## Movies - Ian Driscoll

## Maurice Sendak! I'm With You In Rockland

Spike Jonze's adaptation of Maurice Sendak's Where the Wild Things Are is not, thank god, a film about growing up.

Its opening credits, in which hand-scrawled monsters devour corporate logos, and its glorious freeze-frame opening title (hand-lettered against a smeared image of protagonist Max thundering down the stairs, fork in hand, in pursuit of his dog) announce that this is a film about childhood.

And Where the Wild Things Are is a film that's smart enough to understand that childhood is scary. It can be as cruel as it is joyful and as senseless as it is wondrous. And often, these contradictions occur because the world of childhood bangs up against the world of adults.

Working with the omnipresent Dave Eggers (if he didn't write the book you're reading, he wrote the introduction, or at least provided a blurb for the back cover), Jonze perfectly evokes childhood situations and emotions—and their friction with the realm of grownups.

In an early scene, Max has built an "igloo"—a tunnel in a snow bank—and tries to show it off to his older sister, who, busy talking on the phone, tells him to go play with his friends. From his lack of response or movement, from the way he stands on tip-toe, peering through the window at his sister, it's clear that he doesn't have any. In an attempt to connect with her, Max instigates a snowball fight with his sister and her friends—a fight that ends with Max's snow fort collapsed on top of him, and Max in tears. Childhood play runs smack up against the adult (or at least adolescent) world, and it hurts.

The snowball fight/fort incident later become a heroic tale in Max's retelling, and finds a happier resolution when Max, having run away from home and ended up on the island of Wild Things, organizes them to build the ultimate fort. It also finds an analogue when Max, playing king of the Wild Things, divides them into teams (good guys and bad guys) for a dirt clod war. (If you're not familiar, it's a melee in which people pelt one another with, well, clods of dirt. It's actually a pretty awesome part of childhood.) Predictably, participants get hurt, get hit when it's "not fair," and storm off, sulking. But in this case, it's Max, in the adult-responsibility role of king, who's to blame for the hurt and tears.

Of course, Max is not the first to bring adult concerns to the land of the Wild Things. (Who, it turns out, have names. Apparently, when the book

was being adapted for an opera, Sendak named them after his relatives. They've been renamed for the film.)

Even before he arrives, the Wild Things have relationship issues. Personal issues. Interpersonal issues. Perhaps even psychological issues. Many of them mirror Max's own problems: like Carol, he has trouble controlling his anger; like Alexander, he wants to be noticed; like Judith, he is bossy; like Ira, he is clingy; like Douglas, he desperately wants friends; like The Bull, he is worried what people think of him. And like KW - ?

Is KW some part of Max? If she is, it's not a part of him that I can readily identify. Is she representative of his sister, who ignores him to spend with her friends, or his mother, who's dating Mark Ruffalo?

It's around KW that the simple metaphor of the Wild Things as representatives of aspects of Max's personality breaks down. And I think this is purposeful. The film isn't legible in simply Freudian terms. Childhood is not about metaphors. It's about experience.

Throughout the film, we encounter other discordant elements—animals that, while in the land of the Wild Things, are not themselves wild. There's a housecat. An improbably large dog ("Oh, it's that dog. Don't feed it, he'll just follow you around"). And a raccoon, an animal that straddles the wild/tame divide.

What are these animals doing in the land of the Wild Things?

I think we get the answer to that question when, at one point, we meet the raccoon inside one of the Wild Things (where Max is hiding, from one of the other Wild Things). The promotional campaign for Where the Wild Things Are claims that inside all of us is a wild thing. But it seems that inside every Wild Thing is also a domesticated thing.

Inside every child, not to put too fine a point on it, is an adult.

But thankfully, we don't see adult Max, because, as I said earlier, this is not a film about growing up. In the end, Max solves his problems by not solving them. Why? Because he's a kid. So he runs away again, but this time he runs away to home, there to find waiting for him soup, and chocolate cake, and his mother, not hysterical, just happy to see him. She sits and watches him eat, and the expression on her face seems to quote Ginsberg:

I'm with you in Rockland
in my dreams you walk dripping
from a sea-journey on the highway
across America in tears
to the door of my cottage in the Western night

The Wild Things have issues, yes. But they talk around instead of about them. Instead of discussing, like adults, they throw dirt clods and knock down trees and build forts and lash out and run and hope. Perhaps it's because they lack the vocabulary.

Or maybe it's simply because they know that sometimes, it's better just to howl.

## Is This What You Call A Dachshund?

Normally, I think of Ron Howard as the Midas of mediocrity – everything he touches turns to boring. So, what went right with Frost/Nixon?

(If you're totally unaware of the last 40 years of American history, spoiler alert.)

There's a moment near the end of the Frost/Nixon in which Frank Langella's Nixon, shaken from his trailer-worthy excited utterance ("I'm saying that when the President does it, that means it's not illegal!"), stumbles out of the house in which the interview has been taking place. Outside is a crowd, which we have seen him glad-hand his way through numerous times by this point. But in the wake of his disastrous final interview, the equation is changed. Tricky Dick is out of tricks. He's surrounded, seeing himself as he's seen. Fumbling for a safe interaction, he approaches a woman standing on the sidewalk with her dog and asks, as if unsure of the answer, "Is this what you call a dachshund?" The woman proffers the dog and, his fingers curled into loose, arthritic claws, Nixon skritches the animal gently on the head.

