

INTRODUCTION

ALL AS IT HAD BEEN

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“He who imagines disasters in some ways desires them,” Theodor Adorno noted a half century ago. Imagining this disaster is what the movies are all about. It was as though a message had bounced back from outer space. The giant dinosaurs, rogue meteors, and implacable insect-alien who have destroyed movie-set Manhattans over the past few years were now revealed as occult attempts to represent the logic of inevitable catastrophe. The big-budget recreation of Pearl Harbor in particular seemed to have emerged from some parallel time-space continuum to provide an explanation for what was even now occurring.¹

SO IT SEEMED TO THIS RESIDENT OF LOWER MANHATTAN, SEPTEMBER 12, 2001, the day after the volcano erupted, the asteroid crashed, the Martians landed, the Pacific fleet was destroyed, the big ship went down. Movies offered the only possible analogy for this “live” televised phantasmagoria of urban disaster, mind-boggling cartoon explosions, digicam special effects, and world-obliterating mayhem.

Blockbusters are what bring audiences together, all at once, around the world. Their lingua franca is violent action, and since the collapse of the Soviet empire, those sounds and images have belonged overwhelmingly to the American-run multinational force conveniently designated “Hollywood.” Hence, the familiar sense of a scenario directed by Roland Emmerich for the benefit of Rupert Murdoch, the déjà vu of crowds fleeing Godzilla through Manhattan canyons, the bellicose rhetoric of *Independence Day*, the cosmic insanity of *Deep Impact*, the romantic pathos of *Titanic*, the national trauma of *Pearl Harbor*.

A psychotherapist I know told me of a patient who, since childhood, had the recurring nightmare of a low-flying airplane crashing into his apartment house. On September 11, he exited the subway at Chambers Street, saw a jet hit

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the World Trade Center, and assumed he had suffered a psychotic break. On September 11, then, the dream became reality—for the dreamer and for us. But what did that mean? As the German social critic Siegfried Kracauer was the first to argue, “The films of a nation reflect its mentality.” Analyzing the popular movies of the Weimar Republic in the light of the Nazi rise to power, Kracauer wrote, “Germany carried out what had been anticipated by her cinema from its very beginning. It was all as it had been on the screen.”

Do we live in a world of unmade film scripts that desire to go into production? Searching for an instant response to our leader’s apparent confusion, the government incorporated elements of *Air Force One*, the 1997 hit in which blowback from a joint U.S.-Russian operation against neofascist, nuclear-armed, Kazakhstan results in an attack on America—specifically the President’s plane. (It was not the American people but their leader who was in danger.) Not only history but also film history changed. In retrospect, *Independence Day*, *Titanic*, et al. became the quintessential Hollywood movies of the fin de siècle.

All as it had been on the screen. The Events of September 11 were a 2001 scenario to rival that envisioned by Stanley Kubrick at the height of worldwide cinephilia back in the now-mythical year of 1968. Was the terror attack then a prophetic fantasy come true? A form of perverse wish fulfillment? For over half a century, the United States had bombed nations from Japan to Vietnam to Iraq to Serbia, without itself ever suffering a single bomb falling on its own cities. But even more—and for longer—we had bombarded the globe with our images. As *Variety* put it in one 1995 headline: “EARTH TO H’WOOD: YOU WIN.”²

Some reverends and mullahs were quick to attribute September 11 to divine retribution. Other spectators understood the planet-transfixing Events as but one more spectacular world-dominating megabillion-dollar Hollywood science fiction extravaganza. (There were also those who imagined that, like the movie industry, this super production was organized by a conspiracy of Jews.) In his “Letter from China,” published a month later in the *New Yorker*, Peter Hessler described the DVD quickies he found in Wenzhou video stores, displayed between the piles of *Jurassic Park* and *Planet of the Apes*: The cover of *The Century’s Great Catastrophe* was appropriately garnished with a view of the twin towers aflame and portraits of the spectacle’s rival stars, George W. Bush and the Dr. Mabuse-like mastermind Osama bin Laden—at that moment the biggest media personality since Adolf Hitler.³

Crediting *Armageddon*’s Jerry Bruckheimer as its producer, authors of *The Century’s Great Catastrophe* combined American TV news footage with Chinese commentary, using the menacing shark theme from *Jaws* to underscore the north tower’s slo-mo collapse and interpolating footage of Michael Douglas from *Wall Street* into a conclave of world leaders responding to the

Events. Other Chinese videos—*Surprise Attack on America* and *America's Disaster: The Pearl Harbor of the Twenty-first Century*—were more outrageous, sweetening the newsreel footage with (in)appropriate movie clips from *Godzilla* and *The Rock*. From the detached Wenzhou point of view, the Events were a study in dialectics: Jihad vs. McWorld. Suddenly, the Chinese were us—enjoying the spectacle of cataclysmic mass destruction from a safe vantage point.

André Bazin termed this particular cinematic pleasure the “Nero complex,” referring to the decadent tyrant who supposedly supplied his own musical sound track as Rome burned. This rarefied aesthetic experience was democratized by motion pictures—which trafficked in disasters almost since the birth of the medium—and is even suggested by those televised movie critics who pass judgment on movies, thumbs up or down like parody Roman emperors.



Fin de siècle cinema was nothing if not what the scholar of early movies Tom Gunning termed a “cinema of attractions,” characterized by the production of F/X action blockbusters, grandiose disaster flicks, and other big loud movies, not the least of which was the first George Bush’s Operation Desert Storm.

While *Titanic* (with its unprecedented, albeit digital, representation of mass death) displaced *Star Wars* as the top-grossing movie of all time, the Clinton impeachment and Y2K panic proved to be the much hyped doomsday thrillers that fizzled at the box office. In addition to the jihad terror of the first, 1993 WTC attack and the exploded federal building in Oklahoma City two years later, there was the “natural” terrorism of movies like *Twister*—not to mention “art” disaster films as varied as *Tribulation 99*, *The Rapture*, *Schindler’s List*, *The Ice Storm*, *Crash*, *The Sweet Hereafter*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *Magnolia*, and *Thirteen Days*.

