endless,



Les films de mon oncle

Still from *Mon Oncle*

uniform lengths of red rubber pipe at the “Plastac” plant, his intercession immediately introduces variety and variation, producing fat piping, thin piping, piping like strings of sausages... In an interview in *Les Cahiers du Cinéma* with André Bazin and François Truffaut, Tati may have said that, in contrast to Chaplin's tramp, “Hulot doesn't invent anything,”<sup>4</sup> but his actions, nonetheless, enact a kind of creative destruction, releasing people and objects from their prescribed purposes. Before Hulot arrives at M. and Mme Arpel's garden party, for example, the atmosphere is inhibited, staid and painfully boring (guests infrequently emit the dullest of expressions like “we produced 40,000 metres of piping: a considerable achievement!”). But Hulot arrives and, while looking for a place to plant an oddly-shaped glassholder, stabs a hole right through the

plumbing to the Arpel's fountain, flooding the garden. His small interruption not only quickly renders proper pathways of the garden superfluous (while trying to catch the wayward dogs, guests sprint across the garden with abandon), but prompts the guests' behaviour itself to deviate from previously prescribed patterns and conduits – they chat with one another, they laugh, they clap and cheer each other on.<sup>5</sup> Their transgression is our delight: just as the boy Gérard and his mates derive unadulterated joy from seeing passers-by diverted from their decided course (a whistle in their direction is enough to send them careering into a lamppost), we can't help but laugh to see the normative constraints of home and work in tattered ruins.

**Anarchy is kids' stuff**

Hyper-technologised modernity, accord-

ing to Tati's vision, yields only coldness and cruelty, stripping individuals of their free will and channelling natural productivity into industrialised production. The form of life that this artificiality supplants exudes vitality and warmth, its maintenance of social bonds between individuals arising out of camaraderie and a voluntary commitment to social cohesion rather than a desire for exploitation or social mobility. Yet, as the final scenes of *Mon Oncle* appear to indicate, the process by which modern man is divested of his will is by no means irreversible and here the figure of the child becomes important.

If the character of Hulot intervenes at certain junctures in order to introduce alteration into modernity's strictures (anarchy made flesh, as it were), the figure of the child evokes an anarchistic pre-lapsarian purity, largely serving as *Mon Oncle's* transcendent externality. Throughout the film the director regards them with a kind of awe and their assured expression of individual will irrespective of social context is brandished as exemplary: re-awakening a shadow of this childlike willfulness, Tati appears to suggest, might be a crucial step towards recovering man's lost autonomy. For M. Arpel, for instance, simply finding himself part of an unintentional, childish prank (whistling to Hulot, he sends another hapless gent careering into another unseen lamppost) is enough to stir in him an appetite for dissent and, in defiance of yet more road markings, he leaves the ferry car park by the entrance. A small rebellion, perhaps, but significant.

Indeed, one could argue that the entirety of Tati's oeuvre is designed to awaken in the audience members themselves a childlike sense of glee which might, perhaps, be mobilised towards this end. The majority of his visual gags function simply

by manipulating the banal, adult world into appearing as objects or situations drawn from the child's world. Inanimate objects, for example, are infused with life and take on unexpected forms: at the "Plastac" factory the red rubber hose appears to carefully snake by a sleeping Hulot and similarly, as Hulot clumsily sneaks into their garden, windows of the Arpel's house appear as a pair of giant, watchful eyes. If this is the case, however, one has to wonder if Tati's programme might still be an effective means of achieving anarchist redemption in a 21st century world. When lo-fi advertising systematically infantilises the viewing public and persistently attempts to induce generalised regression to sell the kind of products which caused Tati concern, it may now be impossible for us to comprehend the radical transformative potential he envisaged.

Diamuid Hester<sup>6</sup>

1. This is a pretty unorthodox interpretation of Tati. With the notable exception of Laurent Marie's "Jacques Tati's Playtime as New Babylon" (in *Cinema and the City*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2001) which reads Tati's vision of Paris in *Playtime* (1967) with spatial theories from the Situationist International, to my knowledge, no other work explicitly aligns Tati with an anarchist tradition.

2. Tolstoy, L. "The End of the Age (On the Approaching Revolution)," available at: [http://www.nonresistance.org/docs\\_pdf/Tolstoy/End\\_of\\_Age.pdf](http://www.nonresistance.org/docs_pdf/Tolstoy/End_of_Age.pdf)

3. Like most of Tati's visual gags, a textual description doesn't capture a modicum of the humour and originality of this scene. Nevertheless, I hope this may be adequately evocative that those unfamiliar with *Mon Oncle* might be more inclined, when they watch it, to pay particular attention to this finely crafted scene.

4. Bazin, A. with François Truffaut. "Entretien avec Jacques Tati," *Cahiers du Cinéma* (Mai 1958), pp. 2-20.

5. A similar situation presents itself in Tati's subsequent film, *Playtime*: with the introduction of Hulot, the elegant and chic restaurant, "The Royal Garden," quickly morphs into a raucous nightclub reminiscent of the village café in *Jour de Fête*.

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# The New Epic Theater of Brent Green

Donna K



Bertolt Brecht

*In the middle of 2008 I fielded a lot of e-mailed concerns and phone calls when I moved out to the middle of rural Pennsylvania abandoning my city life as a Brooklyn New York cubicle dweller. I moved to Pennsylvucky to be exact, the Republican*

*mid-section of the huge American state which, in retrospect, does seem like a pretty drastic change! When I moved to New York I was looking for some kind of feeling, some overwhelming city-centric zeitgeist that I had read about.*



*Gravity was Everywhere Back Then*

I wanted to be in a metropolitan area that was sparking social change and culture and ideas! I wanted the Paris and Berlin of the post war eras and uprisings of the artists against the raging social injustices—a thing I thought would be happening for certain after the terror of 2001. But, when I got to New York, all I really found were a lot of cut-throat capitalists looking for ways to exploit the internet, safe guard their studios/intellectual property and hustling to pay the ever increasing rent. One day, at a gallery opening, I met an artist. I had never heard of him so I went home and, like any good New York internet stalker, I googled his name. I watched his beautiful, rickety hand drawn animations and listened closely to his words. His words were what really struck me. They were loud musical rantings, stringing along seemingly whimsical folk tales but with a much, much larger political sense at the core. As a scholar of Bertolt Bre-

cht in college I immediately thought of the similarities between the two. Of the craft, hand and distance that both used to expound on the injustices of society, both in very political volatile times. The artist I met was Brent Green and, after working closely with him on his first feature film *Gravity Was Everywhere Back Then*, I think I can safely say that Brent's film practice can be seen, unbeknownst to him, as an extension of Brecht's epic theater, paving the way for a new era of political DIY angst.

Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) was a German playwright who, in post World War I & II Europe saw the failings of modern theater and it's inability to enact any real social change. He was frustrated with the melodrama of the stage and set out on a path to an alternative. The development of his "Epic Theater" was a system of practices that allowed for an audience to become critically distanced yet socially engaged. His plays were a form of

art reacting to the oppressive politics of fascism, the rise in petroleum production and the need for the class struggle to be addressed. Brent Green (born in 1978) is a self taught artist and animator who lives and works (as I mentioned above) in the Appalachian hills of rural Pennsylvania. Whether through hand drawn lines or the prominent sight of strings holding animated actors aloft, Green's DIY aesthetic is always apparent. The tales he tells appear as simple folk tales but these stories are just the surface of the thing Green is constantly struggling with. All of Green's work has a political tension just below the surface of the whimsical folk tale. In Green's short *Carlin* he tells the story of his aunt who was letting diabetes destroy her life " She was slowly going bad around us she would come back missing a couple of toes...she was getting amputated away" later extending the metaphor out to horrors of war "Bringing our children home from an unnecessary war one piece at a

ence that could remain critically distanced enough to question action, to think for themselves, to engage in a conversation with the work instead of passively taking in pictures and feelings. Most of the Epic Theater was structured around this basic concept, the A- effect as he later labeled it, "The object of this 'effect' is to allow the spectator to criticize constructively from a social point of view"<sup>2</sup>. With this in mind, Brecht was a proponent of exposing the wires and pulleys that changed the scene, of laying bare the mechanisms behind his stage production. He uncovered the magic to force the audience into a state of contemplation not the trance they had become used to. Similarly, the increase in craft/DIY culture that Green is most assuredly at the forefront of, is a perfect manifestation of exposing the reality in created things. When thought of in political terms, DIY is really about exposing the means of production: you see the person creating the product. In Green's case he is the one

whose reflection can be seen in the glass of the animated frame, visibly pronouncing the artist behind what is being made. Despite the inherent politics in DIY, the earlier versions of the movement found in punk rock embracing an all

**“ DIY is really about exposing the means of production: you see the person creating the product ”**

time.” As an outsider approaching his creative field in a truly visionary way Green, like Brecht, pushes the political into his art form using his unique development of expanded cinema as a new visualization of Epic Theater.

At the crux of the Epic Theater was alienation<sup>1</sup>. Brecht did not want his audiences doing what audiences had been trained to do: identify with the characters to the point of losing their ability to think, lost in a stage dream. He wanted to form an audi-

around antiestablishment aesthetic and purpose, I find little substance is being voiced past that initial handmade recognition in today's movement. In today's DIY movement things are made by hand but this handmade-ness lends itself to a craft market that is expensive and exclusionary, luxurious instead of accessible. Not to say the crafty aren't all making things unique for a reason but the current movement seems to have devolved into a style instead of an ethos. As Brecht warns "...for

example, it is not untrue that chairs have seats and that rain falls downward. Many poets write truths of this sort. They are like a painter adorning the walls of a sinking ship with a still life.<sup>3</sup> But in Green's case, the products he is producing aren't just scratching the surface of much larger social issues; they are carving deep grooves, bubbling up with anxiety about our human condition. The artist is the hand behind the machine leading you. But, in Brent Green's case, he wants you to see the larger conditions surrounding what he is making: the beauty in the world, to question those who have made themselves authority and to stop being blindly led. The revealing of production is at the heart of the alienation tactics of the Epic Theater and inherent in modern DIY culture. By showing the man behind the curtain the audience is awoken from their theater going trance, the new man behind the curtain wants to converse on the topics of the day not distract with smoke and mirrors.

