



**Free**

# Welcome to the fifth issue of One+One Filmmakers Journal

**One+One** Filmmakers Journal is named after the 1968 film *One Plus One* by Jean Luc Godard. The film is in part a document of the Rolling Stones in a studio, recording the song *Sympathy for the Devil* and part staged scenes of political revolutions over which we hear extracts from various revolutionary texts. A reoccurring image is of slogans being painted on to walls and cars but each time the shot cuts before the slogan is completed. This is a film made in a time of upheaval and revolution, it captures the sense of a revolution in progress, a revolution that has not yet concluded.

When the studio released the film they made two changes which significantly altered the meaning of the film - the first was that they changed the title to *Sympathy for the Devil* and the second was to include the full version of the song at the end of the film, both done in order to make the film more commercial and both were made against Godard's wishes. To have the completed song at the end of the film contradicts the theme of revolutions in progress that is the movie's focus. Godard was so angry about this that he punched the films producer at the UK premiere.

We are on the side of Godard, we are on the side of all filmmakers that have a vision that can not and should not be compromised for commercial or any other reasons. **One+One** seeks to be the fist in the face of those that force a compromise on the artist's voice.

One+One is never the final word, it is a part of a process for all who write for and all who read it, a centre for thought and discussion, we will fight to break open the process of filmmaking and give attention to the art of film rather than the industry. In fact industry is no longer needed, film no longer has to be a part of industry, film makers now more than ever before in the history of the medium can make films as art in the purest sense without giving an ounce of energy to industry or commercialism. No longer should film be seen as product.

Please take a look at our website [www.filmmakersjournal.co.uk](http://www.filmmakersjournal.co.uk) where you'll be able to read articles from previous issues of **One+One** and find links to our Facebook and Twitter page where you'll be able to keep up to date with news and events. For those of you interested in writing please see the submissions section of our website or contact [submissions@filmmakersjournal.co.uk](mailto:submissions@filmmakersjournal.co.uk) for more information.

**Daniel Fawcett**

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# Searching for New Languages

## A Look at Stan Brakhage

Clara Pais

*Imagine an eye unruled by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception. How many colours are there in a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of 'Green'? How many rainbows can light create for the untutored eye? How aware of variations in heat waves can that eye be? Imagine a world alive with incomprehensible objects and shimmering with an endless variety of movement and innumerable gradations of colour. Imagine a world before the 'beginning was the word'.*

This is Stan Brakhage's proposition, in 1963, on his letter to P. Adams Sitney that was compiled and published in his *Metaphors on Vision*. To create an eye untamed by culture, a cinema that speaks its own language, different from any other. To recreate language is quite a challenging proposition – it's trying

to deconstruct one of our most intrinsic conditions, to understand its rules and rewrite them. Imagine, like Brakhage suggests, how it would be to perceive without fitting shapes, colours, sound and movement into the categories that we have already culturally established. How would we actually perceive them? How can we



Stan Brakhage

then construct film, what do we base it on? I am not sure Brakhage's thought went so far in his beginnings but his fellow filmmakers were definitely a great influence - the American independent scene in his time was named avant-garde because of its persistent challenging of conventional cinematic language. Exploring film at a very low cost, from narrative, to documentary to visual poetry, they were examples of different working methods for Brakhage, something closer to artistic exploration and formal experimentation. Maya Deren, Marie Menken and Sidney Peterson were all personal friends of Brakhage at different points of his life and major influences.

Consider nowadays, when the abundance of new virtual technology is opening up new paths in image and meaning making, and neuroscientific methods enable us to understand how these affect our brain – these questions can start being answered. A new language begins to come forward and it seems to be coming out of these cinematic codes developed at the margins of the cinema. Brakhage's artistic and formal strategies are incredibly interesting to analyse in this light, since they seem to be directly responding to the demands of contemporary modes of communication. In order to illustrate the points of connection, I will try to describe his methodology and approach in this article.

He started in the early fifties with a bunch of works that fall on the psychodrama category. The characteristic feature of these films is that the camera is used to portray the psychological reality of the protagonist, making it subjective by nature, be it either in the first person or a testimony of that individual's crisis.

