

## Transgressions & Regressions: The Rigidification of Form as *genre-genesis*

“As / The / Spirit / Wanes / The / Form / Appears”

– Charles Bukowski, “Art” (1979)

### 0. Introduction: “Genre” as (pro-/re-/retro-)genesis

Genre; a common enough word, but what do we know about it? Etymologically the word partakes in a whole family of related concepts derivable through Middle French (*gendre*) to Latin (*generare*, *genus*, *gens*...) and Greek (*genos*, *gignesthai*...). In modern English, related words include *kin*, *kind*, *generate*, *generation*, *genesis*, *genus*, *gender*, *general*, *generic*, *gentile*, *gene*, *progeny*, *eugenics*, *degenerate*, *genealogy*... Indeed, *genre* is a matter of lineages and genealogy; **the biology of form in the arts**. The original polysemantic content of the root can be summed up succinctly as below:

Creation (*genesis*) - Procreation (*progenesis*) - Recreation (*regensis*) - Relatedness (*genealogy*).

The conflict between activity and passivity, between creativity and re-creativity (repetition), is an eternal problem in the realm of Ideas and of Art. The artist, the sculptor, the poet – is her role that of an innovator (a master-guru) or that of a craftsman (a well-taught apprentice)? Consequently, an artwork can be seen as either a unique and “priceless” *objet d’art*, or else a reproducible and economically commodifiable thing. Paradoxically, I will take *the moment of the inscription of “value” as the very moment of devaluation*. This process of devaluation is speeded up by what I call “genre-genesis”, namely the obsessive-compulsive categorization by *mediators* (cultural subjects as “economic rational agents”) of techno-cultural processes including the intentional *acts* and *products* of artists. Since it would be largely impossible (not to mention presumptuous) to attempt a historical survey on an issue of this magnitude and this level of generality without limiting the scope of my essay to a manageable slice, I will forgo a deeper analysis of art forms other than 20<sup>th</sup> Century (American) Cinema. So, I will recline myself to the position of a student of the social, technological and group psychological aspects of the “Movie Experience” as a social construct. This position

incorporates and amalgamates the roles of the cinema historian, the film critic and the social commentator. Since my subject-matter is the Arts, I will respect *the artistic Spirit*, which, in Bukowski's terminology, is always in danger of becoming "mere" Form, i.e. rigid formalism.

I feel that binary motion between *differentiation* (uniqueness) and *assimilation* (belongingness) aptly characterizes the dual nature of American ("Mass") Cinema; always between innovation and renovation, between a fresh start and a continuation, between an indie film and a block buster. In my essay I will analyse this dual tension between anarchy and X-archy ("the rule of/by something" - from *arkhê*, "rule" or "beginning"). I believe the concept of a "genre" is useful enough a tool for thinking about the ways in which innovation **always** turns into an established *pattern*, something to be copied and reinterpreted. "Genre films", in this regard, are phenotypic materializations of a genotype (mind the etymology again), or perhaps more like canvases on which the stereo-/arche-/prototypical innovations are mended together into a 24fps collage-montage. In terms of semiosis, I study the escape of the ultimate referent (the signified) behind the sea of signs referring to another signs referring to another signs *ad infinitum*... Against the onslaught of intertextual hypertext, I will analyze the ushering-through of true creativity and true novelty (i.e. the presence of authenticity of both form and content) as found both in mainstream and so-called *alternative* American<sup>1</sup> movies.

I believe that Cinema has opened up "*a new world, a new society, a new phase of history*", in Raymond Williams's cheerful words (1974, p.35), but I do not accept the label "technological determinist" (ibid, p.38), because Cinema for me is at the flux of different impulses and drives. Without resorting to any "Great Man" interpretation of its history, I wish to propose that the value of "*innovation*" in the use of a technology reaches, beyond the specific novel content, unto the medium itself. Innovation is not only intra-medial but always-already multi-medial and multimodal. The "medium **is** the message" (in McLuhan's mantra), but *the medium is always a composite frame of innovative relationships* amongst subjects, actors, players, creators - i.e. message-makers. Users do not "use" a technology/medium/structure, but innovate/mediate/construct them pragmatically.

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<sup>1</sup> To restrict myself to American movies is quite a feat, because my expertise and interests place me squarely in opposition to the aesthetics and ethics of American cinema. Having spent my childhood and youth watching American movies, I now live and breathe European-Asian cinema. In the conclusion, I will say a few words about the possibility (and existence) of truly non-American, un-American and even anti-American cinematography in the world today.