Another way Brecht sought to alienate the audience was through acting. He did not want the silent audience to be overwhelmed with emotion to the point of losing their own identity. He cites Chinese theater as the main source for his development of acting style. Traditional Chinese actors seek to live out gestures of ideas not characters<sup>4</sup>, each movement they make is a deliberate, conscious process in conveying an idea, which is a concept inherent in all animation. Each fraction of a second of a frame of Brent Green's *Gravity Was Everywhere Back Then* is a still camera shot. Every action that is performed by the actors is a conscious division of blinking, mouth movements (which were made by plotting out the phonetic shapes to a recording of scene dialogue and then determining the numbered frame they oc-

cur in), hand gestures and thoughts that the actors and director took into account. The tableau-ing performed in the movie, which as an actor in the film I was close to, could not have been more belabored or thoughtful. At one point there were 40 minutes between shots within a sequence as Brent scaled a ladder to move along animated wooden characters as I exited a door, 40minutes to think of the act of exiting a door can lead to so much minute attention to detail that the weight of every gesture can be felt both on set and, eventually, on screen. The strangeness that is created by making stop motion animation with human beings, a process known as pixilation, is a deliberately distancing act. Much like that described here about Brechtian actors "...he will make the unique, surprising, exceptional quality of each of his acts stand out for the audience. For each depends on choice. It is only one possibility among many, an 'alternative,' and the actor ought to suggest this idea of alternatives...he subjects them to a 'productive' criticism. And it is productive since it ought to move us to transform and humanize our fate."<sup>5</sup> To further remove the actor from the character, Green and Brecht often create characters as weighted symbols. In Brecht's *Galileo*, the story of Galileo discovering that the planets revolve around the sun is a framework for the conflicts of science vs. religion, of blindly following leaders, of man's inability to rise up against forces he views as greater than himself. Green's *Gravity* is based on a love story between two real figures, a man who tried to build a house to save his wife's life and the wife who takes control of her situation yet, the Green-ian overlay is one about the complexities of faith, the destruction of religious wars, the lack of health care in America. No audience can



*Gravity was Everywhere Back Then*

fully relate to a puppetized version of people or an overthought symbol of a person, your eye and mind might adjust but it is still not "you" that you are watching. The use of the actor employed by that of Green and Brecht is a sure way to remove oneself from falling prey to the Freudian desire to identify with the performed hero/ego, scripting a new type of hero that they hope to inscribe in the real world through a new type of audience.

*Gravity*, like Green's short films, is often performed live with a band and live Foley sound effects appearing on stage in front of the projection screen. Brecht, most famously in his production of *The Threepenny Opera*<sup>6</sup>, stationed the musicians directly on stage as well, not letting there be any fallacy as to the production of sound.

Neither Green nor Brecht look for the score to underscore emotion, they look to the score as a separate entity<sup>7</sup>. Green's largely improvised soundtracks lead to an ever-changing feel which usually tends to bounce off of the feelings that the audience is exuding creating a dialectical performance between the musicians and the normally passive audience. For example, during a recent live show performed in Detroit Michigan, a crumbling American metropolis, the soundtrack was a somber cadence to the cold, distanced crowd whose concerns lay far outside the performance space in the realities of the city in which they live. The audience is reflected in the performance as opposed to the other way around, conveying an idea about the state of those watching more than those being

watched. The construction of the words in Brecht and Green's song work is really difficult to discuss but also adds to the creation of an odd distancing. There is a rhythmic quality, an off rhyme that both use in their lyricism that is stilted in such a way to prevent pure enjoyment. Stressing and straining the words along Green and Brecht use their song crafting as a way to express messages of concern both for the action in the play/film and for the action in the real world, sometimes even going as far as to write their thoughts down for the audience to read or directly address the normally absent.

During Brent's live performances he will sometimes chastise the audience for not clapping or point out a joke that seemed to be missed, actually engaging those present. Brecht's theater too would often have a narrator figure that would prod, recount or sing the action to the audience, underscoring the nature of the theatrical experience as an object to be looked at actively<sup>8</sup>. Both also use title cards to this end as well<sup>9</sup>, Green's childlike scrawl appears in all of his films, explaining things, introducing imagery, underscoring ideas just as Brecht often produced title cards or projections of the written word relating to the plays action. Green & Brecht even go as far as to announce the action to the audiences before it happens- truly removing the audience as mere observer, putting them in the educated position of critical thought even above the characters on stage. In Green's case with *Gravity* he even seems to announce the most upsetting or emotional events before they occur to prepare the audience for what they are about to see. By warning of the moments of increased tension and emotion before they happen the impact of the event is lessened and the audience can focus on more im-



*Gravity was Everywhere Back Then* Poster

portant questions at hand. When Leonard, in *Gravity*, prepares to save his dying wife's life we are told in advance so as an audience we are not shocked by the events but can become more concerned: Why does he have this faith? Is he blinded by his religion? Does he think he can communicate with God? How far can these beliefs harm him/us? Along eerily similar lines Brecht tells of the action in *Galileo* with placards announcing each scene: "In the year sixteen hundred and nine/Science light began

to shine./At Padua city, in a modest house,/ Galileo Galilei set out to prove-/The sun is still, the earth is on the move"<sup>10</sup> and "January ten, sixteen ten: Galileo Galilei abolishes heaven."<sup>11</sup> Beyond dramatic irony, this pre-telling of the action sets the audience in a knowledgeable, aware position of power and concern.

I rarely write these academic kinds of comparisons now that I am out of school and, as I was writing this, I wondered why I felt the need to do so, why I felt compelled to move to a barn in the Pennsylvania woods in the first place. The reason I wrote this, the reason I moved to a field in the middle of nowhere is because not a lot of art and film wants to be political lately and I found a filmmaker who wants to be. A filmmaker working in the same vein of my academic hero Brecht. I wrote this and do what I do out of concern: Why aren't more filmmakers making work that is socially conscious, instigating and controversial especially at a time, like Brecht's, when new technology is making messages so much easier to broadcast, when DIY is sweeping the nation? Why can't we change the world through art, literature and collective reasoning? Through the creation of the Epic Theater and the plays he produced Brecht taught his audiences to denounce fascism, question unfair labor practices, worry about the future of capitalism and band together as a political force (just to name a few) all in the harsh face of reality, of realities that are lurking below today's current society: why is there not more creative action? Even film work and festivals that are progressive (*True/False Film Festival*, Herzog's *The Forgotten Caves*, Sam Green's *Utopia In Four Movements*, the latter which has New Epic Theater qualities similar to that of Brent Green's in the form of a live film

performance, narrator, live music and all!) and that seek out important, timely issues seem to be largely met with an audience that is unwilling to process them. There are a lot of people who find Brent Green's work to be "whimsical" and "cute" but the lack of critical interpretation and listening that surrounds his work is almost more worrisome than the lack of politically instigating work out there. Brecht, whose plays were just taken as entertainment in the beginning of his career, worked hard to become the voice of an oppressed proletariat and, in a similar yet folksy fashion, Green's work, whether conscious or not, is doing the same. One can only hope that over time more and more audiences will pick up a camera, seek out change and desire brain stimulation in a form other than explosions.

"...it is precisely theatre, art and literature which have to form an 'ideological superstructure' for a solid, practical rearrangement of our ages way of life"<sup>12</sup>

1. John Willett, *Brecht On Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, Hill & Wang, New York, 1992, pg 37

2. Willett, pg 125

3. Charles Laughton, *Galileo; A Play by Bertolt Brecht*, Grove Press, New York, 1966, pg 136

4. Willett, pg 91—99

5. Walter Weigl, trans. Daniel Russell, *The Art of Bertolt Brecht*, New York University Press, New York, 1963, pg 73

6. Willett, pg 85

7. Willett, pg 38

8. John Fuegi, *The Essential Brecht*, Hennessey & Ingalls Inc., Los Angeles, 1972, pg 147

9. Willet, pg 43-44

10. Laughton, pg 47

11. Laughton, pg 59

12. Willett, pg 23



# Paradise Lost

Treasa O'Brien interviews Marcel Schwierin, co-curator of the 'Shooting Animals' programme at Oberhausen Short Film Festival 2011

Treasa O'Brien

The Oberhausen Short Film Festival has been celebrating short film for 57 years. As well as hosting international and national competitions, and mini-retrospectives, it has a film market for distributors of short film and artists' moving image and at its centre a thematic programme, which in 2011 concentrated on 'Shooting Animals'. This treat of a programme unearthed rare archive documentary from the 1890s of cockfights, biologists and anthropologists' films, propaganda films, and artists' films and videos. Over 10 programmes of 6 - 10 short films explored a wide variety of subjects including dog training, animal handling for film sets, love between humans and animals, ethics, hunting, captivity, pets, wilderness, desire and animal experiments to name some. The

programme was co-curated by the filmmaker/curator Marcel Schwierin and the biologist/philosopher Cord Riechelmann. Together, their unifying and guiding principle was the dignity of the animal within film. Noticeable in their curating style is a move away from curating author filmmakers or innovation in form. Instead, the programme treated film as a phenomenon we make collectively as a human endeavour. This makes the audience more complicit than they might be if the programme had been more author-centric. Rather than showing the filmmaker's 'take' on animals, it allowed for a more content-oriented approach. I spoke with one of the curators, Marcel Schwierin, about the dramatization of the animal, power relationships between animals and humans, dignity of subject,

the animal as symbolic and the animal as real, and what kind of methods we use when we 'shoot' animals on film. In film, do we see animals or do we see an idea of the animal? What is being represented?

**Q What are the trends you noticed most when you were researching for this film programme? What does a human do when she or he shoots an animals?**

That is an interesting question. If you look at the all the films you will see a power relationship between humans and animals, which is of course that humans are dominating animals and animals are very respectful towards humans, they fear them.

