vestigial brain review

jumbled thoughts on film

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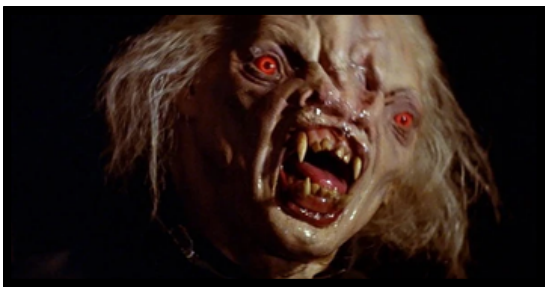
'M' (p. 10)



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Light and Shadow

Tobe Hooper's *The Funhouse* (1981)

by lewin redfern

Mapping Hooper's operatic, maximalist style to a more muted studio production seems like a waste of potential, but on many levels, The Funhouse is a massive success. With less of his iconically cluttered mise-en-scene right in the camera's path, and gel lighting tuned down from the all-consuming RGB washes seen in his other work, it would seem that Hooper's hand turned to more mature methods of fleshing out immersive filmic space. This is seen particularly in the (rather nonsensically) industrial-setting climax, in which our compelling hero (unlikely in emotional complexity for a final girl of her time) finds herself while fleeing the antagonistic mutant. Now, under analysis, there's not much to this set, despite it initially feeling so expansive and intricate in artifice, similar to the cavernous halls of Robert Bresson's A Man Escaped.

A conveyor belt lined with meat hooks (a Tobe Hooper special) runs overhead; the existence of a second elevated belt is implied by a large shadow cast on the furthermost wall, running parallel to the one in-frame. The size of this shadow, as well as the parallel motion, stitch together a mental image of a space that is far more expansive than Hooper's budget was able to disclose. As the final girl moves left along the wall in a slow tracking shot (a right-to-left trajectory often symbolising a transgression into a realm of danger), we see the skeletal frame of a light, rocking side to side. This shadow is cast even larger. While functioning to add to the general industrial aesthetic of the environment, this detail also symbolizes an imposing, dangerous presence in its large size and visual imposition over the hero, and an off-kilter dynamic in its swaying back and forth, like in the climax to Hitchhock's Psycho, or the Italian brothers' closet clash in Do The Right Thing.

Beyond this shot, Hooper continues to flesh out the space brilliantly through optical effects, lighting, and fixed camera perspective, such as the low angle shot of our protagonist seen from between the motion-blurred grinding cogs of some undisclosed industrial element. I wonder how differently this environment would have been drawn together, given the exhaustive tool that is modern CGI. Far more would have been disclosed, but far less would have been seen.

Regional/SOV Horror, and what it can add to the genre pool

Don Dohler's *Fiend* (1980)

by lewin redfern

Fiend (1980) directed by Don Dohler finds itself among the camp of 70s and 80s movie brat production that operated from within genre film, typically horror and/or sci fi, working on cheap film reel or shooting on video. These were reminiscent of the proto-splatter productions of the 1960s in their cheap feel, boxed framing, and massive focus on cheap, high-impact gore. They also provided brilliantly anti-Hollywood portrayals of America in a much more realistic light, due to the amount of 'found actors' and location shooting involved. This also lead to flubbed acting and constant breaking of suspension, which eventually became a trope itself, contributing to part of the surreal feeling and specific kind of horror found, an accidental aesthetic similar to David Lynch's trademark deterrirorialization and subversion of a suburban USA. While it would continue as an incredibly underground movement through to the 1990s with key players like Todd Sheets juicing whatever the tropes had left, the 80s was the real heyday for this movement, with much of Dohler's work coming out within this timeframe, and one-hit-wonders such as Larry Thomas' Harryhausen-inspired UFO horror film. That doesn't mean that the 90s was devoid of hits: Alien Beasts, made in 1991 by one Carl J. Suzenick, is perhaps the paramount of this independent production style, an accidental associational film masterpiece (or perhaps dissassociational film would better describe it) found in the violent mashing of pixels in a surreal dance to the overture of Suzenick's stuttering, awful monologues. But Alien Beasts is both stylistically and qualitatively (although what quality, I'll leave up to you to decide) an outlier. A much better middle ground is found in Fiend.