In the disaster cycle of the 1970s, calamity—like the loss of Vietnam, the Watergate scandal, and the Oil Shock recession—typically arrived as a punishment for some manifestation of the boom-boom sixties. Some disaster movies even blamed the catastrophe on rapacious, environment-aping corporations and craven, inadequate leaders. In the nineties, however, it was as though America was being punished just for being its own ever-loving, arms-dealing, channel-surfing, trash-talking, butt-kicking, world-historical Number One self.

Unchallenged hegemony created its own universal antithesis. In the absence of the Communist menace, the foe was everywhere. For Hollywood, this “unspecified enemy;” in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s phrase, was variously visualized as Euroterrorists in *Die Hard* (1988), narco-terrorists in *Die Hard 2* (1990), neo-Nazi terrorists in *Die Hard with a Vengeance* (1995), homegrown terrorists in *Under Siege* (1992), “international” terrorists in *Under Siege 2*

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(1995), extraterrestrial terrorists in *Independence Day* (1996), microorganic terrorists in *Outbreak* (1995), dino-terrorists in *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* (1997), Russian terrorists in *Air Force One* (1997), Bosnian terrorists in *The Peacemaker* (1997), and Islamic terrorists in *True Lies* (1994), *Executive Decision* (1996), and *The Siege* (1998), a movie that dramatized the wholesale roundup of Arab American suspects.

Meanwhile, Republican politicians and American jihadists argued that the real enemy was Hollywood itself—the movie industry had spent the past decade carrying out a form of soft terrorism. What force was more pervasive? Or persuasive? By positing several billion casualties, *Independence Day*—to name but one blockbuster, extremely popular in the Middle East as everywhere else on earth—pretended to massacre nearly as many people as paid to see it. Even at the time, audiences were observed to cheer the image of the vaporized White House. Who now will forget the stirring image of *Independence Day* good guy Will Smith fearlessly piloting his aircraft into the very citadel of alien power? And who cannot associate it with the fall of the Trades?

Hollywood's first response to September 11 was a fascinating exercise in magical thinking. Immediately after the Events, Warner Bros. postponed *Collateral Damage*, a movie in which Arnold Schwarzenegger plays a firefighter who wreaks cosmic vengeance when his wife and child die in a Los Angeles skyscraper blown up by narco-terrorists. Jerry Bruckheimer decided that the time might not be right for *World War III*, which simulated the nuking of Seattle and San Diego. MGM shelved *Nose Bleed*, with Jackie Chan starring as a window washer who foils a terrorist plot to blow up the WTC. ("It represents capitalism," one of the terrorists was to explain. "It represents freedom. It represents everything that America is about. And to bring those two buildings down would bring America to its knees.")

A new self-censorship was in place. The CBS show *The Agency* dropped a reference to Osama bin Laden. *Sex and the City* trimmed views of the Twin Towers; Paramount airbrushed them from the poster for *Sidewalks of New York*. Sony yanked their *Spider-Man* trailer so as to eliminate images of the WTC and similarly ordered retakes on *Men in Black 2* that would replace the Trades with the Chrysler Building. DreamWorks changed the end of *The Time Machine*, which rained moon fragments down on New York. It was as though the future might be made safe by rewriting the past.

Hollywood felt guilty. Only days after the towers fell, the studios eagerly reported that the FBI had informed them they could well be the terrorists' next target. On September 21, Los Angeles was swept with rumors of an impending attack. That great whirring sound wasn't the swallows returning to Capistrano but all those chickens coming home to roost. Not everyone was as blunt as

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director Robert Altman, who told the Associated Press, “The movies set the pattern, and these people have copied the movies. Nobody would have thought to commit an atrocity like that unless they’d seen it in a movie.... I just believe we created this atmosphere and taught them how to do it.”

Such megalomania might seem unwarranted but, as the Chinese videos suggested, the Events of September 11 would be a hard act to top. It was the end of the End of History, the beginning of the Clash of Civilizations. In the days following the disaster, the *Los Angeles Times* reported entertainment industry concern that “the public appetite for plots involving disasters and terrorism has vanished.”

What then would movies be about? A prominent TV executive hastily assured the *New York Times* that entertainment, post-September 11, would be “much more wholesome” and that “we are definitely moving into a kinder, gentler time” (presumably 1988). A DreamWorks producer explained that the present atmosphere precluded his studio from bankrolling any more movies like *The Peacemaker* and *Deep Impact*. “We make the movies that reflect, in one way or another, the experiences we all have. There are just some movies that you can’t make from here on in.”

Hollywood expected to be punished. Instead, it was drafted. Before long, the Pentagon-funded Institute for Creative Technologies at the University of Southern California convened several meetings with filmmakers to “brainstorm” possible terrorist scenarios and then offer solutions. For the first time since Ronald Reagan left office, it has become all but impossible to criticize the movie industry. After George W. Bush’s late September suggestion that Americans fight terrorism by taking their families to Disney World, Disney chief Michael Eisner reportedly sent out an e-mail praising the president as “our newest cheerleader.”

The reign of movie lover Bill Clinton was over. Yet, as the theater of battle moved from New York and Washington to Afghanistan, even Representative Henry Hyde—implacable scourge of Clinton’s Hollywood amorality—requested motion picture industry input into a congressional hearing on how the United States might successfully win the “hearts and minds” of the Arab world. Unable to ignore the similarity between their religious fundamentalism and ours, the Bush administration now wanted to promote the traditional American values of “tolerance” and entertainment.

Among their other crimes, the iconoclastic Savonarolas of the Taliban had proscribed the sale of television sets and banned all movies—even subjecting them to public burning. Hence the phenomenal photograph printed

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November 20, 2001, by the *New York Times*, page one above the fold, captioned “Kabul Cinema Opens to Joy and Chaos.” In an image that would do the professional hysteria stokers of the Cannes Film Festival proud, a mob of smiling Afghan men were shown storming and even scaling the walls of the 600-seat Bakhtar Cinema to participate in Kabul’s first public movie screening in five years. Not since *Independence Day* . . .