## **1. The Socio-Historical Theory of Hyper-Categorization**

The concept of a genre is a concept much despised by many craftsmen these days. To call something “generic” is a cruel thing to say, for the artist it feels like calling the wrath of the gods upon the result of your hard labour. Inversely the same holds true: critics might say “genre transcending” when they mean “groundbreaking”, or might begrudgingly urge us to go see a good comedy/horror/action film *despite* the fact that it does not plod any new ground: “*It is after all pretty good for yet another [insert genre] film*”. We expect genre movies (because we are led to expect and consume them), yet we secretly wish for something more. It is also curious that, usually and quite consistently, what come to be generally recognized as the “best films in the genre” (best of their “kind”) are always somewhat *exceptional* and *noteworthy*, i.e. not very “generic” at all!

It is obviously true that Cinematic genres partake in the history of Classification and *genre-genesis* in the Culture at large (for example in music, literature and painting). Still, the concept of a genre, as it occurs today, has quite a unique place in the cinematic arts (encompassing Television and Cinema). It would be absurd to ask: “What genre is Beethoven?” His genre, if such a term means anything, was *music* (as opposed to say visual arts). Today, of course, we can talk of Romanticism or late Classicism (or more broadly of Classical Music), but historiography always implies a skewed and hindsighted perspective. The classificatory models used in grouping people together to form a coherent narrative in historical processes tend to superimpose modern terminology and ideologies in quite anachronistic ways. This is of course what people *do*, and what historians and pedagogues have always done, not to forget archivists and museum keepers, but only the recent revolutionary developments of the urban information society have made possible (and perhaps necessary) this mania for hierarchical classification and “relational analysis” (i.e. analysis of relationships and genealogies as networks). In Manuel Castells’s words, “[A]t the end of the Twentieth Century, we are living through one of these rare intervals in history. An interval characterized by the transformation of our ‘material culture’ by the works of a new technological paradigm organized around information technologies” (p.29). But this explosion of machines and signifiers is a two-edged sword, a blessing in disguise, because if genres are the result and effect of quite recent development, they are for the same reason also *on the frontline of disappearance*, as the ever-onward-marching acceleration of mutability of form necessitates the abandonment of old clichés and boundaries. But, weirdly enough, due to the increased storage capacity of digital media, the Old is not *forgotten*; on the contrary, it is remembered as *ironic fragments* and as *remixed code*.

Genre-definitions, then, are a relatively new method of classifying the natural variation of styles, codes and forms in the arts. The fact is that something analogous to genre-classifications has become commonplace, not only in cinema, but in all the other arts. This, again, is testament to the hyper-rationality underlying late industrial consumerism. Genres in movies are a symptom, or an epiphenomenon, of technocratic economic orderliness. The predominance of more-or-less monopolistic ownership models with equally straightforward distributive channels ensures the need for easily classifiable, package-able and marketable products. One result of the monopolistic corporate model has been a striving towards mergers and semi-legal cartels. In the early days this was quite clear: “[*Warner Brothers and*] its biggest rivals were vertically integrated [--]; that is, studios owned chains of theatres and thus had ready markets for their products.” (Winston, p.62) As in many other fields, after the “anti-trust boom” of the middle of the Century, the last couple of decades have seen the (re-)emergence of mega-corporations aiming to integrate any which way they can (horizontally, vertically and diagonally) and to dominate, via sponsorship and market deals, as much as possible of the existing markets. This has led to an ever-deepening drive towards cross-commercialization of the public sphere, one of the symptoms of which is a desire to Brand products in a way that emphasizes their (fictive) Identity as Logo. No, the consumer is not the one who wants to buy a “rock” album or see a “drama” movie; it is the *retailer-producer* who wants to know which shelf to display the latest product on. The consumer is indeed quite capable of purchasing, say, The Simpsons Series 3 box-set together with Godzilla (remake) Director’s Cut and a Coldplay Live DVD, without worrying in the least about genre or classificatory paradigms (except to the degree he has to *find* the physical products in the store). It seems that genres are indispensable for marketers, record companies, retailers, advertisers, critics, TV and Cinema guides, MPAA ratings, theatrical and DVD promotion, IMDB classifications and critics (did I mention critics already?).

To recap my fundamental position, the actant-subjects are always constructing their Lebenswelt, and this is no less true in people’s attitudes towards Shops, Malls and other techno-economically driven spaces of “imposed meaning” than it is in their appropriation of Cinema and Television as means of (often subversive) social meaning construction. In Johan Fornäs’s words: “*Each situated interaction between people, symbolic networks and technological hardware is a constellation of subjects, texts and contexts which shapes intersubjective shared meanings, collective and individual identities, as well as the complex life worlds embedding them.*” (1998, p.27) While the desire and need to categorize always exists, for the consumer *and* for the Artist the issue rather becomes: How do I set myself apart from others without imitating/replicating anybody else’s innovative gestures?