*The Way to Shadow Garden* (1954) is a perfect example of this sort of genre that was developed by many of Brakhage's contemporaries. The protagonist is lost in a dreamlike world; both tantalized and threatened by his surroundings, he deals with his own reality. In this particular film, we see a young man coming home to

**“As poems, his films are constructed to manifest the mind and its subjective experience”**

his small apartment only to find himself estranged by every object. Everything seems to be wrong and he becomes increasingly nervous and paranoid despite his efforts to calm down. He ends up plucking his eyes out and fleeing into the garden, which we see in negative film. The camera switches between rapid cutting and longer handheld shots to accentuate his disturbance, and has both a descriptive and an active role in it.

In fact, the opening of this short film is, in my opinion, crucial in defining how Brakhage uses his camera. It starts with a long shot of our protagonist, walking towards the camera introspectively. He is still far as we pan right, going ahead of him. We see two lighted windows and, with a cut, we're in. The movement becomes less restrained, a handheld camera explores the space like a burglar – the intentionality of the camera assures us there is someone there and objects framed up close seem to have a life of their own. As it turns around, the protagonist enters through the door and looks across the room. With a snap the camera is subjugated again and gives us the reverse shot – the open doors through which the wind



Still from *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes*

blows, that the protagonist then closes. What happens here is that another entity besides the protagonist manifests itself, one that seems unrestrained and able to connect with the viewer with incredible power. It gives life and meaning by the sheer intent that we recognise in its gaze. That is the camera, by means of the filmmaker. This is a very important notion in understanding Brakhage – that the camera can illustrate life not as imagined by the filmmaker, but as he experiences it. Other things come into play as he builds up his body of work but I'd say this remains his driving force.

Later on he made a few films that are usually labeled as documentaries, though whether they fit into this description depends on what you comprehend of the films and of documentary itself. *Window Water Baby Moving* (1962) and *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* (1971) focus on life and death in a most peculiar way. The former films a home birth, quite directly and without inhibitions. The latter films a number of autopsies that are carried out in a morgue. The camera relentlessly explores what has before been hidden in both cases. However, there is more than just matter-of-factly stating events, there

is cruelty and elegance – which makes us consider that after all there is a conscience behind the images, driving us closer to its own perception and reality. P Adams Sitney recognises it and marks it as Brakhage's fundamental concept: 'the filmmaker behind the camera as the first-person protagonist of the film. The images of the film are what he sees, filmed in a way that we never forget his presence and we know how he is reacting to his vision'<sup>1</sup>. This attitude is more of a poet rather than the documentary filmmaker.

As poems, his films are constructed to manifest the mind and its subjective experience. Time, being absolutely fundamental in perceiving oneself and framing experience, is one of the trickiest aspects to tackle. Rather than following the usual linear structure, Brakhage unfolds events in a fashion that resembles the stream of human consciousness – as the natural order of events proceeds, suddenly shots of previous stages appear as if called upon by memory and are intertwined with the present, subverting and enhancing it. He uses many editing resources to achieve this – rapid editing, matching-on-action, superimposition, jump cutting – however, their meaning is not absolutely established, it rather establishes itself differently in each frame. Gene Youngblood writes about this, specifically speaking about *Dog Star Man*: 'The images develop their own syntactical meaning and a 'narrative' line is perceived, though the meaning of any given image may change in the context of different sequences. This constitutes a creative use of the language itself, over and above any particular 'content' conveyed by that language.'<sup>2</sup>

Each image seems to have a mental process or visual experience behind it,



Stills from *Window Water Baby Moving*

even if the meaning is unclear. In one of his most famous sequences, 'Prelude' (the first installment of *Dog Star Man*, finished in 1961) he presents a collage of moving

**“ I become instrument for the passage of inner vision, through all my sensibilities, into its external form ”**

images that momentarily superimpose, instead of cutting from one to the other, at a fast pace for nearly twenty-five minutes. The sheer amount of shots, rhythm and some of the techniques used, like painting and scratching on the celluloid, render obsolete any attempt to establish concrete meanings in the relationships between the images. The emphasis is on the vortex of consciousness around a present moment – both in the sense of tense and immediacy; Brakhage illustrates it perfectly when he says 'I think it can be boiled down to one statement (first pounded into my head by Edward Dahlberg): one perception must immediately and directly lead to a further perception.'<sup>13</sup> It is consciousness that he is trying to reproduce – consciousness as experience of being or of mind.

