



# Cinemad

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filmmaker JEM COHEN  
cinematographer CONRAD HALL  
filmmaker BRITTA SJOGREN  
That Guy TRACEY WALTER

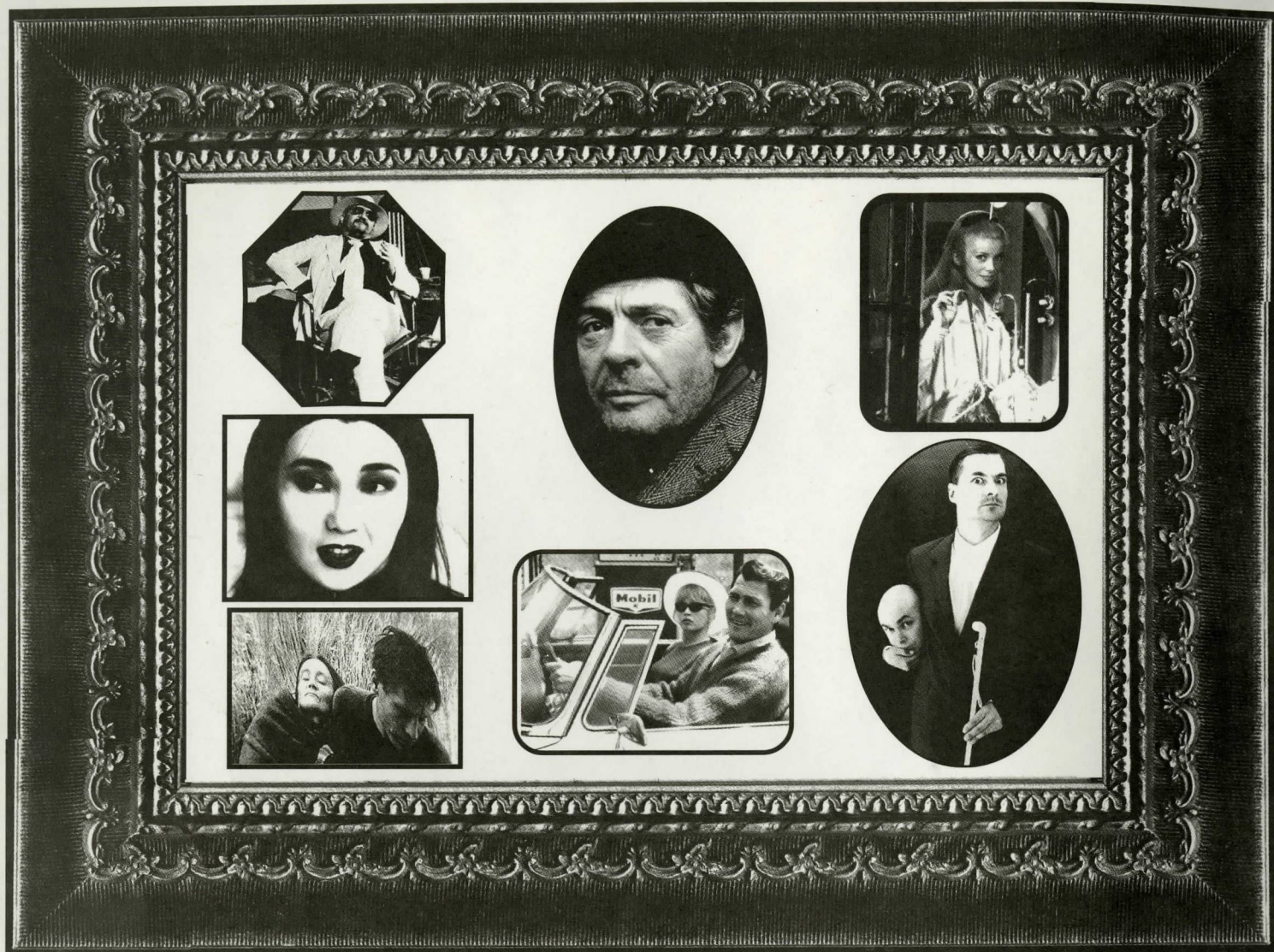


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*Just like family...*

*Tucson, AZ*



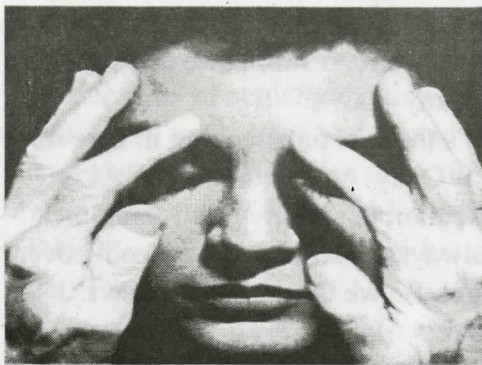
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# CINEMAD

“One mustn’t fall into a conspiracy of complaining. Yes, (filmmaking) is a day-to-day struggle. So what?” -- *Werner Herzog*

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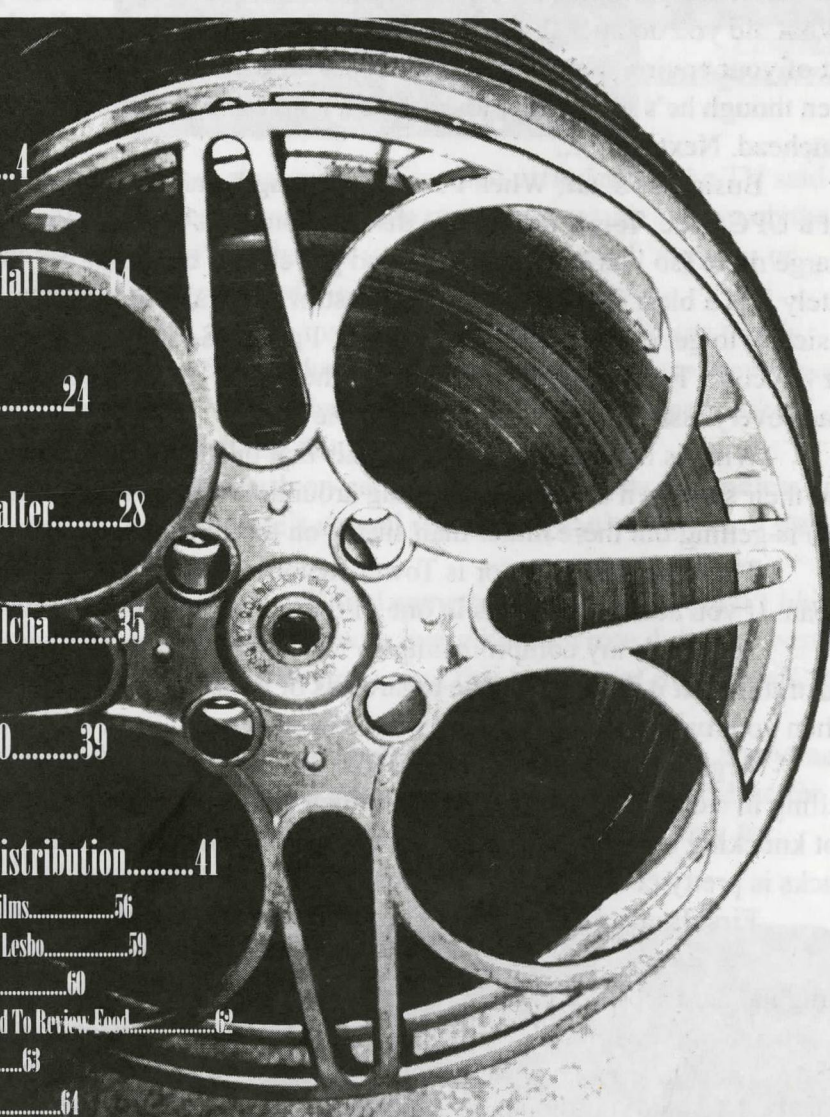
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### CINEMAD

A film maga/zine blurring the borders.  
published quarterly.

content ©M.Plante & Cinemad '99.

written & layout by Plante unless noted.

FRONT: Shadow man by Jem Cohen, Paul Newman's eyes by Conrad Hall

BACK: Tracey Walter in REPO MAN

New Site: [www.premierzone.com/Cinemad.html](http://www.premierzone.com/Cinemad.html)

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# intro here

F\*KSG@#@\*J!@%\*\$# computers. I hope everyone likes the design and format of this (two-weeks late) issue, because from now on I swear it's gonna be cut-and-paste. Computers run the world --my--ass....

First off, thanks for reading Cinemad. If it's the first time reading it, here it is:

I like films if they're one-minute (STILL NACHT: DRAMOLET by the Brothers Quay) or ten hours (DEKALOG by Kieslowski), documentary or fiction or both, made on film or video or a collection of still images. I think the term independent can describe how a film thinks, not just how much it cost. I always get sucked in by a cool cover on a mag then discover they only talk about the filmmaker for a lousy three pages. So we try to do interviews. Cinemad covers as much territory as possible, breaking down barriers if possible.

Call Cinemad a zine, call it a magazine, but please don't ever say it's a fanzine. When I start championing a film because it won an award or talking about which stud actors are sleeping with models or making fluff lists of who's the "best" or other tough subjects covered by *Premiere*, *People* and *Entertainment Weekly*, then you can call Cinemad a fanzine.

Now, I can still be a big fan. I asked the stupidest questions possible to Jem Cohen. "What was that like?" "What did you do after that?" "Was it well received?" Guh. Sometimes you're on, sometimes you're starstruck and out of your environment. It happens. I met Werner Herzog at a film festival and barely got words out of my mouth even though he's very down-to-Earth. I am convinced that my stuttering and bleached hair made him think I was a bonehead. Next time....

Business vs. art: When I started the mag I wanted a lot of distribution. However, I never thought I'd have to get a UPC code. To get one of two distribution deals I agreed to go to regular size rather than digest (fine by me), charge more (so I have more pages) and go -choke- quarterly. So, now it's a full-time job that doesn't pay. Fortunately it is a blast making each issue. Last in the deal was buying a UPC code, a satan-signpost to many. This is basically to get carried in Border's stores, I guess. So if they don't buy any issues, I ain't plopping down any more for the code. For your info, it's \$150 for the 'bipad' number (borrowed money from a friend) and about \$25 to some place every issue for the actual copy of the code.

What is making this worthwhile is that the distributor, Desert Moon Periodicals, is very cool towards zines and their salesmen are getting the mag around, doing far more than I have time to. What matters most is that the info is getting out there rather than sitting on my living room floor.

The second distributor is Tower Records & Mags, who said a few copies would even go to London and Japan. If you actually buy this in one of those places, lemme know. I laugh whenever I say 'worldwide'.

So there's my compromising so far. The content is still controlled by me. The fund-raising is constantly frustrating but it is for everyone regardless of which art they choose. I'm not bitching, I'm telling you the truth so when you make a mag you know what's in store.

Argh — the cover price. The first was supposed to be two bucks then I learned about the huge margin when selling in stores, keeping up to 50%, which is less than what it costs to print. I'm fine with that but with advertisers not knocking on the door the money has to come back from somewhere. I looked at similar maga/zines and four bucks is pretty comparable. Sorry about that....

First Issue: messed up on Facets website, it is [www.facets.ORG](http://www.facets.ORG) not .com. In the case reviews, I said FAT CITY was Stacy Keach's 'best performance ever' and that PAYDAY was Rip Torn's 'best performance ever'. Laughed hard when this was pointed out to me. Actually, I picked those reviews at random out of a group I wrote over a few months. I ain't the best writer but I do really mean that statement about both of those performances.

Half the questions we get are about how we make the mag, which is flattering. On the website we'll go into specifics, hoping it will help someone else get past uneducated moves we (okay - I) made. I decided this issue's topics: Very inspired by Jem Cohen and we had a common friend. Always liked Conrad Hall and wanted to ask him some non-technical questions for a change. A friend is friends with Britta Sjogren and I've been interested in her work. Always looking to talk to ThatGuys, my friend works for Tracey Walter's agent, I grew up with REPO MAN.

And all these interviewees are real people, no unapproachable celebrity crap. Existential car flicks — just some interesting movies we like, getting others to check 'em out. Maybe trying to apply a theory to anything. Most importantly, I think all of these people/topics are barely covered by other media. I wanted to learn more about them so when I couldn't find any articles I went out and made some.



A quick line about to-day's filmmaking trend: whining about filmmaking. In film school I encountered many people who wanted to talk big about making films instead of actually making them. These people will fit into the mainstream media very well. After budget and stars, the hot topic seems to be how incredibly hard it was to make a film. Now this may be the media concentrating on the issue, but if a director of a film with a budget of 50 million can talk only about how hard it was I'm going to put a paper hat on their head and tell them I want fries with that. Try that for a living, Mr. Auteur.

Criticism: people have asked, 'why don't you like anything mainstream?' I do, but not if I've seen the same thing over and over again. I totally understand the human need to be liked, to have friends and support in what you do. Yum, feels good. I do not totally understand the need to dump your individuality and artistic goals to fit in and sell a product, which ends up being yourself.

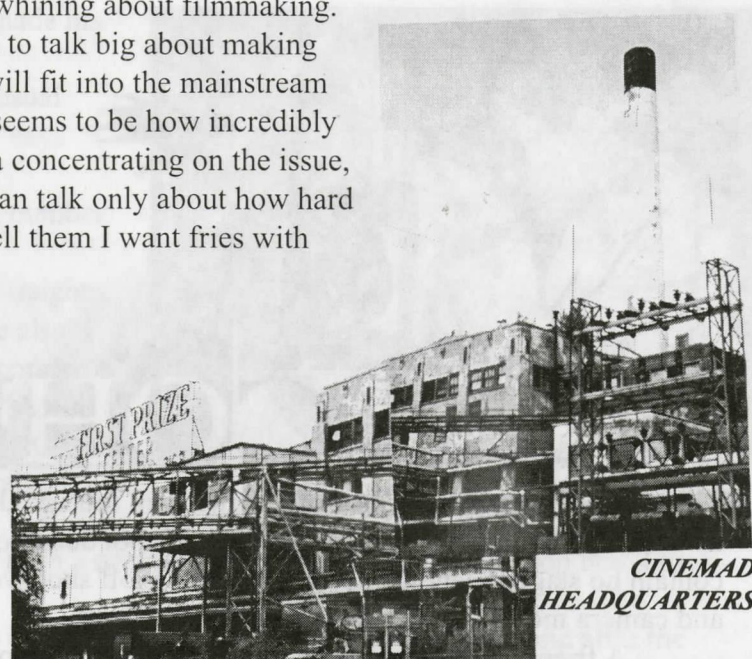
It's just my opinion. Everyone should have at least one. If you like some film or champion some filmmaker, whether it's Spielberg or Godard, just because a magazine (Cinemad included) or the TV said they're great, that's false. I certainly regurgitate things I've seen or read but I do my own research and watch the films. A filmmaker that made one single film that's really 'hot' for the last month is not a great filmmaker or even an important one. Let's see what the film feels like after repeated viewings years from now.

I feel that when you know the inside-outs of anything, you are more critical about it. You'll see trends, surface-level nonsense and rip-offs a lot sooner. My musician friends don't champion a band because they dress nice, spend millions on a video and play one song real catchy. My mechanic friends don't buy a Supermarket Utility Vehicle because sexy rich people drive them, they know those things suck.

We want to blur the borders some distributors and media push on people. Awards and lists are endless and pointless. Sure, some films are more important than others. But there's no real reason you can't enjoy both the Russian minimalist MOTHER AND SON and TAPEHEADS.

You won't like everything in each issue of Cinemad but you will find something interesting. I don't like every single thing in mags I love, either. No biggie. I'm not even thrilled with everything I wrote, I did my best in the time allowed and some articles came out way better than others. Trying to put this backlog of useless info to some sort of use. Happy to pass it on, use it at parties.

I always leave people out on the thanks list so the illuminaries are below but also fat thanks to: everyone who let me sleep on their floor, MG for major driving, ASC/RdR/MM for hooking up interviews, Jim/Mike for printing, Italian Ices, air conditioning, public transportation, public libraries, Hotmail, Alex Cox & Guy for quotes, DMoon & Tower for pushing the mag, friends in Japan, everyone at Telluride, parents everywhere, people who filled my shifts at work, Tylka's mic and anyone who bought an issue. Also - Larry is the man.



**CINEMAD  
HEADQUARTERS**

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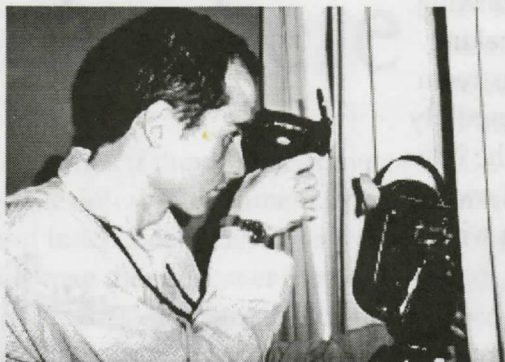
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# JEM COHEN

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Working off an archive of his own film footage, Jem Cohen's projects have no actors yet interesting characters. They are not documentaries but they generally contain no staged scenes. They have no show-off shots yet use time-lapse, slo-mo and camera movement to create a rich atmosphere.

A friend introduced me to Jem Cohen's work about three years ago. As a fan of the big city, I loved Cohen's *THIS IS A HISTORY OF NEW YORK* (1987), a street-shot portrait of the metropolis done in world-altering super-8 film.

I was then blown away by *BURIED IN LIGHT* (1994), a document of Cohen's travels through Central and Eastern Europe. His super-8 captured what it looked like before corporate change would alter it forever.

Then I got jealous. Cohen's *LOST BOOK FOUND* (1996) is the film I had always wanted to make. Shot on NYC streets in super-8 and 16mm, *BOOK* is a spooky mix of documentary and narrative, telling the story of a push cart vendor's encounter with a book full of mysterious listings of places, objects, incidents — the key to the hidden city. I knew when I met Jem I would ask him how he made a film with my thoughts.

At the New York Video Festival I caught Cohen's newest, *AMBER CITY* (1999). A portrait of an Italian city, the project continues the filmmaker's form of city-portrait storytelling yet shows a definite progression of style. Later viewings made me like it more and more.

I got to talk to Cohen a couple of times, appropriately enough all around NYC. We met in Brooklyn and caught the F train to Manhattan.

Like most of us, Jem Cohen grew up watching films.

"I didn't really get insane about it until college," he says. "My senior year I was watching 10-14 films a week. Maybe that's why I hardly go to see them anymore."

A studio art major, he started with painting, moved to photography, made slide shows to music, and got further into film. He took film theory classes, booked screenings and worked as house manager for the film series. But he had to leave this environment in order to do actual film production.

When Cohen was young he knew a couple who had a film company that produced "industrial" projects. Their usual output was training films for pregnant women and firefighters. They taught him aspects of filmmaking including some animation. Presumably this influenced Cohen's later use of time-lapse photography.

Later, Cohen worked for the company as a shipping clerk in exchange for off-hours use of the film equipment. He made his first film in 16mm rather than super-8.

4 "I had done some super-8 as a kid but basically I had written it off," Cohen says.



He basically taught himself filmmaking as he made his first project, *A ROAD IN FLORIDA* (1983).

"It was a real crude thing but it was kind of unusual. ...A weird mix of documentary and narrative already," says Cohen, hinting at his style to come.

It played at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a number of festivals and even won an award.

After graduating college in 1984, Cohen went straight to NYC, intent on doing his own projects. However, he also needed work. He knew someone working on Martin Scorsese's film *AFTER HOURS* and got a security job watching the film gear. Being obsessed with film (and therefore Scorsese), Cohen hung out a lot when not working and got to know the other departments on the set.

"It was a paying job as a guard," Cohen says. "Then a non-paying spot opened up for a prop boy. I took that and quit the paying job.

"For better or worse, I did real well in the prop department and just started getting jobs, one after the other," Cohen says. "It was good because I was able to make a living and was suddenly kind of fully in the film industry."

As Cohen worked prop jobs he and his brother were also attempting to get another 16mm film off the ground. The project was stumped when Cohen had problems finding a producer and dealing with the high costs of renting equipment and crew. In a short period of time, Cohen had experienced both spectrums of the industry. He saw first-hand, in the Scorsese production, the ultimate side of filmmaking, and then encountered the harsh realities when he tried to garner equipment and find people interested enough to fund a project. It proved overwhelming. The 16mm project was never made.

Soon after that Cohen decided to play with a super-8 camera for the first time as an adult.

"Somebody suggested that I pick it up and I was like, yeah right," Cohen admits. "It just seemed like a sure way to admit that you weren't a real filmmaker. I was kind of embarrassed about it. That didn't last for very long. I bought the camera, shot a few rolls of film and was really blown away. For one thing, it looked a lot better than the 16 in a lot of respects. It looked more interesting, more visceral. I liked everything about it. Super 8 has a tendency to capture the way things feel, which is often more important than capturing exactly how things look.

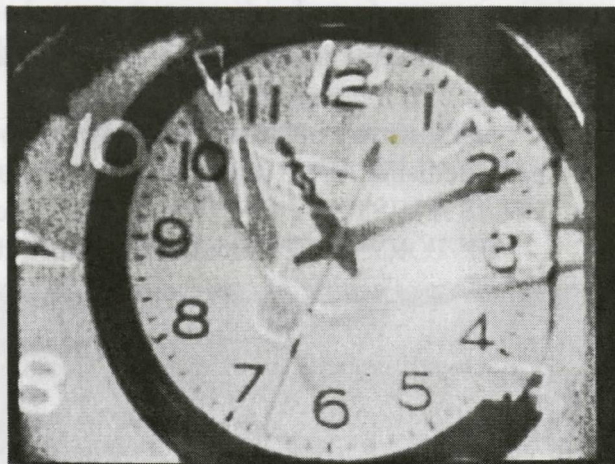
"Basically, I went from being an obsessive film viewer to being a failed filmmaker and then suddenly instead of being a failed filmmaker I was making films all the time. I was just showing them on the wall of a living room, but there they were. It was completely concrete."

Cohen has used a variety of super-8 cameras. Just as good footage has come from low-end, crude ones as from good pro models.

"With 16mm it was, 'We'll rent the gear on Friday and we'll have to return it on Monday and we'll get just a few shots,' with the super-8 it was just keep it loaded all the time. I was kind of obsessed with some bands and music stuff back then and that wasn't very long before I started shooting the Butthole Surfers, which led to that first project, *WITNESS*, in 1986."

The 12-minute film, drawn from 3 or 4 live shows and a visit to their house in Texas, included footage shot by his brother, Adam. The band was different in those days, giving much more primitive performances. Disturbing images in the film include things on fire and singer Gibby Haynes having sex with someone on stage. Shot in heavy contrast black-and-white, tinted and slowed, Cohen made film grain become a character in the film.

The notorious piece got noticed, but Cohen wasn't interested in being bunched in with New York's then current Lower-East Side super-8 "transgressive" film scene (Richard Kern, etc.). While bucking some mainstream trends, that crowd still stuck to the usual unmotivated sex and violence for shock value, they just did it at the



*"4:44" from JUST HOLD STILL*





other end of the spectrum.

Cohen says the Surfers piece was shocking because the performances documented were so extreme. But he thought of it more as an "ethnographic film that tried to capture an experience so that it really felt you were there. I really wasn't interested in trying to shock people or be part of the whole rock and roll underworld, or to promote the band. At the same time I was shooting on the street a lot, in New York, gathering the footage that led to THIS IS A HISTORY OF NEW YORK (The Golden Dark Age of Reason)."

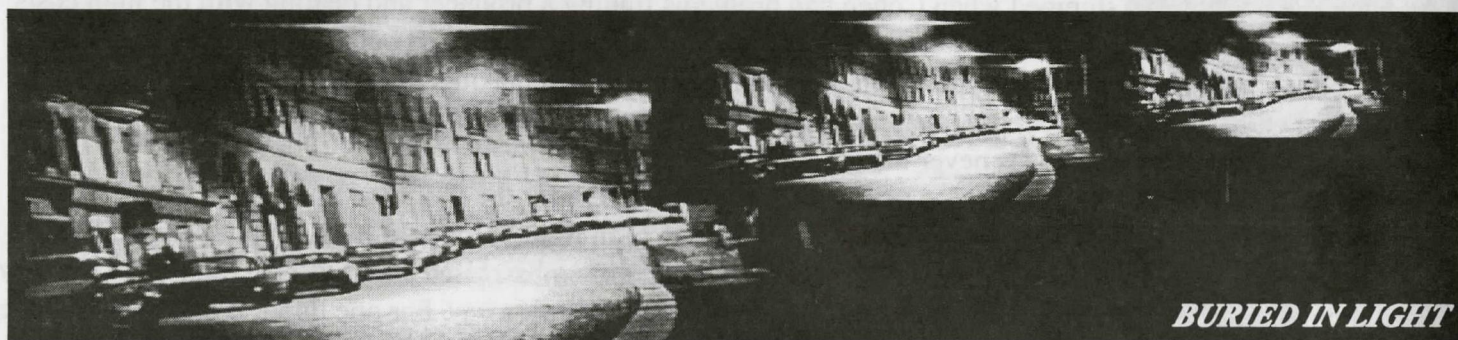
HISTORY is a 23-minute piece illustrating the so-called Great Ages of Man entirely with documentary street footage. The title of one section, "The Hunters and Gatherers", completely describes Cohen and his methods: an image hunter-and-gatherer.

"Once I became hooked on this concept of carrying a little camera all the time," Cohen explains, "it led me away from the structures of cinema as defined by the industry. It led me toward a more documentary tradition that had more to do with street photography than it did with movies."

Cohen got into shooting a lot while simply walking around NYC. The real world provided amazing images of kids, birds, street preachers, cops, homeless people and, of course, intense buildings. There are great sequences that look like Cohen was standing on a corner filming, then someone or something interesting went by and he just plain followed it.

Rather than a bunch of home movies, what Cohen chooses to film and the way he frames the images is interesting. Then, by specifically looking for related images and editing and creating unique soundtracks, he gives the photography a new context far removed from a simple travelogue.

"With HISTORY, this ridiculous framework allowed me to categorize the footage and go out and look for



certain things rather than shooting completely loose," Cohen says. "I had a lot of footage and I started thinking of ways to structure it and apply it. Like most of the projects, it's kind of a 50/50 thing where half of it is a bunch of footage that exists and then as I develop a project I would start to seek out other things that I needed to shoot."

Cohen's style makes the film project alive. Nothing against strict scripting and production, but his films actually live, created as they are being shot.

Occasional prop jobs paid the bills, but became frustrating for Cohen. Besides having to stop his own projects completely for two or three months at a time, it's hard to be around the "just doing a job" attitude on the set and see the various hierarchies and idiocies that make mainstream film run.

"The money being thrown around and being wasted was mind boggling," Cohen says. "Once you get over that romance of all those weird words like what's a grip, what's a gaffer, how do they make that fake smoke or rain or all that.... Once you're behind the curtain for a long time and all that magic is gone, what's left is usually not all that much. What I would often see is this incredible mechanism, an unbelievable amount of man-hours, of human wear and tear, usually directed at something that wasn't of any real worth to start with."

These observations are from Cohen's own work experiences. He can still love 'big' films, Bogart or Bresson, the Marx Brothers or Tarkovsky.

"There are incredible camera moves that I respect and think are worthwhile," he says. "I don't have any real problem with watching that. One of my favorite films is Tarkovsky's ANDREI RUBLEV. I don't have problems with the thousands of extras or whatever mechanisms he had to employ to make his films. Every once in a while someone really needs that level of applied industry, but most of the time the movies would be much better if they were stripped way down and they didn't even have access to all these toys and gimmicks and clever vices."



Inspired by filmmaker Jean Vigo, artist Robert Smithson and street photographer Leon Levinstein, Cohen finished *HISTORY OF NEW YORK*. It got around to festivals, PBS and even screenings on European television. It has a feeling of New York that is disappearing today.

“(HISTORY) was really a way of me getting to grips with New York,” Cohen says. “It was a way of looking at the city and of experiencing the city and of trying to encompass the extreme levels that co-existed here, the beauty and brutality.”

*HISTORY* also laid down the groundwork for Cohen’s mode of working for the next 10 years.