## **2. Theorizing Innovation / Actualizing Stagnation**

A style is born as a reflective medium of social conditions. The exploration of themes is “topical”, but this topicality is always elevated to a properly artistic level of generality. For example, Dostoyevsky’s depictions of Russian working class poor and the bourgeois townsfolk constitute accurate historical *topoi*, reflecting not only the material-technological conditions giving rise to the modern realist novel as a genre (in terms of its subject-matter, readership and “moral scope”), but also the constant arguing, mediating and problematization of Reality itself in terms of “the critical subject” (even more clearly present in Tolstoy, Zola and Dickens). Because of the critical distance over and above the historical situatedness in turn-of-the-century Russia, the novel has lasting value as a reflection of quite generic techno-cultural processes of industrialization, urbanization etc... Similar situatedness is, of course, present in films, whose *mise-en-scène* captures a very real frame of objects, things, rooms, locales, environments and people – even when anachronistic “period pieces” are being filmed. In “*Withnail & I*” (1987), for example, a film set in the 60’s, one can find numerous clues that the film was shot in the 80’s. At any rate, it is interesting that it is precisely “iconic” and allegedly “typical” technologies that film makers use to situate their films in a specific period – this includes not only costumes and architecture, but also household items (wooden or metal spoons), tools (hammer instead of screwdriver), transport (horse - or Lada - instead of a car) and other facets of assimilated everyday items. There are also *anachronistic anachronisms*: in a movie about Columbus, for example, one can find the claim that his contemporaries thought that the Earth was flat (simply untrue), or in a film set in medieval Europe one can find modern curse words uttered by dying warriors (who somehow speak 20<sup>th</sup> Century English dialects)... The limitations in “know-how” serve to break the illusion of accurate time-shifting. Historical re-enactments, then, are subject to contemporary prejudices, crystallized in the genre-genesis of various types of historical movies; how very different approaches to historical situations are the king plays of Shakespeare, the proletarian and peasant films of Sergei Eisenstein, the “Historical Epics” of Hollywood, low-key period pieces (e.g. “*Barry Lyndon*” 1984, or “*Marie Antoinette*” 2006) and fantasy tales set in an imagined past (e.g. “*Lord of the Rings*” 2001-2003). Each crystallizes a contemporary genre approach to historical narrative. Consequently, there is not one single history, but *histories*.

The question then becomes as follows: Are films products of historical circumstances or are they individual, unique and “free” expressions of “auctorial intent”? The auteur-theory of cinema, the most serious answer to this “structuralist” challenge, is largely seen to correspond and reflect the rise of New Wave cinema in Europe and especially France (where it centred around people like

*Bazin* or *Truffaut* and the journal *Cahiers*). The auteur theory is one of the most serious attempts to intellectualize the status of movies as true art. According to this theory, the business of making a movie is rather like the work of building a cathedral; there may be a whole army of workers and underlings working to finalize the artist's vision, but ultimately there should be one Michelangelo or Spielberg giving directions (i.e. directing). This theory opposes itself not only to movies-as-mass-entertainment but also movies-as-representatives-of-a-genre. An analogy is to be found in fantasy novels: almost every new release is a Robert Jordan, but occasionally a Tolkien comes along. Indeed, Tolkien *invented* fantasy as a genre, for all intents and purposes. Likewise we could say Godard innovated the Godardian film, Bunuel gave birth to Bunuel-esqueness, Lynch invented Lynchianisms and Kaurismäki the Kaurismäki-style of downbeat realist cinema. But there are clear problems with this auteur-centric (and elitist) position. It is always subject to what Winston calls "*the poverty, or 'thinness' of great-man histories*" (p.59): Does the innovator act as a *true* innovator ("timeless genius"), or is he simply the first claimant to arrive at a freshly-emerging field, made possibly by historical circumstances such as technological innovation and socio-structural metamorphosis? My question, in simple terms, is this: Do actants dictate positions ("Annnd... *action!*"), or do positions shape actants ("You say we have nothing but clay and paper? Fine, let's animate some clay and paper!")? Depending on the answer, genres (as "prototypal" forms, in Elena Rosch's terms) can be seen as either necessary or accidental signifying structures. Of course the answer has to be more complex than that, but it is a serious question indeed whether "romantic comedies" and "action adventures" are timeless and inherently representative samples of the archetypal ocean of ideas in our Collective Unconscious or, as it were, flukes of history perpetuated by copycat *faux artistes*. Does "the Bollywood musical" reflect India or Human Nature? Or, to put it succinctly, is there a justification for "*Ocean's Thirteen*" (2007)?

### **3. The Fountainhead of the Mainstream**

To understand American counter-culture – to be explored later as "Indie Cinema" – one has to first understand American (proto-) culture, explored here from the perspective of "the Dream Factory".