On the other hand, we were very interested in finding these moments in the animal films where the



animals look back.

The main question is: How do animals and humans communicate? What do we get if we see an animal? What do we see even when we look at an animal because we are so full of ideas of animals and these images are overlaying the reality of the animal.

For example, the crocodile is shown in movies as hyperly aggressive, snapping monsters that are highly dangerous. In reality, crocodiles eat and hunt only every several months. If you meet a real crocodile, it will probably just lie around and not do anything. This was my big disappointment when I was a kid and it was my first time in the zoo. I saw a crocodile that was just not moving for hours. Our ideas are completely different, these im-

ages we have often come from fables, from books, from movies, and they overlay the real animals.

One of the ideas of our programme was to glimpse what could be the real animal.

**Q How do filmmakers deal with animals in comparison to how filmmakers deal with humans? What are the differences and similarities in their approach?**

I think the main difference is language. If you film a human being, you usually communicate through language, e.g. you tell them what you want: 'Go there, do this, don't do this'; so you have a variety of actions. Animals do not communicate with humans that way, so you don't have the possibility of language. So

either you can use training, which is often used in staged films e.g. William Wegman makes films with dog training, and then we also have horrible films about the theatre of the animal, Russian movies where you see Pavlov/Stalinist training of animals. In most films, you cannot really communicate with animals, so then something extremely interesting happens; the power relationship turns, the animal decides what it wants to show or not. You can only wait. Wait for the moment when the animal appears in front of the camera. This determines all kinds of animal films. It's about patience.

**Q Your programme at Oberhausen is centred mainly on documentary and 'verité'. Even the art films use performance or documentary-type structures. But one of the most interesting for me was this fictional film by Roz Mortimer, *Dog of My Dreams* which featured young girls' emotional and erotic relationships with their dogs, overlaid with adult women's voices speaking about their childhood memories and texts from fictions by Virginia Woolf and Enid Blyton. This film seemed**



Still from *Dog of My Dreams*, 2001

**to me to be about power and identification. What have you found in your research that can tell us more about these relationships between human and animals as played out in fiction?**

If you analyse the films of David Attenborough, the famous British documentary maker, you will find he is telling the story in an Aristotelian way. He dramatises animals, so the animals are put in a certain context. We are reproducing human animals, we are training animals and documenting animals so that they behave like humans. Think about Lassie and Flipper, these are fictional characters, they've nothing to do with

the real character, it's very cruel to bring them to this point. This is exactly what we didn't want to show, or if we did so, we wanted to do so in a way that you get conscious about it. We wanted to show the animal in its own dignity, the animal a little but like it is. For the opening, we showed *Donkey with Snow* by Romuald Karmakar, and it's just a donkey approaching the camera, looking into the camera checking out what's happening. It seems he's looking into the audience, there's nothing happening so he slowly turns around and goes back. This is, for us, a kind of ideal animal film, because the donkey remains in his dignity,

he communicates to the camera, he is communicating with the human being and he's not dramatised in any form.

We wanted to show films that are conscious about the image of the animal they produce so that there is a certain reflection, and this is often the case in artists' films e.g. in *Our African Trip*, Peter Kubelka is very aware of the image of animals he is showing, the representation of animals in movies. We also decided not to show any kind of symbolic animals. You know, there was a funny story about Carl Barks, the animator of Donald Duck. He was asked, when Donald Duck

eats a Christmas duck, if this was not cannibalism, and he said "No, because Donald Duck is not a real duck. Donald Duck is a human in the form of a duck." So our programme is about the representation of animals in film, and this might tell us as much about the societies in which these films were produced than about the animals themselves.

**Q. There is so much anthropomorphism going on in animation but you seemed to have deliberately resisted this as a thematic strand. Why is this?**

It would be a completely different programme. In fact it would not have much to do with animals, it would be more to do with the symbolic animal. Then you could look at the heraldic, sculpture, fables. If you look at the animation films we do show, these are the ones in which the animal is represented as an animal.

**Q Do you think that the reason that there are so many symbolic animals in animation is because they are mainly for a child audience and if that means that children have some special affinity with animals? That**

**they might relate more to an animated animal with human traits rather than to an animated human?**

The anthropomorphism of the animated animal is very interesting. Donald Duck is reduced to certain aspects of the very complicated human psyche, it is a kind of reduction of human complexity. Thus it is nothing to do with the relationship between kids and real animals. Kids identify with animals because they do not have the means of language, or at least not in the same way that adults do. Kids are fascinated with dinosaurs, because the dinosaur symbolises power and strength, what the kids want to be. On the other hand, they symbolise the vulnerability and clumsiness of kids. Kids cannot express themselves properly, like animals, they are very reliant on the pity of humans. There is a film in the programme about a chimpanzee that was raised like a kid was raised [*Comparative Tests on a Human and a Chimpanzee Infant of Approximately the Same Age, Part 2*]. In the titles, it says they were fed, raised and punished in the same way. Punished is the key word, and this is why the kid relates to the animal.

**Q I wonder if there is something more subversive at play when it comes to the dinosaur because the dinosaur lives in a world without humans. For a child, adults are in power, and in the dinosaur film, adults are not in power, so it becomes a way to identify in a world without adult power. Also there is this idea of civilising, where children are still in the process of being civilized, so perhaps they identify with the animal in this way as well.**

In the Bible, the story of living with animals is as presented as an idea of Paradise. You have to leave the garden at the moment when you are gaining your consciousness. The main problem of humans is that we are always imagining something better. Buddhism tries to overcome this with the idea of being just here now ... in a certain way this is going back to an animal state, although there is a limit on that.

**Q There is a certain wave of animal programmes planned internationally for the next year. Why are we now looking at animals so much?**

My thesis is that it is because we are living more

and more in the virtual world. Television was a huge step towards the virtual world, then came the internet and now with the mobile internet and social networks, we are entering a new phase, where we can communicate parallel on several different channels, e.g. surfing the net, watching TV, and being on your mobile, simultaneously. And wherever you go, nearly anywhere on the planet, you are almost always connected to a wifi spot, so in a certain way you are never where you are. So this idea of leaving the paradise, and getting, through your consciousness, different options of spaces and time, this is becoming a reality, a virtual reality. So this is why we are now looking at animals, as a way of looking back on the paradise that is lost for humans, but you cannot get it back, it's just an illusion. But this is my suspicion why animal movies are so in fashion now.

**Q How did you think about keeping the integrity of the animal when showing them as a spectacle within films? And also how do you think about this experience of spectacle as it extends to us, the audience, when**

**watching the films?**

To allow dignity of the animal is to first learn about it and respect it. Animals have a certain way of behaving and they are not as free in choice as humans are e.g. lions react in a certain way if you come close to them; they attack if you go close, if you go back they won't attack, if you go closer again they will. The first thing you have to know is a little bit about what kind of animal you are approaching, you must ask in what way does the animal behave? If you follow the path of the animal, then you are like a very good hunter, or a very good animal filmmaker, meaning that you become, in a certain way, an animal. You have to make a kind of mimicry of the animal to really understand how the animal behaves. Only in this moment, can you respect the dignity of the animal, because if you don't know who you are filming, then you can't get in any kind of communication. And this means a very sophisticated knowledge of the needs of animals.

This is an element we thought of for our zoo-themed programme. Should animals be kept in zoos? This is not something that we say should

be forbidden but it is important to fulfill the needs of the animal. Again I talk about William Wegman; the relation of William Wegman to his dog is a very respectful relationship. I wasn't so sure about this before but then I discussed it with Cord Riechelmann [co-curator of the Shooting Animals programme], who is a biologist, and he said "Yeah, it's a real love, it's not a one-sided love, it's a love from both sides". You can feel that the animal and the artist have a real friendship ... William Wegman tries to convince his dog to smoke, and the dog refuses, he doesn't want to smoke, so that's ok, he is not hurting his dignity. But you're hurting the dignity in the moment when you force the animal to do something which is not part of the behaviour of the animal, which is done without love.

**Q But this is something that we humans do, we often dominate animals, but you have chosen not highlight this in the programme.**

Well we do. You know, in the programme, we show even the torture of animals. We chose a film about the execution of an elephant, [an archive called *Circus*

*Sarrasani in the World War: the Execution of Arno the Elephant after He Runs Amok*] and one about dogs who are sent to space [*Four-legged Space Travellers*]. In these films, they are violating animal rights for sure, they are violating the dignity of the animals and they are really putting them in pain. These films are so obvious in the way that they are misusing or abusing animals that there is a certain consciousness about that, and this is what we are interested in.

**Q After watching films of animal spectacle, you referred to Adorno in one of the post-show discussions, saying that we are not afraid of old fortresses because they are not dangerous anymore. As an audience looking at some of the archive material in this animal programme I laugh, because they are not dangerous anymore. But what are we doing now that we are not even aware of, that we are not even laughing at yet? What are the contemporary fortresses we should be afraid of, or better knock down, in relation to animals as a subject in film?**

The new fortresses are the animal farms, they are ex-

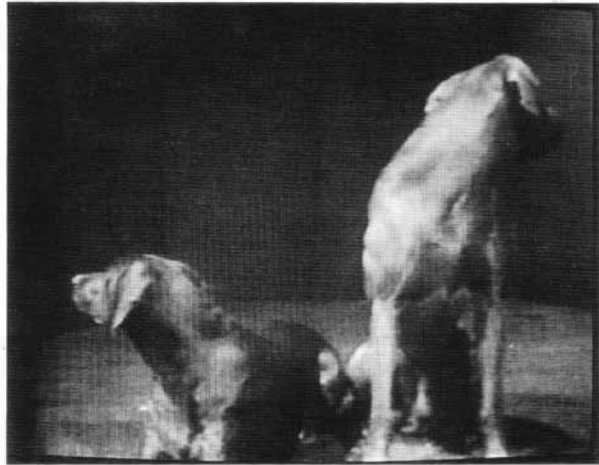
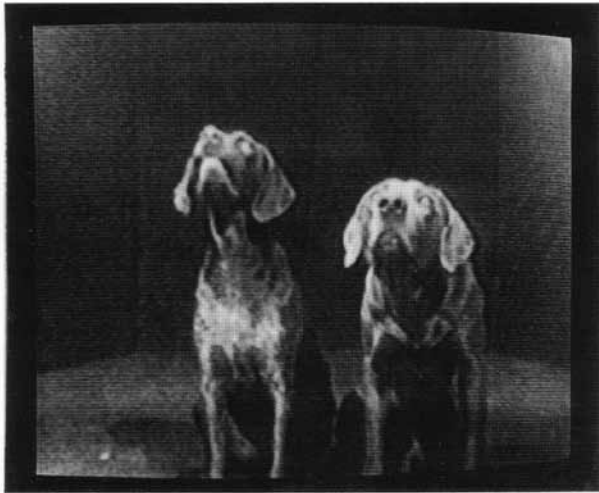
tremely cruel. You're not allowed in ... The animals inside are so neurotic ... I don't think that this kind of fortress will ever be beautiful, the architecture is so horrible, it is without dignity. The animal farm is a representation of nothing, it's a little bit like a military camp. This is not by chance, it's for a reason.