“I kept shooting on super-8, transferring to video at this place Brodsky and Treadway,” Cohen says. “These amazing, very personalized, in-depth, respectful transfers from people who really were into small-gauge cinema.”

He then edits and distributes on video.

Another form of short film was very popular at the time: music videos. Cohen was a R.E.M. fan and sent them a copy of *HISTORY*.

The band liked it and Cohen eventually made five videos with them. The first, for “Talk About the Passion”, used some images from *HISTORY*, no footage of the band and a direct political statement at the end: the text “In 1987, the cost of one destroyer class warship was 910 million dollars,” superimposed over a man sleeping on the abandoned elevated train tracks overlooking the U.S.S. Intrepid battleship.

Being an unconventional, non-star-worship video, Cohen thought this would shake things up a little at MTV.

“I was a little naïve thinking it would be subversive,” he remembers. “I lived in Brooklyn where we were spared MTV, so I went all the way to Tower Records when I knew it was going to premiere. I walked in, my heart beating a little bit, and it appears on 15 video monitors. No one even looks up and they’re playing a Michael Jackson song really loud and everybody’s just shopping! (says with a smile) ‘Okay, lesson one: this is not necessarily the most important venue for your work.’”

Cohen has made a dozen or so music videos, but all were in some way outside the system rather than the popular ego-fest advertisements. He usually stays away from them. “Music video as we know it became such a formulaic rut. Why would I want to take the two things that I love, music and film, and corrupt them both at the same time so efficiently?”

*JUST HOLD STILL* (1989) showcases a great Cohen idea.

“I started doing these shorts and collaborations,” Cohen says, “and decided to thread them together in a way that was really like a record album, a visual LP.”

*STILL* did not turn out to be a huge seller on VHS. For some reason the public at large won’t even try to watch short films although they spend most of their time watching music videos and sitcoms. The visual LP fits

**“I feel like, walk down your street and get a good honest shot of every building. Particularly if that street’s going to change a lot, you’ve done something valuable. It doesn’t mean that you’ve made a good film. It just means that you haven’t wasted your film.”**

*“Love Teller” from JUST HOLD STILL*





perfectly into this realm: short subjects, even 30-second ideas, with beautiful photography and a similar style running through the entire piece.

(What turns people off to shorts? Scared of the poetic narration? What if I don't get the metaphor and my boss does? Try watching something you don't understand a second time. Maybe you'll enjoy it even more).

When I met with Cohen he was nice enough to show me some of his material I had yet to see. This included the freako Surfers piece and a really cool, calming swimming hole film called DRINK DEEP (1992).

There were a few others I didn't get to. One Cohen insisted I could only watch in complete darkness. It was afternoon. Unfortunately, I ran outta money, had to leave NYC and didn't get a chance to see it.

"BLACK HOLE RADIO (1992) was an installation that I did in Holland," Cohen says. "It was based on these recordings I was making of this confession line in New York. Weird phone thing where you could confess for free at this number, but if you wanted to listen to confessions you had to pay by the minute. So I would call in and listen to them and record the ones that sounded real to me. Eventually I did this short piece using those recordings. I worked with Ian MacKaye (of Minor Threat and Fugazi). We did a little mix, pieced it together."

Now I'm really bummed I didn't see it. Cohen says the installation itself "was this tiny, completely dark room. It was only for one person at a time. You had to go in and shut the door and there was a phone on a desk. When you shut the door the phone would ring and when you picked up the phone, if you picked up the phone, it would trigger the video. You heard the confession voices through the phone. It was fun."

Although it wasn't finished until 1996, LOST BOOK FOUND was being shot and developed years before.

"I started to shoot probably in '89, '90," Cohen says. "And then it wasn't until I started trying to fund-raise and apply for grants and it came together very slowly over the next six years."

As with HISTORY OF NY, Cohen carried a camera obsessively and logged endless amounts of street footage.

"All the time I was shooting I was also picking up debris on the street and filing it away," Cohen says. "I have this really nice archive of scraps of letters, broadsides, leaflets, flyers, all this stuff. Notebooks! Really weird books."

"If HISTORY OF NY was mostly looking around in awe of New York, craning my neck and looking up at these big, crazy buildings, then LOST BOOK FOUND was looking straight down at my feet and starting to shoot real peripheral things."

After starting to get footage together, Cohen went looking for grants to fund the production. After one had run out, he got tons of rejections between 1992 and 1995. Finally, Alive Television out of Minneapolis agreed to give Cohen money to finish BOOK. He went to Ohio where he could use an Avid editing system, taking his mounds of footage along.

But then Alive dropped out and stopped answering phone calls.

"That sucked," Cohen vividly remembers, "and was incredibly demoralizing. I was stuck in Ohio with (crates and crates of) footage."

But he also thinks it was positive because "it really liberated me from any concern about who I was making it for."

It brought the project back down to Earth. Cohen then added the most interesting pieces: a main character and autobiographical elements.

"The summer before my senior year I came to New York and got a job as a pushcart vendor," Cohen says. "When I was working on BOOK years later, I realized that was the pivotal job for me because I was sitting there on the street watching the very mundane goings-on. Watching this very hidden sub-strata of behavior and economics. Even though I wasn't shooting film I had kind of become a camera for a summer."

Cohen made a main character for BOOK, a pushcart vendor. But this job served as more than a storytelling device. For Cohen, sitting and watching street happenings "really, really ended up leading to much of my work. There was a whole world that could be revealed if you hung in there and stared at it and watched the different surfaces reveal themselves. It seemed like there was a connection of my becoming a filmmaker and that shitty-ass job."

BOOK's pushcart vendor is not really seen. Instead, he narrates. One day a sidewalk grate fisherman, who retrieves stuff through those grates you walk over using string and some sort of epoxy, offers the vendor a



Then he cannot forget about the entries, seeing them everywhere he goes in the city.

The film has varied haunting images of small storefronts, people behind glass making mysterious transactions, 'atomic numbers' and money themes. All the images are captured from real life.

"The thing about HISTORY and a lot of the other projects is that they sent me on this collision course between documentary and something else," Cohen says. "None of the films are normal documentaries. None of them are normal narratives. I can't stand to have the work described as experimental film or avant-garde film. It's just some hybrid where these are. By necessity and by choice I found myself working in-between those realms."

This confuses some people who want their dramas strict and fake.

"I never bought that definition of narrative," Cohen says. "To me, the whole point of BOOK as far as narrative was to confront this idea that the world was made of a million narratives, many of which were invisible, some of which were forgotten, some of which were existing but happened and then ended before you could even get a grip on them. Some of which were on going. The street is literally clogged and cluttered with them.

"In other words, narrative, to me, is not attached to actors and to scripts. It's to life. It's like life is full of narratives. BOOK was a way of saying that if you walk along the street, you're going to be stepping on narrative debris. If there's a cigarette butt, well, somebody dropped it. They were standing on that corner for a reason. Maybe they were waiting for somebody. Maybe there's a narrative there. It was just important to me to engage this hidden world of what to me was sort of narratives."

And again, this is not a simple rejection of the mainstream; it is just that other forms of filmmaking need to be recognized as well.

LOST BOOK FOUND made its way around to festivals, Europe, Australia, broadcasts on PBS, the BBC, even Polish television and a few screenings in America.

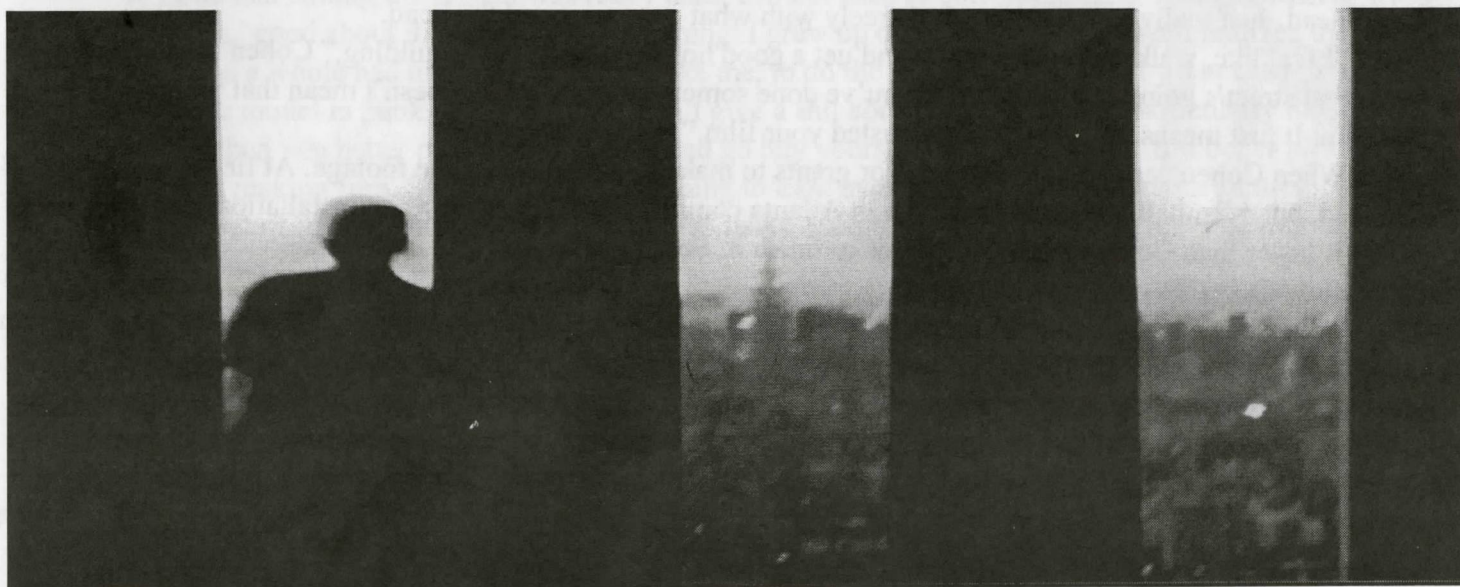
Cohen says. "I've done this thing called the Southern Circuit tour twice, where I go to little theaters and media centers throughout the South and deal with people who never see that kind of thing. I've shown it in a quonset hut in South Carolina to a bunch of senior citizens"

Distribution is the second toughest part of filmmaking, primarily for shorts and non-mainstream themes. Distributors, exhibitors and critics very often pigeonhole filmmakers as un-sellable before even watching their projects.

"I want my work to be accessible," Cohen says. "It doesn't mean I want it to be predictable. It just means I want people to find something in it that they can get a grip on. Even if it's just, 'I've seen things like that when I rode the bus,' or, 'I had a shitty job like that,' or, 'I've had weird thoughts like that.' I feel like every one of my works you should be able to show it in a barroom or in a library or in a film festival and most of the people in the audience ought to have something they can either relate to or grapple with in a way that doesn't alienate them.

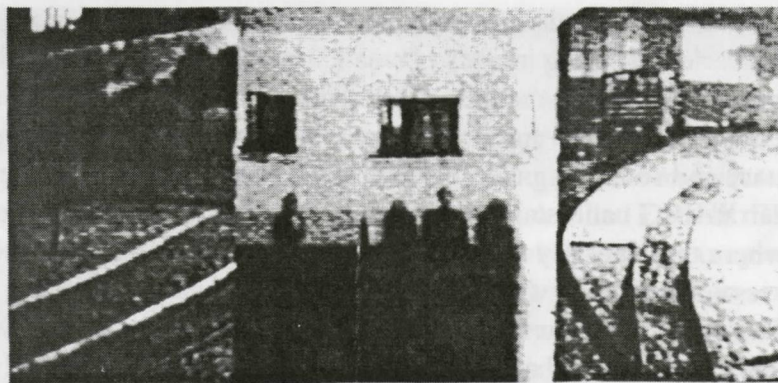
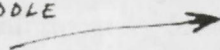
"I do respect some filmmakers who have to make alienating movies. Sometimes I'm really glad those movies exist, sometimes I'm blown away by them. Often, they bore me. I believe in a wide spectrum of different

*Jem Cohen films New York City from the World Trade Center*





2 A.M. - SHOOTING AN  
ITALIAN RAILYARD.  
OUR SHADOWS ARE THROWN  
AGAINST THE TOWER.  
THE WIND-UP BOLEX IS IN  
THE MIDDLE



*Railroad  
tower  
from  
AMBER  
CITY*

kinds of moving picture experiences, but I don't like the way that non-traditional films are ghettoized by Hollywood, or isolate themselves as 'art-films.'"

The toughest part of filmmaking is funding the damn things. Cohen's survival has been a juggling act. Money came from the earlier prop jobs, some commissioned work, a few music videos, shooting for other people, selling films to foreign television ("which has completely saved my ass") and getting grants. Non-profit grant awards allow the filmmaker to finish a project without having to concede to some financier's own dreams, which could take away control.

"I've been pretty dependent on the occasional grant," Cohen says. "The only problem is it's a real drag to constantly be writing grant applications. I used to bitch about that. But now I better stop bitching about it cuz there aren't any left to write applications for. Most of them I used to apply for got discontinued. So I've been pretty lucky, but I've also had a lot of rejections — up to 20 in a row."

Travelling Europe to show stuff in festivals was the motivator for Cohen to make the impressive **BURIED IN LIGHT**.

"When the Berlin Wall came down, at that point I had been in the states for 15 years straight," Cohen says. "I didn't even have a passport. I was really concerned that I was going to be too late — in the sense that, it was about four-and-a-half seconds after the wall came down that they were making horrific Pepsi ads showing people passing sodas across the iron curtain."

Although change was drastically needed from totalitarian regimes, the answer isn't necessarily a complete swing to a corporate takeover where people still have no say.

Cohen wanted to capture the culture that would be soon erased by billboards. (A scary one seen in the film shows a cigarette ad that imitates underground resistance graffiti.)

For what became **BURIED IN LIGHT**, Cohen walked around Central and Eastern Europe, shooting street scenes without knowing a lot about the countries.

"Travelling blind like that is a blessing and a curse, because you have the deficit of a certain amount of ignorance," Cohen says. "But you also have the benefit of not having expectations and not having pictures already in your head. Just really being able to deal freely with what comes around the bend."

"I feel like, walk down your street and get a good honest shot of every building," Cohen says. "Particularly if that street's going to change a lot, you've done something valuable. It doesn't mean that you've made a good film. It just means that you haven't wasted your film."

When Cohen came back he looked for grants to make a project out of the footage. At first, no one was interested, but eventually the High Museum in Atlanta commissioned the work as an installation piece. But they wanted it faster than Cohen could raise funds to finish it. So the museum found a corporate video place that would allow Cohen to work at night.

Cohen moved to Atlanta for about five months. He would edit all night, sleep, read and then go edit again.

"I may have used some applied ignorance while shooting," Cohen says, "but when I wanted to put the piece together I spent a lot of time in the library. ...It was a great total immersion. And I had access to this pretty amazing gear at the big commercial joint. The people were sometimes a little condescending, because I'm in there doing my super-8. They're cutting these multi-million dollar Coca-Cola ads during the day, then peeking into the room: 'Jesus, what's with that guy's footage, hey man, what's wrong with your footage? Something we can do to smooth out that grain?' I'm like, 'No, that's okay.' (laughs)"



The museum installation for BURIED had three synced television screens running along with various still photos and found objects. The project also showed that strip malls and their mentality erase regional character in Atlanta just as it does overseas. The museum ran the film for three months in 1994.

"It was great because it's a museum where buses of school kids and old folks go," Cohen says. "It's not like an art scene thing; people just wander in...."

Cohen's soundtracks are as important as his images. For BOOK, as with imagery, he used 'found' ambient sounds and created an intricately layered soundtrack.

"For example, I would record things like the sound of money coming out of an ATM machine. Every once in a while it just purrs there on the soundtrack."

For BURIED's soundtrack, there are found sounds, music and some creative invented music.

"I got to work with a lot of people I really love, including Vic Chestnut and Ben Katchor, who's known mostly as a great cartoonist. He played clarinet and banged some pots and pans and made some great stuff. He couldn't come down to work in the studio with me and Vic, but he gave me his music recorded over an old audio cassette of Napoleon Hill's money making plan 'Think and Grow Rich.' Every once in a while that would bleed up though the tape because it was such a crude recording. (laughs) So we were really excited about that."

Narration is another important part of the soundtrack. Basically the glue for putting the images together, narration can often serve as a crappy 'this is what it means' device. Cohen's narration and text is never condescending. It lets the viewer think for him/herself and always seems motivated.

Lately, Cohen has been getting a lot of notice for co-making the Fugazi documentary INSTRUMENT. While first shooting for pleasure, Fugazi and Cohen (friends since they were all growing up in D.C.) were making it into an

official film for the last five years. Rather than a strict informational documentary, INSTRUMENT is a unique portrait that includes background on the band. Using every format from consumer video donated by fans to sync-sound 16mm film, INSTRUMENT shows that it's not about breaking down the barriers between musicians and fans, it's about not putting them up in the first place.

"Working with Fugazi, they are the best example I know of a group of people that stepped out of the ballgame as it is regularly played and still managed to do what they wanted to do and bring it to a large audience and kick a lot of ass in the process," Cohen says. "I find them to be a serious inspiration. I love their work. I love to watch them work."

"It's true that editing the project was really hard. I'm not used to collaborating.... INSTRUMENT was tough, but we feel good about it. I had a real lucky thing: I grew up on punk rock and when I realized that the (film) industry as a whole had no room for people like me, to do the kind of projects that we needed to make, I had a readymade model in punk. The industry doesn't give a shit about you? You don't particularly like the industry? Well, then you better pick up your guitar and go buy yourself a used amplifier. You better pick up a camera and start making film. So I had a real good thing to look over at and give me some inspiration."

We run out of time to talk. A few days later I'm lucky enough to tag along with Jem as he journeys to the World Trade Center to film.

The first elevator has two numbers: 1 and 78. Another elevator takes us to 91. We finish the interview as Cohen films the sun going down on Hoboken and the lights coming up in Manhattan. It's incredible.

For Cohen's newest, AMBER CITY, an experimental arts group in Italy invited him to make a portrait of their city. Although he usually doesn't take commissions like that, he found it a great experience.

"In Europe, people aren't embarrassed by culture like often they are here," Cohen says. "So they actually get money from the municipalities. The money for AMBER came from the state and instead of worrying about grants, I had to worry about whether an Italian left-wing municipality would win re-election...."

The film was shot with a Bolex 16mm camera, which led to a different style, although Cohen notes that

"They're cutting these multi-million dollar Coca-Cola ads during the day. They're peeking into the room: 'Jesus, what's with that guy's footage, hey man, what's wrong with your footage? Something we can do to smooth out that grain?' I'm like, 'No, that's okay.' (laughs)"



his camerawork is getting less and less showy with time.

"When I'm shooting super-8 it's a little bit cheaper and I'm usually bombing around a little bit more," Cohen says. "A little more guerrilla style. There are often very short bursts. When I'm shooting on 16, which is really expensive and where I'm often on a tripod, I tend to be much more measured in the shooting. It's more like breathing. I often do in-camera fades. Just pick a shot carefully, bring it up and hold my breath and just fade it out when it feels right."

On the other hand, "in the Fugazi thing there's an 8 1/2-minute shot that was determined by when the camera rolled out of film. (laughs)"

"You can't just make your camerawork be shitty and boring because you don't want to be overly stylized," Cohen says. "But you can find yourself drawn toward a type of camerawork that doesn't make you sit there and think about how long the dolly track must have been to get the shot."

One striking shot in *AMBER* is of tiny human shadows on a railroad yard tower. While he didn't think it would come out on film, it ended up looking surreal. The train yard looks like a model.

"Every once in a while you get something like that back in the lab and you realize that the whole thing is insane and miraculous," Cohen says. "One of the things about film versus video is that there's something different about a mechanical sense of the miraculous versus an electronic one."

While looking different from the super-8, the photography is still beautiful and framed in a unique way. A mainstay Cohen feature is still there: portraits of people.

At the end of *LOST BOOK FOUND* there are great portraits of New Yorkers, just standing and looking at the camera. *BURIED IN LIGHT* has various close-ups ranging from people in public to prisoners' mug shots at a concentration camp. A tradition for *INSTRUMENT* was to photograph kids standing in line to get tickets.

I think about how Cohen's films connect with the Lumiere Brothers and the start of filmmaking. Many of the first films were simple portraits: people leaving a factory, a train passing and a baby feeding. It sounds simple, but the portraits are fascinating in what is different from today and what is the same.

In his office, Cohen has an August Sander portrait from 1921 of a bulky man carrying a load of bricks on his shoulders.

"When I stop people in the street now in Italy and I say, 'Can I take your portrait,' I don't feel like I'm

## **JEM COHEN Filmography:**

**BLOOD ORANGE SKY.** 25 min. 16mm/video. 1999.

**LITTLE FLAGS.** 6 min. super-8/video. 1999.

**AMBER CITY.** 49 mins. 16mm/video. 1999.

**INSTRUMENT.** (collaboration with Fugazi) 115 mins. super-8/16mm/video. 1998.

**LUCKY 3.** (a portrait of Elliott Smith) 11 mins. 16mm/video. 1997.

**LOST BOOK FOUND.** 36mins. super 8/16mm/video. 1996. (first prizes include: 1998 Locarno International Film Festival, Bonn Videonale, and the International Review of Social Documentary Film (Florence).)

**BURIED IN LIGHT** (Central and Eastern Europe in Passing). 60 mins. super 8/video. 1994.

**DRINK DEEP.** 10 mins. super 8/video. 1992.

**BLACK HOLE RADIO.** 7 mins. super 8/video. 1992.

**JUST HOLD STILL.** (Short works and collaborations compiled) 35 mins. super 8/video. 1989.

**THIS IS A HISTORY OF NEW YORK.** 23 mins. super 8/video. 1987.

**WITNESS BUTTHOLE SURFERS.** 12 mins. super 8/video. 1986.

**A ROAD IN FLORIDA.** 11 mins. 16mm. 1983.

**Cohen** has also done film/music collaborations with musicians including **R.E.M., Jonathan Richman, Miracle Legion, Flat Duo Jets, Gil Shaham** and the **Orpheus Orchestra, Vic Chesnutt, Sparklehorse** and **Blonde Redhead.**

*For video availability contact VIDEO DATABANK: 1-800-634-8544 or [www.vdb.org](http://www.vdb.org)  
For INSTRUMENT contact Dischord Records (703) 351-7507 or [www.southern.com/dischord/](http://www.southern.com/dischord/)*



doing anything new. I don't feel like I'm doing, 'that Jem Cohen's thing....' It's a tradition that I'm pleased to carry forward."

We run out of time in the World Trade Center. We talk some more while waiting for the E Train.

Cohen is now heading for a feature, still starting from 'documentary' footage and without traditional script, actors, or production machine. For it, he has been collecting landscapes. Most are modern and not easy to place. He is fascinated with how landscapes affect the emotions of people they surround.

"I'm already a third of the way into the feature because I've been shooting very particular indeterminate landscapes for years — I shoot them all over the world but you can't place where you are," Cohen says. "I'm already thinking as I shoot them that they are narrative frameworks. It's the coat rack that I'm going to hang the narratives on. I've got to get the rack right first."

After catching the train and going a few stops we get out to catch the F train to Brooklyn.

With digital video being somewhat accepted by big distributors as something small they will actually buy, more possibilities open for small-budget features. But does film need 10 million more directors?

Cohen feels he has become "sort of a poster boy for super-8. Do-It-Yourself." Although he adds, "Well, it's more like a 5 by 7 than a full size poster.... But, anyway, we may have reached the point of over-saturation. It's the same with zines. It's the same with music, where 'alternative' has become a bad joke. For the most part now, the word 'independent' coupled with filmmaking is a bad joke.

"I think that whether it's with DV or a super-8 camera or a Xerox machine, it doesn't really matter what you're using. It's nice that anybody can get a hold of it, but it doesn't mean people shouldn't be thoughtful about what they're doing. Cuz there's just too much out there. You have to stop and think, how much more stuff does one want to add to the pile? People think that new technologies will save them, but with video, people just hold the record button down, or they try to replicate the Hollywood game and the work isn't necessarily vital, connected to life.

"Hey, here's the train."

*The F train runs from Queens down 6th avenue in Manhattan, then out to Brooklyn.*

*Photos of Jem Cohen (pg 4,9), cityscape (5) and subway (8) by M. Plante. All other photos courtesy J. Cohen.*



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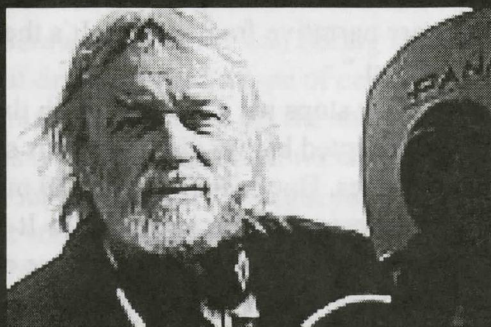
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# ONE LAST WISH

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# Conrad Hall



**"The Only Rule is..."**

*We interviewed Mr. Hall at the American Society of Cinematographers' clubhouse. While writing this, I started to put in '(laughs)' wherever it applied. But we laughed so damn much it took up too much space.*

Conrad Hall has been considered one of the elite Hollywood cinematographers since the 1960s. His amazing work is displayed in the heavy contrast of *IN COLD BLOOD*, in the super-realism of *FAT CITY*, in the golden hues of *DAY OF THE LOCUST*, de-saturated colors of *ELECTRA GLIDE IN BLUE* and most noteworthy in *BUTCH CASSIDY AND THE SUNDANCE KID*, for which Hall earned an Academy Award.

With 1967's *COOL HAND LUKE*, Hall started a real effort to break the accepted rules in mainstream camerawork. The sun flaring the lens or muted colors were considered 'mistakes' and not allowed by the major studios. Forcing new effects on studios by using them in motivated scenes, Hall went through many battles with producers and studio honchos. But he also got many of them through, at least in the film climate of the late 1960s/early 1970s.

After watching his kickass work, it is surprising that he picked the 'job' of cinematographer out of a hat. Literally. In 1955, as part of a three-man production group starting a film, they had to decide who would do what.

"We all wanted to direct it," Hall remembers. "And you can't direct by committee, so we wrote 'producer', 'director' and 'cinematographer.' I pulled out (makes a -gink- sound) cinematography."

And he goes on to be one of the best and most admired in the profession.

"You know, half of life is accident, don't you think?" Hall explains. "Some people choose to be a doctor and then go off and do it. But a lotta people get to do and find out what they want to do by accident. Earlier than that I tried to figure out if I had any genes rattling around from my Dad."

Dad was novelist James Norman Hall, co-author of the *Mutiny on the Bounty* trilogy and many other seafaring novels.

"I signed up for journalism at USC in 1947. After the first semester I got a D+ in creative writing. So...(laughs). I figured there weren't any genes rattling around," Hall says. "I picked up the liberal arts and sciences manual. A – Astronomy, B – Biology, C – Cinema. And in '47... C – Cinema? Wow! You mean you can go to school for that? Like being a mechanic? That stopped me right away for all the wrong reasons. I thought I'd rub elbows with the stars, get to travel all over the world and have somebody else send you, you know. So I signed up and never looked back."

At film school in the 1940s, classes weren't so specialized. The students learned all aspects of film at the same time, from editing and shooting to producing.

"When we got out of school we were immediately film bums, we did everything," Hall says. "I made films for the Los Angeles school department, I worked doing documentaries, photography, I edited, I was production manager on some things.... You know, whatever job you could get. And there was hardly any money in it, even though television was just starting out."



Today, even film schools are very specialized in the variety of film jobs.

"The business in 50 years has become a business!"

After school Hall and two friends got together and formed a company called Canyon Films. They bought a short story by Steve Frazee called *My Brother Down There*. The next week they got a call from producer Irving Paul Lazar offering them \$25,000 for the story.

"We paid 750 bucks for it!" Hall says with a laugh. "We said thanks but no thanks."

They changed the title to *RUNNING TARGET* and made the film.

What did novelist Dad think of all this film hubbub?

"Dad was not interested in it at all," Hall admits. "A lot of his books were made into films: *MUTINY ON THE BOUNTY*, *HURRICANE*, *PASSAGE TO MARSEILLES*. For him cinema was... uh...(laughs). But for me it was like being on the ground floor. Here we were, 47 years out of the invention of cinema. Graduated in June of '49 and June of '99 is coming up and that'll be 50 years, my friend. (Luckily, he laughs.) That's half the life of cinema!"