The American Ideal, and the American "Way", are present as an evanescent veil over each and every celluloid frame of film shot in the Golden Age of Hollywood. This is the *Weltanschauung* that unites the sparkly glamour of the Broadway musical, the uninhibited chivalry of Humphrey Bogart or Cary Grant, the unbridled optimism of Frank Capra and the polychromatic adaptations of

19<sup>th</sup> Century fairy tales by Walt Disney Co. The power of illusion is here the power of positive suggestion, the power of inspirational cultural leadership. Belief in the high ideals of society and individuality expressed itself as a massive onslaught of Optimism: In Hollywood, the Great Depression never happened, and the Roaring '20s, as if by magic, lived on through the next two decades as the cinematic Golden Age (elsewhere, both in working class America and in Europe at large, experienced as the *interbellum* years of turmoil and grief), which produced many of the greatest classics of American (and indeed world) Cinema: "It's a Wonderful Life" (1946), "Gone with the Wind" (1939), and even that quirky little masterpiece "Fantasia" (1940). In the arts, in the media, in the culture, the American Dream has made itself seen and heard by ever-renewed and ever-reinvented displays of glimmer and gleam. The fanfare and the hectic musical performances in the Tonight Show with Johnny Carson (and their later developments in Jay Leno, David Letterman and Conan O'Brien) are a heightened state of a social orgy of obsessive-excessive<sup>2</sup> consumption of often painfully exuberant modalities of amplified channels of noise, light and violence:

"The American Way": Sound → Noise; Visual FX → (pure) Light; Contact/Tactility → Violence.

So, the pomposity and self-assured heroism in movies reflects the wider reliance in the American culture on hyper-powered, extravagant and obsessively excessive showman mentality. Whether in the miniscule scale of personal dramas or in the epic nationalism of Jerry Bruckheimer, "the American spirit" forces itself through and above the mundane Ur-Grund of "mere" Realism (the material-technological socio-political conditions). The spiritualism and transcendentalism in American Cinema, whether in "uplifting", "awe-inspiring" or even "imperialistically aggressive" forms has obfuscated and held back a materialistic reading of American Cinema. However odd it may sound, the supposed "crass commercialism" and "no-nonsense materialism" of the U.S. has acted as a vessel, a container, for the most religious-spiritual attitude towards Matter and the Real. This same attitude is to be found in the owner-class treatment of the aspiring middle and lower classes; the upper classes are the *emergent leisurely component* (in a way, *the Spirit's self-relaxing*) of the stratification of society: Hence the mythos has it that, on the one hand, there are those "who *have* made it" (i.e. have earned their place in heaven, like Jehova's Witnesses) and, on the other, those "who *could* still make it [if only they tried harder etc...]; this is America after all!" This attitude is both reactionary (in its faith in divine justice) and radical (in its proselytizing zeal).

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<sup>2</sup> In Baudrillard's terminology: "obscene" excesses of (over-)consumption.

In his holiday resort at Berghof, *Adolf Hitler* could be seen (and was filmed) entertaining his guests with *Gone with the Wind* in, one surmises, jealousy and awe of the American propaganda machinery (“The Dream Factory”). He styled his whole career as a technologically conscious performance artist – a pompous and self-assured rock star. He was a good showman on stage, but to achieve full effect he utilized the audio-visual stunts of Albert Speer, the propagandist connivance of Joseph Goebbels and, perhaps most impressively from the point of view of foreigners (including international film critics), the cinematic prowess of *Leni Riefenstahl*. Her “*Triumph of the Will*” (1934) and “*Olympia*” (1938) are still today spectacular examples of cultural aesthetics in film. The chain of influences is pretty complicated, because the propaganda model of political propaganda in mass media was borrowed from the British, while both the propagandist and the entertainment value of cinema was adapted mainly from the Americans, all mixed within Teutonic ideals of beauty and valour. At any rate, both in Europe and America, there is a curious continuity from pacifist-oriented bombastic idealism to military-oriented *bombastic* realism. In the next chapter I analyze further the curious history of social pressures exerted by what Eisenhower called the “Military-Industrial Complex” on studios, film-makers, cinema and television. Technology is never a neutral medium, but always a battleground. Cinema, likewise, has its scars.

#### **4. Militainment - From Disney to Bruckheimer, from WWII to Iraq**

If Hitler was enamoured by American cinema (and there is no question), likewise the American efforts to counter the Nazi propaganda during WWII were equally fiercely imitative: Frank Capra, the master of American Optimism, provided his skills to the dubiously militant (and occasionally racist) “*Why We Fight*” (1942-45), which mirrors the anti-Semitic “educational” documentaries of the Goebbelsian variety, such as Fritz Hippler’s crude and vulgar “*Der Ewige Jude*” (1940). The American film-goer, of course, could not be taught to hate the Germans *as a race* (more because of the genetic background, intermarrying and pan-Caucasian camaraderie amongst Americans than because of any inherent moral principles), but the public had to be, and largely could be, desensitized against identifying the Japanese “yellows” as civilized human beings. Towards the end of the war, remember, it was the Japanese and not the Germans who were interred *en masse* in camps. Also, dropping an atomic bomb on a German city would have been inconceivable, but it was seen as appropriate (or at least less troublesome) against the sub-human “Japs”; here, in fact, we have premonitions of later American adventures, or “civilizing missions”, in Vietnam and Iraq, where racial prejudices play an important role as a morale booster. Disney, too, lost his innocence