It's not a stretch to see a reference to/mirroring of Nixon's famous Checkers speech, but this is not a moment of misdirection or politicking; it's a moment of human vulnerability, where the only safe love is unconditional dog-love. Which is not to say that Frost/Nixon is, as some have claimed, an apologia for the Nixon administration and its unequivocal crimes. It's something more complex—and more equivocal.

Peter Morgan, who wrote the stage play Frost/Nixon, as well as also scripting and co-producing the screen adaptation, seems to have an uncanny knack for getting inside the private psychology of public figures in moments of crisis. (Not that he bats a thousand: he's also responsible for The Last King of Scotland, about which I'm pretty ambivalent, and The Other Boleyn Girl, a movie for which the term credits should be replaced with, "blames".) As an evocation of life under the sunlamp of hot media, Nixon's encounter with the dachshund is a mirror of Elizabeth II's encounter with the stag near the end of The Queen (although an equally strong case for mirroring could be made for the scenes of Nixon staring out over the ocean in the film's coda). These are ambiguous moments that force the audience to project and draw their own conclusions, and in so doing, confront the fact that we may not know as much as we assume—that sound bites, scrums or indeed a person's professional conduct may not tell the whole story.

Hollywood in general (and Ron Howard in particular) isn't very good with ambiguity (exhibit A: the frankly insulting The DaVinci Code, where the only thing ambiguous is the motivation behind Tom Hanks' hair cut). But the Nixon story is all about ambiguity and plausible deniability the dark matter of what could have been contained in the missing 18 minutes of White House tape. Interestingly, one of Frost/Nixon's most debate-worthy sequences involves a telephone call from Nixon to Frost that Nixon later can't recall, and which effectively gives him his own missing 18 minutes. Is unrecorded experience real? Discuss.

Frost/Nixon is a story with an unstable footing, a story of changing media changing the world, a story of the power of the television camera as much as the power of men of power (all that on top of being, in itself, an echo-chamber adaptation of an adaptation of media event). As Sam Rockwell (redeeming himself slightly for the execrable Choke in the role of James Reston, Jr.) summarizes:

You know the first and greatest sin of the deception of television is that it simplifies; it diminishes great, complex ideas, trenches of time; whole careers become reduced to a single snapshot. At first I couldn't understand why Bob Zelnick was quite as euphoric as he was after the interviews, or why John Birt felt moved to strip naked and rush into the ocean to celebrate. But that was before I really understood the reductive power of the close-up, because David had succeeded on that final day, in getting for a fleeting moment what no investigative journalist, no state prosecutor, no judiciary committee or political enemy had managed to get; Richard Nixon's face swollen and ravaged by loneliness, self-loathing and defeat. The rest of the project and its failings would not only be forgotten, they would totally cease to exist.

Reston's words resonate today (think of the Bush White House's stridently reductive soundbiting of the good/evil dichotomy). But Frost/Nixon is not about good or evil. It's not about private or public. It's not even about Frost or Nixon.

It's about that slash.

I'm willing to argue that Frost/Nixon may be the world's first Oscar-nominated slash fiction (tell you what; instead of delving into an almost-certainly NSFW explanation, I'll let you Google that if necessary). The slash is where things brush up against one another. It's not a reconciliation of opposites, or an equalization of quantities. It's not umbilical or connective. At best, it's an imperfect equation, a division with a remainder.

And perhaps what remains is Nixon the man. Not that that's a simple

thing – as a man, he's still a combination of opinion and fact, nature and nurture, paucity of foresight and surfeit of hindsight. And at the centre of it all is something untouched (and maybe untouchable). As Henry Kissinger put it when describing Nixon, "The essence of this man is loneliness."

To return to my initial question, what went right here may be the fact that Frost/Nixon doesn't choose between right and wrong for you. It asks you to think about complex ideas. And that's anything but boring.

## Go!

I recently had a chance to watch the Wachowski siblings' live-action adaptation of Tatsuo Yoshida's Speed Racer (aka the much-more-evocative Mach Go Go Go) for a second time. After 135 hallucinatory, candy-coated minutes of Möbius strip racetracks and Möbius strip plot, I was left with one question: is this the future of cinema?

Speed Racer tosses linear narrative out the power window in its opening sequence, as it Tokyo drifts between an elementary-school-aged Speed Racer doodling flip-book racecars in class, a teenage Speed Racer racing against his brother's ghost (in his imagination) while redlining toward the checkered flag on a CGI racetrack that leaves Newtoninan physics in the rearview mirror, and a formative-years montage that gets gallons to the mile. It's a Pimp-My-Ride mission statement that says, in no uncertain terms: ADHD is not a learning disability. It's an evolutionary adaptation. In the space of a few minutes, Speed Racer traces the entire history of animation, then proceeds to colour outside the lines as it delineates the go-go-check world of tomorrow.

The world of Speed Racer moves too fast for physics. It's a world where cars pedal-to-the-metal at over 800 kph, racetracks look like roller-coasters and people age in jumpcuts, only accessing the intervening years through dramatically convenient, on-the-fly flashbacks. In Speed Racer (as in cinema, as in life), the only direction is forward.