Never mind that women were banned and that the Afghans were fighting to see the 1995 *Uruj*—a movie celebrating those same mujahideen heroes whose war against the Communist infidels had brought bin Laden to Afghanistan in the first place. *Shrek* would surely follow—and maybe even *Pearl Harbor*. Kabul had rejoined our civilization.

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Will the dozen years between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the World Trade Center ultimately be perceived as a golden age? American movies reigned supreme in the international marketplace; but, for no small number of cineastes, this happy period was understood not as the end of history so much as the end of movie culture.

Only a few months past the centennial anniversary of Auguste and Louis Jean Lumière’s first public exhibition of their cinematograph, Susan Sontag wrote that “cinema’s 100 years seem to have the shape of a life cycle: an inevitable birth, the steady accumulation of glories and the onset in the last decade of an ignominious, irreversible decline.” (Yet, such directors of the fin de siècle as Hou Hsiao-hsien and Wong Kar-Wai, David Lynch and David Cronenberg, Chantal Akerman and Béla Tarr, can be legitimately counted among cinema’s glories—and has there ever been an individual film artist more powerful than Steven Spielberg?)

Something else may be irreversible. Perhaps the projection of the disaster, years before it occurred, was a form of bravado: How could ordinary life, after all, possibly match the magical make-believe of virtual reality? Or possibly, by pretending to destroy the world, Hollywood’s mindless demonstrations of cinematic might acknowledged the impending obsolescence of the motion picture apparatus that had so conveniently defined the twentieth century. It was as though the machine could sense the waiting junkyard. How striking that much current vanguard work—as well as academic film theory—should be focused on primitive cinema and the soon-to-be-anachronistic movie projector. Similarly, the quasi avant-garde Dogma movement—whether a quaint European reaction against Hollywood economic dominance or a cynical branding strategy—takes its stand on the endangered status of cinema’s indexical relationship to that which has actually been.

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Even as audiences continued to wander in dreamland, melancholy—if not sentimental—movie-movies from *Blade Runner* to *Memento* acknowledged their own mortality by insisting that memory, at least as we know it, is based on photography. A less humanist message from the future, George Lucas's long-awaited *Phantom Menace* turned out to be essentially an animated cartoon fashioned from photographic material—and thus a movie without external reference (unless it was the analogous form of the Japanese *anime*). The political possibilities of such digitally produced fantasies may be extrapolated from the melodramatic pageant *Forrest Gump* as well as the topical satire *Wag the Dog*. As the nature of the movie apparatus changes, so will our sense of the past—including the artifact that is the movie past.⁴

Cinematographers know that objects filmed in the “magic hour” before dusk are often suffused with an unpredictable golden glow. If the century's end cast a late-afternoon light on all films released during the 1990s, nostalgia for the photographic era—as well as that of serious moviegoing—can also be deduced from those adaptations of classic novels so characteristic of fin de siècle cinema. Just as the phrase “nineteenth-century novel” now conjures the richly populated, self-contained worlds of Dickens and Dostoyevsky, so the old-fashioned “twentieth-century movie” may come to represent a lost fusion of modernist aspiration and mass appeal—what the critic Raymond Durngat meant by “the wedding of poetry and pulp” and neo new wave filmmaker Quentin Tarantino called “pulp fiction.” The catastrophe then is to no longer remember what that fusion meant.

NOTES

- 1 J. Hoberman, “News of the World,” *Village Voice*, September 25, 2001.
- 2 For most of the 1990s, the national film industries that inspired the greatest degree of cinephiliic enthusiasm developed in countries outside the American cultural sphere: Iran and China (which itself had three centers). A measure of resistance was also provided by a few strong individuals who developed under the regime of the former Soviet empire—Krzysztof Kieslowski, Jan Svankmajer, Béla Tarr, Alexander Sokurov—as well as the cultural protectionism practiced by France.
- 3 Writing in the *Village Voice* (January 8, 2002), Mike Rubin speculated that the Osama bin Laden videotape discovered in Kandahar and widely telecast in early December 2001 was “for most American viewers, probably their first experience watching something with subtitles.”
- 4 In that spirit, the pieces that are here collected appear as originally published, save for the elimination of topical references and repetitions.

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THE LANG TWENTIETH CENTURY

Originally published as “Old Lang Zeit,” the *Village Voice*
(January 5, 1993).

THE NOTION OF HITLER AS MASTER CRIMINAL UNDERSCORES WORKS AS DISPARATE as Brecht’s *Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* and John Farrow’s *The Hitler Gang*. It’s another personality, however, who dominates the Goethe Society program “Out of the Dark: Crime, Mystery, and Suspense in the German Cinema.” The central figure in this 16-film series is Hitler’s fellow Austrian and near contemporary, the painter-turned-filmmaker Fritz Lang.

Lang, whose 1990 centennial passed virtually unnoticed (at least in New York), was a pulp fiction maestro—perhaps the greatest in movie history. His official masterpiece, *M*, is the original portrait of a serial killer, but there is scarcely a popular genre—sci-fi, sword and sorcery, espionage, gangster, horror—that did not pass through Lang’s hands and does not bear his mark. (That was just in Germany. Once in America, Lang directed a proto-*Bonnie and Clyde* and helped invent film noir.)

Even more pop and less literary than his precursors D. W. Griffith and Louis Feuillade, Lang can scarcely be recuperated as anything other than the mad genius of juvenile trash. His worldview seems eternal. As Stan Brakhage put it, Lang sought to fashion a religion *out of* his adolescent daydreams, the “sexiest simplicities . . . crudest power madness . . . meanest worship—that which effects masturbation most easily.” Lang’s silent movies even have a built-in Oedipal kick; they were mainly written by his then-wife Thea von Harbou and often starred her ex-husband Rudolph Klein-Rogge in villainous roles.