After *TARGET*, Hall helped make the film *EDGE OF FURY*.

"It was just three of us on the whole damn production," (we force Hall to remember). "Gripping, electrical, the whole thing. Climbing up telephone poles and hooking onto wires, stealing electricity and stuff like that." (Hey, reader, don't try that at home.) "Crazy stuff, huh? Cuz I didn't know enough to (not) be doing stuff like that."

With Hall's film experience so far, he got into the American Society of Cinematographers (ASC), the cinematographer's union. He worked with Floyd Crosby (*HIGH NOON*) as a second assistant and then as camera operator under super-old-school cameraman Ted McCord.

"We shot *EAST OF EDEN*, *JOHNNY BELINDA*, *TREASURE OF THE SIERRA MADRE*, all those great films," Hall says. "(McCord) was a great, great, great cinematographer. I call him my 'Father.'"

Working with McCord on *PRIVATE PROPERTY*, Hall got to know writer-director Leslie Stevens, who went on to do the television series *Stoney Burke* starring Jack Lord and (ThatGuys) Warren Oates and Bruce Dern. McCord didn't want to do episodic television, even though it was shot on film, but ABC wouldn't go for camera operator Hall. For Hall's sake, McCord agreed to do the first six episodes while Hall did second unit photography, which gained him first cameraman status and ABC's respect. After six shows, Hall would become the main man.

Unfortunately, McCord became ill on the fifth episode, although it ultimately benefited Hall.

"So in I came," Hall says. "And Ted is one of these guys who'd like to say, 'Okay, let's get the 20 by 20 black up there and cut out the sun,' right? And then bring in the arcs and light it all up to look like all the major studio shooting of those days. Geez, I wasn't used to doing that kinda stuff at all."

It is the first stage in developing Hall's great style.

"So I said, what's wrong with this thing called the sun? Can't we use it to light scenes? And work on how to make it look good?"

Hall was now a director of photography.

When Hall was busy, Stevens made the pilot for the landmark *Outer Limits* television show with another cameraman. When the show got picked up, Stevens wanted Hall, but didn't want to not give the other cameraman a chance. So each cameraman shot 13 episodes of the series.

After making *INCUBUS* with Stevens (see sidebar) in 1965, Hall shot *WILD SEED*. One of the producers was Marlon Brando's father. Everything was set up for Hall.

"I had known Brando from being (second unit camera operator) on *MUTINY ON THE BOUNTY*," Hall

This issue's motto comes from Mr. Hall: "Your most powerful tool is Yes and No."



**COOL HAND LUKE**



says. "Go out drinking together and that kinda stuff. So when he was about to do MORITURI, he asked the producer whom he had in mind to shoot the picture. The guy said he was thinking about Jimmy Wong Howe. Brando did one of those three minutes of staring up at the ceiling, three minutes staring at his toes, had this guy thinking, 'What the fuck did I do now?' Brando said, 'Have you ever heard of Connie Hall?' That's how I got it. That's exactly how I got it. And rather than upsetting Brando too much, he decided to look at WILD SEED and he liked it."

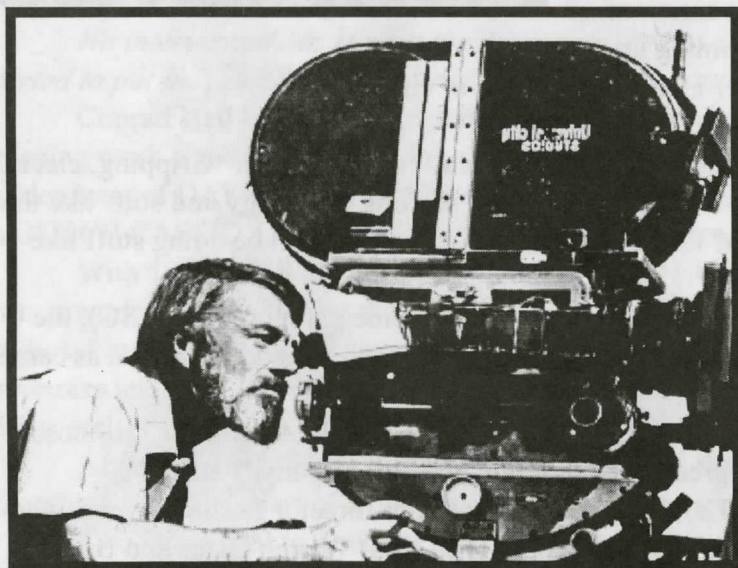
Hall received an Academy Award nomination for MORITURI. His career and influence was off and running.

But before he could start breaking the rules, Hall had to get used to color. His television work and many films he operated on were in glorious black and white. (Watch the documentary VISIONS OF LIGHT for an interview with Hall about the amazing shots from IN COLD BLOOD).

"I always liked doing black and white because it gives your imagination more of a sense to go out and figure it out," Hall says. "It's like reading a book. You don't get the ocean painted blue, you get it painted with words. When you look at it all highlighted in black and white, you know it's blue! You take color out of it. So in case the color is different, it doesn't bother you. It doesn't take away from the story of the human drama that's going on. You get better focus on the characters. Without going along and suddenly the ocean isn't the color you imagine or the sky's different and you say 'Oh, what is this?'"

"Now it's all changed because of MTV. Now it's gotten to be all like magazines. The idea is like, 'Hey, green ocean and orange sky.' And wow, is that hot. Nothing wrong with that."

On the other hand, when Hall did color he really started breaking the rules. For COOL HAND LUKE, he shot straight into the sun in order to show the heat taking its toll on the chain gang. In the old studio days, any time a lens would flare like that the



shot would have to be redone without question. But in LUKE, a flare knocks (ThatGuy) Harry Dean Stanton out cold!

"A rule is to be used appropriately," Hall says.

"If you find something about that rule that you can change, make it new and interesting, do it. Thing about it is, in film, 'the only rule is' doesn't work. If it works for the film, hey, it's the thing to do. It's a language. I guess there are rules in language, aren't there? But they're broken by slang. You break them and you can make it what you want it to be."

Also in LUKE was Hall's touch of realism, dumbing down the bright Technicolor look and using silhouettes. Of course, Hall says the studio "drove me insane. I did a shot with Paul Newman one time, coming back after they (recapture) him and line him up. They were all in backlight. So I shot the scene frontlit, over them onto Strother (ThatGuy) Martin. So I shot them all in backlight and each close-up in backlight and the studio came back and said, 'We have to do this one over again, Newman's close-up.' And I did it over again and they said, (whispers) 'Can't see his blue eyes.' So (in other words) they paid him three million or whatever he was getting in those days and we have to see his blue eyes."

Hall redid the shot but had to make it match visually with the shots to be edited around it. "I did it four times and it just wasn't good enough (for them). So I finally just took an arc and went 'whoosh-chak!' Smashed him with light from the front, with no backlight! (laughs hard) Baby blues hanging out there, and man they loved it."

Considering music videos and their influence on films today, the way they go nuts with light flares and missing frames and other rhubarb, it's a shame Hall couldn't have copyrighted some of that look.

"What can you copyright? It's a language," Hall says. "No, what you can pray for is a good story. A block-



buster could be a good story. It's often not but that doesn't mean it can't be. If you find a good story, that's the important thing. Somebody's got to have a vision about it. I'm not a visionary. What I do is, when I get into a situation I can quickly come up with a visual answer. But I can't imagine it. I can when I write it. But hey, wait a minute, I don't know whether the sun's going to be shining. What if the sun's not shining? I want to wait until everything is there and then boom! Lay it in there."

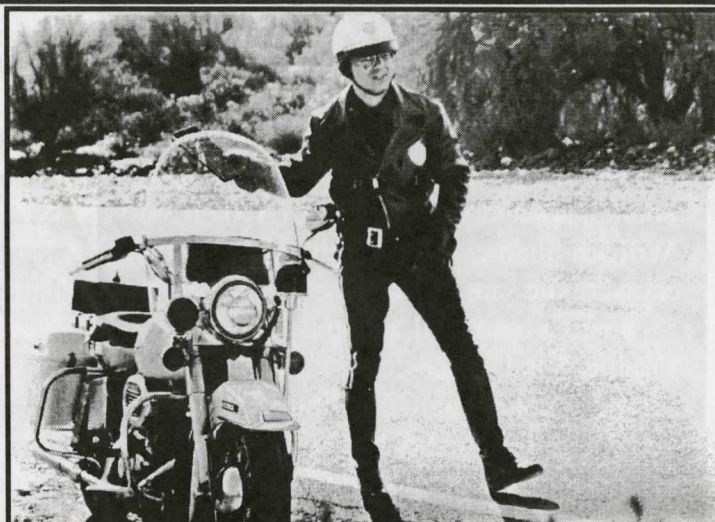
What really impresses us about Hall and many of his peers is the attention paid to the script by a cameraman. They are not just equipment techs, they really care about what context they're filming.

"Your most powerful tool is yes and no," Hall says. "Turning something down or accepting something. When you accept something, it's a big responsibility. You feel like you want to be involved in telling that story. You feel like it's something worthy of being out there and people knowing about.

"You don't to begin with. I didn't. I was a film bum. Anything that came along to begin with was worthwhile doing in order to gain the experience. In doing *Stoney Burke*, 20 episodes, and *Outer Limits*, 13 episodes, those were little feature films, an hour film. A lot of experience going down two years, and you wait to get your next break, your next script. I've been lucky all along, but it's because the work that I did was something people remarked on. 'This is a comer.'

"The script has to mean something to me in terms of the story. It's got to be something that I feel is

**"What's wrong with this thing called the sun? Can't we use it to light scenes? And work on how to make it look good?"**



**ELECTRA GLIDE IN BLUE**

not just about entertainment. It's about communicating the ideas, whatever the ideas that are expounded in the story. Whether they be social, human, whatever kind of elements the story is about. I'm not so good at keeping people on the edge of their seat. If that's the idea, to scare people, I'm not into scaring, basically just for scaring sake. I'm certainly not into violence for violence's sake."

Hall picks many scripts with people on the downswing of life. The script is the driving force behind John Huston's great *FAT CITY*, following Stacy Keach as a small-time boxer. You know in the first scene that this is no champion. Not just at boxing, but at life. We can all relate in some way, at some time.

"I think this is about failure, basically," Hall says. "I know John Huston brought the production designer, Dick Sylbert, into a meeting with him and me and said 'What do you think the picture is about?' And Dick gave him his idea and I gave him mine. Huston said, 'Well you know what I think the film is about? It's about people whose life is running down the drain and they don't know how to plug it.' And you know how your life can hit the toilet real quick and you can't figure out how to stop and go into a different direction or bring it up again, you end up watching cars go by or sitting, becoming those kind of people. It's kind of an important story.

"It's what happened to Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid," Hall says in discussing the real people he helped bring to film in 1969. "This is bank robbing, right? This is what they did for a living. And along comes super-posses, technological advancement and invincible banks and what are you gonna do to make a living? It's about people not being able to make the change and give up bank robbing and take up banking! It's what's happening nowadays. This is about people not being able to regroup and do something with their lives. Pretty powerful feat."



Even in the early 1970s, *FAT CITY* wasn't terribly popular with people.

"It wasn't successful at all in fact," Hall remembers. "But everybody who loved it thought, 'My God, what happened? Why didn't anybody see it?' So they took out an ad in the LA Times, full-page ad, signed by hundreds and hundreds of movie stars: Paul Newman and all kinds of people. Urging you to go see this picture. They re-released it.

"Guess what? Nobody went to see it. It's a cult film. Nobody wants to know about failure. 'Hey kids, you want to go to the movies tonight? It's all about this guy who can't get it up (laughs).'"



## INCUBUS

### Almost Lost

Made in 1965, this 76-minute film feels like the lost *Outer Limits* episode: stunning cinematography, spooky locations and soundtrack and an eerie story. (AND it stars William Shatner.) It helps that the filmmakers were the same *Limits* crew: cinematographer Conrad Hall, composer Dominic Frontiere and writer-director Leslie Stevens.

If that's not enough, the film is even more separated from reality by using the invented language of Esperanto. Always intended for theaters, the occult horror would've proved

too much for television viewers. After successful festivals screenings, the film seemed to fade away from public view. When producer Anthony Taylor requested the negative from a lab in the early 1990s, he discovered they somehow lost or destroyed the negatives and prints! Some lab 'error'. After years of searching, Taylor finally found a beat-up print in Paris and remastered a new negative. France's placement of the English subtitles could be lower but it's still a beautiful copy showcasing Hall's work. Taylor says, "Conrad Hall did a fantastic job under conditions more difficult than can be imagined. He is a true master."

*Video available directly from Mr. Taylor at*  
[www.incubusthefilm.com](http://www.incubusthefilm.com)

But if a viewer can't handle a film that's realistic, how do they handle reality? At least after seeing films like *CITY* one might feel better about one's own situation or maybe even relate and get something positive out of the film.

"I guess what's happened is that we've gotten into a mentality that's different than what pictures used to be," Hall says. "The 'blockbuster' mentality. There's no place for anything else but blockbusters. In the '70s we didn't have blockbusters. When they'd release a picture they put out, what, 60 prints? 300 was big stuff. Now it's like 2500, 3000. Even more than that."

With *FAT CITY*, and again for Hall, the studio didn't like the dark, realistic photography.

"I had a run-in with (producer) Ray Stark," Hall says. "Everybody was saying it was too dark. I operated the (camera personally) and they didn't want the DP operating. I did all of it. I get all these letters (from the studio) – there's nothing on the negative, I can't see that, I can't see this. I said, let's just take the dailies to a movie theater and see if we can see anything or not.

"Wooowwww! Did it look great! So Ray was saying 'I can't see his face here,' and I said you're gonna see it in the next moment, you know what I mean? You don't have to see it all the time. We got into a big argument. I said, 'It looks great. I shoot for this guy, not for the producer.' They took it out on me later on, wouldn't let me time the picture."

A quarter of a century later, *FAT CITY* is still an amazing piece of film. The great direction, writing, acting and images hold up.

Hall used less realism on *DAY OF THE LOCUST*, another story about people who aren't exactly on top. Set in 1930s Hollywood, it outdoes even *L.A. CONFIDENTIAL* in showing the city's lurid qualities.

"Oh yeah, I love that film," says Hall. "I did the video some years back. I went in, there were some pieces missing from the negative. They would take (frames) for publicity purposes and never put it back. So we had to reconstruct the negative...."

The images are realistic, but when a budding actress, played by Karen Black, walks in a door, she's got a studio-lit backlight from the sun, glowing over her. She thinks she's really gonna get the big lights.

John Schlesinger directed *LOCUST*. Hall says, "When we talked about doing (*LOCUST*), I had just done *FAT CITY*



and he said, 'Should we do this gritty, Conrad? In black and white?' Because the story is really a gritty story. It's about the failures in Hollywood and the 90 percent of the people who don't make it, but live next to the people who make it. And as long as they rub elbows with the stars and can go see the premieres and can dress up and be like it and live in the little courtyards and all of that kinda thing, they were perfectly happy. Like the moth near the flame.

"So I said, 'You know, I just made this picture... (laughs) about losers. And this is about losers. And if we do it gritty – nobody will go see it.' So we decided to make it about what they imagined themselves to be. They were all the failures, but they were always 'about to make it.' Right on the cusp of stardom, on the cusp of getting a break... like the moth near the flame. The golden tones and everything just came out of the nature of the flame and money and gold."

Hall didn't watch '30s era films to get the right look.

"I take from life," Hall says. "I don't take from pictures. The reason I've done more gritty stuff than I have the painterly thing is because I've never studied the painters! Lately I've gone to see them. My girlfriend takes me to the art shows and stuff like that. I didn't come from a painterly background. I came from looking at the streetcars going by and the people walking by. And the situations you get in and reading the paper and reading books. I got my information from that and visualization from everything I see. Right now, you're against that window, backlit, I can't see your face! Later on, I'll be doing something and I'll pull that image out and use it."

But does Hall like the painterly look for what it's worth?

"Oh, are you kidding? Do I love Vittorio Storaro (*THE CONFORMIST*, *THE LAST EMPEROR*)? Yes I do. Do I wish I could do what he does? Yes I do! As well as he does."

As with *CITY* and *LOCUST*, Hall's work on *ELECTRA GLIDE IN BLUE* has become a cult favorite. For this one, Hall's fight was with color.

"At that time I was sort of moving into breaking a lot of rules. One was over-exposing so you would get rid of saturation, the Bill Clothier look (*THE MAN WHO SHOT LIBERTY VALANCE*). With the deep blue skies, the John Wayne look, Technicolor look. I was working toward taking color out of it, leaving color in it but using it more like black and white.

"I was paling things out with color. I made some tests beforehand and (director James William Guercio) saw them and didn't say much. One day I got word that he wanted to see me. So I went up to his room and there's these great big corkboard and on it were tacked postcards. And you know – the donkey with the blue sky and the cactus. Arizona – in it's most lurid! Colorful. And we talked a bit about the script. He said, 'Conrad, I see what you're doing. But can I tell you something? This is what I like. And the deep, rich blue sky.'

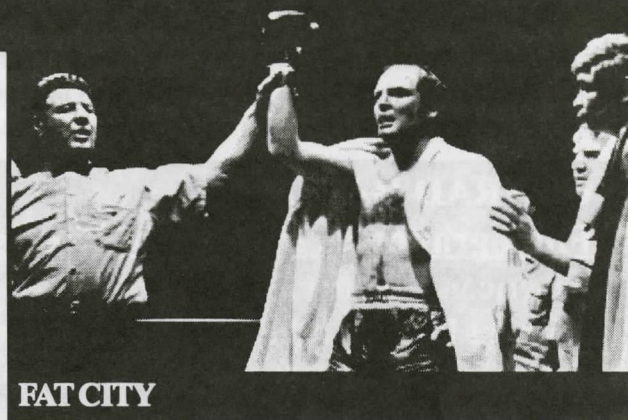
"And my heart sank. Oh, there's a guy who does this thing named Bill Clothier. Get him! I said, 'Hey, listen. Okay. I know what you want. Let's see what happens.' So what I did is gave him almost Bill Clothier to begin with. And then weaned him away from it – little by little! As the dailies came out, a little less blue sky, stuff like that. While we're shooting. But I also gave him what he wanted. I never saw him being disappointed."

But Hall did a lot of things different from the old school.

"Clothier never used a long lens. When you're shooting fucked up images like through the back window,



"I didn't come from a painterly background. I came from looking at the streetcars going by..."



**FAT CITY**



through the front window to something happening over there with other people crossing out of focus, smoke. Needless to say it's not Bill Clothier. But we had a great time. I love Guercio."

GLIDE features the ThatGuy, Elisha Cook Jr. (profiled in Cinemad Issue One).

"I first worked with Elisha Cook on *Stoney Burke*," Hall recalls. "If not I saw so many movies with him I felt like I worked with him. He was great. He was an old-timer who would do it just any way you want it. Real professional. He was like Strother (Martin). Any way you want it. He's amazing. Rambling on. (Actually does a good impression of Cook.) I had a good time working on that film."

I wondered how much influence or control cameramen have with the art director on films, the person most responsible for the set and how it looks.

"Not that much," Hall says. "I take what's given me and try to make something wonderful out of it. I'm not about to take anything away from anybody. Unless I see that it's not working. In *A CIVIL ACTION* there's a blue jacket that, oh my God! (laughs) I tried to get rid of that thing best I could. But I don't go over there and say, 'I think

he should wear something with wide lapels.' I think that's a little too much. It is a collaborative process. Now, the director is the bet-on leader and he can say, 'I like something with stripes.' And that's his area to work with.

"I do work with the production designer a lot on color of walls. Color of floors, material of floors, whether it's going to be bouncing light, whether we shellac the walls, or something shiny or carpeting. Carpeting absorbs the light, it doesn't reflect light. I have a lot to do about the materials involved. When I see something is very sort of orange and skin tones are warm, and I want cool skin tones I want to work out the compatibility of the skin tone with the wall. Somewhere we are gonna be for awhile."

Sets are usually built for the studio films, but many still use real locations.

"There you can get a wall painted, too. Less likely, normally it's pretty good. The way I look at it... (points around the room) here we are in this room. May not be the bookcase that you want. Is that really it? (laughs) And the main thing about it, just take a look at it..."

It has lots of glass doors. A million reflections.

"A millllllion reflections," Hall continues. "A fucking billion. And every set I get, they use so much glass and all these reflections, (Hall actually shudders at the thought) which forces me into lighting situations that are so brutal."

Even in the desert, lighting situations are complicated.

"You're choosing where the light's gonna be, what time of day you're shooting, all that," Hall says. "It's not just 'here we are folks.' Nowadays it gets to be that way. *WITHOUT LIMITS* – what are you gonna do? You got eight, nine track meets to do in two weeks because that's how long you got the

## CONRAD HALL

### Filmography as Director of Photography

*American Beauty* (1999)

*Without Limits* (1998)

*A Civil Action* (1998)

*Love Affair* (1994)

*Searching for Bobby Fischer* (1993)

*Jennifer Eight* (1992)

*Class Action* (1991)

*Tequila Sunrise* (1988)

*Black Widow* (1986)

*Marathon Man* (1976)

*The Day of the Locust* (1975)

*Smile* (1975)

*Catch My Soul* (1974)

*Electra Glide in Blue* (1973)

*Fat City* (1972)

*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969)

*The Happy Ending* (1969)

*Tell Them Willie Boy Is Here* (1969)

*Hell in the Pacific* (1968)

*Cool Hand Luke* (1967)

*Divorce American Style* (1967)

*In Cold Blood* (1967)

*The Professionals* (1966)

*Harper* (1966)

*The Wild Seed* (1965)

*Morituri* (1965)

*Incubus* (1965)

*The Outer Limits* (TV) (1963)

*Stoney Burke* (TV) (1962-63)



stadium, right? You got to make eight track meets look like they were shot in all different places.”

I had heard about LIMITS, a biography on stud runner Steve Prefontaine. But I could think of about 20 reasons why I wouldn't like it. I watched it before meeting Hall and guess what — I thought it was good.

Hall explains, “The reason I took it finally is that he made a drama out of it rather than track and field. It was track and field when I got it. Then he rewrote it and rewrote it and at the end there were great feelings that were brought up.”

In an interview about the film in *American Cinematographer*, Hall mentioned Kon Ichikawa's TOKYO OLYMPIAD, a forgotten masterpiece I'm always trying to get people to watch.

Hall says, “That's another reason — I saw that damn thing and said, ‘Holy shit!’ If I can make a film look like this! You know what I mean? But you can't. They had all that wonderful weather over there. And probably 80 cameras shooting all slo-mo this and slo-mo that.”

OLYMPIAD had over 100 cameramen shooting all the time.

“Exactly. And I had four doing eight track meets in two weeks.”

But Hall pulled it off beautifully. Now, after being inactive through much of the 1980s, Hall has made seven films in the last nine years. Still working 12 or 14-hour days, six days a week, operating almost every shot!

“I've got three or four directors that like to work with me,” Hall says. “I think probably because I'm 72 years old, they want to work with Connie Hall before he passes on. That's my take on it. I work with some of the neatest guys. Young, doing stuff that's way out there. I think they like to listen to the old time stories.”

*We sure do. It is refreshing to find that someone 70-something, working in Hollywood 50 years who is on the same wavelength as 20-something film bums trying to make a living today.*

#### Some cinematography terms:

Director of Photography (D.P.) / Cinematographer / First Cameraman = the person in charge of the photography and look of the film, working with the director to coordinate the shots and lighting.

Camera Operator / Second Cameraman = actually operates the camera, concerned only with the camera movement rather than lighting or shot composition. (Often the producer or union doesn't let the DP operate.)

Assistant Cameraman/Focus Puller = the person adjusting the focus as the shot is going and is in physical charge of the camera.

Second Assistant Cameraman = does the clap board and is equipment man. The least glamorous camera job is also the most recognizable.

Second Unit Photography = a separate, small crew that gets shots that do not require the presence of the main crew or actors, usually including landscape shots and stunt work.

Grip = does the grunt work, like a stagehand, including working with the dolly tracks, minor carpentry, lighting accessories, etc. The key grip is the head grip working under the D.P. and has the most tattoos.

Gaffer = electrician, also working under the D.P.

Art Director = responsible for the sets from design to actual production.

Arcs = big, super-bright lights, usually used to simulate daylight. A 10K is 10,000 watts.

Dailies / Rushes = the raw footage of the film processed the same day or overnight so the cast and crew can watch what they did right away before sets are torn down.

Long Lens = telephoto lens, which compresses space, making the foreground and background seem closer than they really are, as opposed to a wide-angle or short lens.

Technicolor look = a process of color film that separated colors onto three different pieces of film, resulting in deep, rich colors that stand out and look somewhat unreal.

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**--Arizona Daily Star**

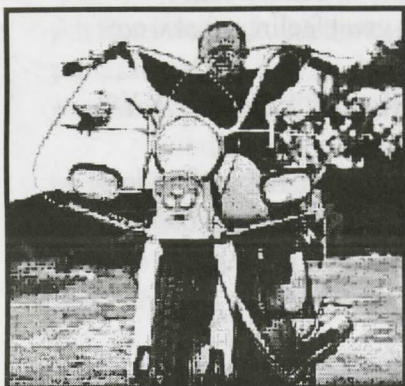


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# - IN CASE YOU MISSED IT -



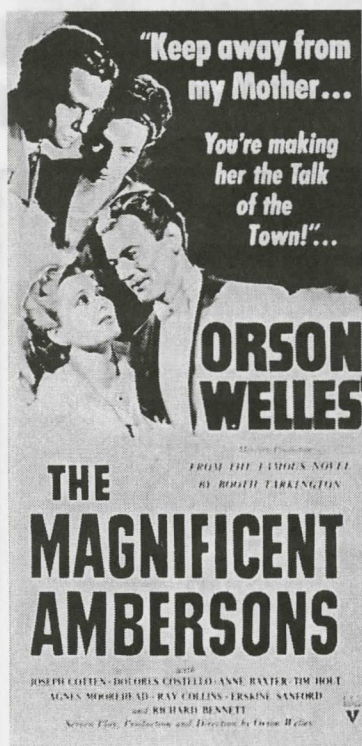
## **EVEN DWARVES STARTED SMALL (1970, Werner Herzog)**

Starring an all-dwarf cast (90 min)

Werner Herzog made his madman mark with this, his second feature film. Inmates at some sort of institution take over for hilarious and anarchic results. You laugh for a while until it sinks in. The haunting tone, other world locations and sympathy with those on the edge of society set the scene for Herzog's later and better-known masterpieces AGUIRRE and MYSTERY OF KASPAR HAUSER. The German director doesn't exploit outcasts; he loves and defends them, showing that normal people are the ones with something to prove. He

insists that it is not the actors who are small, but "the world that has gotten out of shape." Filming was rough: one actor was run over by the driver-less car in the film and another caught on fire. Herzog promised the actors that at the end of shooting he would jump into a spiny cactus to show his understanding. He still has some of the needles in his leg. *Why did you miss it?* It doesn't seem to show at many revival houses and it is just now coming to home video. If you don't know anything about it, the title doesn't help a lot. But I don't think you can get much

more unique than this film. *Just released on video, check stores.*



## **THE MAGNIFICENT AMBERSONS (1942, Orson Welles)**

Starring Joseph Cotton, Anne Baxter, Tim Holt, Ray Collins (88 min)

The young and talented Orson Welles brings a great cast, incredible black-and-white cinematography, huge sets and great editing to a decade-spanning story. CITIZEN KANE? No. Welles' second film, an adaptation of the Booth Tarkington novel, would have been just as good *or even better* than his first had the studio not taken the film away, re-edited (from 131 minutes to 88!) and shot new, crappy footage. Regardless, the remaining movie is still wonderful. The first half-hour supposedly remains unchanged, telling a story how only Welles could do. Stanley Cortez's great camerawork highlights the story of the wealthy turn-of-the-century Ambersons who must contend with a changing world or be left behind. *Why did you miss it?* The overwhelming popularity of Welles' KANE buries his other projects, not to mention the much-publicized legacy of his other unfinished films and fights with the Hollywood system. Unfortunately, the actual projects get lost in the gossip. *Available most video stores, beware colorized version.*

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## LITTLE FUGITIVE (1953, Morris Engel, Ruth Orkin and Ray Ashley)

(80 min)

Generally credited as one of the pioneers of the current independent cinema movement (as far as making your own film your own way without a big budget), Morris Engel used his background as a New York City photographer to bring a fresh, down-to-earth feeling to filmmaking. Engel and his wife, photojournalist Ruth Orkin, wrote, directed, produced and edited their own low-budget films, shot by Engel using a hand-held 35mm camera of his own design.