**Q Your curating style seems to employ a natural history museum approach, dividing your programme into categories such as insects, birds, the zoo, hunting. It is an older model of curation, using classification rather than a thematic/stylistic or authorship approach. Is this how you work normally or is this a new departure through your collaboration with Cord Riechelmann?**

When I curate, I follow the path of the films and I follow my intuition. I like to curate in a way that it is a surprise for the spectator, to bring in films that you consciously would say "oh they've nothing to do with it". I combine very different genres, times and subjects, following a hidden line of intuition. In this case we consciously decided because we were a scientist and curator to

follow a more scientific approach. This is why Oberhausen Film Festival invited a filmmaker/curator and an author/biologist/philosopher - to break with the creative intuitive curating, going more to a logical deductive way of curating, and this is what happens. So like you say it's a very rigid structure which limits the freedom of the curator to bring rhythms into the programme. If I look at the programmes from a curatorial perspective, I see that they are not perfect, because the content was more dominant for us than the form. But I am very pleased to see that the audience is following this path. It's sometimes difficult for the audience because there are breaks that are not always aesthetically satisfying, but you get something else; like in science, you get a reflection on the subject that is much deeper than the usual curatorial approach.

It was a kind of blind date. Cord Riechelmann and I didn't know each other beforehand. I learnt about him through his book, he learnt about me through my last film, and we tried to approach each other and find a way to communicate together. Everything was open at



*Dog Duet* by William Wegman, 1975

nor a curator, either. But if you are working with someone who does know how they are constructed, if you work on animals with a biologist, you get a completely different level and you also get questions you never would have thought about. It's also the other way around for a biologist, you know, and I think it was a very fruitful collaboration.

Marcel Schwierin is a curator and filmmaker. He co-curated the 'Shooting Animals' programme for Oberhausen Short Film Festival 2011, with Cord Riechelmann.

Treasa O'Brien is a filmmaker, writer and curator.

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the beginning. In the past, Oberhausen tried to do programmes where the content and the form have an equal status, but now they wanted to try something completely different, and this was also what was so tempting for me, to try something completely different than I did before.

When I'm curating without any scientists around, which is mostly the case, I always feel very uncomfortable that I do not really know what I am curating about. I know this is not what curating is about, e.g. an artist photographing a house does not have to know how it is constructed,

# Re-Interpreting the Violence of A Clockwork Orange

Greg Scorzo



*A Clockwork Orange*

40 years after its initial release, Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* has acquired the reputation of a ground breaking, envelope-pushing hall mark of 20th century cinema. This reputation is well earned, as the film is (at the very least) one of the most beautifully constructed, complex, iconic, and controversial films of the 70's. More astoundingly, the film retains its capacity to thrill, puzzle, and provoke audiences today. This is not so much because of the film's explicit portrayal of sexual and non-sexual violence. Audiences have since become

accustomed to such explicit imagery in mainstream thrillers. What still makes the film an intense and perplexing experience for viewers is its attitude towards the violence it presents to the viewer. This is particularly true of the violence presented to us in the first 30 minutes of the film. Throughout the 40 years since the release of the film, audiences have found the film's attitude towards this violence to be a source of confusion. This explains part of the divergent amount of praise and hostility the film has received over the years.

The film initially divided critics in 1971. While some film critics praised the film as a technically dazzling and thematically daring piece of cinematic provocation, other critics accused the film of everything from misanthropy and misogyny to an endorsement of extreme right politics.<sup>1</sup> Outside the world of film critics, the film was seen by many public figures as a potential threat to public order. The extremely stylized sexual violence of the film was, for a time, judged as the cause of a series of copycat crimes in the UK.<sup>2</sup> Gangs of men engaged in acts of sexual violence often recited lines from the film to their victims. These men would later blame the film for their abhorrent crimes to courts deciding on appropriate prison sentences.<sup>3</sup> Even the film's critically acclaimed director Stanley Kubrick agreed to ban the film from being shown in the UK on advice of the police.<sup>4</sup> This was less than two years after the film had won the New York Film Critics Award for best picture.<sup>5</sup>

In 1999, Kubrick's death precipitated both a lift on the film's UK withdrawal and a reassessment of the film's critical status. Since then, the film has enjoyed a near universal acclaim.<sup>6</sup> What is interesting about this acclaim is there is now be a critical consensus regarding the film's primary

**“ Critics accused the film of everything from misanthropy and misogyny to an endorsement of extreme right politics ”**

meaning. The consensus is that the film is best interpreted as a parable about man's free will. According to this reading, the film is a treatise on the indispensability of man's free will to choose between good and evil actions. Whatever ambivalences are to be

found in the film's attitude towards the violence it shows in its first 30 minutes is a consequence of the film's thesis. According to this interpretation of the film, the film is expressing the attitude that it is better for man to choose evil than to not have the capacity to choose his actions. As I will explain, this interpretation is at odds with what happens in the narrative of *A Clockwork Orange*. Moreover, if we are to truly understand the film's violent first half-hour, we must look to what's on the screen and not merely the plot which is common to both the film and novel.

It should be noted that the standard interpretation of *A Clockwork Orange* as a film about Free Will is not accidental. This is the interpretation that has been given in interviews both by director Stanley Kubrick and star Malcolm McDowell.<sup>7</sup> It is also the interpretation of Anthony Burgess who wrote the novel upon which the film is based.<sup>8</sup> Even the title of the novel is a cockney expression which denotes a piece of fruit which appears organic but is in fact mechanical. Burgess chose this title because he intended it, in the context of his story, as a metaphor for a man who is incapable of making free choices.<sup>9</sup> The critical consensus regarding how to interpret the film is thus a consequence of critics taking the creators of the film at their word.

The problem here is that there are some cases where the understanding of a work of art can greatly benefit from an interpretation which is distinct from the intentions of the work's creators. Sometimes this is because of reluctance on the part of the creators to attempt to understand their own work.<sup>10</sup> Sometimes it is because the work of art actually fails to be what its creators intended it to be.



*A Clockwork Orange*

In the case of Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, the film fails to function as a parable about the moral indispensability of man's free will. This is because there is nothing clear in the narrative of *A Clockwork Orange* that deals with the moral wrongness of depriving a person of their free will. This is true of both the novel and the film.

Both the novel and film tell the story of a teen psychopath (Malcolm McDowell) named Alex who is forced by the state to undergo aversion therapy in exchange for being let out of prison. Alex's crimes include robbery, rape, accidental murder, and random beatings of homeless men on the street. After undergoing the aversion therapy, Alex is conditioned to feel debilitating spasms of pain and nausea when he experiences urges towards violent or sexual behaviour. He also is (because of an accident during the aversion therapy process) conditioned to feel the same spasms of pain and nausea when hearing Beethoven's ninth, a favourite of Alex.

Once out of prison, Alex is beaten and tortured by his former victims without the ability to defend himself. After a suicide attempt, the government currently in power decides to perform an operation on Alex which will restore him to his natural state. Worrying about unpopularity in an upcoming election, the government gives Alex financial compensation for his suffering in exchange for his public endorsement. Alex agrees and rejoices in his ability to experience his former urges as well as his capacity to experience joy when hearing Beethoven's 9th.<sup>11</sup>

This narrative does not deal with the issue of free will because the moral problems raised by Alex's aversion therapy have little to do with his lack of free will. They have to do with the fact that Alex has, through his conditioning, been made vulnerable to sadistic, life-threatening physical attacks from his former victims. Additionally, Alex has been deprived of the ability to experience either sexual arousal or the hearing of Beethoven's 9th without spasms of pain and nausea. These effects on what Alex can do are not, in any clear way, a total negation of his free will. They are only negations of a range of his moral choices. The important point is that there are still plenty of moral choices Alex can make. He can choose to vote Labour or Tory. He can choose his occupation and the set of people who he wishes to spend his life with. He

can listen to most pieces of music and even most of the works of Beethoven. What has been prevented for Alex is his ability to defend himself from violence, his ability to have a functioning sexuality, and his ability to hear Beethoven's 9th. Although these limitations constitute extreme moral problems for Alex's aversion



*A Clockwork Orange*

therapy, it is not clear that free will deprivation is itself an inherent moral problem for the aversion therapy.

After all, we can imagine the same aversion therapy happening without the pairing of Alex's pain with Beethoven or any music at all for that manner. Likewise, we can imagine a more sophisticated aversion therapy which only conditions Alex to have an aversion to performing acts of unprovoked violence and rape. Such a sophisticated conditioning might leave him perfectly capable of performing acts of self-defence or sexual acts which are consensual. What is important here is that there is nothing in such a sophisticated conditioning that the film appears to have any potential gripes with. In the second half of the film, we sympathize with Alex because he can't defend himself, is deprived of having a sexuality, and can't listen to one of the great orchestral works of the millennium. The important point is we can imagine Alex undergoing a sophisticated aversion therapy where all of this is

quite different.