This is a world where everyone has their own personal greenscreen, and every speech is accompanied by a background montage that illustrates, complements and amplifies what is spoken. It's the triumph of the subjective, as dialogue scenes become paired monologues become vehicles for a stream-of-consciousness motion-controlled cameras that no longer need a shot/reverse shot structure to tell you who's talking to whom. Case in point: as Speed Racer, his girlfriend Trixie (side note: I could watch Christina Ricci weld all day long; a previously unsuspected fetish) and Racer X drive through the mountains, each in their own car, a three-lane dialogue scene takes place. But instead of cutting between the speakers, the camera simply zooms and tracks in and out from one cockpit to the other, never missing a beat of the conversation.

It's a bravura sequence that leads to an even more bravura fight scene between the Racer family (Chim-Chim and all) and the agents of the requisite villainous racing tycoon, Arnold Royalton. The fight evolves the Wachowski's Matrix aesthetic in a way that its sequels failed so miserably to do, creating anime speed-lines out of swirls of snow through

camera movements, using the fighters' bodies to wipe (again rather than cutting) from one struggle to another and perfectly tracking the fisticuffs among no fewer than a dozen combatants. All this with a swelling score that breaks out—at the perfect moment—into a rendition of the Speed Racer theme. It's something pretty rare, that scene—a moment of pure, cinematic joy.

But Speed Racer also has a serious chassis. Its plot driver is a story of big, corrupt, colluding business out to profit from or destroy the livelihoods of independents—people who do it for love—and in these times of (can't believe I'm going to type this, but here it goes) global economic crisis, it resonates—far moreso than the first time I watched the film.

Why didn't Speed Racer do better at the box office? Good movies often don't, but that's a Model-T answer. I think the real reason is that the people who buy the tickets just aren't ready for a movie that starts in overdrive and gears up from there. They're used to Michael Bay using special effects to make product placements look good. Or Spielberg using special effects to serve classic Hollywood storytelling models. In Speed Racer, the Wachowskis use special effects to serve storytelling models that have are barely off the assembly line. Speed Racer plays Chicken with the audience, and I think a lot of people yanked their aesthetic steering wheels to the right and ended up seeing little more than the Wachowski's brake lights disappearing in the rearview mirror.

So, yeah, Speed Racer is the newest entry into my list of favourite car chase movies. It might not deliver the visceral tension of The Seven Ups or the sustained adrenaline of The Road Warrior or the unrelenting inventiveness of The Italian Job (1969 version, as if I needed to clarify) or the creeping speedometer of suspense that is Duel.

What it does do is perfectly capture—and realize—the childhood dream of what it would be like to be a racecar driver. The cars of Speed Racer don't run on gas, or ethanol, or even hydrogen. They run on pure imagination.

Cool beans.

## Dangerous Because It Has A Philosophy

In David Cronenberg's Videodrome, shortly before the arrival of the least sexy waiter in the history of cinema (go rent the movie), Max Renn (James Woods) and Masha (Lynne Gorman) share the following exchange on the nature of the phantom Videodrome signal Renn is tracking:

MASHA
Videodrome is something for you to leave alone. Videodrome. What you see on that show, it's for real. It's not acting. It's snuff TV.

MAX RENN
I don't believe it.

MASHA
So, don't believe.

MAX RENN
Why do it for real? It's easier and safer to fake it.

MASHA
Because it has something that you don't have, Max. It has a philosophy. And that is what makes it dangerous.

That, in a nutshell, is how I feel about the Cultural Gutter. It's dangerous because it has a philosophy.

What are the tenets of that philosophy? I'm pretty sure it's post-pomo, and believes we've gone beyond any sort of central or authoritative narrative (and contends that's really the central metaphor of Diary of the Dead). Yet at the same time it abhors aintitcoolnews.com's onanistic abuse of the exclamation point.

The Gutter would rather watch Turner Classic Movies than AMC, even though it's kind of creeped out by Ted Turner, because it believes movies are meant to be seen in their proper aspect ratio, and from beginning to end without commercial interruption. (It admires David Lynch for his stand on this, among other things.)

The Gutter went to shoot-along screenings of The Killer back in the 90s, and got that out of its system. Now, it makes an ominous half-turn to stare down people who talk during movies. It gets up and exits the cinema to complain if the film goes out of focus, or if the sound is bad. Insofar as this goes, the Gutter may be bit of a cranky old man. It definitely likes wearing cardigans, though part of this is in homage to Bob Newhart.

It's still kind of angry about the replacement of unionized projectionists with pimply-faced candy-bar staff. It believes the projectionist is the last member of the film crew, and the one with the most power.

It believes that even though the seventh art is a latecomer, it's still an art form.

And yeah, it kind of always wanted to French kiss a television.

So, why put yourself out there? Why write several hundred words a month? Why imagine your opinion matters to anyone, or that you have anything of value to contribute? Why do it for real, when it's easier and safer to fake it? Maybe simply because stuff can't be uncommunicated, and because a bullet in the right place can change the world, but it's no substitute for a good meme.