Opening with a flickering red intertitle, which we later find to be an excerpt from a book on the supernatural, Fiend sets us up for the assumption that this is another tame pulpy mess of the 1980s budget genre field. But that's a little diversion from the truth of the film: beyond this expository intertitle (and some occasional optical printer glow effects), the film assumes a much more bleak palette. In actuality, Fiend depicts a series of sadistic strangulations, typically carried out upon women and young girls, though not in a Marqui de Sade way, unusual for slasher movies (though one may debate whether this is really a slasher movie).

The pulpy genre stuff remains there in the background, as motivation for these actions: Mr Longfellow, a name which is perversely unnerving for no particular reason, is our titular Fiend, meaning he is a corpse possessed by some limbo-esque demon, who is compelled to kill and drain the life force of living people periodically, in order to sustain himself, lest he begin show his age. Luckily for me as a born and raised movie gorehound, he does eventually show his age, and the latex skin effects are brilliant fun. If only the genuine murders were so fun, though the complete omission of blood from these strangulations adds a lot to the off-kilter, artificial yet a little too real feel of these movies, which (to my knowledge) have neither received any name more descriptive than SOV horror, nor received any significant scholarly attention, even among the obsessive-compulsive categorisation freaks who frequent the genre community (myself included in this mildly offensive pathologization).

Now, with these movies, when they're bad, they're enjoyable and a bit scary, but when they're good (and Fiend is certainly that), there's masses to learn from them in terms of independant, low-budget direction. Fiend is edited with particular adeptness, and it follows up on the pulpy red interstitle with an old-style location montage as a backdrop to opening titles (a convention of film that I want more than anything to revive), scored, of course, to cavernous synth tones. The location of choice: a graveyard, and Dohler manages to find many angles and points of interest towards which to point his lens, among them, a cross, an American flag stuck into a grave (as a non-American, I find this hilarious), and a statue of the Virgin Mary, framed particularly well from a side angle with a slow zoom in to end the sequence. While the rest of the film isn't given quite as much space for montage, Dohler still utilises basic (and at times, mildly innovative) film language to tell his slightly unusual story with riveting flair, but nothing too flashy. Most of all I appreciate the static camera angles: coming out of the late 70s and early 80s, the post-Manson Hollywood style still flies a bit, with all those out-of-focus shaky handheld bullshit movies that annoy me so much, even on the (exceedingly) rare occasion that they're done well. The thing I love most about this camp of movie brat productions is that they're all composed in tight academy ratios or ones close enough to academy, they're all static, and when there's movement in a shot or sequence? There's a reason for it. I haven't explored Dohler's work enough, and after enjoying this, I certainly will, but a bigger prerogative that this viewing has left me with is the categorisation of these kind of movies, and some genuine discussion of them.

Kaiju as Cool Japan

Ishiro Honda's *Destroy All Monsters* (1968)

by lewin redfern (rewatch)

Destroy All Monsters is perhaps the definitive Daikaiju film, for as much as I would like the genre to be defined by its fine wine, the fine wine is so often Kaiju only by narrative content: Gojira 54 serves to define key tropes that will evolve and mutate over time, but viewed alone tells us nothing about the essence of Kaiju; Shin Godzilla similarly is an outlier, in the most part a harkening back to the maternal Gojira film, playing on its elements not as mythological tropes of an abundant genre but as 1st generation immigrant themes to a different movie. The Gamera films (both originals and remakes, but especially the remakes) perhaps define the genre well, but don't contain as exhaustive an archetypical narrative as this technicolour gem of mythology. This isn't the best Kaiju film out there, but it is excellent in its way. I feel if we needed to understand the genre through one film only, it would be this (but perhaps it is futile to try and grasp tropes in the vaccuum of deterritorialization). For as much as the themes of nuclear catharsis, invasive mass destruction and remnants of attacks long past fascinate me within Gojira, and as much as Shin Gojira's socialist parable nature grants me great vigour, I cannot say with a straight face that they in the slightest remain throughout the Gojira timeline: while he remains a symbol of abstract destruction and appetitism, similarly to Tetsuo of 1988's Akira, the fixed societal coordinates of that destruction loses its footing and stumbles from nuclear fallout into something far more insular to the genre tropes as it becomes a set of rules, a history of itself, La Histoire du Kaiju.