If a sophisticated aversion therapy *only* prevented Alex from engaging in unprovoked violence and rape, would the film condemn this therapy? It seems unlikely, since one of the film's main dialog motifs is the importance of moral choice.<sup>12</sup> What we should remember is that a sophisticated aversion therapy can allow a criminal who cannot control their impulses the chance to live and thrive in society. If a criminal were to choose to undergo aversion therapy as a way of being able to live in society and restrain impulses he otherwise could not help, this would be a moral choice. Here, aversion therapy would be allowing a criminal to express his moral choices rather than depriving the criminal of free will.

What these insights illustrate is that the narrative of *A Clockwork Orange* fails to constitute an argument for the preservation of man's free will. But just because the narrative of *A Clockwork Orange* fails to constitute an argument of this sort, it

doesn't follow that the narrative fails as a story. Moreover, the film contextualizes the story in a highly specific, visual future which gives the story thematic overtones not present in the book. This is why, if we are to truly understand the film, we can't reduce every scene to a component of an argument for free will. We need to look to the visual and sonic storytelling of the film to understand the film's main thematic and philosophical concerns. After all, the film uses the counter-culture of the late 60's as its inspiration for constructing the future in which the narrative of *A Clockwork Orange* takes place. The novel obviously doesn't do this because it was composed in the early 60's, before such counter-culture existed. If we can understand the main thematic and philosophical concerns of the film, we can understand the uncomfortable ambivalences of the violence in the first half hour of the film.

The primary story telling technique of the film is to present its narrative in the context of a visual and sonic dystopia. What makes this dystopia distinctive is it does not try to divorce itself from the iconography of the present (like Kubrick's previous film, 2001: *A Space Odyssey* had done). Rather, the future created by Kubrick is a futuristic exaggeration of the counter-culture of the late 60's. Characters wear interesting and exaggerated variations on op art, psychedelic, and hippy fashions. The decor contains bright, multi-coloured patterns juxtaposed against functional (and often cartoon like) depictions of female sexuality. There are stark, neon-lit environments of indoor decadence in close proximity to noire-ish environments of outdoor poverty and squalor. We see images of recreational drug use that suggest that such drug use is both a social norm and an instigator of anti-social behaviour.

There are numerous images in the film that illustrate how the future society depicted is rife with crime, drugs, violence, decadence, political corruption, and sexism.

Yet this society is not a typical Orwellian dystopia that consists of a helpless population terrorized by some totalitarian government. This is a society that manifests a degree of social freedom that realises a good deal of what 60's counter-culture wanted to see in mainstream society. In the film, recreational drug use appears to be legal (night clubs actually sell recreational drugs rather than function as social spaces to illegally buy recreational drugs). Also, there seem to be no puritanical norms governing sexual behaviour. There are no cultural norms which enforce a linking of sex with marriage, monogamy, or emotional intimacy. There is evidence that homosexual activity between women is tolerated to a much greater extent in this future society than it was at the time of the film's release.<sup>13</sup>

The society depicted in *A Clockwork Orange* contains a thriving and stylish youth culture. Not only do hang outs for young people contain variations on the most interesting and stylish decor of the late 60s, they also contain paintings and sculptures of sexually explicit, erotic art. Such explicit imagery goes far beyond what was considered a socially acceptable form of decorating a public space in 1971. The music played in the film's shops, street windows, night clubs, and government films ranges from psychedelic rock<sup>14</sup> to pre-20th century orchestral music and avant-garde electronic music. The taste of mainstream youth in this future society is, in some ways, more daring and eclectic than the taste of the actual youth of the late 60's and early 70's.

This is also a society in which technol-

ogy is advancing beyond the technology of the 60's and early 70s. An early scene in the film where Alex beats a drunken homeless man suggests that the film takes place at a time when there is a more developed space program. The aversion therapy that Alex undergoes demonstrates advances in behaviouristic psychology which also did not exist at the time of the film's release. Yet in the film, both these technologies are used to harm rather than help members of the society they emerge from. The space program takes money and resources away from the solving of domestic problems like crime and poverty. The advances in behaviouristic psychology are used to deprive criminals of the ability to perform acts of violence and rape. Such deprivations wind up stopping the protagonist of the film from having the ability to defend himself from violence, engage in consensual sex, or enjoy Beethoven's 9th.

Similarly, the social freedom and youth culture of Kubrick's future society wind up being used, throughout the film, to facilitate various forms of brutality. The drugs served up at popular night clubs help to motivate brutal gangs of young men to engage in acts of violence and rape. The erotic images of women in the background of public spaces reinforce a conception of women as beings whose primary purpose is to gratify the sexual urges of men. The music and art of the film do nothing but provide an aesthetic background of sounds and images to accompany the brutality that the film's characters engage in. In Kubrick's future society, art provides the atmosphere for, rather than moral motivation against, brutality.

Hence, the future society that Kubrick depicts in *A Clockwork Orange* is a dystopia that illustrates a problem with the social freedom sought after by the coun-

ter-culture of the late 60's. The problem is that social freedom facilitates an opportunity for an increase in creative actions. Creative actions, by their very nature, are actions which involve remaking the world according to the desires of the creative actor. Creative actions range from the creation of great works of art to the destruction of other human bodies. Creative actions can include scientific technology that results either in cancer treatments or hydrogen bombs. Creative actions can be used in the realisation of counter-culture ideals like peace and love. Stanley Kubrick's film *A Clockwork Orange* demonstrates, with a fierce intensity, that a counter-culture inspired, socially liberal society need not be a society that emanates peace and love. It may be a society that primarily emanates brutality.

This theme is illustrated visually throughout the film's first half-hour. The film opens with a close up of protagonist Alex staring menacingly at the screen. As the camera dollies backwards, we see his gang of fellow hoodlums sitting next to him. As the camera pulls further out, we see a stylish table made to resemble the nude figures of two naked, nubile women. Both Alex and his fellow hoodlums are wearing lipstick, despite the poses of aggressive masculinity they exhibit for the camera. The table in front of them is a beautiful piece of sculpture, and yet it functions as a piece of furniture which reduces women to passive sex objects that exist for the pleasure of men. The music on the soundtrack is the dark, dazzling electronica of Wendy Carlos. The piece is an atmospheric reconstruction of the Music for the Funeral for Queen Mary by Henry Purcell. Just seconds into the film, we are given a visually beautiful cinematic summation of the main elements of the



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society Kubrick will be presenting to us throughout the film.

We see a highly creative and free society that expresses its free creativity through various forms of brutality. It relishes in the freedom for men to wear lipstick like women do. At the same time, the act of wearing lipstick heightens the exaggerated masculinity of the gang of hoodlums who will spend the next few scenes beating and raping random citizens. The table that sits in front of them is beautiful and interesting. The placement of the table in front of them belays a level of sexual openness with explicit imagery that initially seems progressive. Yet the table reduces the sexuality it displays to an image of a naked, aroused, passive, nubile woman. Such an image is both reducing sexuality to the male desire for nubile, naked women and de-individualizing the woman as much as possible. We can see very little of the expression on the woman's face apart from the fact that she is aroused. We see nothing about her body except

the fact that it is naked, nubile, aroused, and in a state of submissiveness. Carlos's background score is dark, spacey, and beautiful. However, it functions primarily as an atmospheric addition to the menacing quality of the image we see before us. Everything we see before us which is the result of a free and creative act also functions as an expression of brutality.

The situation only gets worse as the dolly pulls back even further. We see that we are watching Alex and his fellow hoodlums in a nightclub. The sculptures of passive female nudes are both tables and dispensers of drinks laced with narcotics. The other clubbers sit passively in a state of drug induced stupor. As the dolly continues, we see the submissiveness of women become more pronounced in the club's sculptures. Sculptures of naked women sit atop platforms with their hands tied behind their backs in chains and handcuffs. Sexuality is here being represented by images of naked, nubile women who are in a position of *forced* submis-

siveness. As the camera dolly reaches the end of a long line of sculptures, we see two male bouncers (one black, one white) standing up, arms folded, looking over the nightclub's sitting, intoxicated customers.

**“ A society so preoccupied with hedonistic pleasures that it seems to have become numb to pleasure ”**

Both appear quite menacing and yet both are wearing one piece leotard outfits that make each appear like particularly athletic ballet dancers. Alex is now talking to the audience in voice over. He informs us, using his futuristic nadsat slang, that we are looking at a night club which goes by the name of the Kerova milk bar. We are also informed that some of the narcotics dispensed by the night club “sharpen you up and make you ready for a bit of the old ultra-violence.”

Here we can see quite clearly that Alex is an emergent property of the society he inhabits. In his society, gender bending and aggressive sexuality have become symbols of ultra-masculine dominance. This is a society which tolerates an increased explicitness regarding female sexuality but only because such explicitness presents men with an opportunity to aggressively dominate women's bodies. This is a society which eroticises male-on-female rape. It is a society so preoccupied with hedonistic pleasures that it seems to have become numb to pleasure. This creates a population which is largely oblivious to much of its own problems. One of the main problems is a youth subculture of teenage men who seem to satisfy their desire for pleasure through the

brutal domination of others. At the same time, this is a highly creative, free society with a highly developed aesthetic sensibility. These social elements coalesce in the creation of Alex, the protagonist of *A Clockwork Orange*. Indeed it would be very odd for a society such as the one depicted in Kubrick's film to not contain a person like Alex. As we see in the subsequent scenes of the film's first act, Alex embodies the main elements of the society in which he emerges. He is violent, brutal and a person who relishes in the aesthetic beauty of creative actions.