The Spiders (1919), Lang’s first success, concerned the megalomaniacal head of a clandestine organization. So, too, did the sumptuous and snappy *Spies* (1928). But the most celebrated of Lang’s criminal geniuses—the one who, for him, personified the zeitgeist—was introduced in *Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler*, a two-part epic based on Norbert Jacques’s self-consciously “modern” settings—

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the art nouveau nightclubs and art deco gambling dens populated by cocaine-snorting aristos. Early audiences were more impressed by the car chases through the Berlin night: “Speed, horrifying speed characterizes the film,” one reviewer wrote. But even then, Mabuse was employed to epitomize the postwar period of political instability, social turmoil, and crazed hyperinflation.

In the person of Mabuse, Lang gave Germany’s breakdown a single cause. The gambler is a master of disguise and hypnotism, exerting his will over cabaret dancers and millionaires alike. Hidden yet ubiquitous, Mabuse is history’s secret agent. It is he who masterminds the long-distance murder of a courier and panics the German commodity exchanges; he who wrecks the economy by flooding it with counterfeit dollars. According to Lang, the movie was originally introduced with a montage that skipped from the 1919 Spartacist uprising and 1920 Kapp Putsch through various disorders to the assassination of finance minister Walter Rathenau, to ask, “Who is behind this?” (Who, indeed? Rathenau was not assassinated until nearly two months after *Mabuse*’s release.)

The history of film or the film of history, as Jean-Luc Godard might ask: Mabuse was responsible for the lunacy of postwar Germany; the movie fittingly ends with his confinement to a madhouse. But Lang was persuaded to resurrect, if not precisely spring, Mabuse 10 years later—in the aftermath of *M* and on the eve of Hitler’s election. In *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*, the seemingly catatonic gambler takes control of the asylum doctor, who is soon ranting that Mabuse’s *übermensch* brain will “smash our rotten world.” Through mysterious recording devices and the pliant Dr. Baum (his study crammed with human skulls, primitive masks, and expressionist , paintings), Mabuse plunges Germany into “an abyss of terror.” His minions are everywhere; the normal world barely exists.

As *M* was predicated on an actual case, so *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* was presented as the explanation for the crime wave Germany experienced during the early thirties, and the movies are further connected by presence of the earthy, cigar-smoking commissioner Lohman (a kind of Berlin Kojak). Although less methodical than *M*, *The Testament* is brisk and often brilliant filmmaking. As a master of suspense, Lang is the bridge between Griffith and Hitchcock. *The Testament* opens in the midst of an unexplained incident—a frantic man concealed in a print shop, playing cat and mouse with his armed pursuers to the overwhelming pounding of the unseen press. “Life under a terror regime could not be rendered more impressively,” observed Siegfried Kracauer in hindsight.

Reveling in rhapsodic destruction and purveying a universal fear of authority, *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* was scheduled to open on March 23, 1933—the same day, as it turns out, that the Reichstag voted Hitler dictatorial powers. But the movie was banned; its “presentation of certain criminal acts” was deemed “so detailed and fascinating” authorities feared it might inspire “similar” inci-

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dents of antistate terror. In an introduction written for the 1943 U.S. release (which was shown to coincide with Lang's anti-Nazi feature *Hangmen Also Die*), the director, now an American citizen, maintained that *The Testament* was made as an "allegory" of Hitler's terror. "Slogans and doctrines of the Third Reich [were] put in the mouths of criminals." But if *The Testament* attacked Hitler it may only be in retrospect. Mabuse represents disorder, not fascism—and von Harbou was a member of the Nazi party when she wrote the script.

Goebbels evidently banned *The Testament* sight unseen. After he saw it, he told Lang that the only thing wrong with the movie was the absence of a proper Führer to defeat Mabuse. It was at this meeting, by Lang's account, that Goebbels wondered if the director might like to head the German film industry. Lang would maintain that he closed out his bank account and left the Reich that evening.



In early 1958, an elderly Lang returned to Germany at the behest of producer Artur Brauner to make *The Tiger of Eschnapur* and *The Indian Tomb*; the success of this two-part feature, based on a script Lang wrote in 1920, prompted Brauner to suggest another *Mabuse*.

Lang decided to make a "brutal" film, evoking "the cold reality of today." That icy world was, of course, the Cold War and its epicenter, Berlin—a still undivided city where the hallucinatory prosperity of the rebuilt Western zone was surrounded by desolation and misted in intrigue, where Allied military sedans daily cruised one another's sectors, and no one was sure who was counter-spying for whom. As *The 1000 Eyes of Dr. Mabuse* went into production, the Soviets called for the withdrawal of all foreign troops: "Only madmen can go to the length of unleashing another world war over the preservation of occupation privileges in Berlin."

According to a reminiscence published by Volker Schlöndorff, "Lang was past recognition. Since he couldn't go out without feeling like a stranger, he confined himself to the international anonymity of a hotel room . . . His only thoughts were of Germany, of what it had been, of what it had done, of what it had become." Almost ridiculously straight forward, *The 1000 Eyes* is a work of studied geometry in which B-movie automatons glide through a constricted version of prewar Berlin, replaying incidents from the earlier *Mabuse* films (as well as *Spies*) in the zombie nightclubs and bunkerlike sets of the "Hotel Luxor."

Is it really the same map of the city splayed across the wall behind the jolly, *echt* Berlin police chief? (He's played by Gert Frobe, soon to embody the Langian figure of Goldfinger.) Mabuse is now pure *geist*. The megalomaniacal "genius

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of diabolism” who died in 1932 has been reincarnated as another hypnotist who plans to rule the world by gaining control of a millionaire American rocket scientist cum industrialist. Mobile spy units cruise the streets; the Hotel Luxor is not only a nexus of unsolved murders but also an unholy relic of the Nazi era, designed by the Gestapo to monitor, as well as house, foreign diplomats. Every room is under constant surveillance through a combination of hidden microphones, secret cameras, and one-way mirrors (which allow the innocent Ami to observe the German mystery woman in her underwear). But, if much of the action is framed by TV monitors, nothing is exactly what it seems.