This spans much of the genre: Kaiju as destructive, irrational enemy emerging from the fissures of that nature that brinks on civilisation (while under the mind control of the Kilaaks), Kaiju as humanity's (no, Earth's) defender, Kaiju as entertaining pop art brawler, Kaiju as fantastic creature, Kaiju as mascot (Minilla referenced in the commentary on the battle), and the narrative beyond the titular Monsters is multi-faeceted as well: elements of Japan's modernity within pop culture mythology, crystalised as Space Race-type stuff with all these rockets going from the Moon to Earth and back again, all presented through this beautiful, technicolour widescreen. The Japanese studio system really comes to life here, the wideness of the formatting giving way to brilliant use of horizontal movement, tracking non-linear passages of emotion and power through movement and angles, and every element of the screen is used:

you can see much of Kurosawa here, who was lifelong best friend to Ishiro Honda, in the way that natural motion backdrops re-shuffling of the human elements on these horizontally spanning and vacant sets practically BUILT for widescreen: what the Americans seem not to grasp about widescreen is that it cannot be an overly layered image, otherwise it becomes far too complex: I find a backdrop layer, layer of horizontal motion (Kurosawa would famously use the elements, while as psychological symbolism, also as a constant flat layer of visual stimulation behind any other action or subject), and main subject populates such a stretched field of film well, and this film makes great use of that. This is a brilliant reference point for academy format visual composition on a budget, because the sets here are so often almost empty, and yet feel so layered and constantly interesting and rich for motion/orientation based symbolism mining. I have a feeling John Ford would dig this shit.

It's interesting that within the linear progression of this film's narrative you can kind of grasp a progression of the Kaiju genre as a whole, their transformation from monsters to wrestlers to pop culture symbols, references to a reference (Look! It's Godzilla!). I doubt that Honda ever intended it as such, but it certainly works well as a genre retrospective (although there would be much to come, the kind of Godzilla canon consists of the Showa films, regardless of the quality of the later ones), and it's fitting, as he would leave the directing seat after Terror of Mechagojira, which was also the final Showa film.

Towards a Screen Giallo

Mario Bava's *Black Sabbath* (1968)

by lewin redfern

Black Sabbath assumes perhaps the best form for expressing its pure Giallo pulpiness, that of a three-volume anthology of short tales (each assuming the approximate span of an airport novella), tied together by Ultra Q-adjacent narration from the pleasing yet surprisingly muted Boris Karloff, apparently consigned to Italian genre cinema on the thin end of his career. Note that, in reference to Giallo, I mean yellowcover Italian pulp in general, as opposed to the cinematic specification of crime-slasher movies oriented around a central mystery.

The first segment of this anthology of three, titled 'The Telephone' in classic Giallo font, grounds itself in a John Carpenter-like interior setting, where a pleasingly Eurotrash woman begins to receive threatening calls from someone who alludes to being an ex-lover of hers, who she snitched in to the cops. The story plays out fairly typically, as our Italian diva changes mechanically from glammed-up mink to nightgown to bathrobe to wet towel to finally her underwear, intermittently cowering at the telephone while a spitting, snarling Italian man scowls yarns of misogyny and sadism from the other end. However, it takes a quick turn when it is revealed to the audience Hitchcock-style that these calls have been coming all along from our diva protagonist's estranged best friend, who assumes a simple name along the lines of Mary. This fake-out plot twist leads us to believe that there is no genuine threat to the life of our protagonist when, just as Mary is preparing her apology for the fake calls, she is murdered by the rather plain-looking ex-boyfriend, showing us that he was driving the suspense plot all along. In a standard Giallo ending, Mary stabs him in the gut, escaping victorious. There is little to nothing to say surrounding this segment, except that it is a milestone on the way of adapting yellowcover pulp books to filmreel, a kind of prototype to the cinematic Giallo. I love plenty of Bava's work, especially Blood and Black Lace and Planet of the Vampires, but there's little room for anything but superficiality in this first of the three narratives.

The medium segment is the longest, and with certainty the best of the three. As Bava piggybacking off of a better film of his, Black Sunday, it can certainly be seen as inferior, but as a style-crossing continuation, shaping his prior chiaroscuro efforts into Hammer-like Technicolour spectacle, there's a fair bit more to be said, and derives a great deal of inspiration from Murnau's Nosferatu, with its transformation of Karlof into an expressionistic image of decrepit European smoulder, a grimacing figure in the snow, sunken eyes in a stormy beard. And with medieval maidens, as well as a culturally specific vampire substitute with a name as sick as the titular 'Wurdulac', what's not to love? It's certainly the slice of pulp that I dig the most out of the three.