In the second scene Alex and his fellow hoodlums (Pete, Georgie, and Dim) taunt and beat a drunken homeless man they find in a dirty, dilapidated tunnel. The scene opens with a close up of the homeless man which then pulls back to a wide shot of Alex and his gang hovering over the man in giant, menacing silhouettes. As Alex recounts in his narration, their sole motivation for beating this man is the fact that he is filthy, drunk, and loud. Before they strike the man with chains, kicks, and clubs, they listen to him profess an indifference to his own death. His reasoning is that he does not want to live in a society that is itself indifferent to the crime and domestic squalor of which he is a victim. The homeless man believes he lives in a society that is more concerned with its thriving space program than with the oppression of the old by the young. Alex and his gang listen to the old man in amusement before mercilessly beating him. Here, we see that the social freedoms expressed in the Kerova milk bar do nothing to undermine the existence of extreme poverty on the street. More interestingly, the very social freedoms expressed in the

Kerova milk bar deprive the rest of society from having the freedom to walk the street without fear of being brutally assaulted. The most vulnerable members of society wind up making the easiest targets for Alex and his gang.

In the next scene, we see a derelict building with ornate greco-roman adornments surrounding an abandoned stage. This scene opens with a close up of a bronze figure of a bearded man's face and then dollies out to a wide shot of the abandoned stage. On the stage is a rival gang of Alex headed by a military gear adorned young man called 'Billy Boy'. Kubrick's camera lingers on Billy Boy's gang attempting to gang rape a naked, nubile young woman who resembles one of the statues in the Kerova milk bar. Juxtaposed against this, Rossini's *Thieving Magpie* plays on the soundtrack. The juxtaposition of this brutal rape with the greco-roman visuals and 19th century orchestral music is ironic. However, it is not merely ironic. It is an illustration of the co-mingling of brutal violence with the creative arts present throughout the film's future society.

Alex and his gang disrupt the proceedings, emerging from dark silhouettes once again. With a slang infested series of insults directed at Billy Boy, Alex prompts the two gangs into a quick, violent confrontation. What is unusual about the way this confrontation plays out is that both gangs leap into action with what seems like an exhilarating burst of joy. For Billy Boy's gang, the prospect of a violent confrontation with Alex's gang is more exciting than a mere gang rape of an attractive young woman. Members of both gangs laugh and yell “yah-hoo” and “yip-eee” as they punch, kick, and throw tables and smashed plates of glass at one and other. For members of both gangs, the violence

is joyous because it is a way in which the teenagers creatively express themselves. Thus, it is no accident that such expressions happen in environments cluttered with sounds and images of the creative arts. Such creative arts, in *A Clockwork Orange*, constitute a motivating influence for violent acts. For the youth of *A Clockwork Orange*, violence, like art, is a form of creative self-expression.

As the fight progresses, it is clear that Alex's gang is the winner. Alex relishes beating a twitching Billy Boy on the ground with a large black club while letting out a joyous scream. A siren slowly becomes audible above the soundtrack of Rossini's music. Alex blows a loud whistle and signals for his fellow gang members to leave the derelict building before the police arrive. The film then cuts to a medium shot of Alex and his gang speeding a futuristic car down a dark country road. They scream and yell in fits of joy, purposefully driving into oncoming traffic. Behind them is an obviously matted background image of a country road moving at a speed too great to match the speed of Alex's car. This produces a hyper-real effect, communicating to the viewer the drug effected qualities of Alex's consciousness. While Rossini's music still booms on the soundtrack, Kubrick cross cuts between shots of Alex and his gang and shots of oncoming cars and pedestrians. Alex narrates the proceedings as if he were narrating an exciting visit to an amusement park. He notes that the car he is driving, “gave you a nice, warm, vibrating feeling all through your gutty wuts.”

At this point, we are watching a film which is portraying Alex's violent actions as acts of creative expression which are exhilarating and fun. The film is cinematically emphasizing the experiential quali-





*A Clockwork Orange*

ties of violence for the perpetrator, rather than the victim. This changes, in a disturbing and unexpected way, in the film's next scene. Alex and his gang decide to play a game called 'surprise visit' where they trick a random home owner into letting the gang into their house. The gang will then proceed to beat and rob the unsuspecting home owner in an explosion of "laughs and lashings of the old ultra-violence." The gang arrives at a swanky home in a posh neighbourhood, adorned with a sign in front of its stylish architecture that simply reads 'HOME'.

Kubrick cuts to a shot of the interior of 'Home'. We see a man (Mr. Alexander) writing away on his type writer as the camera pans rightward so that we see the futuristic decor of the house. Mr. Alexander's wife sits reading a book in a chair that resembles a space pod. Off screen, the doorbell rings, announcing Alex's gang with the prophetic chime of the first four notes of Beethoven's 5th

symphony. Mrs. Alexander leaves her chair and book to see who the visitors are. Peering outside her front door, she hears Alex tell her that his friend has just had "an accident" and is "bleeding to death". Mrs. Alexander is somewhat suspicious as Alex pleads with her to let him in so that he can use her telephone to ring an ambulance. "Who is it dear?", Mr. Alexander asks from behind his type-writer in the living room. Mrs. Alexander replies, "There is a young man here. He says he's been in an accident and wants to use the telephone." Mr. Alexander replies, "Well I suppose you'd better let him in." With this, Mrs. Alexander opens the door and the now masked Alex, Pete, Georgie, and Dim joyfully proceed to beat, restrain, and gag Mr. And Mrs. Alexander.

Once it becomes apparent that Mr. And Mrs. Alexander are reduced to a state of helpless acceptance, Alex begins to put on a performance. Parodying the famous dance sequence in *Singing in*

the Rain, Alex sings and dances his way through the house, kicking and knocking over desks, tables, and bookshelves. Restrained and gagged by Pete, George, and Dim, Mr. And Mrs. Alexander look on at the proceedings in shock. Here, Alex is not merely performing an in-home robbery. He is using the in-home robbery as a forum for another spontaneous creative act. Alex punctuates the dance with a blow to the face of Mrs. Alexander and several rhythmic kicks to the belly of Mr. Alexander. Noticing that Mr. Alexander is now restrained on the floor looking up at his helpless standing wife, Alex decides to rape Mrs. Alexander in front of her husband.

Alex keeps singing as he cuts off and removes Mrs. Alexander's clothes. The camera cuts to a wide angled close up of Mr. Alexander, ball and gagged, watching in a frozen terror as Alex rips the clothes off his restrained wife. Kubrick's camera then cuts to a shot of Alex, standing next to a nude Mrs. Alexander, undressing himself while singing and looking down at Mr. Alexander. This shot is from the perspective of the living from floor, containing both the helpless Mr. Alexander at the right of the screen while also containing Alex and the nude Mrs. Alexander at the left. The shot lingers statically as Alex ends his rendition of 'Singing in the Rain' by pulling down his trousers and kneeling down to stare into the eyes of the helpless Mr. Alexander. He taunts, "Viddy well governor, Viddy well." Alex then proceeds to jump up to face Mrs. Alexander, presumably to begin a forced act of coitus. The camera then cuts back to the wide angled shot of Mr. Alexander staring up at the (now more horrific) action from his position on the floor. The last image we see from this sequence is a close up of the head of Mrs.

Alexander. We see her wincing in pain, her mouth covered with tape, hearing her muffled screams as she closes her eyes in a helpless, horrified state of acceptance.

Although the coitus is suggested rather than explicitly shown, this scene has become one of the most infamous rape scenes in cinema history. The scene possesses a particularly unpleasant resonance because it is the first scene in the film to focus on the experiential qualities of the victims of violence. There is no background music to illustrate how the robbery/rape is an exciting expression of creativity for Alex and his gang. The song and dance Alex accompanies his actions with quickly loses the sarcastic irony of the Rossini music of the previous scenes. The cinematic presentation of the violence is no longer grounding the violence in the decadent future or illustrating how the acts of violence function as creative acts for Alex and his gang. Rather, the film seems to be emphasizing, with a newly clinical and naturalistic style, that the violence perpetrated by Alex is extremely sadistic. The violence is sadistic because it is predicated on the delight of causing strangers extreme forms of physical and psychological pain.

While the violence of beating up fellow gang members and a drunken homeless man is vicious, it lacks the psychological sting of the rape we see. The drunken homeless man's drunkenness may partially shield him from a detailed and visceral memory of the beating. Sadly, for such a man, being violently assaulted on the night time streets may not be something he is experiencing for the first time. With the gang fight, there is a sense of excitement and consent from both parties in the mutual decision to charge at one another in the derelict building. But with the rape,

it is not just the excitement of inflicting violence on random individuals which is grounding the pleasure that Alex and his gang gain from the activity. It is the thrill of inflicting violence that is presented through a traumatic and visceral experience of psycho-sexual torture and humiliation. The film goes through great pains to remind the audience, throughout the scene, that Alex enjoys hurting Mr. And Mrs. Alexander both physically and psychologically.

On the other hand, there is an even more disturbing feature of this naturalistic examination of psycho-sexual brutality. Mrs. Alexander, despite being visibly older than Alex and his gang, is attractive by the standards of the futuristic society she inhabits. When undressed, it is apparent that her body also bears a striking resemblance to the naked statues in the Kerova milk bar. Because she is both gagged and in a state of horrified acceptance, the camera sees more of her wiggling naked body than behaviours manifesting resistance. Her gagged moans are so muffled in how they sound that they could easily pass for the sounds of orgasm. To many viewers, this scene comes across not just as horrific but also as erotic. This, for most critics and writers, has traditionally been the most troubling aspect of the film. The rape is shown to be an extremely viscous act motivated partially by deliberate cruelty. However, the rape is also presented in a manner which shows why, for Alex and his gang, it is an erotic act. It is this ambivalence which has resulted in the film being labelled misogynist and self-undermining by many of its critics.<sup>15</sup>

According to the misogynist argument, the film is sexist (among other reasons) because it eroticizes its rape scene by having Alex rape a stereotypically at-

tractive woman who showcases minimal resistance. The scene is presented, according to this reasoning, in such a way as to titillate the male audience. It plays into the male fantasy of a man being able to walk into the home of any adult female he finds desirable and sexually dominate her with minimal resistance. To a certain extent, there is a kernel of truth in this objection. It is partially these features of the rape that make Alex and his gang find it appealing and erotic. These features are uncomfortably showcased in the depiction of the rape. However, the rape scene does not *only* showcase these features of the rape. It also showcases the features of the situation which are physically and psychologically traumatic for both Mrs. Alexander and her husband. This presence of this duality is why the scene is so uncomfortable for the viewer.