No less than his pre-Nazi German films, Lang’s swan song is a trove of prophetic paranoia. A séance arranged by a blind clairvoyant in a chamber where constellations are marked in phosphorescent stars offers a bizarre foretaste of the Pentagon war room and title character from *Dr. Strangelove*. On May 1, 1960, an American U-2 spy plane was shot down over the Urals; on May 14, *The 1000 Eyes of Dr. Mabuse* opened in Stuttgart. The following summer, the Berlin Wall went up and an American defector named Lee Harvey Oswald applied to return home The Lang century continued.

WHITE DOG

Originally published as “Howl,” the *Village Voice*
(July 16, 1991).

THE MOST SOUGHT-AFTER AND ELUSIVE OF SHELVED STUDIO RELEASES, Samuel Fuller’s *White Dog* has finally been unleashed. Inaugurating Film Forum’s month-long Fuller retro, the movie gets its theatrical premiere nine years after Paramount decided it was too troublesome to open and sent it to the pound.

Adapted from Romain Gary’s 1970 nonfiction novel, a section of which originally appeared in *Life* magazine, *White Dog* is an unusually blunt and suggestively metaphoric account of American racism. In the original story, Gary and his then-wife Jean Seberg find a stray German shepherd who, they soon discover, has been raised to attack blacks on sight. Although told that the dog is too old to be deconditioned, they ultimately turn him over to a black animal trainer who vengefully reprograms the creature to maul whites (including, at the book’s climax, Gary himself). Paramount acquired the property in the mid-1970s; the project then went through seven scripts, with Roman Polanski, Arthur Penn, and Tony Scott variously named to direct, before it fell to Fuller, fresh from his comeback triumph, *The Big Red One* (1980).

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In *Sam Fuller on the Set of White Dog*, the Christian Blackwood short that rounds out the Film Forum bill, producer Jon Davidson explains that he recruited Fuller because Fuller was the only man in Hollywood who could rewrite a script and be ready to start shooting in 10 days. It's also possible that Fuller was the only American filmmaker who could successfully short-circuit Gary's "civilized" irony and present *White Dog* head-on, treating the yarn with the sort of absurdist humor and unabashed didacticism the material warranted. Indeed, intuiting his potential audience, Fuller reconceptualized the movie to put the conflict inside the dog's brain: "You're going to see a dog slowly go insane and then come back to sanity in front of you," he promised *Variety*.

Fuller altered Gary's ending (making it more pessimistic and irrational), modified the character of the black trainer (Paul Winfield), and changed the protagonist from an activist movie star into an aspiring actress (childlike Kristy McNichol in her first "adult" role), whom the dog initially saves from a white rapist. In Fuller's world, unlike Gary's, racial paranoia doesn't drop from the sky but is associated from the onset with the paternal protection of the Law.

That, in homage to Seberg and Gary, Fuller maintains the initials J. S. for McNichol's character and R. G. for that of her writer-boyfriend, is suggestive of his film's boldly abstract tabloid stylistics. Filmed in headlines, framed as allegory, *White Dog* combines hard-boiled sentimentality and hysterical violence, sometimes in the same take—as a director, Fuller has lost very little since his masterpieces of the early sixties. (Fuller was exiled from Hollywood at the moment when American public reality was beginning to rival his *Shock Corridor*, and *White Dog* attests to the sad waste of his talent; had his career not fallen apart after *The Naked Kiss*, he might have been making two comparable films a year between 1965 and 1980.)

White Dog's iconic visuals and cartoon dialogue ("Your dog is a four-legged time bomb!") are given unexpected dignity by the somber piano doodling and tense, moody strings of Ennio Morricone's brilliant score. Still, this is an animal film—replete with dog-level tracking shots and frequent close-ups of the dog's eyes. Given the surplus violence of the animal's savage, not always predictable, attacks—their locations ranging from McNichol's living room (TV blasting) to a movie set (a process shot of Venice flickering in the background) to a church (St. Francis of Assisi looking on)—and Fuller's regard for the dog as an alien intelligence, *White Dog* infuses a politically conscious variant of *Jaws* with intimations of Robert Bresson's sublime *Au hasard Balthazar*, not to mention the director's own unclassifiable nuttiness.

Where else but in a Fuller film would a purveyor of trained animals (Burl Ives) hurl darts at a poster of R2D2 ("that's the enemy!") or, having doubled

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for John Wayne in *True Grit* by reaching into a nest of rattlesnakes, proffer his paw with the invitation to shake “the hand that helped Duke win the Oscar!” Of course, the choice contradictions are reserved for Fuller’s hero. “To me, this is a laboratory that Darwin himself would go ape over!” Winfield exclaims of the animal farm where he works; “How I wanted to kill that son of a bitch!” he describes his response on discovering the white dog trotting away from his latest victim, “But you can’t experiment on a dead dog!” By the time Winfield swears that if he fails to cure this animal, he’ll find another and another until he does, he has come to seem like a black Captain Ahab.

Fuller—who strongly criticized American racial attitudes in a number of his fifties action flicks (and made them the subject of *The Crimson Kimono*)—is responsible for some of the toughest social-problem films ever made in the USA. It’s understandable that the NAACP would have taken an interest in *White Dog*’s production; it’s unfortunate that, by warning Paramount that the film might give racists ideas and encourage the production of actual white dogs, the NAACP provided the studio—and later NBC—with an excuse to suppress what seems to me one of the most unflinching statements to ever come out of Hollywood, something like *Rin Tin Tin Joins the Ku Klux Klan*.

White Dog “naturalizes” racism in a strikingly unnatural way. While the movie’s white characters are invariably amazed by the whole idea of the “white dog,” most of the black characters treat his existence as a brute fact of life. Unlike in Gary’s novel, the dog here doesn’t seem to have a name—he’s referred to once as “Mr. Hyde,” leaving us to consider just who “Dr. Jekyll” might be. Late in the day, we discover his creator is a kindly old codger, with two little granddaughters and a box of candy for the lady who sheltered his pet.

What’s stunning about *White Dog* is how it gives race hatred both a human and subhuman face. Which is the mask? Conditioned as it is to fear Willie Horton, white America might well ponder the bloody image of that snarling canine.

BASIC INSTINCT

Originally published as “New York Letter: Fantastic Projections,” *Sight and Sound* (June 1992).