To cap off the film, Bava offers his most American effort, with a Twilight Zone-ish narrative in which a cynic is made a believer through some serious bad juju. While attending to a chillingly sculpted corpse (props to Otello Fava, who also excelled in makeup for the melodramatic miniseries Jesus of Nazareth, and a personal favourite of mine, ultimately pulpy spy thriller Danger: Diabolik, the covered tracks of which can be seen fucking EVERYWHERE in pop culture narratives in the West and the East also), a nurse steals a sky-blue diamond studded ring, which is the catalyst for her subsequent torment, seen through an immensely physicalised performance from the all-time postergirl beauty Jaqueline Pierraux. The segment is hurried out by a cyclical ending typical to these Tolkien-adjacent narratives of temptation, before the film is capped off by a final segment in which Karloff bids us adieu one final time, before a metafictional frame-widening to reveal the old-style practical effects at play, which include (heartwarmingly) stooped men running around him in circles with plastic trees in their hands, simulating the speed of his traversal. And while the film wasn't up to a whole lot, that ending just about made my day.

Bomber Jacket

Joseph Zito's *The Prowler* (1981)

by lewin redfern

While it rests on the uneasily muted point between the phenomenally acted thrillers of the early-to-mid 70s and the juicy ham that is the late 80s slashers and Giallo, The Prowler manages to muster some character, in face of fairly pedestrian cinematography and lacklustre performances. If you look beyond the surface (yet undeniably incredibly important) elements of the film, there's *some* thematic richness to be had, as well as a frightening soundtrack that encompasses some highly sample-able percussion stabs. It's easy enough to think of this as a tale of shellshock-gone-violent, and the desensitising effects of World War 2 on young men, with its titular prowler donning a bomber suit and killing with both a militaristic precision and bloodlust, with less of a focus on the sexually penetrative nature of murder in its various forms in the American horror cinema, and more on the literally violent nature of these actions. However, I think this is more interesting when thought of as a literalisation of the imposing generational trauma of World War 2 on Gen X, or perhaps more aptly the effect of past wars on any future generation. While it lingers painfully in moments, and perhaps could be reconstructed entirely in terms of editing, a viewer is left still with a handful of interesting images, one being the blurred view of a showering woman through a glazed glass panel, like the blurring of faces in the opening segment to Begman's Persona, or the audio-led cut in which the death scream of our very same showering damsel is cut together with the rock vocals at the ball, a symbol of the ingrained position of the female scream within American pop culture.

Screen Murder

Fritz Lang's 'M' (1931)

by lewin redfern

Fritz Lang's film 'M' exerts a massive amount of influence over the American and worldwide film canons, and is responsible for setting in stone sets of trope code that would be reused with varying meaning over and over again within the respective Serial Killer and Procedural genres over the decades. Without this, we'd be missing a hell of a lot. Lang already displays his tendencies for a noirish Egalitarianism of aesthetics, diving into the grit, sweat, violence and moral greyness of an early Nazi Germany. While some shreds of expressionism remain, this is very much of the strain of German Realism, even predating it a little. In many ways this is an anticipatory work. With the birth of sound film coinciding with the election of the Nazi party, this feels very much an expression of an intellectual unrest, a first footstep onto the brink of a new wave that may rock the boat a little too hard. As with Metropolis, Lang uses this as a vessel for his leftist cynicism, critical of the state, the institution, all that is organised as for a lopsidedness of power, and it is no surprise that it was a burden to make under the emerging censorial government. This film is a lens to look at many things contemporary to it, but perhaps it would be best used these days as an Archimedean coordinate to juxtapose the evolution of the several strains of genre that plant the base of their shadow in 'M', and Lang's work as a whole. Now, this is a large field of influence to cover, so I will specifically look at key tropes within the Serial Killer genre and use their paternal film here as to understand them better. It is my opinion that meaning is cultivated in the cracks of the tropes, that is, in the Genre.

In Serial Killer films, you will often see a search. Often the film gravitates entirely around said search. However, you may also see a macrocosmic visual representation of this search, which I will call The Woods. This entails a spanning comb of a woodland area, done either by police as a procedural method, or by citizens as an organised community effort (see: one German working title for 'M' would be Eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder, translating to ' a city searches for a murderer'), often with a team of sniffer dogs on leash. This can be done to find evidence, or often to find a child, but a crucial element of this is the long shot of dogs and men (not to mistakenly gender, the trope is often a masculine one) combing through tall trees, untouched woodland. They are searching for something missing. Ring any bells?