Or maybe because the battle for the mind of North America will be fought in the Gutter. The Gutter is the retina of the mind's eye. Therefore, the Gutter is part of the physical structure of the brain. Therefore, whatever appears on the Gutter emerges as raw experience for those who read it. Therefore, the Gutter is reality, and reality is less than the Gutter.

You could think on that. Or you could ignore this article entirely and watch the version of Videodrome Brian O'Blivion would watch—all the good bits1—in eight minutes and 29 seconds.

Either way, keep tuning in to The Cultural Gutter—the one you take to bed with you.

1 www.youtube.com/watch%3Fv%3DYtp69fBh0J8 (Will anyone really type this out, other than you?)

## A Drowning Man

Tomorrow (November 7, if I post this on time), Toronto's Trash Palace1 is showing a print of Frank Perry's The Swimmer. If you're in the city, do yourself a favour: go see it. If you're elsewhere (I understand the internets now extend beyond the GTA), do yourself a favour: go rent it.

Based on the John Cheever story of the same name, The Swimmer stars Burt Lancaster as Ned "Neddy" Merril, denizen of the affluent suburbs of Westchester. His diminutive nickname is a metanym, I think, for the entire film—the society being portrayed, the plot that unfolds and the man at the centre of it all. The false camaraderie it implies, the superficial bullet-point relationships and false-front (self) images unfold over the course of the film, until their weight overwhelms even the barrel-chested Lancaster.

But maybe I'm getting ahead of myself.

The premise of the movie is pretty simple, if unusual. As the film opens, Lancaster is at a pool/cocktail party at the Westerhazys'. When it comes time to leave, he hits upon a novel idea, which I'd perhaps best let him explain:

NEDDY
Well now, with the Grahams there's a string of pools that curves clear across the county to our house. Well look: the Grahams, the Lears, the Bunkers. Then over the ridge. Then a—portage through the Paston's riding ring to the—Hallorans and the Gilmartins. Then down Erewise Lane to the Biswangers, and then—Wait a minute, who's next? I can't think, I had it just a minute ago. Who is it? Well, who is it? Who's next to the Biswangers?

HELEN WESTERHAZY
Shirley Abbott.

NEDDY
Shirley Abbott. And across Route 424 to the recreation center pool, and up the hill and I'm home. Well don't you see? I just figured it out. If I take a sort of a dogleg to the southwest… I can swim home.

Which is exactly what he does over the rest of the film's running time: portage from backyard to backyard, pool to pool, swimming a length in each. Along the way, things get a little weird.

Of course, you'd expect no less from director Frank Perry. Perry also helmed such notable cum notorious flicks as Ladybug, Ladybug (nuclear paranoia fabulism at its best), Last Summer (which is less a loss-of-innocence story than an annihilation-of-innocence story), Mommie Dearest

(the first film to sweep the Razzies) and Hello Again (zombie Shelly Long? Comedy gold!), among others. Along with his collaborator and wife, screenwriter Eleanor Perry, he specialized in peeling away the veneer of polite society (impolite society, too, come to think of it) and showing his characters ugly things in beautiful ways.

The Swimmer definitely bears Perry's stamp, but according to the interviews on Saturday Night at the Movies2 (god bless you, Elwy Yost), he left the production due to creative differences. Several segments were re-shot after his departure, and a key scene, in which Neddy meets with his former mistress, was reportedly actually directed by an uncredited Sydney Pollack.

So, no support for auteur theory here. The Swimmer is definitely a team effort. It's hard to go wrong with source material as strong as Cheever's story, but a lot of credit definitely goes to Eleanor Perry. Cheever's story covers fewer than 10 pages, and her 95-minute screenplay never feels stretched or repetitive. If the short story is the most challenging literary form, the feature film adaptation of a short story may very well be the most challenging task a screenwriter can undertake.

Which brings us to Burt Lancaster (Side note: you must also see The Killers, The Sweet Smell of Success and The Gypsy Moths). Lancaster is a no-fooling movie star, and almost every inch of him is in display in The Swimmer, in which the sum total of his wardrobe is a pair of swim trunks. How much farther can he strip, when he's wearing nothing but a swimsuit? You'd be surprised.

Throughout the film, there are clues that things are not as they should be. Marigolds bloom out of season. People react strangely to ordinary topics of conversation, make seemingly incongruous offers and attack without apparent provocation. Pools are found dry and drained, houses for sale. It's later than you think, and things are breaking down.

But what communicates this breakdown most remarkably is Lancaster's physical acting in the film. (Side note two: I think physical acting is an underappreciated talent. Watch Peter Weller in the first two Robocop films, then watch anyone else play the part in any other Robocop franchise production; he's the only one with the physical acting talent to make Robocop believable. Addendum to side note two: don't watch Robocop 2, or any of the franchise's later productions.) He peels away at his character with a limp, a slouch, a slowing pace, a shiver and a less frequent and less credible smile. But it's not just a physical breakdown he's showing us—it's a mental, emotional and societal one as well.

It’s a performance that hurts like a lungful of water, an evocation of what it feels like to go from swimming to drowning.

So, like I said, go see it.