THE MIRRORED CEILING IS STANDARD BOUDOIR ISSUE IN PAUL VERHOEVEN’S *Basic Instinct*—a movie that’s been refracted through the American media for so long, it seems to get off on watching itself. The camera somersaults out

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of the looking glass in the very first shot to glom a naked couple grinding loins on silken sheets. She straddles him, ties his wrists to the bedpost, then arches her back to rebound with an ice pick . . . Clearly, Verhoeven wants to give new meaning to the phrase over the top.

More inadvertently self-revealing than effectively malign in positing a sinister conspiracy of rich, beautiful, man-slashing crypto-Lesbians, *Basic Instinct* is a film whose goofball preening is exceeded only by its ham-fisted dialogue. Offering his instant diagnosis of the ice-pick killer, a forensic psychologist tells the cops who found the grisly remains that they're "dealing with a devious, diabolical mind . . . a deep-seated obsessional hatred . . . someone very dangerous and very ill." Yeah, like the murderer and who else?

Reaping a whirlwind of publicity (and receiving violently mixed notices in the daily press), *Basic Instinct* grossed \$15 million over its opening weekend to displace the teen comedy *Wayne's World* atop the national box office charts, before being succeeded by Ron Shelton's basketball buddy-drama *White Men Can't Jump*. In New York, where it was released the same day as a report detailing the rise in gay-bias victim attacks, *Basic Instinct* was protested by a coalition of gay and lesbian groups—as it had been while in production last spring. Still, the movie's basic instinct is not simply homophobia. As expulsive as the opening attraction proves to be, it's a veritable geyser of pathology.

Basic Instinct is nominally set in San Francisco (and thus an anthology of allusions to *Vertigo*, *Bullitt*, and *Dirty Harry*) but actually unfolds in the realm of unfettered desire. The atmosphere of super consumption—the cops operate out of posh burnished-wood executive offices, interrogate suspects in a junior version of the Pentagon war room—is reinforced by the full panoply of ostentatious dolly and crane shots, the carefully dappled light that falls across the elevators, the casually superfluous helicopter overheads. (The film's budget has been put at \$49 million.)

As with *Robocop* and *Total Recall*, Verhoeven places a Hollywood genre between quotation marks. It's as if he gave the routine *policier* the same madcap treatment he accorded middle-period Bergman in his last Dutch feature, *The Fourth Man*; as a thriller, *Basic Instinct* is more baroquely twisted than it is suspenseful, closer to De Palma than Hitchcock. The biggest tension builder is the shot-countershot montage that proceeds cop Michael Douglas's going down on suspect Sharon Stone in one of the film's hypertheatrical hot and slurpy sex scenes.

A hard-boiled wise guy who leads with his putz, Douglas here synthe-sizes all previous roles from *Fatal Attraction* and *The War of the Roses* to *Black Rain* and the long-running TV series *The Streets of San Francisco*. He's a

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superego tied into a pretzel, a cop with an addictive personality who consistently does the wrong thing—most spectacularly, we gather, when two tourists wandered into his line of fire. (It's also suggested that he drove his wife to suicide.) As a result, *Basic Instinct* opens with Douglas in a heightened state of deprivation, having temporarily given up cigarettes, sex, booze, and cocaine.

American movies, at least those directed by Howard Hawks, used to make a fetish of professionalism. *Basic Instinct* is almost delirious in celebrating the absence of ethics. Or maybe it's a form of social criticism. The movie is so opportunistic it could be taking place in the brain of Donald Trump—this fantasyland is sprinkled with sleaze instead of Disney dust. Sentenced to psychiatric care after the tourist incident, Douglas sleeps with the police psychologist assigned to be his therapist (Jeanne Tripplehorn) while she, in turn, circulates his confidential file—ultimately sold off to Stone's mystery novelist cum murder suspect, who explains that writers are amoral by nature.

This blithe lack of scruples has been recapitulated after a fashion both by Verhoeven's bland assertion that the crypto-lesbians are the movie's most positive characters and screenwriter Joe Eszterhas's campaign to distance himself from a script for which, despite its being a virtual reread of his *Jagged Edge*, he received \$3 million. But the scenario also evokes the paranoid domestic mind-fuck of *Total Recall*, and chief among the movie's cartoonish pleasures is the spectacle of Stone playing Madonna to Douglas's Arnold.

Stone is the ultimate bad girl—it's interesting that, in general, men (straight and gay) have been far more disapproving of the film than have women. In every instance, the Stone character flaunts her transgressive power. Questioned by the police, she not only brazenly smokes in a no-smoking zone and confounds six seasoned cops (their faces pouring sweat into the camera) with frank sex talk but reveals that she's donned her miniskirt *sans* knickers. Whether or not the scene sells the movie, it's enough to send Douglas pirouetting off the wagon into a rough *sex pas de deux*: "You've never been like that before," Tripplehorn observes after he brings her home, slams her against a wall, kisses her, rips apart her underwear, kisses her again, then pushes her face down onto a chair and takes her from behind.

From the Douglas perspective, *Basic Instinct* is one long confusing come-hither look. (To reinforce the point, Dorothy Malone periodically traipses out of the woodwork to reprise her fifties impersonation of nympho excitement—rubbing her back against the wall, sucking in her cheeks, batting her bedroom eyes.) Stone pals around with female multiple-murderers—as opposed to killers of multiple females—and, perhaps, lives out her bestsellers. She explains her relentless interest in Douglas in terms of a work in progress about a detective

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who “falls for the wrong woman” and gets himself killed. It’s the boudoir-mirror principle, life imitating art imitating life . . . Ultimately, Douglas will propose an alternative ending to Stone’s scenario: “How about we fuck like minks, raise rug rats, and live happily ever after.” Too bad for him, the completed manuscript is already spewing out of her printer.