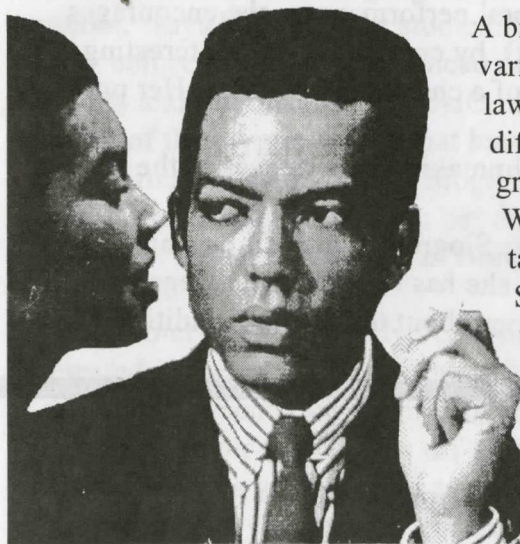
The first of their three films, LITTLE FUGITIVE, is a beautiful, innocent film about a seven-year-old boy who is tricked by his older brother and runs away to Coney Island with six dollars. As the boy interacts with his new world on the boardwalk, Engel really transports the viewer there. The film feels like a documentary: sparse dialogue, realistic acting, hand-held cinematography and real locations. The FUGITIVE actors and atmosphere never come off fake: as the boy is hitting baseball in a batting cage, one hit ball flies towards the camera and you find yourself jumping out of the way! The actor doesn't stop with this film "mistake", he's having fun and keeps going.

All the childhood loves are there: bottles in the sand, hot dogs and cotton candy, ponies and parachute rides. With their films, Engel and Orkin helped pave the way for directors like Truffaut, Godard, Cassavetes and Leigh.

**Why did you miss it?** Actually, FUGITIVE was incredibly successful for a non-studio film in the '50s, playing in almost 5,000 theaters. Heck, still a lot of exposure today. But small films don't have the constant press behind them like studio stuff. You just have to be active and find the good things for yourself. The film was released on video only two years ago. *Available from Kino on video, in most video stores.*



## CHAMELEON STREET (1992, Wendell B. Harris, Jr.) (95 min)



A biting satire based on true stories of separate con-artists that tried to pull various scams, including blackmail and impersonating a reporter, surgeon, lawyer and others. Not a simple comedy so much as a deep look into how different races, social classes and ways of making a living are taken for granted. A true "independent" film, not because of its small budget or Wendell Harris's role as writer-director-star, but from its story and style taking chances. **Why did you miss it?** Even after winning best film at Sundance (before it was the super-popular fest it is now), no distributor would pick it up, apparently scared by the film's content. The only offer was to remake the film with "Fresh Prince" Will Smith, effectively putting a happy face on it. Appalled at that idea, Harris held out and STREET finally made an all-too-limited release in theaters and later on home video. Highly recommended. *Available at most video stores.*

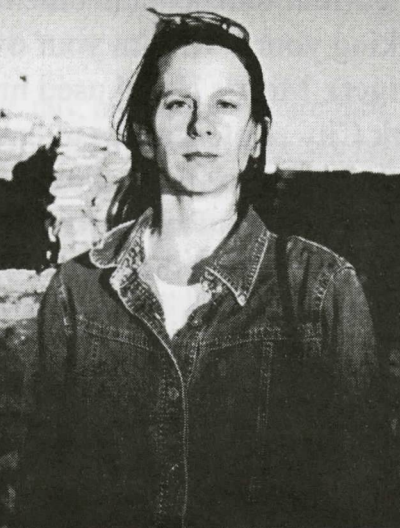


# SPARSE VOICE

by *Minda Martin*



**BRITTA  
SJOGREN**



Britta Sjogren's experimental narrative feature film, *GREEN AND DIMMING* (currently in post-production), is an examination of four people who are at a transitional state in their life. Like a mosaic, *GREEN AND DIMMING* presents the different perspectives we carry within ourselves. By observing the character's daily routines, certain life choices cause them to transform.

I had seen and enjoyed Britta Sjogren's prior films: the existentialist drama *JO-JO AT THE GATE OF LIONS* (1992) and the poetic minimalist short *A SMALL DOMAIN* (1996). Although both films had blended elements of the documentary form (use of real locations, non-actors and some improvisation), *GREEN AND DIMMING* is her closest effort toward non-fiction.

*GREEN AND DIMMING* was written economically with descriptive scenes, void of dialogue. The characters on which the script is based play roles similar to themselves. For example, Chris Shearer, who acted in *JO-JO AT THE GATE OF LIONS*, plays a struggling actor trying to make ends meet.

Another character, also named Chris, plays a man with a history of mental illness who runs into trouble with the law. Even though this was Chris's first time acting, almost all of his performances were perfect on the first try. By the end of the shooting, Chris was known as "The One Take Wonder." All the characters portray aspects taken from their life within fictional scenarios.

I helped record the sound for *GREEN AND DIMMING* and witnessed Sjogren as a director. Her openness and sensitivity on the set kept everyone focused and relaxed. Even though Sjogren is a perfectionist with set design, camera placement and framing, as well as the actors' performances, she encourages spontaneity. This occurred by nature (wind blows at the right moment), by coincidence (an interesting person walks into the frame), by discovery of a location or an aspect of a character's persona. Her pursuit for naturalism was for me, to say the least, inspiring.

I've spoken to Britta over the phone and by email about her filmmaking experiences in the last ten years.

I'm amazed how much she's still struggling to make new work. Sjogren is one of Los Angeles' most educated, independent, critically acclaimed filmmakers. Even though she has two advanced degrees in film from UCLA, her work isn't academic. Instead, she tells powerful stories about the human condition ex-

*Photos courtesy B. Sjogren*

This page: *A SMALL DOMAIN*, the filmmaker

Opposite: Hands and umbrella from *JO-JO AT THE GATE OF LIONS*, middle from *A SMALL DOMAIN*



pressed in engaging narrative structures.

"I started out writing about films—but after a while I realized that I really wanted to be making films instead," says Sjogren. Her films are innovative in the narrative structure, the minimalist rich sound design and the striking austere images. For example, the stark black and white imagery, unobtrusive lighting and sparse sets in *JO-JO AT THE GATE OF LIONS* is a visual style that carries over in *A SMALL DOMAIN* (although it is shot in color) and in *GREEN AND DIMMING*.

Where most films stop with a creative style and an entertaining story, Sjogren's films go beyond embracing ideas. "When I'm writing a script I'm thinking about books and poetry," she says. Sjogren's film titles are often inspired from poetry. In fact, *GREEN AND DIMMING* is inspired by the expressive sense of loss in the first lines of "Keep Moving", a poem by Rumi. "Do you hear what the violin says about longing?" The same as the stick, "I was once a green branch in the wind."

"This expresses how I was feeling when I devised the script," says Sjogren. "That sense of no longer being who you were, or what you are—the ache of recognizing a shift in your being and what comes out of it."

Transgression and sacrifice are recurrent themes that can be traced from her first film, *JO-JO AT THE GATE OF LIONS*, about a young woman torn between two desires: one for the man she loves, and the other for the man who intimidates her.

"The character of Jo-Jo was conceived as a way of exploring the relationship between pain and power, suffering and transcendence," Sjogren says.

I remember seeing *JO-JO* a few years ago. What struck me was the atmospheric world she had created with the use of sound. Like Robert Bresson, a filmmaker Sjogren greatly admires, she uses sound to evoke the character's interiority.

"I've always been fascinated with the musical aspect to words, the sound of languages, and the quality of voice patterns," says Sjogren. She studied foreign languages and poetry before earning her advanced degrees in film. This can be heard and felt throughout *JO-JO* in the rich saturated tonality of the cryptic voices that haunt the main character.

After she made *JO-JO*, Sjogren continued to investigate the use of sound in film in her dissertation, *Sustaining Difference: Female Voice-Off in Hollywood Films of the 1940s*.

"Voice-off is basically voice-over," Sjogren says. "I'm interested in the mutability of the voice relative to space, how it can slip between being a voice-over that comes from outside the story to a voice inhabiting off-screen space. I think this chameleon-esque quality helps to create awareness of contradictory points of view, and of energetic paradoxes between



**"The heroines in this film don't necessarily solve their problems but they**



**look their pain in the face and find a way to reinvent themselves. In so doing, they affect much more**



**than merely their own lives, and their own futures."**



sound and image.”

Even though JO-JO was well received at festivals—it earned second place for Best Feature at the international competitive film festival at Creteil, France, and Best Narrative at the Atlanta film festival—Sjogren was not immediately able to get funding for her next film.

Four years later she made the 22-minute dramatic short, *A SMALL DOMAIN*, inspired by a friendship with Beatrice Hays, whose hands had appeared in JO-JO.

“She had told me stories about her relationship with her dead husband, with a very gentle and romantic view of love that I found very beautiful, and yet somehow out of sync with our time,” Sjogren remembers.

*A SMALL DOMAIN* is a film about the last two days of a kleptomaniac as she prepares for her suicide on the anniversary of her marriage to her dead husband. When she shops, she steals things she needs. Later she steals or takes (since it’s not certain if she thinks it’s a gift) someone’s baby.

“This was such a personal project and I literally just made it out of love for Bee and to do something creative,” Sjogren says. Like JO-JO, *A SMALL DOMAIN* premiered at the Sundance film festival. It won the Grand Jury Prize for Best Short Film.

“A lot of people make shorts as calling-cards for Hollywood, to show that they know how to make a film,” Sjogren says. “I’ve never been interested in making a short like that. To me it is its own art form. The same goes for my features: I’m deeply attached to each of my projects. The motivation for making them comes from the desire to explore an idea that I find compelling, above all else.”

When I went to look for JO-JO at the video store, I was surprised that I couldn’t find it anywhere. “JO-JO is distributed by Strand,” Sjogren says. “It should be coming out on video soon. The last time we talked about it, it was agreed it will go out this year, but they want to wait until *LOST OASIS* is launched.”

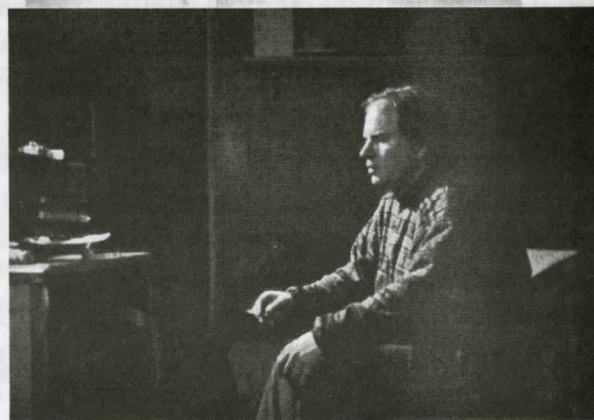
Part of Sjogren’s reason for making *GREEN AND DIMMING* was to keep busy while putting together two other feature projects, *LOST OASIS* and *CLAIRE’S BONES*. Like her previous films, the scripts contain female protagonists who are often perceived or discussed from perspectives of other characters.

“I’m interested in exploring ways to represent a woman’s subjectivity in film. I’ve often looked to other films for inspiration in this regard, like Jean-Luc Godard’s *VIVRE SA VIE*, Chantal Akerman’s *MEETINGS WITH ANNA*, Max Ophul’s *LETTER FROM AN UNKNOWN WOMAN*. Voice-over is something I experiment with a lot, as well as different techniques of storytelling—breaking up point of view, creating distance through a tableau-like structure, making the tense of the story ambiguous, etc.” Sjogren has embraced this structural use of tableaux in many of her scripts, including *LOST OASIS*, currently in pre-production.

*LOST OASIS* is a well-crafted narrative that jumps back and forth in time to reveal the friendship between two women. They have run to the desert to escape traumatic events that were out of their control but for which they still blame themselves.

“It’s a film about grief and rage and how these emotions are experienced both personally and socially,” Sjogren says. “The heroines in this film don’t necessarily solve their problems but they look their pain in the face and find a way to reinvent themselves. In so doing, they affect much more

**“A lot of people make shorts as calling-cards for Hollywood, to show that they know how to make a film. I’ve never been interested in making a short like that. To me it is its own art form.”**



This page: *GREEN AND DIMMING*  
Opposite: JO-JO



than merely their own lives, and their own futures.”

Britta’s other pre-production project, *CLAIRE’S BONES*, is about a young part-Klamath Indian paleontologist who is on a “vision quest” to find the one and only perfect love. As the narrative unfolds, Claire’s complex love-hate relationship with American culture helps us to rediscover the social tensions and environmental history of the Pacific Northwest.

*CLAIRE’S BONES* is being funded partly through grants and fellowships—the project is particularly ambitious and will take some time yet to complete.

“Ninety-nine percent of filmmaking is persistence,” Sjogren says. “Filmmaking is a form of insanity, or a form of addiction. You wonder sometimes why you don’t give up, but you just can’t. Probably because the pleasure of filmmaking is so intense—it makes it all the sacrifices worthwhile. There are moments when I’m working on a film that I think, it’s so exhausting, so stressful, I would never be crazy enough to try to make another film when this one is done.

“But there’s an adrenaline rush to the process, a great kind of energy that you crave when it’s all over. You can’t resist jumping right back in.”

*Minda Martin teaches film production at UC-San Diego and has recently finished a documentary, AKA KATHE.*



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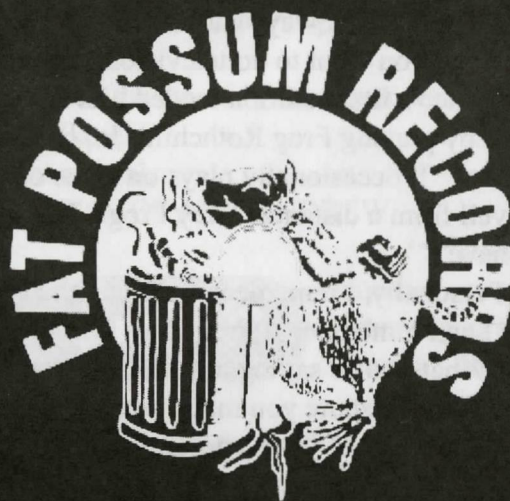
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**REPO MAN**

# THATGUY

## Tracey Walter

*I called my only friend at an agency and asked him what ThatGuys they represented. "How about Tracey Walter? He comes in and talks to everyone, great guy." I grew up with REPO MAN! He always plays a guy named Bob! Get me in touch!*

I got a hold of Mr. Walter on the phone. One of the more interesting talks I've had so far, in that he wasn't into

being interviewed at first and then barraged me with awesome quotes. He asked me a few questions about the mag and then:

"Another question, and we should be honest here. Do you have any idea who I am?"

That's why I'm doing this. The actors who work hard and make memorable performances, yet don't get the respect from the media. ThatGuy. Putting a name to the face.

I wondered if character actors necessarily set out to do character roles. Were they thinking of the smaller roles when they started? "Fortunately," says Walter, "I wasn't thinking."

"When I started out I knew nothing," Walter continues. "My Father was a truck driver and all I knew about Hollywood was that when I watched TV back in Jersey City it said, 'Made in Hollywood.'"

Walter began with a lot of theater work on and off-Broadway. But he "always loved '70's L.A. It was more poetic than today. It always had and still has that mystery, the romance.... The climate is beautiful. If you want to do movies, if you want to do television, it's not in Des Moines, it's not in Kansas City, it's not even in New York."

Walter's first audition landed him a guest spot on TV's *Code R*. He did small roles in films and then got a big boost by playing Frog Rothchild, Jr., on TV's *Best of the West*. "That show we did in the summer of '82," Frog remembers. "It occasionally plays on some obscure cable station. But it's been a while — and I will still have people yell from a distance, 'Hey Frog!' That's amazing! Can you imagine if it would've ran 10 years, like it should have?"

Personally, I remember watching the show when I was young, and I remember liking it. But the only specific I can remember is Frog. This is what character acting is all about.

"What you're saying has been echoed by a lot of people," Walter says. "I loved doing that show."

"Here's a quote you might want to throw in if you like: I'd rather be typecast than not cast at all. (laughs)"

"A number of years ago Truman Capote was drawing an analogy of how stupid actors are. I don't agree with that. Generally, in a very broad sense, you have intuitive actors, intellectual actors and then a combination. I think Robert Duvall is a great combination of both. Capote's thesis was that the dumber they are the better they are. There is something to that. David LeGrant, an acting coach in New York, gave me this example: Raise your hand. Actor says, ok, I'm ready. Hold — hold it! Which hand? The left. Ok, ready. Action. Hold it, hold it! How fast? As fast as you could possibly move it. Ok, ready to go, all set. Everybody set, okay — action! Hold — hold it — raise my left — raise fast — which direction?

"You get a dumb actor, you say raise your hand — he'll shoot up his hand. So — over thinking. And in this business — ignorance does have a place."

Walter has great quotes a plenty. He also has a well-defined idea of what actors need.

"What you need to do to make a good acting experience is a good cocoon-like atmosphere to act in," Walter says. "Where the actor will be able to give you a performance that, when the movie is finished you'll look at it and say, 'I'm glad I don't have to try that again.' *Best of the West* was like that. An enormously supportive



creative situation. And I had the good fortune of working opposite Leonard Frey ('Motel' from FIDDLER ON THE ROOF). An as-good-as-they-are actor. And he, because of his background, because of his talent, he would not accept nonsense. He loved the fact that I was a good actor and approached it with some real zest for life, into the part."

Walter became even more recognizable after Alex Cox's REPO MAN, a film I grew

**"As a character actor, very often, you'll get scripts that say 'work starts tomorrow.'"**

up with alongside SUBURBIA and THE DECLINE OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION. Walter had no idea a whole generation would latch onto the film. He plays Miller, the trash man cleaning out the cars for the repo men. Walter gives Emilio Estevez various words of wisdom about plates of shrimp, not to mention tree air fresheners: "Find one in every car, you'll see."

While considered a 'cult classic', the film is also a great satire with points about L.A. and the myriad of adult advice that youth receive these days. Miller comes off somewhat like a freak, living in L.A. and not knowing how to drive, but Walter plays him straight and with respect. He is a person who at least observes and listens to what's going on around us, rather than regurgitating corporate knowledge while tailgating everyone on an overcrowded highway.

There's a dealership in town called "Ugly But Honest." Maybe this is what endears character actors to us. They don't seem to judge their roles or second-guess the characters' decisions if they're motivated. It is not the famous actor we are watching but a real person. Or a crazy person. Or a laughable one. Or a charismatic one. They don't have near the screen time, yet they get into peoples' heads just the same as the big names.

Walter is also recognizable as the Joker's sidekick, "Bob" in BATMAN, "Cookie" the authentic western chef in CITY SLICKERS and "Lamar," the undertaker in SILENCE OF THE LAMBS.

"Character actors, or actors, achieve a certain status where they're a face," Walter says. He adds that Don Johnson, co-actor on *Nash Bridges*, said that even if 50 percent of everyone polled worshipped Johnson, the other half would have never had heard of him.

As opposed to Johnson, though, Walter says "as a character actor, very often, you'll get scripts that say 'work starts tomorrow.'"

"It's always shocking to me how many people do come up to me on the street." Many even know his real name. "Occasionally they'll start reciting lines that I've long forgotten. (laughs)"

Lately he's been noticed from the Carl Jr's steak sandwich commercial.

Walter plays "Bloodhound Bob" (lots of Bobs, for that matter) in AMOS AND ANDREW.

**"I'd rather be typecast than not cast at all. (laughs)"**

"There's another example of where ignorance works," Walter explains. "I hap-

pened to have the script for six weeks. Never occurred to me—in six weeks—that there could be just a tad of trouble working with two huge bloodhounds on leashes. Going through the woods at night, going down stairs—you know how they like to smoke them up! Never occurred to me. And you know who's the happiest guy on the set when you arrive and he sees the actor who has to work with dogs ain't afraid of dogs? The trainer. (laughs) The most relieved guy."

Walter says, "You never know where or how a job could come up." One time, Walter was riding his bike in New York City and ran into a theater director he knew. He ended up in a play alongside Peter Weller and Mandy Patinkin. One film director hired him not because he saw him in a flick but because the director's wife saw someone who reminded her of Walter and suggested him.

"It's truly a great business when it works," Walter says. "One of the things I love about this business is that I have achieved good acquaintanceships and friendships with a lot of these people."

Like director Jonathan Demme, whom has directed Walter in five films.

"Demme sent me a script for SOMETHING WILD," Walter remembers.



The two had never met. He read it and knew he wasn't going to be any of the leads.

"I went in to meet John and we had a great talk. He said, 'REPO MAN is one of my all-time favorite films. I keep a copy by the TV in case anyone (who comes by) hasn't seen it.'" After agreeing Walter wouldn't fit in to the lead roles, Demme called him the next day and offered him the small part of the liquor store clerk.

"The joke is: fat guy waddles up the ladder," Walter says. "Demme, the brilliant director that he is, says I don't want her hitting on a character that's at a lower stage of life than she is. So we come up with this whole thing of the (goes into accent) country squire who had been to England and had this phony accent and had a pipe and a little moustache. Relatively small part. (REPO director) Alex Cox saw the film and said, 'Where was he?'" A great compliment.

Walter also has a fruitful relationship with Jack Nicholson, acting in two films Nicholson directed. Walter mentions the first, GOIN' SOUTH, and then proceeds to name every actor who appeared in it! In the second, THE TWO JAKES, Walter "played Tyrone Motley — a geologist whose real love was being part-time paleontologist at the La Brea tar pits. There's a mouthful!"

When it appears good actors are in bad films, (I've even been guilty of) the assumption that they had to pay the phone bill or did it for a friend. Walter gives a clearer impression.

**"It's always shocking to me how many people do come up to me on the street. Occasionally they'll start reciting lines that I've long forgotten."**

"Even besides (those reasons), from a more aesthetic point of view, you don't always know how a film is gonna unfold," Walter says. "And you

certainly don't know, six months down the line, what the climate is gonna be like out there and how it's gonna be received. There's a number of reasons besides money to do a movie."

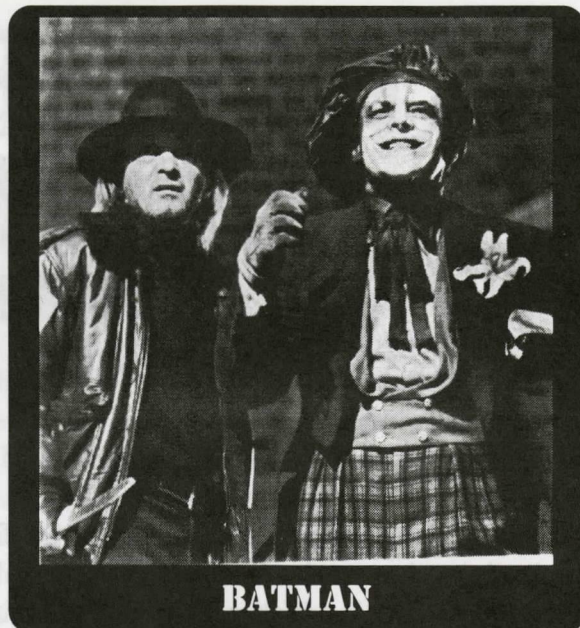
Right now Walter is ecstatic to have a recurring role as an angel on *Nash Bridges*. "How often are you gonna get to wear wings? And they write me some very poetic-type dialogue."

And the kicker: "I realized a couple of months ago I could fly to San Francisco and shoot a scene quicker than sometimes a drive to the West Valley. I'm not kidding!"

*After thanking Mr. Walter for the interview he called it his pleasure. He's a class act who respects his co-workers and remembers their work and names. So you should remember his, too.*

### **Partial Filmography**

Badge 373 (1973) DELIVERY BOY  
Annie Hall (1977) ACTOR IN ROB'S TV SHOW  
Goin' South (1978) OUTLAW  
Blue Collar (1978) UNION MEMBER  
Hardcore (1979) MALE TELLER  
The Hunter (1980) VENGEFUL PSYCHOPATH  
Fifth Floor (1980) MENTAL PATIENT  
Raggedy Man (1981) SOUTHERN TRASH  
The Hand (1981) COP  
Time Rider (1982) OUTLAW  
Honkytonk Man (1982) "POOCH"/MECHANIC





Rumble Fish (1983) ALLEY MUGGER #1  
 Deal of the Century (1983) COMPUTER  
 TECHNICIAN  
 Repo Man (1984) "MILLER"  
 Conan the Destroyer (1984) SIDEKICK  
 Something Wild (1986) COUNTRY SQUIRE  
 At Close Range (1986) UNCLE  
 Malone (1987) HENCHMAN  
 Midnight Run (1988) DINER COUNTER MAN  
 Married to the Mob (1988) "MR. CHICKEN  
 LICKIN"

Mortuary Academy (1988)  
 Out of the Dark (1988) LIEUTENANT  
 Homer & Eddie (1989) STUTTERING COP  
 Under the Boardwalk (1989) BUM  
 The Two Jakes (1990) GEOLOGIST  
 Pacific Heights (1990) EXTERMINATOR  
 Batman (1990) "BOB THE GOON"/ JOKER  
 SIDEKICK  
 Young Guns II (1990) CANTINA OWNER  
 Wild at Heart (1990) TAKES SLED DOGS TO  
 ALASKA (scenes deleted)  
 Silence of the Lambs (1991) UNDERTAKER  
 Delusion (1991) HOTEL DESK CLERK  
 City Slickers (1991) "COOKIE" THE  
 AUTHENTIC WESTERN CHEF  
 Guncrazy (1992) BAR PATRON  
 Liquid Dreams (1992) STUTTERING TEST  
 PATIENT

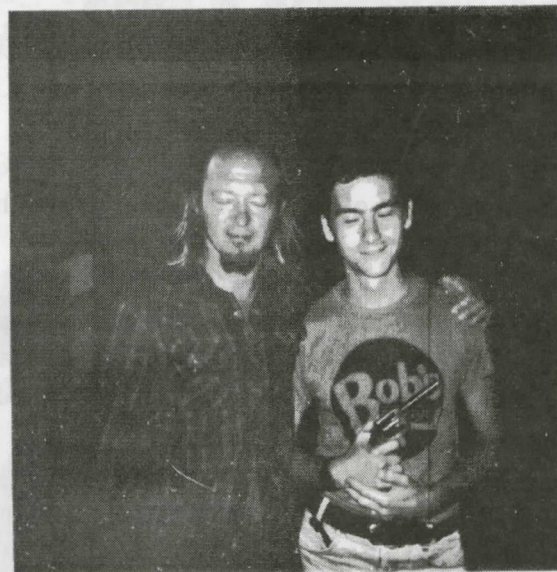
Amos & Andrew (1993) "BLOODHOUND BOB"  
 Philadelphia (1993) LIBRARIAN  
 Cyborg 2 (1993) "WILD CARD"/DOCTOR  
 Junior (1994) JANITOR  
 Mona Must Die (1994) TV REPAIRMAN  
 Destiny Turns On The Radio (1995) DAD  
 Buffalo Girls (TV) (1995) TRAPPER  
 The Companion (TV) (1995) COUNTRY  
 STORE CLERK  
 Fist of the North Star (1995) MEEK VICTIM  
 Matilda (1996) FBI AGENT  
 Larger Than Life (1996) "WEE ST. FRANCIS"/  
 PETTING ZOO OWNER  
 Drive (1996) "HEDGEHOG"  
 Entertaining Angels (1996) STUTTERING  
 ACTIVIST  
 Independence Day (1996) DOCTOR'S  
 ASSISTANT  
 Size of Watermelons (1996) VAGRANT  
 Teddy & Philomina (1996) ANGEL #85  
 Kiss The Girls (1997) (uncredited) BOOK  
 STORE CLERK

Wild America (1997) FARMER  
 Playing God (1997) DESERT BAR PATRON  
 Beloved (1998) SLAVE CATCHER  
 Desperate Measures (1998) MEDICAL  
 INMATE  
 Mighty Joe Young (1998) SECURITY GUARD  
 Physical Graffiti (1999) TOWN SAGE  
 Jazz Night (1999) STREET GUY MISTAKEN  
 FOR AVANT-GARDE ARTIST  
 Amanda (1999) PRIEST  
 Imposter (1999) NEIGHBOR  
 The Man in the Moon (1999) EDITOR OF THE  
 ENQUIRER

### **TV Recurring Roles**

Best of the West (1981-82) "FROG"/  
 SIDEKICK  
 Freddy's Nightmares (1988) GRAVEDIGGER  
 On the Air (1992) "BLINKY"/BLIND  
 SOUNDMAN  
 Brisco County (1993) "PHIL SWILL"/  
 OUTLAW  
 Nash Bridges (1996-on) ANGEL

*It's a small world:  
 Tracey Walter with Jem Cohen  
 (courtesy J. Cohen, see page 4)*





# THAT GIRL

## Thelma Ritter

It is hard to believe Thelma Ritter wasn't in 100 movies. Her resume includes 30 films, along with some television gigs.