However, the combining of emphasis on both the effects of the rape and its pleasure for the perpetrators is not evidence of misogyny. Rather, it is a brutal acknowledgement that eroticism does not carry with it a moral high ground. It is not misogynist to say that the brutal act of raping an attractive woman can be potentially eroticized either by Alex or the male audience of *A Clockwork Orange*. Rather, it is to acknowledge that eroticism itself can be sexist, violent, and sadistic. In much the same way that the film illustrates how freedom and creativity can express themselves in acts of brutality, the film also illustrates how that same brutality can arise from expressions of sexual desire.<sup>16</sup>

This also constitutes a rebuttal to the argument that the film is self undermining. According to that argument, *A Clockwork Orange* is self-undermining because the stylizations with which Alex's criminal actions are portrayed induce the audience

to delight in them. This include the eroticism inherent in the film's rape scene. A variation of this argument is given, surprisingly, by controversial director Michael Haneke.<sup>17</sup> According to Haneke, *A Clockwork Orange* is "a noble failure" because "you can't make an anti-fascist film using a fascist aesthetic."<sup>18</sup> Here, Haneke means that the stylistic devices of the film used to show that Alex enjoys his violence have the effect of shielding the audience from the inherent brutality of Alex's actions.<sup>19</sup> According to this reasoning, the film's exploration of the violence it showcases demands that the audience not be shielded from its brutality by stylistic devices. The film can only portray the violence honestly if the violence is portrayed in scenes evoking uniform repulsion.

The problem with this argument is it ignores the important repulsion that results from the stylistic devices used to portray the violence of the movie's first half hour. The brutality and pleasure of Alex's crimes being

visually juxtaposed against one and other does evoke repulsion. It evokes repulsion even when the audience is titillated by these crimes. In fact, the repulsion is often a consequence of the audience being so titillated. We are repulsed when we view the rape scene partially because we are watching a vicious act of psychological and physical brutality. We are also repulsed for two additional reasons. We are repulsed because the brutality of the act fails to stop Alex from delighting in the sexual dominance of a woman he finds attractive. More disturbingly, we are repulsed because we can see that the brutality of the rape makes the sexual dominance of a woman Alex finds attractive an intensely pleasurable experience for him. The truly disturbing

power of the rape scene in *A Clockwork Orange* is that it visually presents us with all of this information simultaneously. We do not merely see Alex gain pleasure from dominating and hurting a random stranger. We are able to see the specifically erotic pleasure that Alex gets from hurting a woman he sexually desires.

It is one thing to contemplate the sadistic pleasure a human being can get from hurting another human being. But when this sadistic pleasure is partially erotic, this gives the sadism a particularly grim sting. As human beings, we don't like to contemplate the potential eroticizing of behaviours most of us (quite rightly) find morally repulsive. Most of us like the role that eroticism plays in our sexual and mental

**“A Clockwork Orange wants us to see our most human qualities ... as potential expressions of brutality”**

lives. The thought of such eroticism being used to make horrific actions appear desirable makes eroticism seem potentially threatening. This, of course, plays into the overall strategy of *A Clockwork Orange*. *A Clockwork Orange* wants us to see our most human qualities (our creativity, our self-expression, and even our eroticism) as potential expressions of brutality.

The first half hour of the film is troubling for many audience members to digest because it illustrates the close links between brutality and our most human qualities. We don't want to think of criminals as having refined and edgy taste. We don't want to think of gang fights as consensual expressions of creative energy. We don't want to think that certain erotic desires can be



A Clockwork Orange Poster

inherently evil. Naturally, when we see scenes of brutality grounded in such basic human drives, it is easy to think the film is just endorsing violence. Because the film is so powerful, we feel we have to absolve the film of this charge in an easy, simplistic way. So naturally, we accept a safe reading of the film that absolves it of its dangerous exploration of these uneasy connections. So we accept the words of the creators. We look at every scene as a small piece in an argument for the preservation of man's free will. As we have seen, there is little in the film to merit this reading.

*A Clockwork Orange's* power resides in the fact that it seduces, twists, and confuses our fragile moral sensibilities. It does this by illustrating, in a variety of different ways, how the more inhumane tendencies of our species are very much a product of our humanity. It shows us how we are

all capable of being monsters. It shows us how our most monstrous incarnations have human qualities which are worth respecting. It shows us how our desires to contain our monstrous incarnations can produce monstrosities of a different flavour. It shows us, painfully, how our worst selves are connected to our best selves and our best selves are connected to our worst selves. A film like this can't be reduced to a simple argument for the conclusion that it is better for man to choose evil than to not have choices at all. It is so powerful precisely because it does so much more than merely preach.

When we see the crimes of the film's first 30 minutes, we are not induced to condemn the violence. The film already takes for granted that we do. We are also not induced to commit similar crimes. The film already takes for granted that we

know we shouldn't. What the film wants us to do is see these crimes not as alien events committed by monstrous psychopaths lacking in basic humanity. The film wants to see these crimes as human crimes. And it wants us to see its monstrous psychopath as monstrous not because he is inhumane but because he is very very human. *A Clockwork Orange* isn't using these psycho-social relationships as premises in an argument whose conclusion the film is trying to convince us of. Rather, the film just wants us to contemplate these relationships so that we may come to our own conclusions. If the film had one simple take home message, we wouldn't still be watching it. It would have lost its power and mystique over the last 40 years. Amazingly, it hasn't.

1. For positive original reviews of the film, see Murphy, A.D. "Variety Reviews: *A Clockwork Orange*." *Variety* Dec. 15, 1971: n.pag. Cocks, Jay. "Cinema Kubrick: Degrees of Madness." *Time Magazine* Dec. 20, 1971: 80, and Canby, Vincent. "*A Clockwork Orange* dazzles the Senses and Mind." *New York Times* Dec. 20, 1971: 44. For a feminist influenced, negative initial review of the film, see Beverly Walker, "From Novel to Film: Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*," *Women and Film 2* (1972): 4. For an initial review charging the film with misanthropy, see Kael, Pauline. "Stanley Strangelove." *New Yorker* 48 Jan. 1, 1972: 50-5. For an initial review charging the film with a right wing political agenda, see Ebert, Roger. "*A Clockwork Orange*." *Chicago Sun Times* Feb. 11, 1972: n.pag.

2. "Serious pockets of violence at London school, QC says", *The Times*, 21 March 1972.

3. See 'Clockwork Orange' link with boy's crime", *The Times*, 4 July 1973.

4. Schmidt, William E. "British Test 19-Year Ban on 'Clockwork Orange'." *New York Times*, Feb. 6, 1993: n. Pag.

5. See <http://www.nyfcc.com/awards/?awardyear=1971>.

6. See the 91% rating on [rottentomatoes.com](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/clockwork_orange/). [http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/clockwork\\_orange/](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/clockwork_orange/)

7. See Adair, Gilbert, Bonono Robert, Ciment, Michael. (2003). *Kubrick: The Definitive Edition*. United Kingdom: Faber and Faber. See Also: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ua5aO3SHMSM>. In this 1973 interview, McDowell interprets, before a hostile journalist, the film as a parable about free will.

8. See "Anthony Burgess Interviewed in Italy in 1974 about: *A Clockwork Orange* (and other subjects in general)." <http://www.masterbibangers.net/ABC/index.php/online-texts-and-resources/textes-by-ab/49-anthony-burgess-interviewed-in-italy-in1974-about-a-clockwork-orange.html>

9. Ibid.

10. This is particularly true of the work of director David Lynch. In interviews, Lynch routinely refuses to interpret his own work.

11. See Kubrick, S. (1971). *A Clockwork Orange*. UK: Warner Brothers. See also Burgess, A. *A Clockwork Orange*. UK: William Heinemann, 1962.

12. This is particularly true in the prison sequences where the prison chaplain speaks about the importance of moral choice. The prison chaplain states, "when a man cannot choose, he ceases to be a man" when discussing the ludivico treatment with Alex in the prison library. The chaplain also mentions the importance of making moral choices when challenging the minister of the interior during the exhibition of Alex after his conditioning.

13. We must remember that in 1971, lesbian sex was not yet the universal symbol of eroticism that it has become in mainstream heterosexual pornography and culture. Lesbian sex was still, by and large, viewed by western society as a controversial and repulsive act.

14. One can see a Jimi Hendrix poster in the Kerova milkbar as well as a copy of *Magical Mystery Tour* by the Beatles in the film's record shop.

15. See Beverly Walker and Wray, John. "Minister of Fear", *New York Times Magazine*, September 23, 2007, 44-49.

16. The film's rape scene, in a sense, constitutes a rebuttal to the often proclaimed "truism" that Rape is about power, not sex. That scene and the rest of the film suggest that eroticism, among other things, is itself is about power.

17. Ibid., John Wray.

18. Ibid.

19. Haneke's own highly publicized ethos for dealing with on screen violence is that the film-maker should make the experience of violence uniformly unpleasant for the viewer. This, for Haneke, is the only way to deal with the subject matter of violence honestly.