1 trashpalace.ca

2 tvo.org/snam

## Shameless And Greedy People Of Dismal Taste

Interviewed about the legacy of Canadian tax shelter films in Cinema Canada in 1985, Mordecai Richler said,

I think they squandered a grand opportunity and it's largely the fault of producers who were shameless and greedy, people of dismal taste, who were more interested in making deals than films and who made a lot of money for themselves. And so Canadian films do not enjoy a larger reputation anywhere and it's a pity… a lot of damage has been done.

Well, Mordecai, I couldn't disagree more.

In this era of Bill C-10 (which may be gone, but which leaves behind its ideological sediment), and $44.8-million in cuts to arts-and-culture programs (this in spite of a Conference Board of Canada report attesting to the economic benefits of investing in Canadian culture), I think it's more important than ever to remember and celebrate the genre exercises upon which our film industry—and the careers of some of its brightest stars—were built. My Canada includes sleazy movies.

But first, a little primer on the tax shelter years: Although the late 70s are regarded as the heyday of tax shelter films, a 60% tax write-off for investment in Canadian films was available from 1954 on. In 1975, Minister of Finance John Turner announced a new income tax regulation allowing "investors to deduct in one year, against income from all sources, 100% [!] of their investment in certified feature films." Moreover, it was retroactive, and included any film productions begun after Nov. 18, 1974. 100% tax-shelter financing more or less continued until 1982, when it fell prey to the vicious beast known as distribution. (The preceding is a gross oversimplification, but for the complete story on what was and could have been, read Wyndham Wise's excellent and exhaustive article, "Canadian cinema from boom to bust: the tax-shelter years"1, from which I've cribbed liberally.)

But by that point, the damage was done. We already had Black Christmas. Meatballs. Fast Company. Ilsa, Tigress of Siberia. The Pyx.

Russian Roulette. Strange Shadows in an Empty Room. And a host of others. Some have gone on to prestigious DVD releases or undeservedly painful remakes, but most moulder in VHS bins.

Recently (the day before Canada Day, as a matter of fact), I had the opportunity to see a trio of these hidden zirconia, and I have never felt such as swell of patriotism in my life.

The evening started with a screening of The Silent Partner, in which bank teller Elliott Gould preempts Christopher Plummer's scheme to rob

his bank. Several double crosses and corpses later, Gould comes out on top, and along the way, we're treated to an early semi-dramatic turn by John Candy and the you-can't-unsee-it-once-you've-seen-it sight of Christopher Plummer not only in a mesh t-shirt, but also in drag. Written by Curtis Hanson and produced by Garth Drabinsky, The Silent Partner is easily one of the more entertaining crime dramas of the 70s, which is saying something.

Next up was Rituals, starring Hal Holbrook as one of five doctors who go on a fishing vacation deep in the Canadian wilderness only to discover that a crazed ex-patient is tracking them with murderous intent. The plot borrows heavily from Deliverance, but if anything, Rituals looks like it was far more hellish to make – for most of its running time, the actors trudge through forests and swamps, wet and filthy, surrounded by hordes of black flies that ain't CGI. If you can find a print where you can actually see the action (the one I saw was murky to say the least), give it watch. You won't be disappointed.

We rounded out the evening with Death Weekend. A Canadian Straw Dogs, Death Weekend is one of Ivan Reitman's earliest productions, and centres on the tribulations of couple who are attacked by a group of ruffians at their cottage. If you've seen Straw Dogs, you can figure out how it ends. It's not as shattering as Peckinpah's film, but it's satisfying, and smarter than expected.

But where are the midnight Canuxploitation screenings of tomorrow going to come from when funding for anything even remotely artsy is on the chopping block? Especially when there's no reasoning with the people holding the axe? As Tom McSorley, Executive Director of the Canadian Film Institute, recently observed, what lies behind the current government's arts funding cuts is "ideological adamant rock… I don't think they listen with any degree of interest to the fact that the economic impact of the arts is demonstrably positive."

Time has been kind to the tax shelter films. The opportunity wasn't as squandered as Mordecai Richler would have us believe. A lot of genuine entertainment, expression and—yes, I'll say it—art squeezed out between the lines of the producers' ledgers, and we're all richer for it. It would be great if today's filmmakers got the same chance. But in the current political climate, that's a big if.

I like to think that if Mordecai Richler were being interviewed today, he might use that descriptor—"shameless and greedy people of dismal taste"—to describe a group other than the producers of those dingy celluloid dreams.

I know I would.

1 http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0JSF/is_22_7/ai_30155873/

## Having Your Duality And Eating It, Too

When the question arises of who could be the villain in a third Batman movie, I'm stymied. I can't picture The Penguin or The Riddler or Catwoman working in the world Christopher Nolan has created. Poison Ivy? I don't think so. The Mad Hatter? Clayface? Kite Man? Bane? Nope, nope, nope and please god no.

The only possible candidates I've come up with are Hugo Strange, Black Mask and possibly Deadshot (and, it goes without saying, the Gorilla Boss).

Why is it so hard to come up with a villain for a third Batman film? I think it's because The Dark Knight so effectively nullifies its own superheroic elements—and I'm not the first one to make note of this. As Christopher Bird of Mightygodking1 observed in his one-sentence review:

There are many reasons to see The Dark Knight, many of which have been repeated elsewhere many times over, but I will merely say this: any movie starring Christian Bale, Heath Ledger, Aaron Eckhart, Maggie Gyllenhaal, Michael Caine and Morgan Freeman which trusts one of its most powerful and emotional moments to Tiny Lister, and makes it work perfectly, is a movie that is a cut above.