You can see this in Memories of Murder, Netflix's Stranger Things, many David Fincher films, Villeneuve's Prisoners. Now one interesting element of this trope is that it always takes place within the woods, regardless of the actual area of the crime. In many cases, including 'M', the actual crime scene is urban or even metropolitan. Why, then, venture all the way to those areas so unaffected by modernity as to provide a dwarfing natural backdrop? It's exactly that. While nature is often subject to romanticisation within the purely single-unit arts (such as with the actual Romantics), within narrative art (especially those countries with a colonial history, where (hu)man is constantly at odds with nature), it becomes a void, a humanless place, a place where things become lost. 'Evidence' is a lost thing, it is a signifier without a signified in sight, like the wandering ronin without a master, and when the subject of the search is a missing person (most likely a child, also a trope born in the wake of this film), the lostness of such a subject is evident merely in the utterance of the phrase. Nature never fails to dwarf mankind. We seek to cultivate it, place it within the context of a greater urban-ness (such as the miniature parks in cities, botanical gardens, or Japanese bonsai trees), but ultimately it is a cesspool into which items of significance, such as people, may sink. This is why the filmic searches are conducted in the woods. In 'M', the woods are never seen except for in the brief sequence in which they are combed: the act is one of reclaiming, going to the place of lost things to pull back a lost thing, like the mythological descent to Hades. Yet these filmic searches are so often futile, come up with nothing, and when they do, it is never something of the present, always a signifier of past event. A scrap of clothing tells us that someone ran here, a footstep, someone stepped here, even evidence as concrete as the young girl's body in Memories of Murder tells us nothing but 'a rape was done'; we find neither the rape nor the murder taking place on our incursion into the void of nature, only signs for events past. The woods in these genre films are always a timeless void in which we conduct a kind of investigative archeology of crime, and we find these pieces of evidence because they stand starkly against the woods, which is a location present, alive, absolute, intrinsic, as opposed to these forensic relics which are empty indicators of something present, trapped forever in the past. As with all the tropes I will illustrate, and tropes as a whole, these are not absolute, not unchanging: meaning is created within genre by deviation within a code: the quality of a genre film relies on what interesting thing it does with trope, not to what metric it exactly enacts set tropical laws of narrative and semiotics. Sometimes the forest search goes differently, sometimes it isn't in a forest at all, sometimes they come across someone within the act, maybe it is an individual effort as opposed to a group search. Observation and analysis of tropes don't discredit either deviating films nor are discredited themselves by this deviation, they simply, like all art, stand as lens to be held to other pieces of art, so that we may understand them in relation to one another.

As well as igniting fascinating conversation (something I think all good art should do), 'M' is a brilliant piece of classical film. While it's less ripe a resource for contemporary filmmakers to study as the flicks Lang would later come to direct under the Hollywood system (such as 1936's brilliant, genuinely thrilling film Fury), the art critic in me still manages to find things to note down from watching this. Simple examples of symbolism and juxtaposition that would inspire great filmmakers like Kubrick and Kurosawa, in particular the simple visual juxtaposition within one sequence of the shapes of two tables, the criminal's circular table and the police's rectangular one: the rectangle table is orderly, defined, yet ugly and boring; the criminal's circular table at first glance is an invitation to a space of kinship (knights of the round table), equality, comfort... yet circles also represent the unstoppable force of a whirlpool, chaos, tunnel vision, a descent, a beckoning. It's also fascinating to me the extent to which this is a story about humans, wills in systems, digitisation of society, which are all ample themes of the modern serial killer movie, yet 'M' seems to immediately grasp and employ these themes in a highly intelligent manner, seen particularly in the symbolic use of a knife by the serial killer (incidentally, the 'serial killer' being a myth or archetype created by the film industry to sell scary movies), and the revolver used by the police.

the gun is the weapon of the criminal, an opposition to society, an antithetic symbol of force. the knife is the weapon of the serial killer, a weapon of domesticity, ingrained within every day use. the serial killer operates within society, from the inside, they are the quantum binary, that which fits within the code yet may change its nature at will. a knife may stab, and yet it may peel oranges. the serial killer is only caught when they are given depth beyond their archetypical forms, when they transcend the binary into a personage, that is when they are no longer able to change at will. this happens under a crack, a slip up, a circumstance, crucially, a break in character: it is then that 'M' becomes a character at all, as opposed to the reduction he previously embodied. he is no longer a collection of depersonalised attributes (a tune whistled, a coat worn, a smile enacted), under stress he fails to prune the hedge which is his binary dual self, and all elements of the digit converge into one mutating, persisting, *catchable* person. he is no longer able to exist inside the system, and that is his greatest crime.