# The Panic Attack Productions of George Kuchar

a tribute

Clara Pais



*Cinema has recently lost one of its most prolific and exciting offspring – George Kuchar, American underground filmmaker, has passed away late this Summer. I have only discovered George's films during this year and have been taking most of it to be able to articulate the impression it has caused on me; when I knew of his death, I had an urgent feeling to celebrate him and his work, which I consider to be of great brilliance as a whole, and to somehow pay my respects and speak my admiration, if not personally as it's not possible anymore, by sharing it. As a filmmaker, learning about Kuchar was liberating; as a film lover it was an enjoyment. I can't believe*

*anyone can be left indifferent by a Kuchar film and I dare say that after a few exposures you run the risk of being permanently changed.*

Before I was introduced to the Kuchar world, I used to define my concerns as a filmmaker to be exploring film as a language which had the potential to be more truthful than other forms of communication. I was trying to find my position in the world of cinema, trying to fit my pursuits into the boxes I knew of. I was certainly more interested in treating films as artistic projects, explorations of the world, of oneself, of communication itself and that made me diverge from the world of conventional

narrative film, though I never despised it and drew most of my love for cinema from what had been produced by Hollywood and European cinemas. But this world seemed to be sinking under the weight of commercial viability, stories and aesthetics developed for profit rather

than for inspiration and enjoyment, which made the whole enterprise seem repellent, uninspiring and dull, even in so called independent films that practically carried on working in the ways of the industry. Documentary seemed a territory too murky to go into and anyway I was more interested in fiction as a symbolic or mythological construction of reality. I delved instead into the world of experimental and structural, non-narrative filmmaking, which enjoyed the creative freedom I aspired to. There was a more varied range of subject-matter motivated by questioning, there was more experimentation in both the creation and use of images and sound, the production costs were cheaper, the usual hierarchical roles of conventional filmmaking didn't apply and it wasn't even widely considered as cinema. It was exciting to try and get a grip of oneself in this world, to understand how far a film or video can go before it becomes something else, and what that something might be; however, I felt bogged down by certain constraints of such work, particularly that it requires a highly intellectual type of engagement which I considered elitist.



Overall, it lacked some joy – and then I found Kuchar.

To have an all-round idea of who he is it is best to watch *It Came from Kuchar*, a documentary about the films and filmmaking of George and his twin brother Mike, which was how I got introduced to them. You will learn how the legend started: being given a Super 8 camera by their mother, the young Kuchars started making their own productions inspired by the glossy Hollywood melodramas that were pumped into their eyes at the movies in the fifties. They made their films using everything around them – gathering relatives, friends, relatives of friends and neighbours to play their characters, and using their homes and the streets of Brooklyn as their sets. They aspired to make their films grand and spectacular like the movies they watched, and didn't feel swamped by the restrictions that arise from having little to no money to make them. This resulted in a large number of extremely bold and extravagant pictures that ended up disarming the New York underground film circuit and made the twins something of a sensation in those times.

Though they seemed to have enjoyed the parties, they were not doing it to make a name for themselves, nor for money – film was what they loved to do and so they did.

Their movies (and themselves) were very true to their own conditions, and that was part of their charm. They started by accepting to use consumer products as film equipment. I already mentioned the Super 8 camera that captured their first films. These cameras were cheap, small and handy to serve the home-movie market, which suited the Kuchars just fine as they were literally filming at home. It was easy to fit these cameras anywhere, take them everywhere and not worrying about too many technicalities. Their frames are composed with everyday props, impressive costumes and over-the-top make-up applied to characters who are usually tan-

melodrama was to blow it up so wildly that including those boring or disconcerting bits of life (that were usually kept away not to spoil the glossy illusion of classic Hollywood) was meant to have some, preferably a lot, of dramatic impact. In order to do this, they made use of any and all of cinematic devices they knew of, and made it up as they went. Superimpositions, jump-cutting, surreal inserts, stop motion, slow motion, narration, voice-dubbing, use of miniatures and hand-painted models, layers of text and speech bubbles, storms and lightning, colourful dramatic lighting, dynamic movement within and with the frame: the whole shebang. Everything at their disposal is transformed into something cinematic, and not through heavy intellectualisation but by an intuitional critical process that manifests itself through a hands-on approach.

**“ A very humorous and touching portrait of a lonely filmmaker who can't finish his film because all of his friends are busy having sex ”**

gled up in some tempestuous emotional business. Their early films, and especially George's for the rest of his life, are full of twisted characters and vile situations which seem to be the more touching as they are revolting. He was looking to provoke great effect: 'I tried to squeeze the essence out of each scene because each scene was expensive. (...) I did know I had a certain language in film. And that was like, do away with extraneous scenes like coming and going out of doors (...) Just have them go around doing their business, and their business, while you're photographing, should be very high key at that moment. Emotional peaks.'<sup>1</sup> The Kuchar take on the

the filming Donna hadn't stepped out due to illness. Despite that, George carried on making the film by turning the camera on himself and his situation, and composing a very humorous and touching portrait of a lonely filmmaker who can't finish his film because all of his friends are busy having sex. The filmmaking process started to seep into the film, showing us George directing the scenes he had shot with Donna, repeated takes that blur the boundaries between the different films we're watching – the film he began to shoot, the film he's shooting in the film, and the finished piece. George's style relies much on parallel action that reveals the emotional core of

*Hold Me While I'm Naked* (1966) is a favourite example of this. It was one of George's first 16mm films starring his regular star at the time (and high-school friend), Donna Kerness – or that's what it would have been if halfway through



the film. *Hold me While I'm Naked* is one of his most successful uses of this technique, as the tension of the film culminates in a sequence where we see all the characters having showers, however, whilst George is alone and miserable beating his head on the wall, his friends are going wild, kissing and groping each other in the water. The film is erratic and imperfect, and I only made sense fully of its narrative logic after a few viewings, however it is very successful in transmitting a feeling that comes from the frustration of someone who aspires to do something but is surrounded by mundanity. Alone with his mother and a plate of pork chops, George ends the film by looking straight at the camera and asking 'There's a lot of things in life worth living for, isn't there?' – characteristically, George crosses another boundary by levelling up

with the viewer, who can only have a personal answer after such sincerity.

This kind of process is even more overtly explored in a series he started a few years later, the *Weather Diaries*, which were done over his annual stays in a motel in Oklahoma during tornado season. George was fascinated by the weather and went there in hopes that tornadoes would make an appearance, which usually didn't happen. The *Weather Diaries* started to fill up the tediousness of the place and became a rather intricate form of self-entertainment. They are mostly fascinating as Kuchar's explorations of video – nearly all edited in camera, he would make inserts of sound and image into previously shot footage, constructing an entertaining narrative with a commentary of his day-to-day experiences. Every year the experiment went in



a different direction, sometimes producing something remarkable, other times just an interesting document, but very often being quite amusing and sometimes even poignant – like *Season of Sorrow*, where Kuchar mourns his recently deceased pet cat, Blackie. Filmed mostly at dark and featuring an unusually quiet and tearful George, the film uses superimpositions and fades to show the cat's presence lingering over his days.

As personal as his best films are, George is not a solitary filmmaker. As he said somewhere, making movies was for him 'a way to get to meet people, having a little of social interaction'. And indeed most of his films have a lot of people involved, especially since he started teaching filmmaking at the San Francisco Art Institute in 1969. His classes are famous for being an eclectic experience of filmmaking, where everyone gets their hands dirty. A special kind

of atmosphere is created when the production has practically no money to speak of, everyone is thrown into different roles and have only a 15-minute meeting before starting to make the film while, among the set, walks Linda Martinez in full make-up and costume, an old Kuchar star who doesn't hesitate to do all the crazy things George gets her to do. The films might not be up to the industry's established standards of professionalism, but they are true explorations of what a film can be by a group of people who, for a while, are together embroiled in a Kuchar panic attack production.

To sum up, what I find most inspirational about Kuchar is his amateur approach to filmmaking. Because he does not attempt to be professional, in the sense that the development of his abilities do not come from prolonged training or formal qualification, nor does he expect to commercialise his films in order to make a living. Instead, he

takes it as a personal interest so the films have no other purpose than to fulfil whatever personal need he has at that point to make them. The fact that the films, or aspects of his work, can appeal to other people in many different ways, only adds to their value because it means they transcend their own purpose.

In practical terms, this process liberates him in all the ways that I have felt there were constraints before. There is a change in the relationship between the people involved in the films, since they're all unpaid and simply decide to join in the film's particular journey, and

phrases like fixed roles, going over-time and over-budget become meaningless too. Through this process, George has allowed himself to have moments of brilliance and of crap in equal measure, remaining always truthful. His resourcefulness should be both inspiring and exciting for any filmmaker in terms of form and process, and that has definitely been what I have taken from him. Not all of his films are fantastic, but once you get a grip of the Kuchar world you realise you'll always find something fresh, something spectacular, definitely worth living for.



George Kuchar



## One+One is looking for writers and articles.

Articles can be theoretical or practical; however, we are not 5 stars reviews based. We believe and want to encourage a thorough and critical analysis of filmmaking and its social and cultural effects and implications. Contributors should not write from a consumer perspective, or merely a theorist. All articles should be influenced by the act of filmmaking to a greater or lesser extent. We encourage a wide variety of articles whether autobiographical, journalistic, historical, philosophical, socio-political or whether they are manifestos, letters, diaries, sketchbooks or interviews. However the perspective of the filmmaker or the critical re-invention of film, as a theme, is of central importance. **One+One** always tries to tread the fine line between straight up academic prose and popular writing, we encourage articles which can reach a popular audience of filmmakers, artists and intellectual laypersons without becoming anti-intellectual. All articles should cover at least one of the topics listed below.

- Filmmaking practice (including articles written from a practical viewpoint.)
- Broader social, cultural and economic issues for filmmakers
- Film piracy, the internet, new technology and its social, cultural and economic implication.
- Social and political issues in films
- Contemporary Independent and World Cinema (This could include little known or important films or filmmakers from all over the world)
- Pornography and sex in film
- Art and cult cinema
- Activism and Filmmaking
- Film as part of a “Revolution in Progress”
- Underrated or under-acknowledged filmmakers or acknowledged filmmakers who have radically and experimentally broken boundaries in some way.
- Redesigning cinema space and film experience
- Filmmaking and film in relation to cultural theory such as psychoanalysis, phenomenology, psychogeography, queer theory, body politics and Marxism

Articles can range from 500-5000, Although the length should be appropriate to the content.

Send proposals to [submissions@filmmakersjournal.co.uk](mailto:submissions@filmmakersjournal.co.uk). Further information on submissions can be viewed at <http://filmmakersjournal.co.uk/submissions.php> and the journal can be viewed on our website <http://filmmakersjournal.co.uk>.