“My wife says it comes out of all my sexual fantasies,” has been Eszterhas’s convoluted explanation for *Basic Instinct*. Mrs. E. notwithstanding, the women here are all infinitely manipulative. Douglas is confused by two duplicitous shrinks—Stone’s character having graduated from Berkeley with a double major in literature and psychology. Every female in the film is not only a possible or actual killer but also a potential lesbian. The running joke is that each, however, can be temporarily awed by the power of Douglas’s wand. The most comic demonstration of this feat comes after the first Douglas-Stone tryst when, having spent the night watching the action, Stone’s leather-clad consort (Leilani Sarelle) menacingly materializes in the bathroom and Douglas outmachos her, bare ass to the viewer.

As this coy camera placement suggests, it is Douglas who is the movie’s real love object—his reported \$14 million paycheck dwarfs Eszterhas’s. (It is also Douglas who has been pressed into service to give *Basic Instinct* a “progressive”—or at least “libertarian”—reading.) So, is the movie being homophobic or naturalistic when it gives his lumberingly faithful partner (George Dzundza) an unrequited crush? Deducing that Douglas has been to bed with Stone, Dzundza is just as jealous as Sarelle: “Goddam sonafabitch, you fucked her. How could you fuck her!” That this public tantrum was evidently shot at a gay-and-lesbian country-western bar called Rawhide II suggests that Verhoeven, at least, understood the implications of this scene.

Less homophobic than misogynist, more ridiculous than not, *Basic Instinct* is full of fantastic projections—with all manner of doubling, evil twins and shadow selves. (There’s even a character named “Hoberman;” although I consider that less an acknowledgment of my panning Eszterhas’s *Music Box* than a reference to the current Touchstone president.) If half the murders go absurdly unsolved—well, Freud would understand that too. Just what do these women want? The lesbian activity, such as it is, is a surplus of sexual heat, a factor of an overall female uncanniness, the manifestation of a male’s fear that he might be expendable.

Basic Instinct is undoubtedly exploitative, but it’s also unsettling—it’s as if the female sex-toys in a garden-variety porn flick suddenly developed an unpredictable, shocking, vengeful autonomy. “Funny how the subconscious works,” somebody muses late in the film. I dare say, it’s a riot. One man’s basic instinct is another’s high anxiety.

BLADE RUNNER

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the *Village Voice* (September 15, 1992).

SOME MOVIES APPEAR IN TANDEM, SO PERFECTLY MISMATCHED THEY MIGHT HAVE been produced by the force that zapped the rocket fleeing Krypton and split Bizarro from Superbaby. First materializing in June 1982, two weekends into the *E.T.* era, Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* is the Spielberg film’s evil twin—a competing fantasy for the Age of Reagan.

Where *E.T.* was set in an idyllic white bread suburb, *Blade Runner* invented a horrific multicultural inner city. Humanist to the max, *E.T.* resurrected J. C. in the form of a lovable alien; *Blade Runner* featured robot “replicants” more soulful than the *Homo sapiens* who hunted them. And, as *E.T.* proved the most universal movie ever made, Scott’s \$30 million bomb was relegated to the midnight circuit almost immediately. (Indeed, *E.T.* made Reese’s Pieces while *Premiere* once humorously listed the corporations that vanished after being plugged in *Blade Runner*, Atari, Bell Telephone, Cuisinart . . .)

But if *E.T.* was the ultimate middlebrow cult film, *Blade Runner* outflanked it at both ends of the spectrum. At once a touchstone for MTV and an avatar of cyberpunk (predating the publication of *Neuromancer* by two years), an F/X head trip and an object of academic discourse, praised in *Starlog* and parsed in *October*, *Blade Runner* spent a decade proselytizing itself on home video and in classrooms—despite the inherent loss of visual grandeur.

Thus, the very month that trendmeister Peter Wollen informed a scholarly conclave that *Blade Runner* was the lone “canonical” movie of the eighties, its unheralded rerelease in the “director’s version” broke house records at the Nuart in LA. and the Castro in San Francisco. The subject of two imposingly theoretical essays in *Camera Obscura*, *Blade Runner* reopens here timidly relegated by Warners to the less-than-Ziegfeld screen of the Loews Village.

Given *Blade Runner*’s current reputation, it’s instructive to review the tenor of its notices. “All visuals and no story,” David Denby complained in *New York*, the summa of a “hundred naively bad experimental films:” Denby’s verdict (“terribly dull”) was mild compared to his colleagues’. “*Blade Runner* has nothing to give the audience,” declared Pauline Kael, while Michael Sragow concluded his *Rolling Stone* pan by declaring *Blade Runner* “best suited for zombies” and Stephen Schiff, who may be found frolicking about the still-living corpse of Leni Riefenstahl in this month’s *Vanity Fair*, condemned *Blade Runner* to a moral gulag as “a film without sense . . . a film without soul, without conscience.”

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The reasons that *Blade Runner* was hated are the very things that give it grandeur. Visual rather than literary, blatantly post-authorial, the movie is a kind of natural effluvium, a ready-made metaphor, a treasure trove of vulgar postmodernist “jesgrew,” that seems to have escaped human control.

Indeed, like Orson Welles’s *Touch of Evil*, *Blade Runner* is a film without a fixed version. The current release is evidently the cut shown (with disastrous results) to the original preview audiences. Harrison Ford’s much-maligned hard-boiled voice-over has been subtracted (save for the terse eulogy describing the suicide of the replicant *Übermensch* Rutger Hauer). The tacked-on “happy ending” (which supposedly recycled aerial outtakes from *The Shining*) has been junked—the movie now ends with the melancholy reminder that Ford’s replicant love (Sean Young) is fast heading for a pre programmed obsolescence.

Is this an improvement? The old *Blade Runner* was a movie that thrived on disjuncture. In an essay on cult films that has also become canonical, Umberto Eco writes that *Casablanca* is not a movie but *the* movies—it transcends personal artistry or even human intent, the clichés themselves are “having a conversation.” So, too, *Blade Runner*—a glittering mishmash of *Frankenstein* and *The Big Sleep*, *Metropolis* and *Love Story*, Josef von Sternberg and George Lucas. The old phony ending was hardly inappropriate. After all, it’s a second hand image used to construct a pseudo-escape—precisely the sort of simulation that *Blade Runner* is all about.