(if he ever had any) when he provided the government and the public with anti-Nazi (against the Party) and anti-Japanese (against the People) cartoons, partially subsumed within Capra's documentaries. These cartoons, utilizing characters like Donald Duck, range from naively idealistic humanism (pro-America) to dehumanizing racism (pro-White). A third example of anti-Nazi propaganda is "*The Great Dictator*" (1940) by Charlie Chaplin, remarkable and exceptional in its warmth and irony. But even Chaplin-the-Pacifist made the film as *a political weapon* against Hitler.

All of these figures (Capra, Disney and Chaplin) arise from the aesthetics of Golden Age of Hollywood, and all of their modalities of aesthetic experience were easily transformed into the service of the war machinery. Again and again this is proven to be the case: The most blatant examples of war propaganda do not come from Soviet Russia or the Third Reich (both of whom, especially the former, aestheticized and idolized false pacifism), but from "postmodern" & "benevolently hegemonic" United States of America. Every generation and decade has had its belligerent, blustering and militaristic propaganda spectacles (often critical flops but box office hits), from WWII to today, but hardly anybody could have foreseen the rise, in the '80s and '90s, of the new wave of military-sponsored, pro-Republican (in the '80s: pro-Reagan), pro-army mass spectacles like the "*Rambo*" trilogy (1982-1988) and "*Top Gun*" (1986), all the likes of which relied on the charismatic lead of a no-nonsense White Man (e.g. Sylvester Stallone and Tom Cruise). The conscious planning by the army to recruit members through P.R. efforts (which includes sponsorship of movies in the form of free equipment, vehicles and weapons) is well attested: "*Many war films have been produced with the cooperation of a nation's military forces. The United States Navy has been very cooperative since World War II in providing ships and technical guidance; Top Gun is the most famous example.*" (Wikipedia article on "War Film") In the same odious vein, we have TV-series like Fox's "24", which is proud not only of its warm ties with government counter-terrorism agencies, but with its unabashed desire to provide topical coverage of the War on Terror:

*"Only days after the first episode of 24 was aired on Fox, Karl Rove appeared at the infamous November 2001 meeting of Hollywood producers and directors in which the administration called for support from Hollywood for the war on terror. That meeting included representatives from movie and television studios, including the Fox network. Surnow ["24" producer] said Fox picked up the show with the enthusiastic support of network owner and media mogul Rupert Murdoch."*

<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2005/apr2005/2424-a05.shtml>

The scale of pro-war P.R. efforts, and the militarization of media, always *reflects the jingoistic needs and tendencies* of the day's political-societal power interests. In the case of WWII this is obvious. Vietnam is a bit of an exception, because the subversive elements of the film medium were largely used *against* the establishment rather than *in favour* of it, both in documentaries and in feature films. The politicization of Vietnam films really began, however, *post-bellum* as it were, with wildly popular and largely pacifistic films like "*Apocalypse Now*" (1979), "*Platoon*" (1986) and "*Full Metal Jacket*" (1987) all exploring the psychological-philosophical decay of Reason and Sanity as well as the utter feckless inability of the political-societal drumbeat for War to completely hypnotize and desensitize either the "home front" or the common soldier. Vietnam, then, perhaps because of the critical momentum of the 60's countercultural movement and the societal upheavals, was not only "the first war on television", but the first war not to be blatantly propagandized in cinema by the Big Studios (that is to say, not successfully). During the '80s, Reaganism was built on the premise of perennial war-to-death with the "Evil Empire" U.S.S.R., which begat its own genre of Rambo-esque cinema. Today, with various "paramilitary", "counter-terrorism" and "peace-keeping" operations around the world the main focus, a new brand of urban warfare cinema has sprang up as a response and as a mediated form of discourse, both reflective and unreflective, both critical and hypocritical - a good example of this is Ridley Scott's "*Black Hawk Down*" (2001), oscillating between war propaganda ("bringing our boys home") and cynical nihilism. The dearth of Iraq-related fictional movies *circa* 2003-2007 is deafening, but perhaps not surprising as the conflict is still ongoing. The lonely exception to this sea of silence is Sam Mendes' "*Jarhead*" (2005), which, although actually about the *first* Gulf War, is an allegory or a metonym for the current war. Another pleasant (but heavily ideological) exception would be the Turkish-Egyptian production "*Kurtlar Vadisi - Irak*" (2006), which tells the story of the Second Iraq War from the perspective of the victims. Pacifist and anti-war movies constitute a category of their own, but oftentimes it is hard to differentiate between an idealistic critique and a naïve endorsement of imperialism.