It is hard to believe Thelma Ritter wasn't your Grandmother. Always older and wiser than everyone else and always ready to let them know it. She cuts through the nonsense. She takes care of you and gives you someone to look to for the truth.

It is hard to believe Thelma Ritter is a ThatGirl. She never had top billing but was at least nominated for six Oscars as Supporting Actress, showing they did something right (although she never won). Yet her name does not always bring up a face in peoples' minds.

Acting since she was a child, Ritter studied at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts and did many stage productions. After doing radio in the 1940s, her friend, George Seaton, gave her a role in his film *MIRACLE ON 34TH STREET*. It marked the beginning of an unforgettable character actress career.

Ritter not only filled character roles, she stole scenes. Even though she was delegated to being either your Mom or your maid, big time actors



**ALL ABOUT EVE**

never upstaged her.

Bette Davis did not outclass her in *ALL ABOUT EVE*. James Stewart did not out-act her in *REAR WINDOW* and Rock Hudson did not ignore her in *PILLOW TALK*. You remember Ritter right along with the marquee names.

In their description of *MOVE OVER, DARLING*, the Motion Picture Database says Ritter "steals every scene she is in and leaves the other actors looking like high-schoolers in a play with Olivier." The film also stars Doris Day and James Garner.

Known for witty, biting dialogue, Ritter would get the good lines and pull them off as if they were what the audience had just been waiting to say. Not today's surface-level sarcasm, but a stab with some insight. "We've become a race of Peeping Toms. What people ought to do is get outside their own house and look in for a change."

But she could also bring poignant moments to her older characters. She brought very nice, human elements to the divorcee in *THE MISFITS* while other actors would have gone straight for the self-pity.

One of Ritter's shining roles outside of her usual casting assignments was in Sam Fuller's *PICKUP ON SOUTH STREET*. Playing a down-on-her-luck street peddler and police informer, she brings humor and a calm humanity to the character. And in a genre that is known for its melodrama. Yet, she respects the character and never pulls it out of its doomed status.



## FILMOGRAPHY

Miracle on 34th Street (1947) PETER'S MOM  
 City Across the River (1949) MOM  
 Father Was a Fullback (1949) MAID  
 All About Eve (1950) "BIRDIE"/MAID  
 I'll Get By (1950)  
 Perfect Strangers (1950) PREGNANT HOUSEWIFE  
 A Letter to Three Wives (1949) MOM'S DRINKING  
 BUDDY

As Young as You Feel (1951) MOM  
 The Mating Season (1951) MOM (MISTAKEN FOR  
 SERVANT)  
 The Model and the Marriage Broker (1951)  
 MARRIAGE BROKER

With a Song in My Heart (1952) NURSE  
 The Farmer Takes a Wife (1953) "LUCY  
 CASHDOLLAR"

Pickup on South Street (1953) STREET PEDDLER/  
 INFORMER

Titanic (1953) RICH WESTERN LADY  
 Rear Window (1954) NURSE  
 Daddy Long Legs (1955) Fred Astaire's SECRETARY  
 Lucy Gallant (1955) YOKEL MILLIONAIRE  
 The Proud and Profane (1956) RED CROSS GROUP  
 LEADER

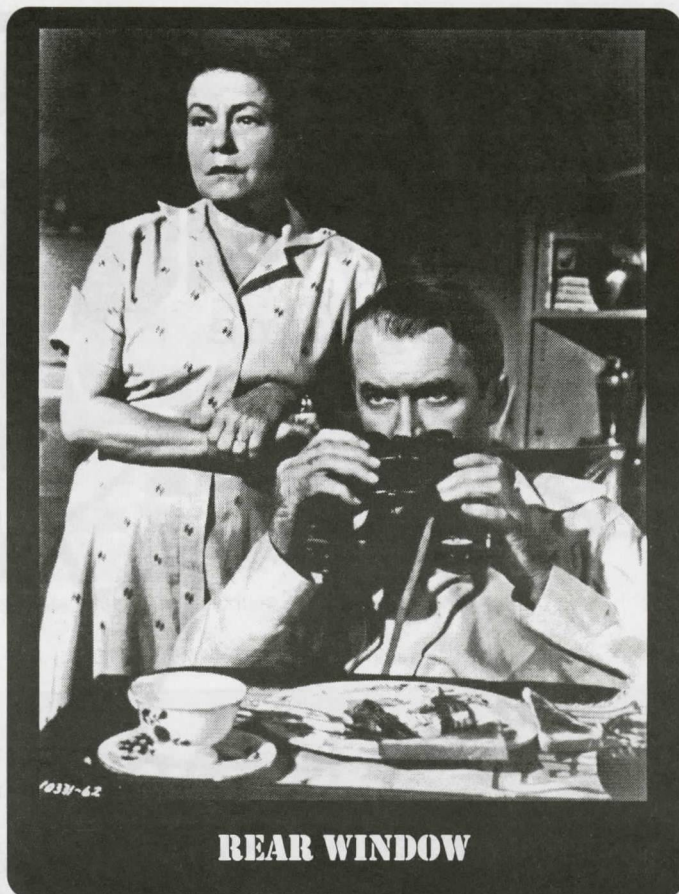
Pillow Talk (1959) MAID  
 The Misfits (1961) DIVORCEE  
 A Hole in the Head (1959) Sinatra's SISTER-IN-  
 LAW

The Second Time Around (1961)  
 How the West Was Won (1962) PIONEER  
 Birdman of Alcatraz (1962) MOM  
 For Love or Money (1963) MOM MILLIONAIRESS  
 Move Over, Darling (1963) MOM-IN-LAW  
 A New Kind of Love (1963) FASHION STEALER  
 Boeing Boeing (1965) "BERTHA"/HOUSEKEEPER  
 The Incident (1967) "BERTHA"/SUBWAY VICTIM  
 What's So Bad About Feeling Good? (1968)

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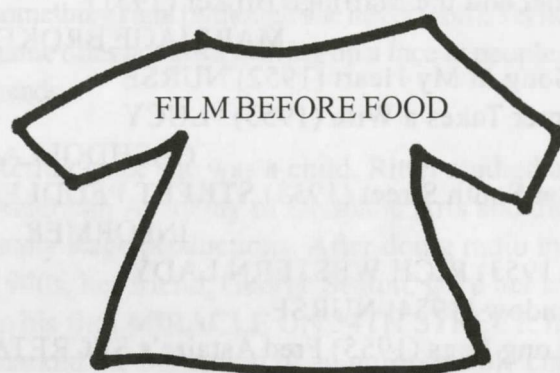
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While talking to Mr. Wilcha (appropriately) on the phone about his office diary project, there (appropriately) were a few office interruptions. This falls in line with the rest of the issue as I interviewed Mr. Hall at the cinematographers' union and Mr. Cohen (whom Wilcha praises as a "film monk") overlooking NYC.

With a surface-level description of "a video diary of working at Columbia House", you might skip over Christopher Wilcha's *THE TARGET SHOOTS FIRST*. But this 70-minute documentary/diary is not pretentious or boring. Instead it's a fun and honest document of when a guy with punk rock ethics finds himself in a corporate position.

Wilcha graduated from NYU in 1993 with a degree in philosophy. During school he played in a punk band. Alas, Wilcha says, "band went nowhere, I graduated, I needed a job. It was as simple as that."

A friend of a friend got him an interview with the music mail order club, Columbia House. He landed a job in marketing, as he puts it, because he knew of Nirvana and the upcoming wave of "alternative" music, impressing the 40-something interviewer.

For the next two years, Wilcha took his video camera to work with him. He taped everything imaginable: meetings, personal discussions, work shenanigans, work parties, lunches, formal product discussions and more. He even scored a quick interview with the CEO.

Wilcha was already familiar with personal documentaries like the works of Sadie Benning, Ross McElwee and various zines: the idea of expressing an unique situation that you may not find yourself in again.

Wilcha likes the idea of collecting material for a project. Later he pulled a story out of it rather than simply stringing things together.

"I got this job because of a kind of fluke, a funny pop culture historical moment, and there I was — given some responsibility and power," Wilcha says. "And what did I do with it? And how did I feel after that? There was the kind of disillusionment that went along with that."

While we both love Michael Moore's work, attacking corporations that totally disregard their employees' welfare, *TARGET* is a very different beast.

"It was different because I was definitely an insider," Wilcha admits. "I was working at the company, I wasn't just documenting it. I wasn't interested in condemning it because I was implicit in it. I felt, how sorry are you going to feel for me? I took the job! I was collecting the paycheck."

"But once in that place, is there a way to look around and to be curious about the way that the company is constructed, the way the economics work, the relationships between the people in the place. If you're going to be there then can you look around and

Reason for form: (Check one only)

☐ Change ☐ Life event

All life events require an explanation

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102

ACCIDENTAL DEATH AND DISMEMBERMENT

Basic coverage only (100%) ☐ x base/benefit salary

Supplemental ☐ Employee only

I authorize any payroll deductions caused by this form

Employee's signature

The Target Shoots First a documentary by Christopher Wilcha

# Is 'head' Capitalized?

## "THE TARGET SHOOTS FIRST"

### working at Columbia House

photos courtesy C. Wilcha



learn something about it."

Wilcha profiles how the company operates. The viewer follows Wilcha through the hiring process, training under an enthusiastic "You Can Hear A Smile" poster and learning Columbia House's system from the head office to the actual shipping center. You get to know the people around him, from the artistic group on the 17<sup>th</sup> floor to the management on the 19<sup>th</sup> floor (where Wilcha is) and all the conflicts in-between.

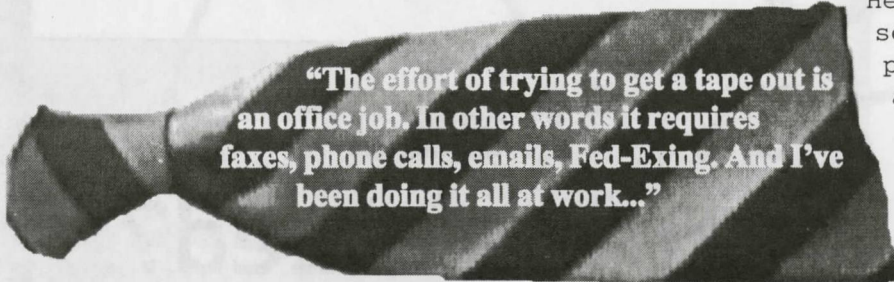
However, the story is not the company, but the way Wilcha reacts in that environment and whether he changes it or it changes him.

"A bunch of forces conspired but basically the woman I was working for got pregnant and never returned from maternity leave," Wilcha remembers. He soon found himself as the marketing product manager for the new alternative section.

"They probably would have never hired someone as young as me into that position," Wilcha says, "but just by default, because I had been doing the work, 'all right, let's give it to him.' Of course they got me for such an incredible steal because I was making no money. They didn't give me a raise (laughs), they just gave me the title!"

Wilcha's punk rock ideals clashed with his new-found heavy corporate responsibility.

He is brave with how he shows himself in his video, his personality possibly changing. It is far from an ego-fest.



**"The effort of trying to get a tape out is an office job. In other words it requires faxes, phone calls, emails, Fed-Exing. And I've been doing it all at work..."**

"I'll be honest with you, I felt kinda out of control," Wilcha admits. "On one side I was feeling completely cynical about it, 'whatever'. On the other side of it, when you're at work,

no matter what I am doing I want to do a good job, you know? If you're there and you're getting paid for it, you're not gonna fuck around. The machinery has to operate. Your ass is on the line ultimately if something is late or something doesn't get done.

"There was this transformation from where it was fun to shoot the shit... but then there would come this point where a meeting was getting disrupted or the writing wasn't getting done and all of a sudden I was in this position of authority where I had to make that happen. I didn't know what the fuck I was doing."

After becoming friends with one of the employees on the 17<sup>th</sup> floor, Wilcha found himself in a confrontation with the person in a meeting. Wilcha exerted his power as a member of the 19<sup>th</sup> floor.

"That scene you are referring to, it was awful and I know that's a funny moment where, ooh, what the fuck is going on with Chris. But that's kinda the point, which is your sympathy for me is probably going to change because I didn't know what I was doing! I felt I was on this tightrope walk. I always wanted to treat people well. But here was this guy openly confronting me and kind of fucking with me. There does come a point where you have to exercise the power even if you don't want to.

"And trust me, my ambivalence about it all is maybe ultimately what the movie is about: how I was not comfortable doing that."

While informative, honest and very serious at times, TARGET is mostly funny. One scene captures Wilcha in an important phone call trying to figure out if the 'head' in 'Butt-head' is capitalized.

"These are crucial aspects when you're writing copy," Wilcha explains. "(The scene) captured the kind of absurdity of the day-to-day work conversations I was having."

After getting background on the company and Wilcha's situation, the documentary moves towards the interesting changes Wilcha was able to make inside Columbia House.

Given the opportunity to design the new alternative music catalog, Wilcha and another marketing manager pulled together artistic people and broke down the rules between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> floors. Anybody could suggest ideas, anybody could do design, everyone gave their input where they weren't allowed to before.



What they came up with was a more human face on the catalog, literally.

They put their real names, faces and jobs in the book. They also put bands together regardless of pre-conceived genres and snuck a lot of humor into stuff they had to sell: "These bands blow... you away!"

Wilcha says, "The story isn't about the condemnation of corporate culture, but it's about people who found themselves in that environment who try to transform their relationship to each other and the workplace. We tried to transform it from the ground up. We did it but then realized that although we thought we were in opposition to (the company's) interests that wasn't true. We were in direct accord with their interests."

"Of course what cynically and awfully and ironically happened after I left was that (Columbia House) decided that branding things with a face and a name was a good thing. So

**"The story isn't about the condemnation of corporate culture, but it's about people who found themselves in that environment who try to transform their relationship to each other and the workplace. We tried to transform it from the ground up. We did it but then realized that although we thought we were in opposition to (the company's) interests that wasn't true. We were in direct accord with their interests."**

they manufactured a bunch of personas that were, of course, fake. Like, Tammy and Bob the jazz club product managers. They put in fake pictures, fake letters. So they were manufacturing the authenticity of the experience we were having...."

Wilcha videotaped his stay at the House from 1993 until 1995, collecting 200 hours(!) of footage.

"By that point my interest in film became exaggerated enough and it had become clear to me that I didn't want a career in direct mail."

Wilcha then went to film school at CalArts, north of Los Angeles, one freeway exit from Magic Mountain. TARGET was his master's thesis.

School was a solid experience for Wilcha. While everyone has a different experience, he benefited from being submersed in his project with expensive equipment available and teachers who had real documentary experience there to critique him. There were headaches with evil computer systems crashing and crunches on time, but Wilcha finished the video in December, 1998. He headed back to NYC to try to get the project seen.

You might be amused to know that Wilcha is back at Columbia House. After getting a freelance job at rival BMG, the work suddenly dried up. House people knew he was in town and said he could have his job back anytime.

Although intrigued by missing rent payments in NYC and ending up in the gutter, Wilcha decided to go back to the House. Ironically, this again helped his project.

"It was well-timed and actually, to be honest with you, it's been amazing for two reasons," Wilcha explains. "One: the effort of trying to get a tape out is an office job. In other words it requires faxes, phone calls, emails, Fed-Exing. And I've been doing it all at work, which is great. So I've gotten to not only make the thing about the place, but subsequently use it as my promotional machinery!"

Can I write that? Will they get mad?

"They're not going to read Cinemad. I think you can write that."

"Second. You know, I didn't realize this while I was making it but now that I've





made it and it exists and its being screened, I think it's really important that the people who are in it see it, that I make sure they're cool with it. For a while, that wasn't even something I was thinking about. I just wanted to get it done. But coming back here I've able to walk up to a person, say take this home, watch it tonight, let's talk about it tomorrow. Half these people I would've never been able to track down otherwise."

Many were very supportive and some even came to the New York Video Festival screening.

"And - by the way - I obviously, still, no matter what, need a day job," Wilcha adds. TARGET (and many documentaries for that fact) doesn't pay the bills. But Wilcha has enjoyed some festival exposure.

"You start to figure out the logic of this whole (distribution) game," Wilcha explains. "You get into a festival and yes, people see it, which is cool, but not that many people see it. What you get out of it often is a clip out of the local paper, or what I've found is that all of these little screenings have websites and stuff. They all look at each other's websites.

"I got a screening at Craig Baldwin's Other Cinema in San Francisco. So many people look to his site for clues on how to program their own places. Immediately upon getting a screening at Other Cinema, a guy from Canada calls me, the Blinding Light cinema. 'Hey man, saw your thing on Craig Baldwin's site, send me a tape.' I have a screening in Canada. So they're all looking out for each other. The microuniverse of indie film community quickly starts to influence who's calling you and the interest you start to get."

The film festival and independently owned theater circuit compares to the music circuit.

"On the indie scale there's a perfect analogy: it's just like going to a city and playing the show. Having a conversation with somebody who's doing a zine or local weekly paper. From that, trying to build interest elsewhere. It's definitely a circuit. And it seems like a lot of these people know each other. ...It's pretty well connected."

One more thing about being back at Sony-owned Columbia House: "Oh, also, I get a Sony employee discount. So I've got my eye on a digital camera. Get that 40% knocked down price."

Wilcha is currently working on new short films, a website for all the stuff that didn't make it into TARGET's final cut and is pursuing the idea of a subscription service of sending short films to your door. Taking over direct mail for the good of the people.

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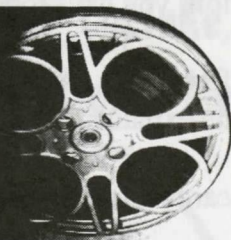
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# Living in a Movie Theater

Telluride: Bruce Miller



*The first in a series about people whom live in movie theaters. I met Bruce while working at the Telluride Film Festival, where he busted his ass working as a theater house manager.*

I noticed that all the theater projection booths at Telluride had a comic strip of a projectionist who lived at the movie theater he worked at.

At first I was surprised because the comic is based in Tucson. The particular strip also adorns the theater I work at. Finding out why it was all over Telluride surprised me more.

Someone remarked, "Hey, Bruce, isn't that supposed to be you?"

"Not literally, but a friend saw it and thought of me."

I asked, "So, you live in a movie theater here?"

"Yeah, at the Nugget."

"Can I interview you?"

Originally from Illinois, Bruce Miller first came to Telluride to go to the film festival in 1987. He was purely a filmgoer. At the time he lived permanently in Salt Lake City. He moved to Telluride for the summer of 1988 but basically couldn't find work. In 1989 he started working for the film festival.

"When I came to work the 1993 festival, I just stayed." Miller got offered a job at the Nugget Theater, which operates year-round. He has been living in the theater since February 1994. He still works as house manager and occasionally as projectionist.

A friend of Miller's saw the comic strip in Albuquerque and sent it to him. It quickly became a piece of equipment for all the film festival booths. When the temporary booths are broken down after the festival, the comic goes in a box with the splicer tape and projector oil.

For a side job, Miller also caretakes houses. He can shower there or at a nearby youth hostel.

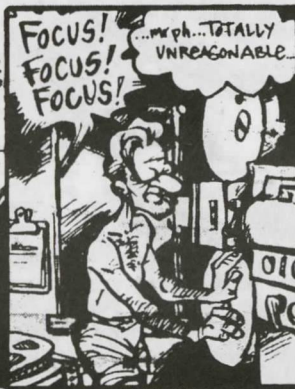
Miller literally lives in a loft inside the theater. A back office has stairs that lead up to it. Once in the



*Bruce and the stairs home.*

## Staggering Heights

By Joe Forkan



Courtesy of J. Forkan. Check him out: [www.joeforkan.com](http://www.joeforkan.com)



loft, you have to bend over, the space is only about five feet tall. No bed, Miller just stretches out a sleeping bag.

The actual amount of stuff Miller owns is amazingly minimal. A small row of clothes on hangers and a few boxes that couldn't take up more than five square feet on the floor. That's it. "I'm the opposite of a pack rat," he explains.

The rest of the loft is storage for various boxes of stuff and a lot of odd stage props, like sequined dresses, cardboard sets and giant dice. This stuff has been there a long time.

Incidentally, Miller is not the first Telluride resident to live in a theater. Malcolm Goldie, who passed away in 1987, was one of the very first festival workers as a projectionist. He lived in the other theater, the Sheridan Opera House, which shows movies but also puts on many plays. People referred to him as the Phantom of the Opera House.

Miller is sometimes referred to as the Phantom of the Nugget.

No matter what time I came to work during the festival, day or night, Miller was there, a true film lover, hard at work with the rest of the staff.

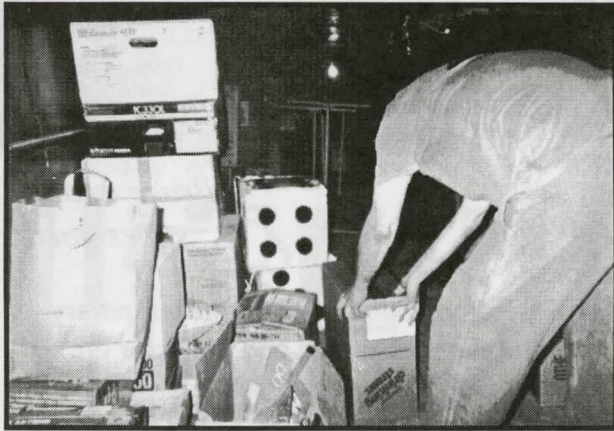
The building the Nugget is part of is one of the oldest in town, dating back over 100 years. After being up for sale for longer than anyone can remember, the building recently sold. The plan is to remodel in order to get the building historically registered.

Miller no longer eats popcorn and rarely drinks soda.

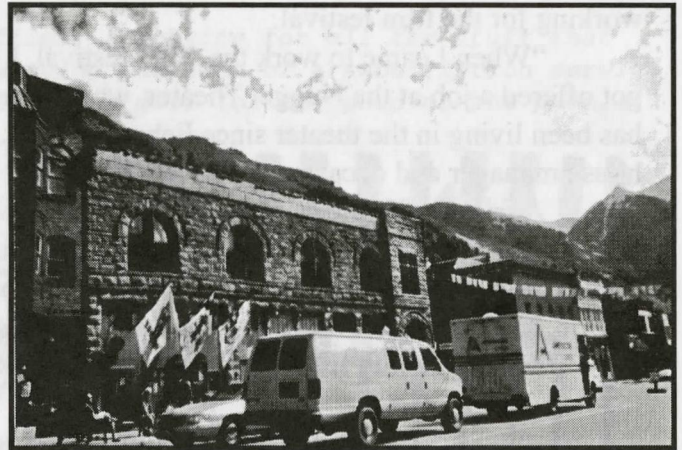
### **Bruce Miller Lives in a Movie Theater —**

**PROS:** Rent is free. No utilities. Work is right here so no need for a car. And if you work the late movie, it's no big deal to walk home.

**CONS:** The major drawback is the lack of privacy, especially if someone tries to use the office for sex. The very minor drawback is being asked to fill-in on shifts often.



*The Nugget also has theater performances.*



*The Nugget Theater, Telluride, CO.*



*All the property of Bruce Miller.*





# READ THIS FOR FREE SEX:

POP CULTURE,  
DISTRIBUTION & ME

An on-going battle for me with mainstream films only partly involves the film itself. I find that I cannot separate the project from the incredible hype and pop culture machine that surrounds it. It's hard to do a film justice if you already know what 20 critics say about it, what genre it is selling itself on and constant talk about box office expectations. Not to mention all the baggage that comes with who's making and releasing it.

For mainstream film I'm talking about something made with Hollywood money, with its posters everywhere you look and distribution in multiplexes across America. Some films made outside the studio system slip in and get the same treatment but the majority have recognizable stars, plots and budgets. Also, ones that slip in completely fit it with money-making ideals.

In the mainstream the egg always comes before the chicken. So much promo-



"You go with the expectancy as an audience to see something that's going to knock your socks off your feet. And you settle for a nice movie." —John Cassavetes

tion and expectation get painted on an unseen project that it feels like staring at a plain, round shell, no different from a thousand other shells, for days and months and sometimes years. After too much paint the animal inside is almost forgotten. It can never live up to the shell, when it should never be expected to. But it ends up being judged by it.

Much of my reaction towards the mainstream focuses on the promotion since the actual films are routinely so bad that they are not even worth putting down. Do I need to write that Arnold cannot act very well? Someone can't figure that out by watching his films? Someone surprised that a remake or sequel was not half as good as the first? The only reason to talk about some films is the incredibly odd way audiences respond as sheep to marketing, knowing full well that they are getting sold date-expired food in a new can.

I don't feel like I'm the only one responding this way. The most common reactions I get from very mainstream friends relate to the egg of promotion. At first, the new STAR WARS film "was not worth the hype." But lately, after months of playing in theaters and years of promotion, the film is "not as bad as everyone says." The only comment I get about BLAIR WITCH is that it doesn't live up to the hype.

What is far more important than both of these films are the extreme pop culture surrounding them. How can you possibly be let down by the new STAR WARS? If you watch the first three films you can make an educated guess the next one will also be kid-fare with total emphasis on special effects. Even creator George Lucas stated in a television interview: "It's a Saturday morning serial, nothing more," relating to the films' influence from old cliffhanger series like FLASH GORDON. If the new version delivers even better effects, even bigger actors and the simple continuation of the plots and themes established before, isn't it just delivering exactly what it has promised for twenty years?

I probably will never see the new film. Long before the first one was re-released I had already re-watched it and discovered some childhood loves are better as memories than re-experienced. I might have checked the new one out some laid-back day when any film would fly by me, but being suffocated by constant ads and people asking me what I thought about it and then acting like I'm a fool for not seeing it really makes me have something against the film. Of course, this is all from the promotion, not the actual film itself.

For me, the film also has something else against it: I'm not too keen on being part of a merchandising empire set on taking my money in trade for cheesy special effects. I'll go to an arcade instead



for a lot less money and more interaction.

And, in the end, the most interesting thing I've heard about the film is not the plot, the acting or the effects but how tons of people somehow have the time to wait in line weeks for a ticket.

I won't see BLAIR for another year at least if at all. I already know the beginning, the ending, the one freaky scene, that it's shakey-cam and on and on. I would rather watch it with nothing in mind or at least be in the mood for a grade Z horror instead of being in the mood to be part of a perceived event.

Although, the fact that most people are disappointed with it makes me want to see it more. Then again, I'm probably giving it a wrong expectation there, thinking it will be challenging and somehow different.



I have seen Quentin Tarantino's films, RESERVOIR DOGS and PULP FICTION. At first, I thought they were fun, shallow but fun, and told people to see them. Then, after I was told to watch Ringo Lam's CITY ON FIRE, THE TAKING OF PELHAM ONE TWO THREE, Martin Scorsese's AMERICAN BOY, Sonny Chiba's THE BODYGUARD, and many other films Tarantino stole plots and his best scenes from, his films turned very sour for me. Not helping was his comments either that he didn't directly steal scenes or you just don't like the film and are looking for reasons. These are all earthbound reasons to not like his stuff.