These strategies are associated with expressionist and surrealist films but Brakhage uses them with an apparently directly opposite purpose: to achieve a sense of time that ultimately *feels real*. As pointed out before, the documental aspect of his work and his poetic approach do not invalidate each other. Malcolm Le Grice describes Brakhage's artistic process as '(...) one of impulsive selection and construction, never constraining himself by preconception of didactic procedure. (...) Structure or form in this kind of process is not a *priori*, but the result of

a search for a *logic* during the selection and construction process.'<sup>14</sup> Brakhage speaks in more spiritual terms about his own process: 'Of necessity I become instrument for the passage of inner vision, through all my sensibilities, into its external form. My most active part in the process is to increase all my sensibilities (so that all films arise out of some total area of being or full life) and, at the given moment of possible creation to act only out of necessity.'<sup>15</sup> He sees himself as a vehicle of his own will, and, in a rather phenomenological approach to art, wishes for film to be the direct manifestation of that will. It is arguable if this method is right to achieve that 'pure film' that he speaks of – one that is free from preconceptions and has a language of its own – but it definitely has at its core a necessity to unrestrain oneself from formulas, canons and conventional procedure.

All in all, considering the aspects of Brakhage's work – the variety of formal experimentations, and the dialogue between the documental concerns and the lyrical, subjective approach – it is difficult to think what more he could have done to reproduce the experience of human consciousness by using film. I wonder how his work would have evolved had he started exploring digital video and multimedia resources like the Internet, or even whether he would if he had the chance. The diversity of work that has been created by filmmakers that go into these areas is astonishing, from Doug Aitken's installations to Peter Greenaway's VJ performances, cinematic language started unfolding into different frames, durations and platforms in response to people's new visual cultural demands. After all, the

appearance of the Internet and the specific form and rhythms of its language has modeled the structure of thoughts in the latest generations, as it has been very recently discussed in the BBC documentary series *The Virtual Revolution*. Professor David Nicholas at University College London conducted a study that revealed younger generations 'answered a question after looking at half a number of web pages – and spent only one sixth of the time viewing the information – than their elders.'<sup>16</sup> Further discussed on this documentary is that because of their handling of this medium during the years when their brains are still very actively creating new connections, these more recent generations have developed a tendency to associative thinking, so strong that there is almost an inability to follow linear thinking. In terms of what they might expect from a cinematic experience, I believe there will be little interest for very restricted forms of communication where undivided attention is called for and totality of meaning is provided simply because people will not know how to deal with that.

This model of thought is highly subjective, since the formation of the brain connections is more influenced by the emotional and perceptual state of the subject at the moment of encounter with the concepts, than by relating it to previously acquired knowledge. In a way, it means our brain is becoming more pragmatic and subjective in the way it maps out the world, because of the sheer amount of stimulation it suffers. It is as if Brakhage worked his whole life to achieve a language that could speak to the new over-stimulated brains. Imagine a world before 'the beginning was the word' or any other code – a world that is pure experience. That is, imagine that the new film

(which includes videogaming) becomes an extension of life itself, an overblown dimension that incorporates it because its mechanisms mimic the brain's. More than that, that it can recreate space and time and allow you to *live* in it. So what happens to perception here? There would be no more need for translation. Brakhage did much in just one medium to reach this. Now we have mediums that almost presuppose it – what can we do with them?

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6 transcribed from online Daily Mail article, 'Internet 'rewires our brains' and makes teenagers vulnerable to mental illness'. Retrieved March 10, 2010 from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-1249946/Internet-rewiring-brains-psychologists-warn-thousands-teens-need-mental-health-treatments.html>

# The Specter of Medea

An Interview with Liz Soden and Greg Scorzo

Bradley Tuck



Colette and Viv, still from *The Medea Legacy*

One+One has always triumphed truly independent films; films that are both independently financed as well as being subversive and explorative. *The Medea Legacy*, a film by Liz Soden and Greg Scorzo, is a prime example. 33 minutes long and made for only £300, the film is an unsettling and provocative exploration of motherhood. It is one of the genuinely fresh and exciting independent

films made this year and seems a perfect antidote to post-political, post-feminist apathy. I was excited to hear what they had to say about this film and filmmaking in general.