Lister, best known for playing the president of the universe (bless your ludicrously self-indulgent soul, Luc Besson) in The Fifth Element, is indeed entrusted with one of the most important sequences in the film, and it does work—maybe too well. As Batman and The Joker battle it out atop the Gotham City skyline, the action intercuts with a sequence that brings the story crashing back down to sea level. The Joker, acolyte of chaos, has set up a variation on the classic prisoner's dilemma by putting bombs on two ferries: one filled with criminals and the other filled with average Gothamites. The catch: the detonator for each ferry is in the hands of the people on the other. The only sure way to save yourself is to blow the other boat up. Then, at the crucial moment, prisoner Tiny Lister takes the detonator on his boat—and tosses it out the window.

What's remarkable about that sequence is that while it plays out the big clash-of-icons themes in the movie (The Joker's chaos unfolds, but backfires on him, as chaos is wont to do; figuratively, Two-Face's coin lands unscarred-side up, validating the morality of chance; good and evil define and demand one another), it also negates the entire superhero side of the plot.

The people of Gotham do what needs to be done and make the right decisions without so much as a pause to ask, WWBD? They save

themselves while Batman is busy having a philosophical discussion with The Joker (the brilliantly not-even-remotely-subtle device of flipping the camera upside down for The Joker's half of that conversation underscores what has happened here: things have changed. As below, so above.)

That would be enough, but just as Tiny Lister steps up to fill the heroic role, another everyman steps into the key villain role. Because the biggest threat Batman faces in The Dark Knight isn't The Joker or Two-Face or his own inner demons, or even the big screen comeback of Anthony Michael Hall. His biggest threat in the film is an accountant.

There have been more than a few critics who have complained about the film's numerous and convoluted subplots, but the one featuring Joshua Harto as Wayne Enterprises employee Coleman Reese is perhaps the most interesting. Harto uncovers Wayne's secret identity not by trailing him to the Batcave or bugging the Batmobile or torturing Alfred, but through simple forensic accounting (in a plot that mirror's Batman's follow-the-money takedown of Chin Han's mob money launderer). Armed with this information, Harto can destroy Batman not in a grand rooftop battle or through a protracted war of ideologies (or by letting Frank Miller write him), but simply by going on television. And because he's going to do it during the day, Batman is powerless to stop him. So, who you gonna call? Bruce Wayne.

In what I think is one of the most inspired sequences in the film, Bruce Wayne manages to save Harto's life (in true playboy billionaire style, by crashing a Lambourghini), then looks Harto in the eyes – man to (not Bat) man. With nary a Batarang in sight, with just a traffic accident and a significant look, Bruce Wayne saves Batman.

Which may go a long way toward explaining why Christian Bale is credited not as Batman, or even Bruce Wayne/Batman, but as Bruce Wayne.

The Dark Knight is clearly obsessed with duality. With its layered internal and external conflicts between Bruce Wayne and Batman and The Joker and Harvey Dent/Two Face, a double-blind love triangle and multiple mirroring plots and sub plots, the film is gay for duality. The Joker's line, "You complete me," might just has well have been "I wish I could quit you." But it has its duality and eats it too.

Which ends up making for a surprisingly satisfying meal.

1 mightygodking.com (Pay special attention to his post on why he should write The Legion of Super Heroes. Especially if you work for DC Comics.)

## His Soul's Still Dancing

In the course of making The Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call—New Orleans, Werner Herzog seems to have discovered the only way to save Nicolas Cage: let him drown.

Why am I writing about Nicolas Cage again, after effectively writing him off in a previous column?1 Maybe because, with his ferocious performance in TBL: POC-NO, Cage has been resurrected for me.

It's a resurrection that happens onscreen as well as off. The film opens with the camera following a snake as it swims through what turns out to be a flooded precinct jail, where bad detectives Nic Cage and Val Kilmer are taking bets on how long it will take a man locked in one of the cells to drown. Cage eventually abandons the game, though, and jumps in to save the man, at which point the screen goes black.

We catch up with him again some months later, as he's being promoted from bad detective to bad lieutenant, primarily for saving the man's life. But he has emerged from the water wracked with chronic pain from the back injury he sustained jumping in—a staggering, lurching Frankenstein's monster, constantly holding one shoulder higher than the other (a crooked man, walking a crooked mile).

The allusion to Frankenstein is deliberate, and none too subtle. Cage's lieutenant is, like the monster, reanimated flesh. He is the walking dead.

And if there was ever a city in which to be a zombie, New Orleans is that city.

Herzog's New Orleans is a drowned city, and even years after Katrina, the (shore)line between land and water is blurry at best. Aquatic reptiles wander everywhere: into jails, as in the film's opening. Onto roads, as in the sequence where Cage visits the scene of an accident both caused and watched by alligators. And, inevitably, into Cage's mind, as in the stakeout sequence where he hallucinates lizards: "What the hell are those iguanas doing on my coffee table?"