It is crucial that sometimes "the time is not ripe" for a film that is too topical; e.g., the first film about 9/11, *bar* Michael Moore's documentary, was Oliver Stone's conciliatory and far-from-subversive "*World Trade Center*" (2006), five years after the event. The same year "*United 93*", a sensitive dramatization of real events, was released to wide critical acclaim. It seems that cinema, in its "mainstream" appearances, is highly sensitive to "the pulse of the nation". In other words, *cinema's autonomy is constricted by a moral supervening authority*. This is somewhat analogous to Brian Winston's idea of "supervening social necessity" (1995, p.68), although in cinematic innovation what seems more pertinent is its inverse, namely *a lack of supervening social inhibition*.

*Everything is permitted, except what is inhibited.* Funding, shooting, casting, release, co-operation of the media and promoters, critical reception and mass appeal are all dependent on *a tacit chain of unobstructed functioning*; if this chain is broken (by cutting off funding, or banning, or ignoring...) the film will never reach the pinnacle of mainstream success that the politically neutral (or, if anything, pro-Anglo-American) “*Casino Royale*” (2006) was bound to achieve.

In the Canadian CBC documentary “*Gamer Revolution*” (2007), the U.S. Army is proud to market itself by announcing that it has entered the era of interactive entertainment. The game “America’s Army” (2002, 2006), a good-but-not-quite-excellent FPS, aims to surreptitiously indoctrinate young players already accustomed to virtual violence into the ways of the Real Army, and to introduce them to the prospect of “realizing their dreams” by starting killing for real. Such efforts always risk back-firing and resistance, but the documentary claims that releasing the game has been “*the single most effective recruitment tool*”, cost-effectively, in the U.S. Army’s history. In the last couple of years, many popular entertainment internet sites aimed at teens and young adults, including many film and gaming sites, have begun to carry ads and commercials (“streaming ads”) by the U.S. Army, in an effort to lure in young recruits, by associating *films-and-games-about-the-army* with *career-in-the-army*. In effect, the line of distinction between virtual-representative reality (of the Arts) and “real Reality” is becoming blurred, vacuous and easily manipulable. Even if Baudrillard’s concept of the “Virtual (inexistent) War” is an exaggeration, and even if the wide-spread nickname “Nintendo pilots” given to Gulf War jet warriors only serves to obfuscate the real violence done to their victims, the new forms of technological integration and streamlining at work in society (both vertically and horizontally) are already blurring the clichéd distinctions between entertainment and work, virtuality and reality, child and adult etc... The most blatant form of propaganda is this form of “innocuous” and “innocent” pedagogic “infotainment”, because *what is shocking and what becomes catastrophic is quiet acceptance and lack of self-reflective resistance*. To add irony to insult (on top of insult to injury) a Syrian government-backed game about the Palestinian *intifadah* against Israeli Army, launched as a conscious political counter-weapon, has proven quite popular amongst Arab kids. The irony is that many Americans would be quick to condemn this game without seeing the exact parallelism at work in their own society. It is quite possible, it seems, to *infiltrate* mass communication tools with a conscious effort to propagandize. For a deeper analysis of the fusion of Military and Entertainment in TV and Cinema, see the documentary “*Militainment Inc*” (2006). The term “militainment” deserves to become popular because the phenomenon is real.

So, since American cinema partakes in both the peacetime and militant aspirations of the American political elite, it is not difficult to see the “dark side” of American extravaganza: the sheer power of the Vision helps to beautify and embellish *any message* – just like a TV series like *Idols* can make *anybody* a Star (for 15 minutes). The aesthetics of beauty, success, happiness can as easily be transformed into the anti-aesthetics of ugliness (obscenity), failure and misery. When the tears come, the mascara melts away to reveal the underlying grimace – idealism can be quite ugly.

Now, though, is the time for perhaps a more importantly question: Is there a justification for yet another self-indulgent art house film? That is the topic of my next chapter.

### **5. “Indieploitation”, or, When Rebellion Becomes Formulaic and Predictable**

The highest shame and humiliation, yet simultaneously the highest proof of human fallibility and thus an affirmative statement of our shared humanity, is witnessing the slow decay, self-parodying and rigidification of *once-avant-garde* forms of techno-cultural innovations. *There are limits to every revolution, and no stagnant state has been founded otherwise.* For example, the James Bond formula, despite a couple of semi-risqué side-tracks, like “*Moonraker*” (1979) and the recent “*Casino Royale*” (2006), has become a self-repeating, self-parodying fountainhead of cash and mediocrity. Most observers will agree that the makers have opted for safety and over innovation and experimentalism – yet this is to be expected, because James Bond (the pinnacle of the Spy genre), is a trademark and a formula that sells and re-sells. In fact, *genre-genesis* entails a kind of “eternal recurrence of the same” (in Nietzsche’s terms); James Bond as gothic horror or as a musical would be met with scepticism to say the least! *There is only one Bond film*; ever re-made every few years.