But how much I write or yell about how Tarantino is directly proportional to how much advertising he has and how much people are talking about him. After trying to talk about how he's not as original or talented as he says he is and bringing up the films he recreated, the usual response is: "You're just jealous." The only defense is a pop culture one instead of something in the films themselves.

The promo phenomena with Robert Rodriguez's EL MARIACHI was that it cost only \$7,000 to make and was just as good as big budget entertainment. Even when talking about what was literally seen on the screen was answer printed (cleaning up bad exposures), transferred from 16mm to 35mm (more than 7 grand alone), had new sound and new subtitles, I was accused of being jealous. Believe me, if you saw a film with scratched images, going back and forth between light and dark exposures, seeing the editing tape on the screen with every cut, listening to unmixed sound that's not even synced up and no subtitles, you wouldn't wonder why it cost so little.

Of course, the defense is not that I'm jealous that I didn't make the film but that I don't have the same exposure. The only thing I'm jealous of is being able to make a living at doing what you want to do, even if it is

"I would not think of quarreling with your interpretation nor offering any other, as I have found it always the best policy to allow the film to speak for itself." —Stanley Kubrick

making the same film over and over again.

Although Tarantino may have less power these days with JACKIE BROWN not being the same sensation as his earlier ones, he set today's pop culture trends of films talking about films and endless slo-mo shots of people walking with guns.

Mainstream media makes its icons and then puts many of them on pop culture death row, where everybody walks away from. Or they even contradict themselves: a recent *People* magazine cover questioned if Cruise and Kidman's EYES WIDE SHUT was too oversexed (and therefore bombed at the box office) above a huge photo of Marilyn Monroe and her cleavage.

So why do we talk about mainstream films at all? Let's just discuss marketing schemes. They are far more thought out and smarter than the majority of today's popular films.

Critics waste their time and paper reviewing them because newspapers are simply part of the promotion machine. I contacted a newspaper to get a review for Cinemad and was told that if I had a color photo I would get a lot more space and better placement. They were trying to spruce up the look so anything that came in with black



and white photos would get pushed to a bad spot.

Which is precisely why pop culture can be evil. Life is not a contest. The constant rating of films on a scale with numbers, whether box office numbers or a hilarious list from the AFI, is just more weight to America's bullshit sports ideals.

I'm not uncovering anything here: as AFI released their plans to make a Best American Films list it was very clearly stated that the list was for video marketing purposes within Schlock Hustler stores.

This constant need to be perceived as the best is in everything. A guy I work with got into a couple of fender-benders with his car. He was complaining loudly and consistently about how much money it was gonna cost and how the car was made really weak. "But now maybe I can finally get that S.U.V. I've always wanted."

Rolling Stone interviewer: *"You don't make it easy on viewers or critics. You've said you want an audience to react emotionally. You create strong feelings, but you won't give us any easy answers."* Stanley Kubrick: *"That's because I don't have any easy answers."*

My response was that a lot of consumer studies had recently been done on Supermarket Utility Vehicles and they're bad on gas, bad for the environment and even more expensive than his car. Just by backing into a pole at five m.p.h. did \$2,000 of damage to a S.U.V. bumper.

"Yeah, I know all that. But I really want one." Despite his previous problems.

It's not the vehicle, it's not the film, it's who sees you in line. These ideals are prominent and people who do not conform, especially in film above all other arts, are not given a chance, are not given press, are not given funding. We do not need survival of the fittest in art.

So the reason being doing Cinemad makes sense, I guess: a reverse promotion to fight dumb pop shit, to talk about what I and many others like but never hear about. It's just that I would rather devote time and energy to simply making, watching and writing about films I love.

And filmmakers in Hollywood should be far more pissed than I am. If you went there hoping to make a great film and instead got forced to make an over-long commercial, I think you'd be mad.

**DISTRIBUTION** companies have the most control in film and how a film is seen. It ain't gonna make any money if the distributor doesn't want it to. Critics won't review it if the distributor won't let them see it. No one will even see it if the distributor doesn't want him or her to.

So who's got the most control over a film? Not the filmmaker.

Every film has a poster, a preview and the film print itself. Huge costs go into mass producing those things, plus the press kits and photos for the media, ad slicks (a big sheet of ad designs for newspapers) and any other goofball promo merchandise you can think of, like shirts, hats, mugs, stickers and pins.

The biggest cost might be just shipping all this stuff around.

Somebody designed all this, too, right? Creative teams take a lot of money as well. (Although you'd never know it with today's film posters: grab the star's



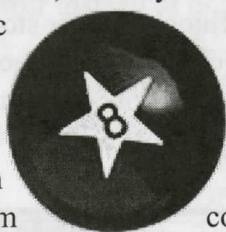


face and make it really big, never mind what the film is about.)

So with each film the theater receives all these promotional items.

Publicity firms are hired for various areas to get promo stuff around, set up press screenings and set up local promo events with radio and television to raise awareness.

On a national level, it always seems that a big studio film's subject matter is subtly coming up all the time, increasing public opinion on the topic. Lots of tornado 'news' happening about when TWISTER is released. Can't get enough TITANIC documentaries. Plenty of local news stories about new kids' merchandise — what a phenomenon! And look, here's a store that is selling STAR WARS and Disney items. Let's go in and see what they 'think' about this craze.... Films are in production for months and years, yet they arrive at just the right time in the public mind. Doesn't this seem controlled?



The small scale I can talk about first-hand, having worked in two so-called art houses.

Smaller theaters, usually with three or less screens, that show smaller budget films, foreign films and generally anything made outside Hollywood's money or ideals are labeled art houses. I don't know where this term started. It seems to suggest a more refined, thoughtful place where deep meanings are exchanged.

That's funny, I thought that could happen anywhere a film is shown, whether it's CHINATOWN or LANDSCAPE IN THE MIST, screened in someone's home or a club or a school, in the country or the city.

The term art house also suggests a level of money inside, which inevitably means rich, high-class pretentiousness. The stupid cliché that people inside don't want to be entertained, they just want to feel more important than the blue-collar worker does.

Someone convince me that my Great Uncle who owns a dairy farm in upstate New York can't understand the characters and meaning in Akira Kurosawa's THE SEVEN SAMURAI. It is about people. I will see a thousand more art films than my Uncle, but he can identify with the farmers and difficult times way better than I can.

On the other hand, many people will not watch a film if it is three hours long, in black and white or has subtitles. Three strikes against the samurai. Art house, as used by marketers, becomes a degrading term. Something that cannot be sold to the masses because they don't want to be challenged.

They may be right. After constant media coverage of how the films are no longer kinder or gentler, something like the acclaimed marketing push you could get comes out and people don't go to see black and white film or subtitles get in their way of a really great film who likes subtitled films; you forget you are even reading. It becomes black and white is just a style. Do music videos in black and white get

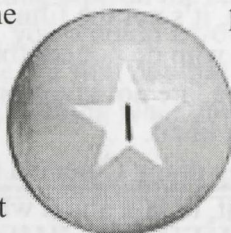
I think people have a problem with the terms, not the films. The foreign will be exactly that: over your head.

Another term: the 'short film.' In a video store someone asked me about a collection of shorts by various popular filmmakers. They liked the names, including Scorsese and Brian DePalma, but put it down when I said it was shorts. Yet the most popular entertainment in the country are 30-second commercials, 3-minute music videos and 27-minute sitcoms.

On the other hand, something like BLAIR WITCH makes 100-million. Guess where that film would have normally played. In fact, art houses show films that are much more cult-oriented (HAROLD AND MAUDE, LATCHO DROM) and films that are far less challenging (MICROCOSMOS, HYPE!, JOHNNY STECCHINO). BLAIR's money is due solely to its solid marketing, but that shouldn't make it special. It should be done for every film.

If art house films were taken care of in the media and in marketing, they wouldn't do 100-million each, but two or three together would. If counting margins is what this is all about, art films traditionally cost a whole lot less to make and still have good-looking actors, sex and violence that you can tout around.

Marketing for small films is infinitely more interesting than big stuff, too. You are forced to be more inventive. William Castle is better known as a showman than a director. His films asked the audience to pick an ending, sent things out flying from the screen, promised to electrocute someone in the audience and gave out insurance to anyone dying of fright while in the theater. Great stuff. John Waters' Smell-O-Vision puts everyone into the film whether you like it or not. While you watched Les Blank's documentary about



public is plenty mad that IRON GIANT with all the it. Most audiences let experience. Ask anybody second-nature. And turned off? suggestion that something



garlic, he cooked right in the theater.

All this doesn't matter if the distributor has a beef against the film. Or if they even know what they are doing in the first place.

Miramax, which touts a reputation as the biggest and most successful distributor of independent films, regularly buys the rights to a film and then never releases it. This is censorship.

SONATINE, the great Japanese film by Kitano 'Beat' Takashi, was bought by Miramax and then sat on their shelves for over two years, released only on the wave of popularity that his later HANA-BI received. A true independent company, Milestone Films, released that film.

Miramax has also bought the acclaimed French film DOBERMANN and Hong Kong's wild FIST OF LEGEND and then never released them. They are now releasing B MONKEY after owning it for three years. There are more titles I can't remember, since they're sitting on shelves. Even if a film is bad, it's not up to one person to ban it from an entire country.

Ted Turner owns the distributor New Line Cinema. They have a smaller section called Fine Line. They release art or "specialty" films.

Apparently someone else buys the films because after Turner already owns them he has a track record of seeing them and getting mad. When he saw David Cronenberg's CRASH he said publicly that he would never release the film because it offended him. Luckily, there was enough of a public outcry that he did release it.

When the theater I work at got Harmony Korine's GUMMO, distributed by Fine Line, easily described as controversial, we got a cold shoulder. No print was provided early for a newspaper review and there were no ad slicks sent. The most basic marketing device a movie has. We made a makeshift ad out of a postcard of the poster image. No review equaled no people. We had to let the film go after one week. Reviews won't come out a week late, no matter how much it would help the theater.

What do you know — for the entire next week we had people showing up looking for GUMMO. Simply on word of mouth there were more people calling and coming in asking about it than had actually seen it. This is all despite the distributor's efforts for their own product. They wanted to censor it quietly instead of publicly. Some people say they stopped caring about the film since it didn't do well in big cities. I'm sorry, but that still doesn't defend censorship.

Turner produced BASTARD OUT OF CAROLINA for his cable TV channel, TNT. He had the book and the script all along, yet when it came time to air the film it would have been on at five p.m. on the west coast and Turner deemed it too violent to air that early since kids might be watching. Other reports say that Turner was simply offended by a rape scene in the film and was already looking for a way to get out of it.

(And, it's a whole huge other thing, but let me say that as a publisher if I am really responsible [and I'm not] for other peoples' kids because they read a magazine I make, then they better start coming over to walk the dogs and mow my lawn.)

In Turner's favor, he did release CAROLINA's rights so they could seek distribution elsewhere. He also is very active in



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**2000**



funding restoration of old films. It's a weird, weird distribution world.

Whether it's big business bullying the small guy or just corporate ineptitude, audiences can still get around that. All a small, challenging film takes is support and a chance. If you give your dollar to a small distributor, they'll bring you more of the same stuff you like. If you don't watch small or foreign films, take a leap of faith for just two hours out of the week, you might like it.

### **ONE SMALL PLACE: SHADOW DISTRIBUTION**

Shadow co-founder Ken Eisen got started in exhibition over 20 years ago with the two-screen Railroad Square Cinema in Waterville, Maine. Originally a 16mm repertory house, it later put in 35mm projectors and started playing new films as well.

Eisen always loved films. "When I saw *THE CONFORMIST*, I was dumbstruck," he remembers. "I was just wondering, how did (director) Bertolucci make it? It was like a great poem, but more complex and involving."

Although he was very interested in the filmmaking process, Eisen wasn't interested in film production. "I thought, all I want to do is show this to people," he said.

After many years running the theater, Eisen and partners decided to go into film distribution.

"We just did this for so long, went to film festivals,"

Eisen said. "We got really interested in it."

At first, Shadow went slowly. In 1987, the company released *WATERWALKER*, a Canadian ecological film. It did very well and still plays in some areas. It cost only \$4,000 for Shadow to release the film, so it acted as a good foundation for future projects.

Shadow's first big thing was *LATCHO DROM* (1994). Money was raised from friends and family and 12 prints of the film were made. It did great business for that small of a release, grossing over a million dollars while getting very minor media coverage. All 12 of *DROM*'s prints played continually for over a year. One print played in a single theater for that long. It's still a cult favorite among a wide variety of audiences.

Shadow continued to do one film at a time, putting all its effort into that specific project. Larger distributors have

many films going at one time and titles can get lost in the shuffle. If a film gets lukewarm reviews or the management doesn't care for it, it can get dumped quite quickly in favor of the 10 other similar works the distributor has.

Even though a film gets all of Shadow's attention, Eisen says, "It's a little bit guess work. How many prints to make, how many play dates concurrently, etc."

Unfortunately, a lot of importance rests on critics' reviews. The New York Times wields enormous power, seen as the signpost of the so-called art crowd in America. Everyone reads the Times' reviews, even in LA.

"A review is the best advertising you could get," Eisen says. "Especially since a Times ad cost \$750 per column inch!"

The problem is, the state of America's reviewers has been questioned for the last two decades. Many simply regurgitate the studio press kit and don't give smaller or foreign films as much time or space.

"It's a crap shoot," Eisen feels. "Most reviewers want to champion safe things rather than going on a limb for different films."

Shadow's films often lose money in NYC and, if lucky, it will break even in LA. San Francisco is always the best. *DROM* played there for 22 consecutive weeks.

*WINDHORSE* has become Shadow's second most successful film. Although hurt by lukewarm reviews in New York, the film has a core audience everywhere: it deals with the current situation in Tibet and was actually shot there very secretly.



*WINDHORSE*



WINDHORSE is still playing in theaters. But times have changed in the past two decades and there aren't as many places to show a non-mainstream film.

"The 1970s were the Golden Era," he says. "That's long gone. It's not that there's less artistic or foreign films around, but they're not being made or distributed by Hollywood anymore. With the escalating cost of filmmaking, they want reassurance, not excitement. Although it seems many audiences also want reassurance, not shaking up."

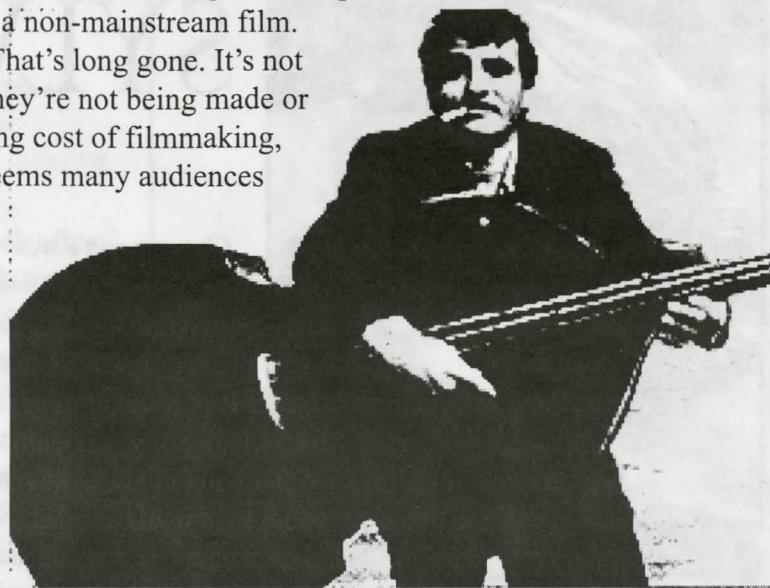
"Now the festivals are great. They've taken the place of '70s art houses. They're much more adventurous than today's theaters."

Eisen still sweeps the floor in his theater. "You can get lost if you remove yourself."

*The Shadow personnel are also responsible for the Maine International Film Festival every July.*

*Theater and fest info can be found at [http://](http://www.mint.net/movies/)*

*[www.mint.net/movies/](http://www.mint.net/movies/).*



**SHADOW** has distributed these films (with director's name):

WATERWALKER (1987) Bill Mason

LATCHO DROM (1993) Tony Gatlif

DANCE ME OUTSIDE (1994) Bruce MacDonald

MAGIC HUNTER (1994) Ildiko Enyedi

MONDO (1996) Tony Gatlif

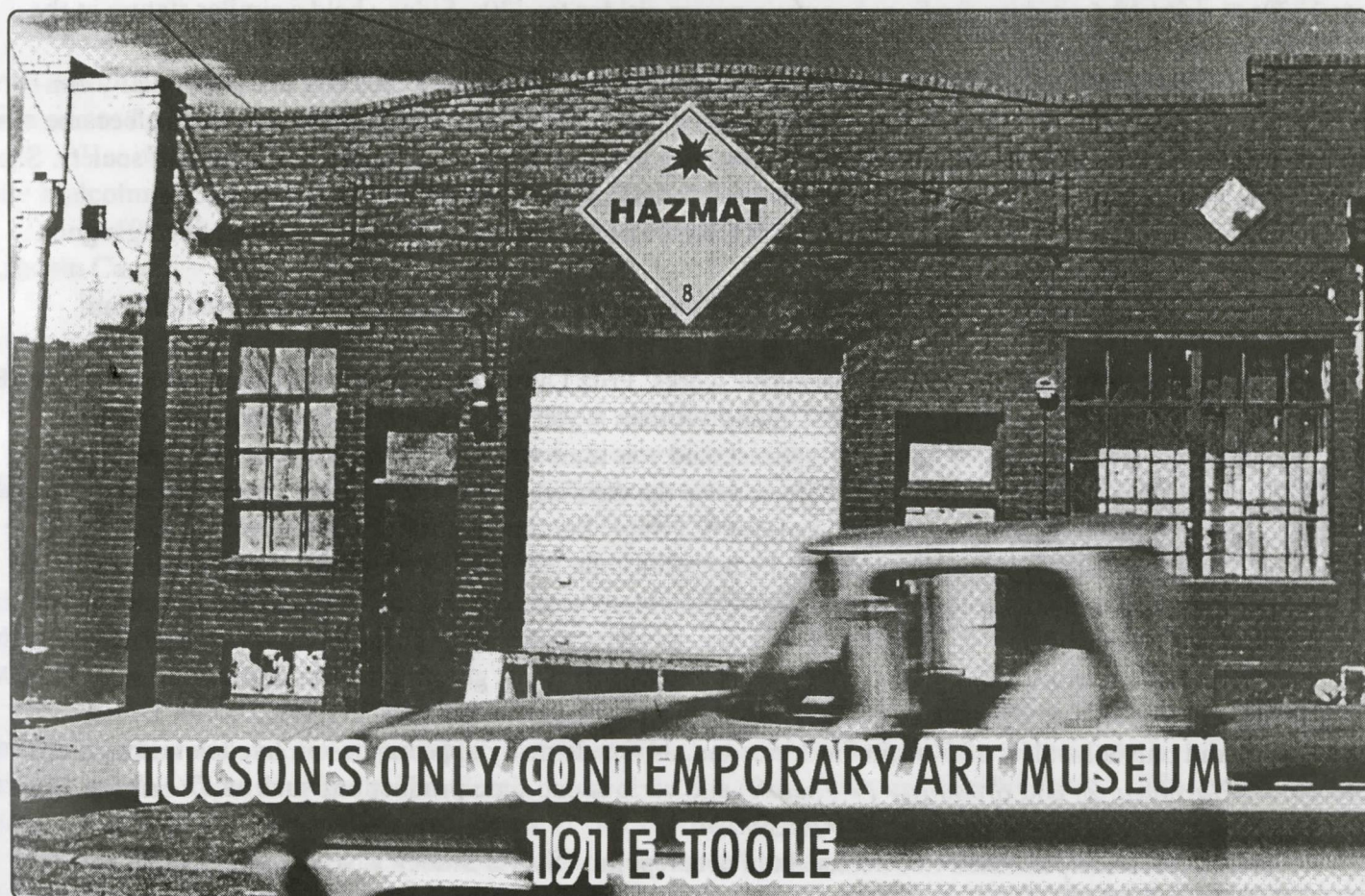
CARLA'S SONG (1998) Ken Loach

PORT DJEMA (1998) Eric Heumann

WINDHORSE (1998) Paul Wagner

PANTS ON FIRE (1999) Rocky Collins

*LATCHO DROM*







# SYLVIA SIDNEY

## 1910 - 1999

*One person I wish I could have talked with was Sylvia Sidney, a great actress who unfortunately got typecast in the 1930s and had a shorter career than she should have.*

Sylvia Sidney was born Sophia Kosow in the Bronx in 1910. Her father was from Russia and her mother from Rumania. After Sidney's parents divorced her mother remarried and Sylvia was adopted by her stepfather, Sigmund Sidney.

Sidney took dancing lessons at age 10. As a teenager she enrolled in the Theater Guild's School for Acting. For her first stage production at age 15 she changed her first name to Sylvia. She later said

that when she decided to become a stage actress, she was more interested in the beauty of acting rather than becoming famous.

Success in stage productions followed and she soon became a known leading actress. So known she played herself in her first film appearance in 1927's *BROADWAY NIGHTS*.

Although she still concentrated on acting for the stage, reputedly the quality of the productions was nothing too great. She acted in two more films in 1929 and 1930.

Paramount studios signed her on to make *AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY*, but when the film was postponed she stepped in to replace Clara Bow as Gary Cooper's girlfriend in *CITY STREETS*. Released in 1931, the film became very popular.

There could not have been a bigger casting difference than Bow and Sidney. Bow was a superstar in the late 1920s, a sultry sex goddess. As Bow became a poster girl for the '20s, Sidney held a similar stature in the 1930s.

Heading into the depression, it's as if movies felt guilty about the party '20s and became socially conscious in the '30s. While just as beautiful as Bow, Sidney had a wholesome image and sad eyes. She became one of the Depression era's biggest stars, a woman with a deep heart and soul who was often a victim of society. She was an innocent fugitive or in love with a criminal in a large number of films.

When the films were bad, such as *MADAME BUTTERFLY*, she was always praised as having a good performance in spite of the overall production.

During the '30s, Sidney was one of Paramount's biggest stars alongside Marlene Dietrich, Miriam Hopkins and Claudette Colbert.

Four of Sidney's best films were consecutive works: Fritz Lang's *FURY*, Alfred Hitchcock's *SABOTAGE* (both in 1936), Lang's *YOU ONLY LIVE ONCE* and William Wyler's *DEAD END* (both in 1937).

But by this time she was completely typecast, and was none too thrilled about it.

Later she told the *New York Times*: "Those were the days when they used to pay me by the teardrop, and since I needed the money, I compromised and played the tragic heroine in a few duds."

She returned to the stage in 1938 and was a huge hit in the 1941 production of *Angel Street*, among others. She stayed in theater through the 1940s despite making the occasional Hollywood film, none of which lived up to her earlier work.

"I didn't leave Hollywood because of anybody but myself. I just got disgusted with myself. I didn't know who I was, as an actress or a person," Sidney admitted later.

She did only a handful of films in the 1950s but also made many appearances on live television, including the shows *Playhouse 90* and *Broadway TV Theatre*, and various one-time productions such as *The Helen Morgan Story* and Paddy Chayefsky's *Catch My Boy on Sunday*.

In the 1960s she published two books about needlepoint: "Sylvia Sidney's Needlepoint Book" and her



“Question and Answer Book on Needlepoint.”

Her big return to film in the 1970s was as an older character actress. She received much acclaim and many awards for her portrayal as a rambunctious mom in *SUMMER WISHES, WINTER DREAMS*.

She worked fairly steadily in films and TV work after that. She had a gravelly voice that cut through the bullshit, and it landed her a number of good characters. Those who haven't seen Sidney's early film work might instead remember her from the television work, such as Carlson's mother in *WKRP IN CINCINNATI*'s pilot episode.

The high point after her comeback was as the no-nonsense Purgatory case worker in *BEETLEJUICE* who tried to get Alec Baldwin and Geena Davis back on track. Some proof that Sidney should have been allowed to do more comedy all along. She once remarked that she thought comedy took true technique and knowledge of the craft of acting.

Sidney's no-nonsense characters seemed to reflect the real woman. When talking about the Tim Burton film she once said, “fell asleep half way in. It's just not my kind of movie.” But she also said she enjoyed working with the director. Her last film was Burton's *MARS ATTACKS*, in which she saves the world.

*The talented star of the 1930s didn't lose her caustic wit with old age. Entertainment Weekly asked her how she was doing. Sidney replied, “Do you really fucking care?”*

man with AIDS. She had said, “I thought that was a lovely, lovely picture. It broke a lot of new ground. It was the first one to deal with homosexuality and AIDS.”

Her most recent acting work was as Clia in the new version of the television series *Fantasy Island*, opposite Malcolm McDowell, although she had to turn down much work in her later years due to sickness.

In 1990 she was honored for life achievement by the Film Society of Lincoln Center.

She was married and divorced three times. Her only child, Jacob, passed away from Lou Gehrig's disease, which turned Sidney into a volunteer for the National ALS Foundation.

A lifelong smoker, Sidney died from throat cancer on July 1, 1999.

When I started Cinemad last year Ms. Sidney was one of the main people I wanted to interview for the magazine. The only contact number I got ended up being some Greek restaurant.

I found a recent short interview she did with *Entertainment Weekly*. Her caustic behavior never faded with old age. When the interviewer asked her how she was doing, Sidney remarked, “Do you really fucking care?” I wish I could've talked to her even more now.

Asked about her early career, Sidney said, “Oh, God. You want me to remember 50 years ago? I was lucky. I worked with a lot of important directors, and I became a very happy actress for a time.”

All this to promote her role in *Fantasy Island*. “For Christ's sake, don't call it a role,” Sidney said. “It's a part. A role is Lady MacBeth. A role is Juliet. A part is a part. It's a job.”

An extremely talented actress who doesn't take herself too seriously? Where have they all gone.... Ms. Sidney will be sorely missed.



Of her films made for television, Sidney enjoyed *AN EARLY FROST*, in which Aidan Quinn played a gay



**BEETLEJUICE**



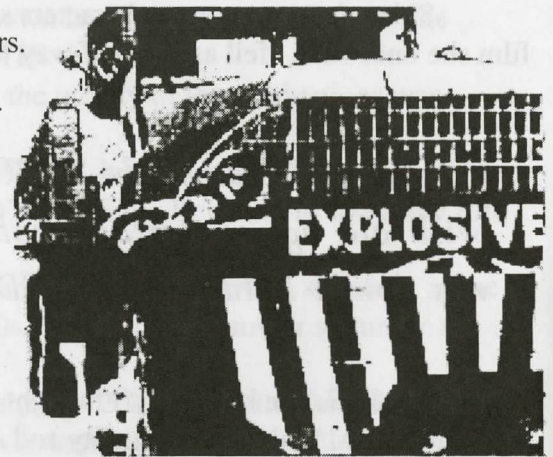
# Existential CAR FLICKS

by Mike Gonzales & Mike Plante

Existentialism is a long word for something everyone understands: your experiences in life seem isolated and are not completely explained by science or religion. You just exist with a lot of unanswered questions. Your decisions determine your outcome. Since someone came up with this term and many art forms convey just what you're thinking it should dispell the isolation — but you feel alone anyway.

In film, existentialism suggests kicking some habits. Away with science and religion. The music score is much more spare. Simple camera movements dominate rather than fast, complicated moves taking away from the characters. Shooting on location. An emphasis on reality, even if it is a heightened one. Don't get me wrong, there's plenty of room for style. Just not for the sake of it.

Lots of American facets came together to produce road films and their popularity. During World War II the government started making transcontinental freeways. After the war gas was very cheap. In the 1950s and '60s car sales grew along with suburbia and people moving out of the city. Cars with aggressive names that guzzled gas were very popular, especially as baby boomers reached the driving age around 1961.



Two-ton truck loaded with nitro-glycerin.  
Being precedes essence.

The allegory with life and existence is pretty easy: you make a journey from one end (of the country or life) to the other with an endless number of decisions and possibilities in between. It all depends on what turns you make as driver. You are isolated in a car. You can be anybody on the road, passing by others briefly, flying through possible identities. Your action equals your essence, so maybe the faster you go in a protective cage the more you can discover.