This is a place where the dead dance. There's a sequence—the one that people walk away from the film (or even the trailer) quoting, in which Cage tricks a group of drug dealers into shooting a group of gangsters. When all the gangsters are down, Cage demands that the dealers shoot the lead gangster again. When asked, "What for?" he responds, punctuating his explanation with a gasping laugh: "His soul's still dancing!" While the dealers are deciding what to do, we get to watch as the dead man breakdances around his own corpse. It's a mesmerizing scene, and

in the film's voodoo-inflected setting, it doesn't even need Cage's uninterrupted drug abuse to seem plausible.

(Side note: I really wish that scene weren't in the trailer. It would have been great to stumble across it in the course of watching the film. It would have been a stunning discovery.)

Of course, because this is nominally a police procedural, with Cage investigating a murder, the film also places emphasis on people who speak for, and act on behalf of the dead. And in the course of the film, acting on behalf of the dead becomes an exercise in just plain acting.

Cage's performance in TBL: POC-NO is all about acting. That is to say, he's playing a character who's constantly acting, pretending, lying. He acts the part of a cop while being a crook. He acts the part of a crook while being a cop. He acts straight when high, dedicated when desperate, confident when utterly lost. He approaches everyone he encounters with a new face (if the same improbably hairline), and fools the audience enough to leave unanswered questions about where his loyalties lie. Is he undercover or under-undercover?

The point is that he never stops performing, within the film or for the camera. He does what it takes to become the bad man for Herzog's bad world.

And make no mistake: this is a bad world. It does not reward good behaviour. It does not spare the innocent. As Herzog himself put it in Grizzly Man: "I believe the common character of the universe is not harmony, but chaos, hostility, and murder."

Of course, like practically everything that comes out of Herzog's mouth, that's probably at least part exaggeration and part straight-faced joke. Truth be told, he's not really interested in the truth.

While he works in both narrative and documentary forms, he eschews the term "documentary," instead preferring to label his films "fiction" and "non-fiction." They're all stories, it's just that some of them are made up, and others aren't. Several of Herzog's films straddle the line, or get to be both: take a look at how his documentary Little Dieter Needs to Fly relates to its narrative remake Rescue Dawn, how the polygraph-buster that is My Best Fiend writes and rewrites personal history, or how Grizzly Man treats the comforting (and sometimes deadly) narratives/lies we tell ourselves.

All of which is to say that, yes, the common character of the universe may very well be chaos, hostility, and murder. But in New Orleans, at least for Nicolas Cage, there's life after death.

1 http://www.theculturalgutter.com/screen/synech-doche_arizona.html

## The Shock Of The Stiff

When there's no more room in hell, the articles will be about zombies. So, here it is: a postmodern examination of the zombie, and a chance for me to use up all my five-dollar words. And yes, I will be quoting Baudrillard.

You've been warned.

Let's start by saying that zombies are thoroughly postmodern. The zombie is what Arthur Kroker calls the somatic body, the anti/ante-verbal part of ourselves with which we have lost contact and suppressed through our determination to posit language as the be-all and end-all of existence, through the desire to be semiotic. But the zombie is also the epitome of Kroker's panic body, which results from the breakdown of our semiotic system. Hence, the zombie attacks us from both sides, in the bodies we have left behind and the bodies we are reluctant to embrace.

George A. Romero's films in particular take place in what Kroker describes in The Postmodern Scene as "the violent edge between ecstasy and decay; between the melancholy lament of postmodernism over death of the grand signifiers of modernity—consciousness, truth, sex, capital, power—and the ecstatic nihilism of ultramodernism; between the body as a torture chamber and pleasure-palace…"

As Night of the Living Dead (1968) opens, heroine Barbra and her bother Johnny are visiting their mother's grave. Within minutes, a zombie attacks them and Johnny is killed. Mentally unhinged by the incident, Barbra flees to a nearby farmhouse where she is joined by salesman Ben, a family, and a pair of teenagers all hiding from the menace of the ghouls. The house becomes a microcosm of social stresses and forced co-operation as the group attempts (unsuccessfully) to survive until morning.

The farmhouse is precariously perched on Kroker's violent edge between ecstasy and decay; between the survivors' fierce and logical determination to live and the shambling onslaught of the zombies, who progress successfully without either ideology or meaning. The house is much like the postmodern condition as described by Buadrillard: "a space radiating with power but also cracked, like a shattered windshield holding together." It hums with the energy of the nuclear family, but as nuclear father Harry Cooper observes, arguing for retreat to the basement, "There are a million windows up here. A million ways for those things to get in."

The only character that truly realizes the death of the grand signifiers is Barbra, whose constant, unanswerable question, "What's happening?" expresses the panic of the situation most aptly. Likewise, Barbra's mental and physical apathy, her total surrender to the situation turns out to be the most rational response. While the other characters fight against the encroaching darkness—boarding doors and windows, hoarding weapons and food, and attempting escape—Barbra sits motionless, waiting for the death that is slouching toward her. She is in shock: Kroker's "shock of the real" and "shock of the stiff". Because this is more than just panic; it is horror. And the only realistic response to such overwhelming horror is an evanescent desire, "the ecstatic nihilism of ultramodernism". Although this suicidal urge may seem irrational, in the context of Romero's films it can be read as a rational desire for a sense of finality.