Particularly distressing to me has been the birth of the formulaic “Indie Film”, with the concomitant “Indie Industry” (the name itself should be a warning sign) and “Indie Festivals”. Once seen as the best hope of American Cinema, the “indie films” of late have proven to be just as formulaic, repetitive, self-unconscious, non-innovative and “socially mediated” (i.e. regulated by rules and morals) as the so-called “Hollywood/mainstream film”. This is not really surprising; *genre-genesis*, in my analysis, is *the expected result of innovation* – just as natural as the decay of public buildings or the standardized establishment of grammar rules and sign-relationships. Still, it is always sad to see history repeat itself as self-parody (history often skips the “tragedy” phase in the Arts).

There is, today, a considerable industry, market, sub-culture and community around “indie” movies. Generally, and inexplicably, every critically acclaimed indie film seems to need at least one Big Star who “generously agrees to do a low-budget film for little or no pay”. This is a bad sign, because TRUE independence is not only independence of studios and of rules but of the “Star System” itself. Without true independent casting, an “indie” film remains a side-show, a bastardly little brother of so-called Mainstream Cinema. Today it suffices to have the *intention* to criticize this or that phenomenon in American society to qualify for screening in Sundance Festival (the “home” of Indie movies). Today, in my estimation, the Industry has overtaken the Innovator, the Form has subdued the Spirit, and *regensis* (Continuity of Ideas) has taken the place of *progenesis* (Birth of Novelty). This phenomenon I will call “**Indieploitation**” (Indie + Exploitation), the emergence of second-rate, derivative, self-un-conscious, uninteresting and unoriginal pretenders to the throne of “independent” or “alternative” cinema. Nay, one cannot “join” Innovation, one has to **BE IT**.

I will now sample some of the most important “indie” films of the last decade or so, in order to clarify my point about *the rigidification of form as genre-genesis* in relation to Cinema. Two of the earliest critically acclaimed “alternative” films of the late 90’s were Todd Solondz’s “*Happiness*” (1998) and Sam Mendes’s “*American Beauty*” (1999). Semiotically, narratively, technically, morally, subject-matter-wise and stylistically these two films, while completely unique in their own ways, were both timely reflections of the turn-of-the-Millennium American suburbia, already explored from the point of view of the younger generation by directors like Richard Linklater and Kevin Smith. The themes of sexual frustration, family-as-a-*façade*, fragile and fragmented social relationships, violence and harsh neo-Protestant Ethics all play a part in both of these films. These themes were quite novel at the time (for example prescription drug abuse), that is to say, unexplored in the medium of film, and so the “social necessity” for these films undoubtedly existed. They belong to a continuum of films whose central subject-matter is the *dysfunctional nuclear family*. For example, Solondz’s *oeuvre* on the whole, such as the 2001 film “*Storytelling*”, is obsessed about a kind of social critique based on harsh irony, cringe-worthy pseudo-realism (even at its best) and deep pessimism about Social Myths. In 2001, Terry Zwigoff’s “*Ghost World*” was also released, dealing with very similar issues (family, sexuality, growing-up-dysfunctional etc...).

But what seemed (and *was*) revolutionary and deeply important five years ago seems awfully contrived and uninteresting today. *This has nothing to do with the social realities themselves*. It is just that “indie films” have seized, by and large, to **produce anything new** to say about them. Zwigoff’s own “*Art School Confidential*” (2006) seems silly in its serious treatment of the kind of

unfair happenstances that aimless losers with anti-social tendencies face. He explored similar themes in “Ghost World”, and much more effectively. An even more egregious film is “*Dandelion*” (2004), a despicably unengaging and self-obsessed, cliché-ridden and thematically unoriginal film in the vein of “*American Beauty*”. Plot tools of death, divorce, violence, crime, dysfunctionality, love, teenage Angst, helplessness, sadness and loneliness are *exploited* here to the fullest (i.e. *Indieploitation*). In fact the whole film is based on the principle of (poorly) repeating, copying and mimicking themes, techniques and plot devices of pivotal films like “*American Beauty*” or “*Happiness*”. Still – and this is my criticism of the Industry – the film somehow managed to win a couple of awards at Indie Festivals around the U.S. The bankruptcy of the moral consciousness of the Indie Industry is evident in its *willingness to award and congratulate well-made genre-films*.