The Philip K. Dick novel from which *Blade Runner* was adapted is set in a radioactive world abandoned by humans for space colonies and concerns a bounty hunter who “retires” rogue androids and who himself becomes a kind of android. The movie retains a number of Dick’s details—notably the “empathy test,” which defines humanity—while simplifying the plot, introducing its own jargon, and transposing the action to Los Angeles 2019, where it could be thoroughly overwhelmed by the *mise-en-scène*.

As splendid an assemblage as *Blade Runner*’s sources is its look—a fantastic amalgam of locations, back lots (including Warners’ old New York set), and miniatures. Although this futuristic vision of acid rain and eternal night, where advertising is the landscape, and Hovercrafts zip past the animated billboards as punks slurp ramen in the casbah below, owes little to Dick, it does anticipate William Gibson (“Night City was like a deranged experiment in social Darwinism, designed by a bored researcher who kept his thumb permanently on the fast-forward. button”), not to mention the hallucinatory inner city of Fredric Jameson’s “Hysterical Sublime,” in which the decay of urban life produces its own heightened exhilaration.

The inspiration must be Hong Kong, although Scott told one visitor to his set that he was “constantly waving [a reproduction of Edward Hopper’s *Nighthawks*] under the noses of the production team to illustrate the look and mood I was after.” Nevertheless, now more than ever, *Blade Runner* has come to seem the quintessential Los Angeles film Mike Davis’s *City of Quartz* has a chapter

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pitting *Blade Runner* against Gramsci while the 1988 report *L.A. 2000: A City for the Future* specifically invokes the “*Blade Runner* scenario” as “the fusion of individual cultures into a demotic polyglotism ominous with unresolved hostilities.”

The *Blade Runner* dystopia is hardly novel—an oligarchy in which a corporate state presides over a squalid ecological nightmare, the population drugged and pacified by image-induced dreams of consumption.

As in *Metropolis*, capital transforms labor into machines. But here, where every desire is reproduced and amplified in an endless chain of simulation, there’s a continual dialogue between human and replicant, nature and culture. The human protagonists are all defined by their relation to the replicants. Are the replicants people who are treated as objects or are they objects who have somehow become human? (The snapshots they use to document their simulated memories suggest another Jameson trope—the postmodern sense of the past as a shoe box full of old photographs.)

As the lacquered replicant of a noir heroine, Young’s Rachel is a multiple simulation. (She’s the ultimate android in that she has no awareness of being anything other than human—her implanted memories are identical to actual experience.) In the movie’s most discomfiting scene, the Ford character—who knows what she is—compels her to love him, prompting her response step by step. Does he feel so free to dominate her because she’s female or because she’s a machine? Is teaching a machine to love you a form of masturbation?

The replicants are products of human vanity—but with a difference. They bear the burden of existential angst and romantic rebellion. Thus, the Hauer character wrests the movie away from its nominal hero and the slogan of the Tyrell corporation turns out to be true: The replicants are “more human than human.”

Call it the death of the subject (as well as the author). Predicated on the pathos of machines who know they are programmed to shut down, *Blade Runner* suggests that, far from a state of grace, humanity is barely a state of mind.

KISS ME DEADLY

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GENRES COLLIDE IN THE GREAT HOLLYWOOD MOVIES OF THE MID-FIFTIES THAW. The western goes South with *The Searchers*; the cartoon merges with the musical in *The Girl Can’t Help It*. Science fiction becomes pop sociology in

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Invasion of the Body Snatchers; noir veers into apocalyptic sci-fi with Robert Aldrich's 1955 *Kiss Me Deadly*.

Kiss Me Deadly, which opens the Walter Reade's month long Aldrich retro, tracks the sleaziest private investigator in American movies through a nocturnal labyrinth to a white-hot vision of cosmic annihilation. From the perversely backward title crawl (outrageously accompanied by orgasmic heavy breathing) through the climactic explosion, the film is sensationally baroque—eschewing straight exposition for a jarring succession of bizarre images, bravura sound matching, and encoded riddles.

Mike Hammer plays with fire and (literally) gets burned. Jagged and aggressive, *Kiss Me Deadly* is an extremely paranoid movie—with all that implies. The mode is angst-ridden hypermasculinity. Fear of a nuclear holocaust fuses with fear of a femme fatale. Hammer pursues and is pursued by a shadowy cabal—a mysterious “They,” as they're called in the film's key exchange, “the nameless ones who kill people for the Great Whatzit.”

Hammer's quest is played out through a deranged Cubistic space amid the debris of Western civilization—shards of opera, deserted museums, molls who paraphrase Shakespeare, mad references to Greek mythology and the New Testament. A nineteenth-century poem furnishes the movie's major clue. The faux Calder mobile and checkerboard floor pattern of Hammer's overdecorated pad—a bag of golf clubs in the corner and Hollywood's first answering machine built into the wall—add to the crazy, clashing expressionism.

Among other things, *Kiss Me Deadly* served to kiss off Mickey Spillane, the most successful American novelist of the Cold War. Spillane's violent thrillers sold 24 million copies between 1947 and 1954; in 1956, seven of the 10 best-selling titles in the entire history of American fiction were by Spillane. Filling a function now satisfied by talk radio, Spillane created a character who was God's Angry Man. Mike Hammer was a self-righteous avenger—judge, prosecuting attorney, jury, and executioner in one. His antagonists were gangsters and Communists. At the end of *One Lonely Night*, he exults that he “killed more people tonight than I have fingers on my hands. I shot them in cold blood and enjoyed every minute of it . . . They were Commies.”

Hammer knows why his “rotteness was tolerated.” His mission was “to kill the scum . . . I was the evil that opposed other evil.” This ends-justify-the-means brutality had its contemporary political manifestation in Senator Joseph McCarthy, described by one colleague in suitably Hammer-esque terms as a “fighting Irish Marine [who] would give the shirt off his back to anyone who needs it—except a dirty, lying, stinking Communist. That guy, he'd kill.” In late 1954, after McCarthy was under Senate investigation, the *Saturday Review* published an essay bracketing Hammer and McCarthy. The same analogy