Existential car flicks made from the middle 1960s until the middle 1970s fit with the current attitude of 'the meaningless of it all'. Less of these films were made after that, possibly because the gas crisis of the late '70s made cars weaker and with the idealistic '80s people got less concerned with reality, especially in their entertainment. The state of films became much more blockbuster-oriented with special effects and fantasy dominated most of film production.

Stepping out of the car era for a moment, what is generally accepted as THE existential road movie is Henri-Georges Clouzot's *WAGES OF FEAR* from 1952. Deep character development takes place for the first hour in a dirty end-of-the-world town. Life there is so dead end that men fight for the chance to drive two trucks loaded with explosives over impossible terrain. The build-up and actual road trip test limits and are thrilling. Detached from the rest of the world on their trip, the men reminisce, wonder about life and confess.





orchestra to tell you suspense is coming. You forget it's a movie and feel the tension even more. The relative simplicity of editing is slow and specific, like you are standing just feet away. Real locations are used except for driving scenes. Most of all you concentrate on the characters as real people.

1973 Ford Mustang.  
We exist by what we are not.

The 60s/70s existential car flicks range from being very cult/trashy to very artsy, done for effect on the fly to being incredibly well thought out, with the results ranging from hilarious to seriously interspective. Going by each filmmaker's track record (no pun), I would guess that most of our examples were made

very down-to-earth with visceral feelings while only a few completely controlled all aspects of the film. Now, we're talking about car flicks rather than road films. There is some sort of difference.

GONE IN 60 SECONDS (1974) is one of the pure visceral ones. Writer-director-producer-actor-stunt man H.B. Halicki also owned a junkyard. He collected together some cars and made this fairly basic action story of car thieves. Of course, one guy turns informant, which results in a 40-minute car chase to end the film.

GONE reaches existential heights by being so pure. It doesn't question life, it doesn't question isolation, it doesn't have unanswered questions. But watching the damn thing puts you in a trance. The raw style is just so no-nonsense you get this crazy feeling of heightened reality.

You see all the ins and outs of a car thief ring, from the intricate equipment they use to steal to how they totally take cars apart and piece things together to not get caught. It's all just a build-up to get to the chase, but it's all incredibly detailed and realistic, an examination of a thief working.

Even the chase is much more real than the typical car film. Halicki made the whole film very literally. Supposedly, you can watch the film and follow the exact chase on a map of Carson, CA. (We haven't done this yet.)

Always a shoo-in for creating realism is the filmmaker just doing it. Halicki didn't have film or stunt car training. That lack of film slickness and even rehearsed coordination provides for some complete mayhem. Over 93 cars were wrecked. The result is more of a 'caught on film' feeling. Unplanned crashes also took place.

By the way, with the 70s clothing, cars, chase and various bad wig and moustache disguises, GONE looks like a feature-length version of the Beastie Boys' "Sabotage". The B-Boys had to be inspired by this....

The main character in VANISHING POINT (1971) appears out of nowhere, flying by in a Dodge Challenger. He's delivering a car cross country, betting a drug dealer that if he can make it in record time he doesn't have to pay for the speed pills he's taking.

Flashbacks reveal the many past careers the main character has had (he's a pretty busy guy). All institutions and identities he was part of (marriage, cop, racing, army) broke down in some way and now the disillusioned hero is

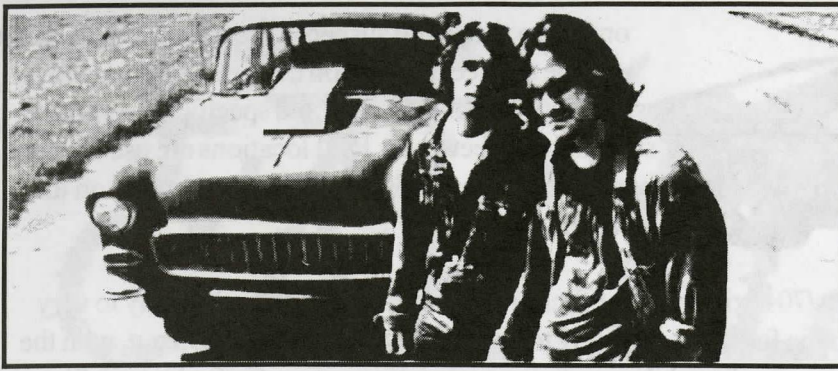
## Toronado. The all-car car for the all-man man.

The line of demarcation between men and one pile. Built on the other. Cars falling place. No question which side Toronado takes. Not with that blowing, broad shouldered look. And that responsive performance from a 455 cubic-inch Rocket V-8, biggest ever built. And that masterful ride and handling, thanks to the superior front-wheel drive and torsion-bar suspension. Like we say, Toronado is all man - right down to that man sized trunk.



TYPICAL 1960s AD





1955 Chevy Coupe, homegrown, with blower.  
Action equals essence.

testing his existence. He's ignoring all street signs and rules, taking chances without trying to hurt others. He has no regard for driving on the wrong side of the road but at least signals when changing lanes.

Along the way the hero is helped by a blind radio DJ (even named "Supersoul") who listens to a police scanner and gives hints out over the air. The blind leading the blind. Of course, the drifter-driver does not beat existence or the world around him ("nobody can beat the desert") but seems to finally feel in control

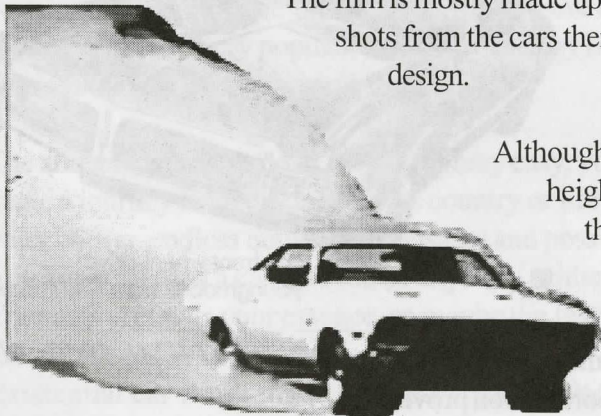
of his destiny.

While the main character takes chances going through his ethical and moral crossroads the film itself doesn't. The soundtrack is full of popular music to reflect the times and sell records. Too much emphasis is put on simply trying to beat the system. While the metaphors and ideas are fun and interesting they get a little over-explained. More of a mainstream existentialism.

LEMANS (1971) is right in the middle. A very pure car racing film with emphasis on man's control over his world, it also excels in simple sports fetishism.

Steve McQueen (who else) plays one of the top racers in the annual LeMans, a non-stop 24-hour race. Speeds reach 230 mph. Drivers are not allowed to individually drive more than 14 hours. Pit stops fill up gas and change drivers so the cars can keep going. McQueen is fighting the memory of a previous accident which caused the death of another driver. A possible love interest also gives McQueen something to ponder about.

The film is mostly made up of incredible camerawork of the cars racing, including great moving shots from the cars themselves. This is pretty slick stuff but still emphasizes reality. A study of design.



1970 Dodge Challenger R/T, 440 engine.  
The self is on a journey of being something.

Although more a study of the race and man with machine, it reaches existential heights from its purity. There's no traditional dialogue until 35 minutes into the film! And talking is minimal even after that. All the sound is taken from the locations and there's only a little bit of music score.

You can say the race (life) is stuck to its circular track, never leaving, with man's control over a very limited space, and even then you've got to depend on other drivers. McQueen has the line: "A lot of people go through life doing things badly. Racing is important to men who do it well. Racing... is life. Anything that happens before or after is just wait-

ing." Let's here it for cheese.

Monte Hellman's TWO-LANE BLACKTOP (1971) is widely known as a cult item but is much more art than trash. Two young men (played by musicians James Taylor and Dennis Wilson) drive their homegrown Chevy Coupe across the country simply in order to race. They have no perceivable goals or even problems.

Along the way they pick up a girl (Laurie Bird), who adds a few problems to the situation, and meet up with an older guy (the awesome Warren Oates) who drives a G.T.O.. The two groups decide to race the rest of the way across the country.



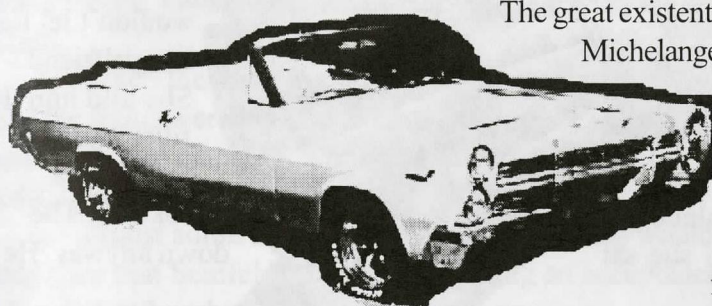
TWO-LANE has no score or obnoxious soundtrack full of songs, using real sound from what is on-screen. No fancy dolly shots, just emphasis on the characters and dialogue. Everything was shot on location, using local people as extras. The ending confounds more than a few people, especially projectionists. Judging from Hellman's earlier western THE SHOOTING and it's existential aspects, he knew what road he was heading down.

The characters only care about their cars and racing but are continually interrupted by outside influences. At points it seems like they start wondering just how shallow their lives are, maybe all their emphasis is misplaced and they should be doing something else. But they want to feel alive so they keep racing.

Everytime we see Oates with a different passenger he has a different life story to tell them. Most seem made up. The moment it starts sounding like truth it also sounds cliché and Taylor tells him to be quiet. The past is behind us and we shouldn't let it catch up.



G.T.O. with a 455.  
We are like a bubble of air in honey.



1966 Ford Mercury Cyclone, convertible.  
Nothingness lies at the heart of being.

The great existential car flick might be THE PASSENGER (1975). Director Michelangelo Antonioni already hit meaningful heights before with his social-questioning L'AVVENTURA and BLOW-UP.

Jack Nicholson plays a man so tired of who he is that he actually trades identities with another man who just passed away. Looking similar, he gets away with it at first but then finds problems as he has to keep the man's appointments as a gun runner. Renting a car and befriending Maria Schneider, Nicholson tries to drive away from his old and new problems.

Although the plot sounds very mainstream and action-oriented, it is much more dramatic and interspective in Antonioni's hands. You get caught up in the plot but it is also a fascinating study of why someone would actually go to these lengths. Again, the characters are disillusioned by the world's perceived institutions. Everyone can relate to their motivations.

When Schneider asks Nicholson what he is running away from, he tells her to sit up in the back seat, turn around and look behind them. That's what he's speeding from.

Less about cars than the previous films, it is still an important part of the film's structure. They only evade the past in the car. Every time Nicholson is away from his car the past catches up with him. And when he loses the car he gets into big trouble.

PASSENGER uses amazing locations, including buildings designed by the architect Gaudi. They show how the main character is out of place. As usual with Antonioni's films, there are very slick shots but they're methodical and motivated by the tone of alienation. The final shot, lasting a few minutes, is one of the best I've ever seen.

All of these films are bigtime fun with some more mentally stimulating than others. They give the viewer great feelings of 'being along for the ride', whether it's crazy speed action or a meaningful slow drive. But you should really ride a bike or a skateboard.

*Thanks to Thom Andersen, Joseph Esposito & J.P. Sartre.*



# Confessions of a Seat Filler by "Ian"

Through a connection I had at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, I got to be a seat-filler for the 71st Annual Academy Awards. Like any red-blooded cinephile, I always wanted to go to the Academy Awards to see what the big deal was, so I filled out the required form, exaggerating somewhat my qualifications to double for stars when they are out taking a cigarette break during the awards ceremony.

My sister, an aspiring fashion designer, fabricated a green bow tie to wear on this big night. Unfortunately, it was one inch too small. Hilarity ensued when I tried it on for the first time the night before the Oscars and realized it would not reach around my neck. Luckily, I had a friend whose mother knew a bit about tailoring and attached some hooks to it, and I was ready.

We had to meet at the L.A. Convention Center at 11:00am, 8 hours before the event in full dress, which means a tux. There were about 70 seat-fillers in all. We were directed to go into a banquet room where they would serve us lunch, and do picture taking for our ID badges. We also had seat-filling demonstrations and rehearsals for an hour or so. Some people actually took this stuff seriously.

At this time, I was able to talk to fellow seat-fillers that have done this in the past. One told me about when she needed to fill a seat next to Nick Nolte. He wouldn't let her sit down, saying that his girlfriend was coming back. She told him that she was a seat-filler and that he shouldn't let her sit down anyway. He was mad. Seat filling can be dangerous.

A couple hours later, we boarded two big buses and headed to the Chandler Pavilion, where the Academy Awards were actually being held. There, there were swarms of movie fans on each side of the red carpet area waiting to see any recognizable face. We were all escorted to an empty theater where there was ice teas, sodas and sandwich-like Horsdeaurves [That's okay, nobody knows how to spell this --ed]. We had to stay there for three hours.

Then, the time came. We were told to form a line and head to the side entrance of the auditorium. When all of us entered the lobby, they split us into two groups: One to seat fill for the right side of the auditorium, and one for the left.

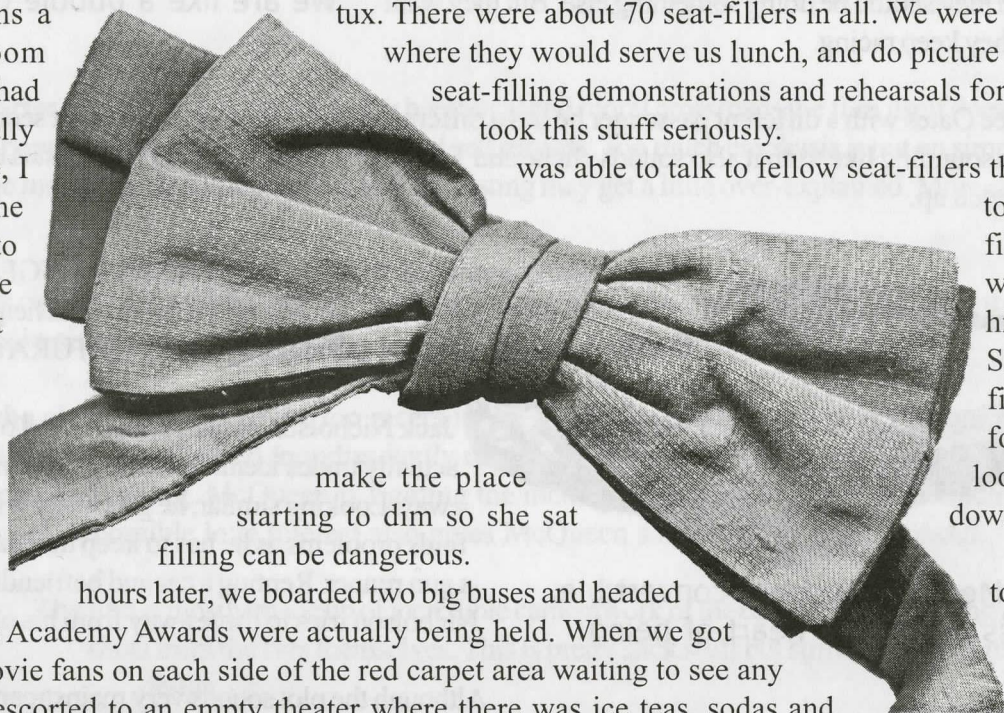
We were waiting in line to fill a seat about an hour before everyone took his or her seats. Tom Hanks walked by and shouted, "Love you Guys!" at the line of seat-fillers. Yeah, we like you, we really like you, too, Tom.

Steven Tyler of Aerosmith also passed by who happened to be the only one with bodyguards. He was dressed as the prototypical-aging rocker with his tight leather pants, and long, satin, unbuttoned purple shirt. He was either being misdirected or very confused because he walked over into the seat-fillers' line and bumped into some people. Then, he popped in and out of that line and eventually made it inside the auditorium.

While waiting in line, I passed by Joan Collins, looking a little too well preserved in silver sequins. She complemented me on my bow tie. The "Dynasty" fashion queen herself!

After this kinda special moment, I was inside the auditorium, ready to fill a seat. It was quite close to where Robert Wise was sitting, in the middle of the auditorium.

Unfortunately, the person I was filling the seat for came back seconds before the end of the commercial break. Normally, I would have walked to one of the side exits, but there was no time. In my haste, I mistakenly headed for a middle exit that was not there, walking right into the path of a giant camera crane. A guy was saying, "Get out of the way." At this point, the show was on air, and I was standing in the middle of the auditorium, while everyone else were in their seats watching Jim Carrey present an award. I looked around for a





seat to sit in, but there were none. I decided to stand close to one of the camera guys to look like I was standing there for a reason. I then saw someone exiting their seat and hurdled past knees in order to sit down.

After this, I decided to check out a less chaotic scene and go to the bar. Uma Thurman was there, talking to the 90's brat pack: Ben Affleck, Matt Damon, and Edward Norton.

Sean Young was there in a red dress that looked quite wrinkled. She was sitting alone at a table in the corner. There were a lot of empty glasses on the table. Her head was bobbing back and forth, clearly heavily intoxicated. She knew she wasn't going to the podium this year.

About half way to the end of the show, I was able to sit in the second row, right next to Andy Garcia in a white tux, looking like he was belatedly trying to get the lead in "Carlito's Way."

The Irving Thalberg award was being presented. A huge screen pulled down and showed clips from a dozen movies of the director getting the award, who was Norman Jewison. While the clips were being shown, I looked down my row at all the recognizable faces. There was Jack Nicholson with his dark shades, possibly sleeping, Anne Heche, Gwyneth Paltrow, Harvey Weinstein, all looking quite bored.

When the lights went up, I noticed Gwyneth Paltrow's blank facial expression slowly turn into a smile, like the lights were her cue to play a new role. Then, when Norman Jewison came out, Gwyneth's arms rose up and she began clapping, almost robotically, and smiling with tears in her eyes, like all of the sudden she cares. At least, when the camera is on her.

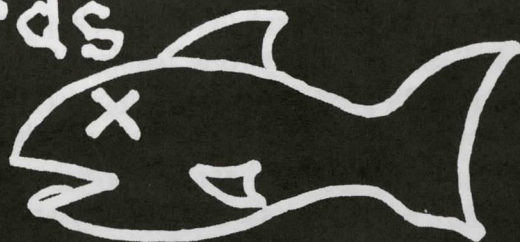
I must admit I was hoping that the evening would end with me being swept up in a group of award recipients (like that Seinfeld episode) and giving an acceptance speech. That would have given me a chance to mention Cinemad and perhaps tell Jack to wake up.

Unfortunately, this was not the year of my Academy Award. Maybe next time.

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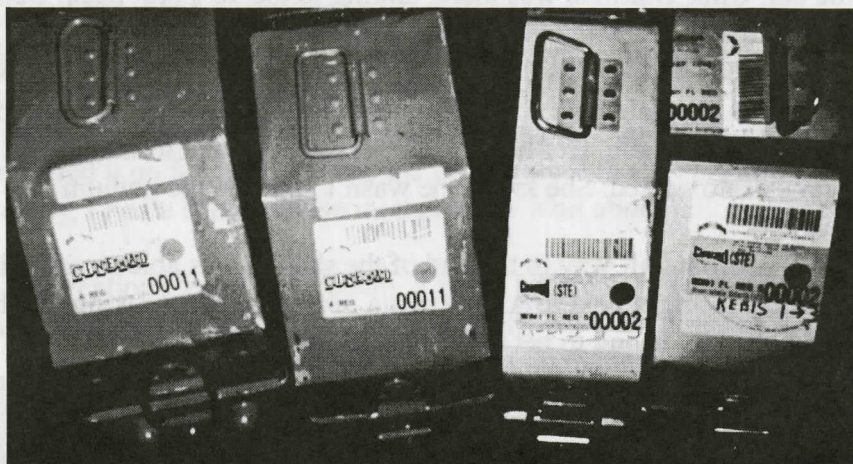


# The SEARCH For Films

*Some places to find unique new and old films.*

## NEW YORK CITY

Went to NYC for the hottest July in history and checked humidity out. It sucks but the films are great. Finally got to see Beat Takashi's great **VIOLENT COP** on the big screen at **Cinema Village** [(212) 924-3363], located in the East Village area of Manhattan. They now have 3 screens full of foreign and non-mainstream films. Tons of other great theaters there, **Film Forum** [(212) 727-8110, [www.filmforum.com](http://www.filmforum.com)] in SoHo had a new print of **HAROLD AND MAUDE**. With 3 screens Forum regularly does new films and retro series of older stuff. The non profit theater was started in 1970 and has memberships available. **Anthology Film Archives** [(212) 505-5110, [www.anthologyfilmarchives.org](http://www.anthologyfilmarchives.org)] also has memberships. Started by filmmaker Jonas Mekas and friends in 1970 and now has 2 screens in a building that used to be a courthouse. They have a wide variety of programs. When I was there **THE HARDER THEY COME** and **RED DESERT** were showing as well as many short films. Aside from the theater Anthology also has a library and helps with film preservation, especially with avant-garde works. **Lincoln Center's Walter Reade Theater** [(212) 875-5600, [www.filmlinc.com](http://www.filmlinc.com)] had the New York Video Festival, where I saw new work by Jem Cohen and Christopher Wilcha (see their respective articles in this issue) and a cool performance piece by Miranda July called **LOVE DIAMOND**. Lincoln Center puts on the NY Film Fest as well.



I'm sure I missed some places and many museums have rad film programs. Check both the Village Voice and the New York Press for listings. Also, during the summer **Bryant Park** shows films outdoors for free. The masterpiece **DR STRANGELOVE** was showing when I was there. This is awesome since the basic ticket price has gone up to \$9.50! Smaller, independent theaters are usually less. And air-conditioning is always a plus.

Although I highly recommend doing only film over video, especially in a big city that has good theaters, I did find a few obscure vids to bring home. In Times Square you can find kung-fu vids galore. The **43<sup>rd</sup> Chamber** (it's on 42<sup>nd</sup>, not 43<sup>rd</sup>, by the way) yielded the formerly elusive **8 DIAGRAM POLE FIGHTER** for \$10, surely one of the most over-the-top action flicks ever made, even for Hong Kong. Chamber has a solid selection of Asian films and although the quality is hit and miss 10 bucks is not much in the world of lost films. A store nearby, whose name I never really figured out, had the out-of-print **WATCH OUT, CRIMSON BAT** for only \$5. This female version of Zatoichi is quite fun. It and **POLE FIGHTER** were dubbed, which works best for old school kung-fu. **Kinokuniya**, an all-around Japanese store in Rockefeller Center, has a good selection of videos for sale, including many copies of the out-of-print **RIKISHA-MAN** starring Toshiro Mifune.

For rentals in NYC, **TLA Video** [(212) 228-8282, [www.tlavideo.com](http://www.tlavideo.com)] located near NYU has one of the best selections in town with plenty of classics, foreign titles and DVDs available for reasonable prices. They also have new and used stuff for sale. Originally out of Philly, they are now trying to take over Manhattan. **Tower Records and Videos** [[www.towerrecords.com](http://www.towerrecords.com)], a few streets away, have a good selection for rental or sale. You've probably heard of them. A few more streets up is **Kim's Video** [(212) 505-0311, [www.kimsvideo.com](http://www.kimsvideo.com)] on St. Mark's Place. They have a great selection of hard-to-find stuff for rental or sale as well as music and books. However, Kim's has been getting a sketchy reputation of late, primarily dealing with their bootlegging of a title that is easily available and non-mainstream, needing all the support it can get. I heard very good things about **Evergreen Video** [(212) 691-7362] located near Film Forum but didn't get a chance to go there. As with the theaters, I'm sure I missed some good places.



## TUCSON

We live here. It's a cool town and a dry heat. **The Loft Cinema** [(520) 795-7777] is Tucson's primary source for new and usually challenging films. The big house of the two screen theater features the largest (indoor) screen in Arizona. The women's bathroom and it's beautiful red tile has served as location for photo sessions, music recordings, films and who knows what else. The world-famous Loft Chicken has more than likely been to your town. For retro and some new films there's **The Screening Room** [(520) 622-2262, [www.azstarnet.com/~azmac/index.html](http://www.azstarnet.com/~azmac/index.html)] downtown. The single screen 16mm theater is also the headquarters for the Arizona International Film Festival every April. Don't miss the 3-D film every July 4<sup>th</sup>. Both theaters are more funky and homegrown than slick. They try to bring certain titles in just to give them an opportunity to play, knowing they won't be huge moneymakers.

For video, Tucson actually features one of the best rental stores in the country. **Casa Video** [(520) 326-6314, [www.casavideo.com](http://www.casavideo.com)] has the space and knowledge to keep over 23,000 titles from the mainstream to the seriously obscure, including tons of DVDs. They just started doing mail order rentals. If you request a title and it's purchase-able they'll get it in, sure enough. Although much smaller, **Director's Chair** [(520) 299-1907] is also very eclectic with some good, hard-to-find titles.

## LOS ANGELES

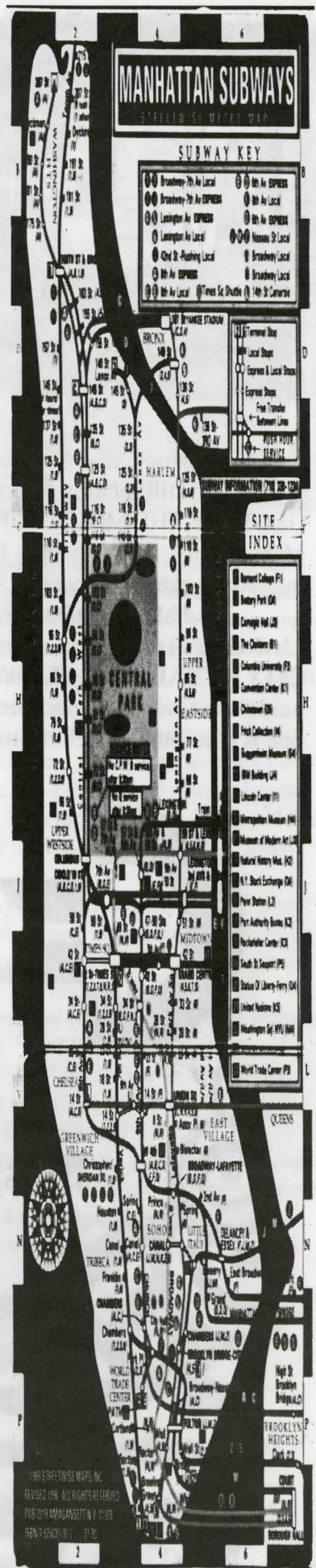
Ironically, when I've go to LA I hardly see any films. Running around doing mag stuff and I have less contacts that can get me in free. Ticket prices in LA are around \$9. (This info should date the mag nicely.)

A few years ago I was fortunate enough to see Sam Fuller and a screening of his first film I SHOT JESSE JAMES at the **American Cinematheque** [(323) 466-FILM, [www.americancinematheque.com](http://www.americancinematheque.com)]. The non-profit Cinematheque has since moved to the restored Egyptian Theater. They feature both retro and new stuff, programming themed festivals like Japan's Outlaw Masters, Film Noir and director retrospectives. I always hear about good stuff playing at the **NuArt** [(310) 478-6379] in West LA and great revival stuff at the **New Beverly Cinema** [(323) 938-4038, [www.michaelwilliams.com/beverlycinema/](http://www.michaelwilliams.com/beverlycinema/)].

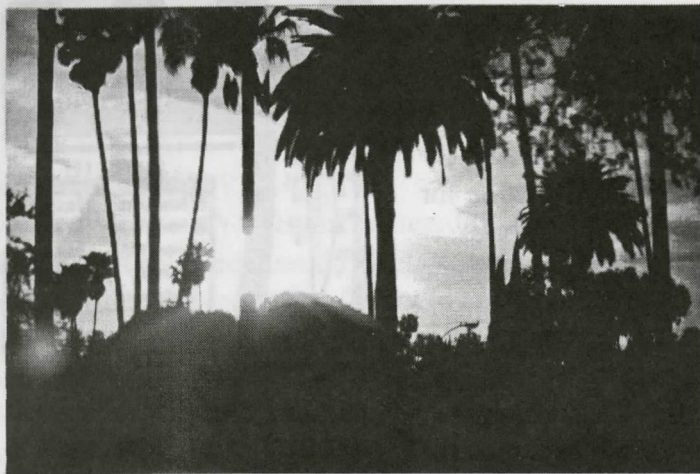
Longtime video store **Eddie Brandt's** [(818) 506-7722] has one of the best collection of titles in the country, despite a slim foreign section. Brandt's also features a solid selection of television programs, out-of-print stuff and movie stills. And they will know what film you're talking about. **Mondo Video A-Go-Go** [(323) 953-8896] is a small, tight store that specializes in super-cult items like '70s adult films. They're packed with goodies. A hardcore selection of the hard-to-find that doesn't bother to compete with the mindless Schlock Hustler.