Even the Oscar-winning “*Little Miss Sunshine*” (2006), a film I have much sympathies for, seems to recap and replay many of the old themes innovated and introduced in films like those mentioned above; also, the dance sequence in the movie bears eerie resemblance to a similar event in Richard Kelly’s “*Donnie Darko*” (2001), including *one same actress*. It was hailed as one of the best films of 2006, but to me the social commentary in the film seems contrived, out-of-date, done-before and, indeed, *generic*. It is a charming little film, but hardly especially transgressive or innovative. Indie film has indeed become a generic, derogatory term for any kind of un-innovative, slack, low-budget movie making. There are, of course, truly revolutionary and innovative films being made (even in America) each year, but the threat of each innovation transforming into self-repetition and self-parody is a perennial one. Not unlike those early 20<sup>th</sup> century cultural elitists savouring a specific “style” or “fashion” in music (such as Orientalism or Serialism), today’s fashion-influenced film connoisseur faces the stark choice, in the American market, between derivative and lazily conceived Mainstream movies on the one hand, and derivative and lazily conceived Alternative/Indie movies on the other. This just goes to show that Form, after being fixed by the initial act of Revolutionary Transgression of the Spirit, established an abiding presence as an influential cultural object/theme. The rule of/by that Form lasts as long (but *only* as long) as the next Revolution of the Spirit.

As Castells puts it: “A *set of macro-inventions prepared the ground for the blossoming of micro-inventions*” (p.35). Under the auspices of a single paradigm (recall Kuhn), generic work may proceed to refine, reshape, redefine, crystallize and clarify the original “point” of the Style.

## 6. Conclusions

I have argued that “innovation **always** turns into an established *pattern*, something to be copied and reinterpreted”. We have seen that innovative stylistic and technical choices are made *possible* by historical, social and technological circumstances, but are not *dictated* by them. In other words, there exist *supervening social (and technological) inhibitions and prohibitions* (akin to Winston’s “*law of the suppression of radical potential*”) which, in the Arts, are the same as the material and ideological limitations affecting the production techniques of a Craft. In the case of Oliver Stone’s “*WTC*”, for example, we have the developing situation of initial *inhibition* (a 5-year “mourning period”) of 9/11-themed films, turning into an eventual *need* (a cathartic desire for self-reflection in the artistic media) for them; “*United 93*” also came out in 2006 – a year thereby turned into a year of catharsis. This is precisely what Winston meant by “supervening social necessity”. Still, there is no possible way to *reduce* or *abstract* the artistic merits of those two films simply to the fact that they are responding to a social calling. What the birth of the new genre (“9/11 movies”) entails is the birth of artistic innovation within the confines of that newly-established tradition.

For some, Form is not only a sufficient but a *necessary* precondition for the emergence of the Artistic Spirit. For others, like Bukowski, the constraints of formalism act as the last refuge of uncreative, unoriginal and tired minds at work. The first position I could call “the fear of Chaos”, the second, “the fear of Order”. The truth probably lies somewhere in between. We have seen that Form can be shaped and reshaped in the process of cultural appropriation: for example, Donald Duck can turn from a children’s fantasy figurine into an instrument of war policy, while socially critical “indie” films can be made into boring, self-repetitive ruts by means of copy-and-paste film making – or, as the case may be, into ever-new forms of inventive cinema. Anybody can be, and *is*, influenced by anybody else; even the most independent-minded film-makers act within the confines of what is *possible* and *permissible* in the technological and cultural environment of contemporary society. There is no “technological determinism”, in the strong sense, at work in the Arts. There is, however, an ever-widening and ever-deepening realm of possibilities (i.e. the lifting of inhibitions), which acts as the “invisible hand” of techno-cultural *progress* (or, to use a more neutral term, *change*), something like the “cunning of history” in Hegelian sense. This dialectic, to be sure, is dialectic of the Spirit, not Matter. Nonetheless: Matter, as mediation, *transforms* the Spirit into an embodied, contextual, mediated and technologically constrained entity. The Spirit is always *in/via* Form, but the Form is never anything more than an empty vessel of self-transformation, a utilitarian

vehicle for revolutionary *matter-transmutating self-mediation*. Text is an excuse to Think, Film is an excuse to Act, House is an excuse to Party, and Matter is an excuse to Evolve...

One hopes that the Spirit of renewal and self-perfectibility will override the entropic principle of formulaic rigidification of styles, genres and techniques. The political and social variables will always impinge on the processes of transgressive endeavours, as a break pedal of sorts. On the other hand, the *very same limitations will always produce a new horizon of transgressive-innovative possibilities*. To copy transgressions is already to regress. To copy regressions is even worse! What the true "auteur" (I cannot but help to think of the likes of Lynch, Fellini, Bunuel and Miike) does is to reset the old rules, set down new rules, and establish a paradigm. Even if all the film makers who imitate and follow the Auteur generically and unoriginally will, as a rule, produce mere inferior imitations, reflections and genre-bound repetitions of the same themes introduced by the Innovator, there is always the chance that by "following the Stars", the modern cartographer will discover a hitherto unseen Secret or a Treasure, or even sail upon a New Continent – a true "New World" – and veritably establish, in Williams's words, "*a new world, a new society, a new phase of history*".

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