For those fighting the zombies, what's scary is not dying at the ghouls' hands, but becoming one of them, not being able to stay dead, realizing that when death ceases to have meaning, so does life. Johnny's death leaves Barbra shattered and immobile because she has invested the concept of death with meaning. But when he returns to her as one of the zombies, she suddenly becomes active again. In the face of semiotic breakdown, she panics, and tries to escape. But the only way to escape is to beat the system—to die and stay dead. Without doubt, this is a panic response; the flight half of the fight or flight urge.

Perhaps most importantly and probably most horrifyingly, the story of Romero's films is one of aftermath, of something that has already happened, that cannot be reversed. No last minute strategy to prevent the zombies, because they are already here. This is not racing against time; it is turning on the television to find that the race ended long ago (just as the characters in the films turn on their sets to find a nation already engulfed by death). What Romero's characters experience is a sudden coming into Kroker's "fin-de-millennium consciousness which… uncovers a great arc of disintegration and decay against the background radiation of parody, kitsch, and burnout."

This is the sudden, cold sweat surety of knowledge that the end has been here for some time. The decay is laid bare as zombies parody life in all its gory, kitschy glory and burnout starts: media stop broadcasting, power goes out, and it's actually darker after the dawn.

(Especially when they let Zach Snyder direct the remake.)

## Shopping For Pants With Martin Kove

There's a pair of pants in the bottom drawer of my dresser. They don't fit me. In fact, they're kind of ugly. They're chocolate brown with thick vertical half-hound's-tooth white stripes, a trio of faux-bone oblong buttons (non-functional) running up the side of each pocket and belt loops wide enough to accommodate a belt half a cow wide.

They're made of (I'm going to guess) cotton, although they're a little slick to the touch to make that argument convincingly, and the only label anywhere on them is a lonely "38" on the inside waist.

So if they don't fit, and I don't like the way they look, why don't I get rid of them? Well, mostly because they're not my pants. They're Martin Kove's.

If you don't immediately recognize the name, don't sweat it. A lot of people don't, even though Martin Kove has a pretty impressive filmography. He was the comic relief deputy in Wes Craven's notorious The Last House on the Left, the fey Nero the Hero in Paul Bartel's Death Race 2000, the Quint-analogue Roland in Gary Jones' Crocodile II: Death Swamp and starred in Robert Boris' Steele Justice ("You don't recruit John Steele. You unleash him."). He also appeared in such underrated classics as Jonathan Kaplan's White Line Fever and J. Lee Thompson's The White Buffalo, and had a recurring role as Detective Victor Isbecki on Cagney and Lacey.

But Martin is probably better known as Ericson, the treacherous helicopter pilot in George P. Cosmatos' Rambo, First Blood Part II, and best known as John "Sweep the leg" Kreese, head of the Kobra Kai dojo in John G. Alvidson's The Karate Kid (parts I - III).

I first met Martin at the American Film Market in 2005. He was there to meet with Nu Image, the producers of Sylvester Stallone's Rambo (2008), to see if Ericson was returning in the sequel. He wasn't.

Which, in 2007, left Martin free (or at least not expensive) to join the cast of a film I wrote called The Dead Sleep Easy. He joined the production team in Guadalajara in January and after moving from the hotel room we'd reserved for him to a suite at the Hilton, wanted to go shopping for wardrobe. As the writer (and one of the few members of the team who spoke a smattering of Spanish), I was deemed expendable for the day's shoot and nominated to accompany Martin on the outing.

As we wandered around open-air markets and storefronts, people started to recognize Martin. They didn't necessarily know who he was, but they knew he was somebody. Martin would smile indulgently and

mention The Karate Kid, and peoples' faces would light up. And so, in between anecdotes about Sam Peckinpah and conversations about whether his character would wear natural or synthetic fabrics, Martin signed autographs and posed for photos with fans.

We ended up at a store called El Charro that specialized in traditional mariachi costumes and cowboy fashions straight out of The Three Amigos. The staff was instantly enamored with Martin, and he had found the look his character needed. Martin popped in and out of the change room, adding shirts and pants to a pile of desired purchases. As the stack grew I tallied in my head, and began to understand how movies go over budget.

But Martin had come equipped for the retail experience with a selection of eight by ten glossies of himself. The sales staff each got one. So did the cashier and the manager. And when the bill came due, he quietly asked if that was their best price. He talked in broad terms about what exposure in a film can do for a business, and how they might want to take that into consideration. I caught on, stepped in, and eventually negotiated a 15% discount in return for credit on the film.

Martin wore some of the clothes in the film and left others in his suite when he went back to Hollywood. I ended up with the pants.

Searching for clean clothes the other day, I ran across them, and it set me wondering, is that what celebrity comes down to? A 15% discount on pants in Guadalajara? Maybe, but I think it's something more than that. Because someone like me keeps those pants, and writes an article about them. Which someone like you then reads. Something makes them more than just pants, and I think I know what it is.

The characters Martin Kove has played are part of him now, sutured to him like Peter Pan's mischievous shadow. And whether you recognize him or not, you sense how those characters—those extra lives led—make him larger than life. At least 15% larger.

That day at El Charro, when the bill was paid, minus the discount, Martin took me aside and told me I should have held out for more.

Looking back on it, he was right.