Since I've visited LA friends have told me of a new hardcore underground store called **Cinefile** [(310) 312-8836, [cinefyle@aol.com](mailto:cinefyle@aol.com)] located near the NuArt theater. With the most obscure titles you can possibly think of, it looks like Cinefile will replace the desperately missed **Goblin Market**, which went out of business a few years ago.

No films but a huge selection of books and cool original posters can be found at **Larry Edmunds** [(323) 463-3273]. I get a lot of press photos from them, who actually have files on many ThatGuys. It's always nice to walk into a place, mention Warren Oates or Thelma Ritter and have the staff know who you're talking about.







#### MISC:

In all of these cities, and hopefully in smaller ones, too, public libraries offer great, great selections of films and videos for rent or personal screening, especially documentaries and short films. And they're free!

Sometimes television comes through. **Encore** showed the four hour version of **THE ICEMAN COMETH** with Lee Marvin! I didn't record it but I'm sure someone around did. This is so obscure rumor has it that director John Frankenheimer had to spend money to get a simple video copy of it from the studio. I also keep missing **I'LL NEVER FORGET WHAT'S 'IS**

**NAME** starring Orson Welles on cable TV.

I'm still looking for many Werner Herzog films: **FATA MORGANA** (I've got it without subtitles), **DARK GLOW OF THE MOUNTAINS** and **BELLS FROM THE DEEP** for starters. Also on the lookout for many Chris Marker films. The only ones I can find are **LA JETEE**, **LE JOLI MAI**, **A.K.** and **SANS SOLEIL**. Of course I missed the retrospective in LA. Many are available on 16mm only and I can't exactly afford the rental costs.

And bless WinStar Cinema: they just distributed a retrospective of Robert Bresson (**PICKPOCKET**, **L'ARGENT**) to theaters around the country and now they're doing one on Taiwanese master Hou Hsiao-Hsien (**A CITY OF SADNESS**, **FLOWERS OF SHANGHAI**) starting this fall. Before this, the work of HHH was the hardest to find in America, especially considering it is less than 30 years old. At least I can understand why no one is distributing silent films no one has prints of....

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# ON THE TOWN: Vampyro Lesbos

by  
Mike  
Gonzales

Manhattan on Thanksgiving... That phrase brings so many thoughts to mind: The multi-colored leaves cover the sidewalks in the park, Macy's has its famous parade, the windows at Sak's are decorated, the tree goes up at Rockefeller center, and there are vampiric lesbians in the East Village. But not until 10 pm.

The latter I discovered only this past Thanksgiving. After an interesting vegan thanksgiving dinner in Brooklyn, my friend and I decided to stop off for a drink on our way back up mid-town. We stopped at a place called XVI (16 1<sup>st</sup> Ave.). The cover was \$7. After paying the toll, we made our way through the maze of couches, ducking for an occasional motorized film screen back to the bar. There wasn't anything about this place that would necessarily distinguish it from any other bar in the area. It had a bar with a bartender, waitresses, fuzzy music being played at just the right level (well this might distinguish it), go-go cages complete with dancers, and video screens kind of serving as ambient lighting.

After plopping ourselves down in the back of the bar, we started soaking in the atmosphere. The DJ looked a little strange. He was selling CDs. Check out the crowd. The music sounds vaguely familiar, but not in an MTV or even "club" way. It's... "Bubble Gum" by Brigitte Bardot and Serge Gainsbourg, a strange, yet cool choice for bar music. A too-young-to-seriously-be-wearing-pasties go-go dancer in a makeshift cage seemed to be enjoying it. I looked to my friend, he was nearly catatonic, staring blankly at the screen behind me. When he saw me looking, he pointed, saying "Ilsa, Harem Keeper of the Oil Sheiks." I turned around and sure enough, there's Uschi Digart in all of her naked glory making an attempt at escape from Dyanne Thorne's evil grasp. The next song came on, "I'll Find my Way to You", by Grace Jones and Stelvio Cipriani from the wonderful Umberto Lenzi zombie epic "City of the Walking Dead". We looked to the cage to catch the dancer's reaction to this choice of music only to find a different dancer had taken her place. We listened and watched as the esoteric selections that we had been enjoying forever now flowed from the DJ booth, eliciting a reaction from the crowd that one would think only came from the latest Jungle tracks, not some forgotten 60s composer's theme to some forgotten 60s Italian-German-French co-production.

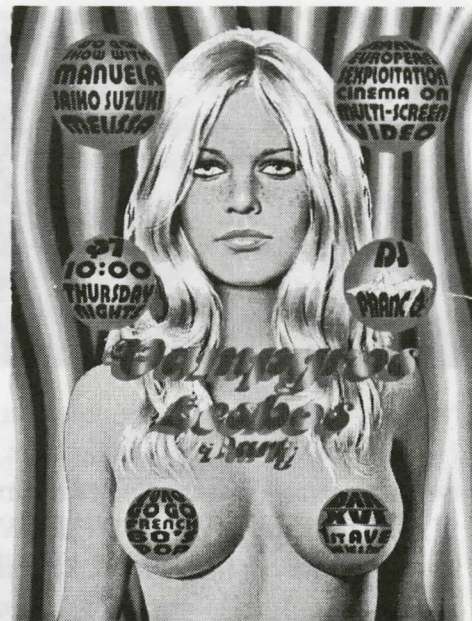
At first our attention was torn between the people actually at the bar (who appeared almost freakishly normal given the aura of the place), the music, the dancers, the movies and our waitress (server). As time passed, we narrowed our focus to solely our waitress (server), the music and the movies. It was like being stuck in Euro-trash trailer heaven. Although we consider ourselves aficionados of the trashiest of world cinema, together my friend and I could only identify about 50 percent of the movies shown (which included mostly Italian Giallo's, German sex comedies, and Blaxploitation and Women in Prison movies from all over the world). A few notable flicks were the above-mentioned "Ilsa" film (along with other films from Dyanne Thorne's oeuvre), Lucio Fulci's surprisingly excellent giallo "Una sull'altra" (aka: One on Top of the Other) starring Marissa Mell, the sexy German film "Schoolgirl Report No. 1", and "What Have They Done to Solange?", directed by Massimo Dallamano (cinematographer of "Fistful of Dollars" and "For a Few Dollars More").

At one point in the night, the over-the-top-cool music, exhaustedly arcane film clips, and really nice crowd proved too much for us and we had to go back to our hotel. We said goodbye to what, at the time, we felt was our surrogate home in Manhattan and reluctantly took the N-R train back uptown. Needless to say, almost anyone (99.99 percent of the general population) coming to this fine establishment will get schooled in the art of trashy European entertainment, especially that having originated in the mid to late 1960s, in a relaxing, casual environment.

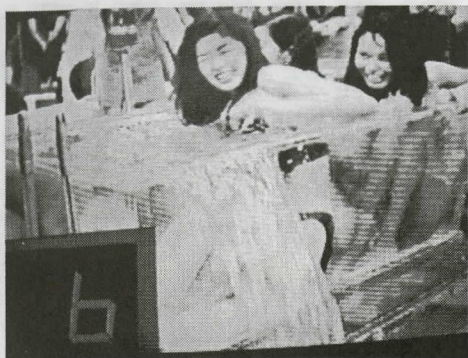
On the plane back to Los Angeles, I could only wish that I would be able to find a club like this back home. Unfortunately I think that there may be only one "Vampyros Lesbos Party," simply due to the fact that only in New York City does there exist the density of adventurous people willing to go to it.

If you liked the Vampyros Lesbos Party, check out:

- "(Italian Girls Like) Ear Catching Melodies" – CD – music by Riz Ortolani, Armando Travajoli, Piero Piccioni, and more. Available on Dago Red CDs.
- "Una Farfalla con le ali Insanguinate" – CD – music by Gianni Ferrio. Available on Easy Tempo CDs.
- "La Legge Dei Gangsters" – CD – music by Piero Imiliani. Available on Easy Tempo CDs.
- "Incubo – Sulla Citta Contaminata" – CD – music by Stelvio Cipriani. Available on Lucertola Media CDs.







## ODD T.V.: *Super Jockey*

While Japan has many television programs comparable to ours, like soap operas and basic celebrity parades, Kitano 'Beat' Takashi has helped to make

some insane 'game' shows in the Land of the Rising Sun. It's not so much contestant driven, rather more of a maniac variety show featuring his hardcore group of comedians.

Takashi first became popular in the 1970s as part of the stand-up comedy duo of 'The Two Beats,' where he got his nickname. During the '80s, he became a comedy superstar on television. He also did late-night radio, some writing and small film roles. He was voted the country's favorite TV celebrity from 1990 to 1995. In the U.S. he is more known for his serious writing-acting-directing in great films like *VIOLENT COP*, *BOILING POINT* (no, not the Hopper one), *SONATINE* and *HANA-BI* (*FIREWORKS*).

As he continues to make some of the best films of the 1990s, he still does seven TV shows a week, pushing the bounds of hilarity. He sits on the sidelines, wearing some sort of weird suit (giant mouse outfit, a frog helmet, a fake moustache with tuxedo jacket and ballerina tu-tu, etc), laughing his ass off while his comedy cronies seem to do whatever they are told. They get catapulted on bungee cords as their clothes rip off (complete with helmet-camera), have hot wax fights, get scorpions and real fireballs rolled into their mouths and grapple with professional wrestlers who throw them into giant flytraps.

One of Beat's shows that did feature real people, at least competing groups of firefighters, had them in odd contests like sawing a tree down so it would land on a watermelon. In the studio, the contestants had to hit a buzzer to answer a question before the other team. Just like in America... except the buzzer was twenty feet in the air and the team had to hoist one member up on ropes to buzz in. Needless to say, they never got the question right on the first try and had to keep going up and down. Or the buzzer would be a foot pad that you had to run very fast on to buzz in.

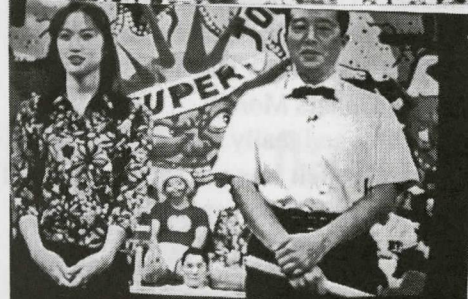
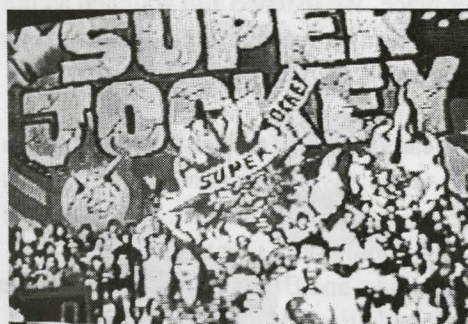
*SUPER JOCKEY* may be the ultimate Japanese television show.

Beat doesn't necessarily host. Instead, he watches from the front of the audience with other celebrities. (If you want to be a successful performer in Japan, you basically have to be seen on TV as much as possible. So the big stars are constantly hosting shows, making guest appearances or just sitting in the audience with a camera on them. Pop group SMAP — Sports, Music, Assembly, People! — is seen everywhere.)

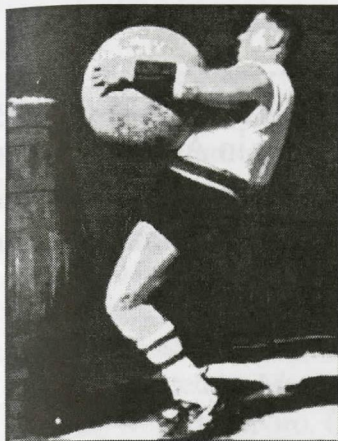
*JOCKEY* would not fly in America. Each episode consists of real people 'off the street' coming onto the show to promote a product they are selling. They (always women) get into a swimsuit and have to sit in a tub of scalding hot water. The longer they stay in, the longer they can talk about their product afterwards. All this while cameras shoot close-ups of cleavage. On occasion, male celebrities from the audience have to substitute for the contestant and get held in the water longer than safety allows. Meanwhile, the rest of the crowd claps very politely. One time a group of American models for *Hustler* magazine went on the show with no clue as to what they were getting into.

You can find this golden footage at various Japanese video stores in America. Ask for Beat Takashi TV shows like *SUPER JOCKEY* or something *MEMORY*. The year-end episodes, compilations of the season's highlights, are the best. It's not subtitled, but that doesn't really matter at this level.

Also, an enterprising American in Kyoto has compiled some Japan TV footage and is selling them as "Japanarama", Vol. 1 & 2, for \$25 each.



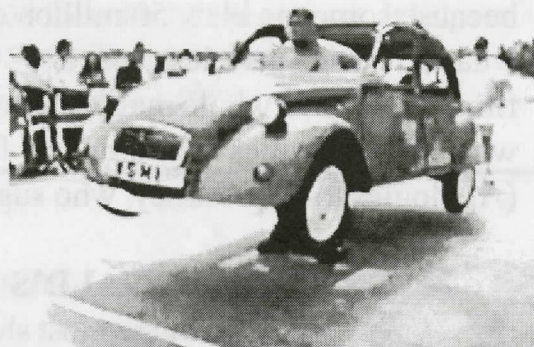




# ODD T.V.:

## World's Strongest Man

If you're gonna waste your time with TV, you might as well see the freakiest stuff possible. Few things can compare with the good ol' Gong Show but here's some worthy oddities.



ESPN2, the freak sports channel, often shows a variety of odd, less-mainstream contests, like arena football and dog decathalons. It has gotten me hooked on THE WORLD'S STRONGEST MAN competition, a whacked out strength competition.

Started in 1977, each year features a myriad of ridiculous tests that only strongmen or stoners would think up. Races flipping over giant tires, carrying huge steel canisters or entire cars on their shoulders. Power lifting normal weights, huge rocks or other objects, like people. Holding things up, like normal weights, or say, battle axes, as long as possible. Pulling trucks, buses or airplanes with a ropes as fast as they can.

Through the 1990s there has been a regular group of badasses in the WSM finals. Gerrit Badenhorst from South Africa, Riku Kiri from Finland, Magnus Samuelson from Sweden and Gary Taylor from Wales. What's interesting is the monsternen buck the usual stereotype. Most of them are naturally huge rather than well-defined steroid freaks. When they compete they are serious and motivated, but the aggression stops there. Generally, they are very calm and courteous to one another and to interviewers.

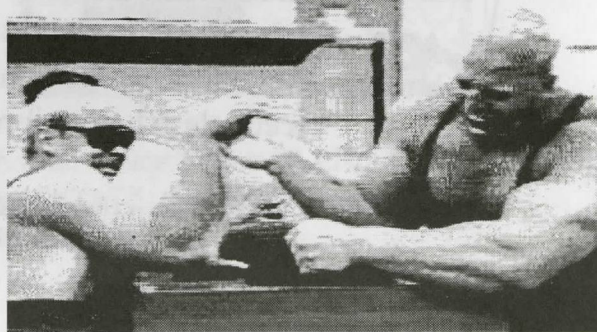
The main man has been four-time winner Magnus ver Magnusson from Iceland. I instantly latched on to him as my favorite, partly from his name, and then from his background as a farmer who is beating the weightlifters. MvM first won in 1991 and then an amazing three times in a row from '94 to '96. Every year in between he placed second. MvM has gained some popular status from the events, now doing regular public appearances, even powerlifting Mujibar and Sirajul on Letterman's show.

Some of my favorite moments on the shows always include the racing-with-a-car-on-your-shoulder, pulling the plane toward you and throwing kegs over a 25-foot wall. The most over-the-top thing I saw was when farmer boy Magnus Samuelson was arm wrestling the massive, muscle-defined Nathan Jones. Samuelson had professionally arm wrestled and Jones tried too hard: Samuelson broke Jones' freaking arm. The huge Jones fell to the ground screaming. The farmer grabbed his head in shock, feeling terrible. "It's happening again."

*ESPN2 regularly shows new and old WSM episodes. Photos courtesy of the official website for WSM at [www.strongestman.com](http://www.strongestman.com). Magnus ver Magnusson's site is at [www.xnet.is/magnusver](http://www.xnet.is/magnusver). You can download audio of MvM saying "I kicked his ass so badly, you know he's still feeling it."*

### PHOTOS:

Upper left: MvM lifts a heavy-ass rock  
 Upper right: MvM carries car  
 Center: Ted Van der Parre holds up an axe as long as possible  
 Left: Ted pulls a plane towards him  
 Right: Samuelson breaks an arm, not his own





## IF FILM CRITICS HAD TO REVIEW FOOD

It seems like every Hollywood film gets to be reviewed no matter how bad or inept it is, simply because someone blew 50 million on it and it shows on every other street corner in America. Then what do critics give less space to? Smaller films, especially foreign films, apparently because the films don't have whole magazines devoted to them and they play in smaller theaters or museums. So what if these critics had to review food?

(Apologies to Ray Carney, who suggested all this)

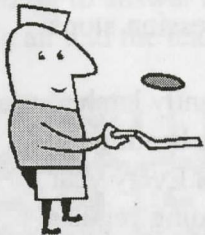


### **MCDONALD'S**

One of the most sheerly enjoyable meals of recent years, this sophisticated burger is permeated with the distilled essence of impure cooking. The grease presents extreme bowel movements and pulls the eater into them with such apparent ease that the pleasure of the suspense becomes aphrodisiacal.

### **HARBOR POINT** (5-star restaurant)

To some, the Chez's perception of filet mignon was brilliant. To us, this gory, cold-blooded steak depicting man's lurid descent into meat is ugly and unredeeming. Judge for yourself. Searing cooking and hot sauce are among restaurant's few virtues.



### **GEORGE'S** (one of those sports bars)

A brand new bar-grill with that time-tested middle-of-the-parking-lot locale. My guess is that it won't flop, because it delivers precisely what it promises. The setting is a big-budget extravaganza with a lot of stuff on the walls! True, there's not an item on the menu that I could believe (eating). But that

didn't bother me for an instant. The bathroom stall and its clever scrawled jokes are not to be missed!



### **CHEZ FRANCE** (5-star restaurant)

I decided to go out to this obscure, little restaurant (there's only one and the parking lot wasn't even full!) to see what other countries could offer up for a meal. I should've known, the food took too long and was typically undercooked. I couldn't

even make out what it was! Vaguely delineating between courses, the maitre'd didn't even speak English.



### **TACO BELL**

It's a great restaurant and probably the best of all American food. The burrito has a rapt intensity that makes it unlike any other date-expired food. The sullen, braced-teeth clerk has a vibrating physical sensitivity like that of the very young Brando.

(Based on reviews of DRESSED TO KILL, TAXI DRIVER, CLIFFHANGER,  
A WOMAN UNDER THE INFLUENCE and BLOW OUT.)



## FUCKFEST

For no other reason than we were interested in which film says it the most. The contest excludes concert films, especially by Eddie Murphy.

Our returning champion is **GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS** with 138 fucks for 1.38 per minute. It helps to have Pacino and Ed Harris (also helping the count this issue for STATE), but still a pretty high count.

According to our new contestants, fuck can be used as a person ("friar fuck"), place ("way the fuck uptown") or thing ("fucking slice of pizza").

---

### First Contestant: **MIDNIGHT RUN**

(1988) Directed by Martin Brest, Written by George Gallo

Starring Robert DeNiro, Charles Grodin, Yaphet Kotto, Dennis Farina (ThatGuy), John Ashton (ThatGuy).

A disarming comedy with a lot of action and cussing, RUN is light entertainment and real fun. DeNiro is a bounty hunter trying to bring Grodin back and ruin gangster (or is it mobster?) Farina in the process. Kotto is hilarious as the FBI guy on their trail. Ashton is another bounty hunter with bad language. I'm not sure why they cuss so much, everything else in the film is on a John Hughes feel-good level. Not to put this film down, it has solid acting. Additional ThatGuys include Joe Pantoliano as a bailsbondman and Tracey Walter (see page 28).

**Extra credit:** Ashton calls someone "whipdick"(1 pt.), DeNiro says "I got two words for you: shut the fuck up" (2 pts), and just having Yaphet Kotto is 5 pts.

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### Second Contestant: **STATE OF GRACE**

(1990) Directed by Phil Joanou, Written by Dennis McIntyre

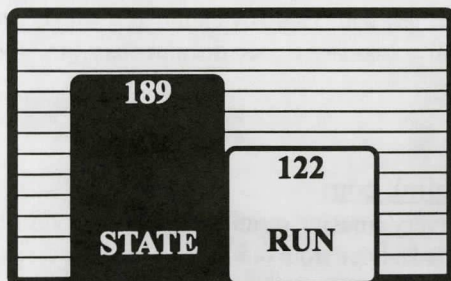
Starring Sean Penn, Gary Oldman, Ed Harris, Robin Wright, John Turturro, John C. Reilly (ThatGuy)

One of the gangster film entries for the summer of 1990. While they all pale in comparison to GOODFELLAS (soon to be profiled in this section), STATE isn't too good. Penn returns to his old gang as an undercover cop in order to take down violent hood Oldman and boss Harris. Meanwhile, Penn also starts back up with old flame and real-life wife Wright. Reilly, as with most ThatGuys, gets killed for talking back. The acting is good, it's just that there's nothing here to work with. It seemed like the cussing was from improvising lines or just being pushed to make the characters more 'raw'.

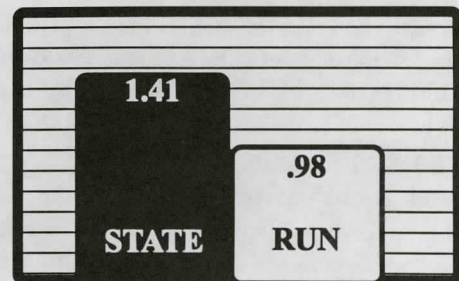
**Extra Credit:** Oldman declares that he is "friar fuck" (10pts), so many people yell over each other I probably missed some (4 pts), Penn ends a big speech with "all fucked up"(2 pts), and by having no dialogue in the last ten minutes or so the average per minute is really brought down (2 pts).

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### SAYING THE WORD



### AVG PER MINUTE



**THE RESULT:** STATE is the winner *and* our new Champion! A shocker, I didn't think GLENGARRY was going to go down for a while. But when I counted 70 in the first half-hour of STATE, the champ was on the ropes.

**Next Issue:** GOODFELLAS and SCARFACE.



# OTHER READS

Small press sticks together

## Acme Novelty Library

Various sizes, digest lately/various prices, none too much/available in obviously smarter comic stores I have dedicated the warping of my brain to Acme. Chris Ware's powerhouse design is half of it: some pages black and white, some monotone, some vivid color, big and small print, classic comic box style and complex pages of pictures that require arrows, incredible recreations of old catalogs and comic book order forms, all with hard-edged humor. On occasion Ware even provides fun-time cutouts that really make things. THEN there's the story and text, self-described as "A robust congress of sophisticated laff-getters certain to brighten even the saddest last Saturday of childhood." Smarter, deeper and more brutal than HAPPINESS. Brutally hilarious.

## Bad Azz Mofo

Full Size/Five bucks/David Walker, PO Box 40649, Portland, OR 97240-0649

[www.badazzmofo.com](http://www.badazzmofo.com)

Issue #5 is coming out after I do this, but I like it sight-unseen. It's not like buying a zine, it's a slowly growing collection of BAMF.

## Beer Frame

Digest-sized/Two and a half bucks/Paul Lukas, 160 St. John's Pl., Brooklyn, NY 11217

[www.core77.com/inconspicuous/index.html](http://www.core77.com/inconspicuous/index.html)

Now when I pass the local restaurant "Cock Asian" or pass Clamato in the supermarket aisle, I can think of BEER FRAME (title from bowling). "The journal of inconspicuous consumption" covers some odd products (styptic pencils for cuts and bites) but it mostly covers the odd way products are pushed, like Clamato being "99.9% clam-free." Great writing and articles that usually interview people from corporations responsible. Issue #9 has a revealing article on brands with edible spokesmen.

## Cometbus

Digest/Two bucks/Cash only/PO Box 4279, Berkeley, CA 94704

"There's something sleazy in the way we walk around in public releasing private feelings while keeping them covered up." I had heard about this zine for a while before I finally found a copy (Tucson's stores generally suck for finding zines) Now I feel dumb and left out as it's already on #44. Where have I been? To me, this is the prototype zine. Handwritten personal stories of Aaron Cometbus's travels and encounters. 44 is "St. Louis Stories," his return to the city after a long absence. The kind of writing that is poetic from its honesty and its humor. You read it and feel it. Also, it is one of those things that you read and then say, "Damn, I wish I wrote this."

## Dishwasher

Digest/One buck/PO Box 8213, Portland, OR 97207

Okay, prototype zine behind Cometbus is Dishwasher. Follow Dishwasher Pete in his journeys as he strives to wash dishes in all 50 states. Issue #15 is about his adventures washing dishes on an offshore oil rig. That claimed Louisiana. I don't know how many states he's up to but I'm along for the rest of the ride. Interesting, funny, down-to-earth, doing things I wish I did. Just what I look for in a zine. When Letterman wanted an interview, D-Pete sent someone else in his place! I ordered #14 to find out more about this....

## Shock Cinema

Full Size/Five bucks/Steve Puchalski, PO Box 518, Peter Stuyvesant St., New York, NY 10009

<http://members.aol.com/shockcin/>

More cool reviews and interviews in #14 (15 is probably out by now). Great interview with ThatGuy Paul Koslo who seems like a regular guy who'd be fun to hang out with. As usual, a wide range of stuff reviewed, from a Leonard Cohen documentary to CONFESSIONS OF A TEENAGE PEANUT BUTTER FREAK. What to say after that?

## West Virginia Surf Report

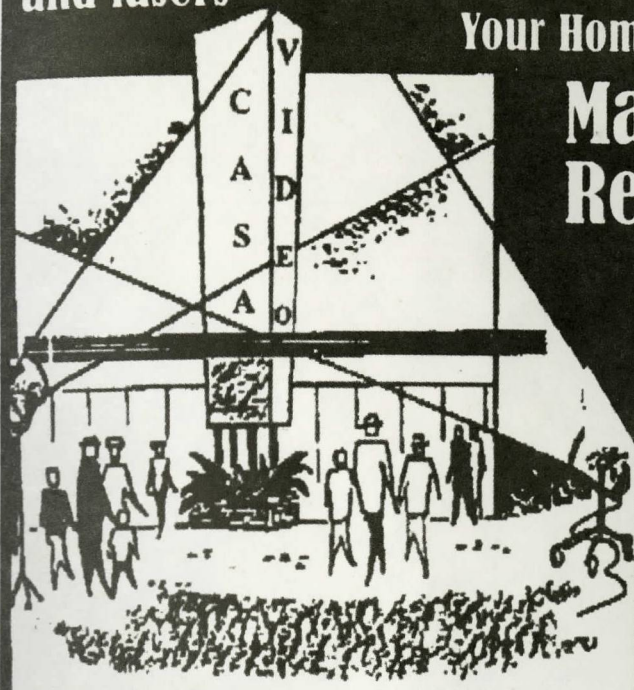
Digest/Two bucks/PO Box 7422, Burbank, CA 91510 [wvsr@earthlink.com](mailto:wvsr@earthlink.com)

WVSR #14 is "interviews" with the citizens of fake-town Noblox. Only text but very amusing scrutiny, the pages therein containing such inventions as "open-sore night at the Capitol City Meat Sox game" and various bad advice from old-timers. Lots of cussing, maybe that's what I'm laughing at, but I'm really tired from staring at the computer.

YOU SHOULD ALSO GET: Bug, Cashiers du Cinemart, Exile Osaka, Heinous, Infiltration, Punk Planet, Zine Guide (inexhaustible).  
ON THE LOOKOUT FOR: Craphound, Duplex Planet, Farm Pulp, Fucktooth, Multiball, Rag + Bone, Stay Free, Temp Slave.



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THAT GUY