**Q How did you come to make this film?**

**Liz Soden:** I've worked in moving image for the last thirty years. Most of my work has always had a political with a small "p" motivation behind it and

I'm particularly interested in gender roles. I think that is a theme that runs through all my work because I was initially a socialist feminist. I gradually become disengaged with the woman's movement because I thought there were a lot of problems with simply treating patriarchy or men as the enemy. I felt that gender roles oppressed both sexes and that sometimes feminism could deify women



The Raincoats, Patty Smith, The Slits

in a way that doesn't really help women's equality. I think a lot of my influences, when I first started, were from women's punk groups. I was really into *Patty Smith*, *The Raincoats* and *The Slits*. They were women who came from the edge of the feminist movement but had a bit of humour and irony. They represented a great way for women to get rid of that passive "we're there for men's pleasure" type of identity. However, what they stood for didn't seem to catch on. We seem to be more entrenched in that passivity thirty years on. When I was younger, I was looking at how women were depicted in films. As a young feminist I bought the line that you must always have positive images of women in films. Films by Hitchcock and Kubrick were read by a lot of feminists as being

misogynist. I started to realise that whenever you have images of women that are negative people read the images as being anti-women. On the other hand, I think a lot of women that people don't see as bad women are actually the scary women. Sometimes *they're* the evil women. Initially, I thought I should make a film about the depiction of evil women and then I was driving along the road and heard this programme on Radio 4. They were discussing the Greek Tragedy play *Medea* and this woman said, in a lovely middle class radio 4 voice, "women are capable of violence, they are capable of coldness and deep deep we don't like to look at but it's a fact of life. Mothers can be evil, they are capable of coldness and violence and revenge. This

is just a fact of life, but no-one wants to look at this." And suddenly at that point I thought: *Mothers!* This is what the film should be about! There was a lot of stuff in the news at the time about "evil mothers" like the mother of baby P. The public was starting to hear about various other cases that had come up through social services of women who had murdered their children. The ultimate in evilness in terms of motherhood seems to be actually murdering your children. So I thought *Medea* is the epitome of the evil mother and she's a character that has been there through all our history. At was at that point that I asked Greg to get involved with the film.

**Greg Scorzo:** I got involved in *The Medea Legacy* because Liz told me she wanted to make a film about evil



Mother and baby, still from *The Medea Legacy*

mothers. She knew she wanted it to be a film that dealt with the subject of motherhood and conflicting viewpoints about what constitutes an evil or good mother. She liked the fact that I had a background in academic philosophy and she knew that I had always wanted to make a dramatic film. So she asked me to collaborate with her on this film. When we started initially brainstorming about motherhood, we noticed that, in popular culture, people seemed to be simultaneously making two claims while never assuming that these claims were in tension with each other. The first claim was that motherhood was a choice - women shouldn't be pressured into having babies just because they are women. The other thing that

people were claiming was that motherhood is a woman's destiny, something that a woman was biologically programmed to be unhappy for not doing. Often the same people would make both of these claims in the same paragraph. So the film dealt with the subject of evil mothers by pointing out that the second of these claims promotes a neurotic fetishizing of motherhood which is generally bad for human beings..

**Q What was the process involved in making it?**

**GS:** We came up with a very basic strategy of describing various philosophical positions that the characters in the film would hold while they were fighting in the bar. It was then a matter of creating personalities around the

philosophical positions that each of the characters hold. After we filmed the characters in profile speaking to the camera enunciating these views we filmed them fighting with each other in the bar. After that we assembled all the footage together with found footage that we cut from YouTube and other places on the internet. Juxtaposed on top of that we put different sounds, electronic compositions and acoustic musical pieces written by my father to create the film's soundscape and soundtrack. That is pretty much how the film was done. We went into the filming with very rough plans and the procedure was very intuitive.

**LS:** We had done a brainstorm around the idea of interviewing woman in their 20s, 30s 40s and 50s, from each decade since motherhood had become a choice. We talked about the typical viewpoints that were thrown at women during those decades. We didn't want to not pay people and spend lots of time filming, so we restricted the locations and we decided that the dramatic scenes would have to be quite minimal because of time. So we thought, right, what

we should do is interview the characters and make a mockumentary. We were interested in playing with the idea that documentaries seem to offer an objective truth. That's rubbish because, as a documentary filmmaker, I know that you basically control everything if you have a camera and an editing suit. So we were interested in playing with the idea of whether we were making a documentary or a fiction film.

**Q The film explores how the roles and expectations of women have changed since the arrival of the contraceptive pill. What do you think has happened over the last fifty years?**

**GS:** People have developed an incredible amount of insecurity over the fact that for the first time in history women have a choice about whether or not to be mothers. This is why on the one hand people want to defend this choice and on the other hand say lots of things that conflict with the idea that motherhood is a choice. The standard liberal position tends to try and have it both ways. According to the liberal position, yes, motherhood is a choice, but on the other hand, women have maternal instincts that must be heed-



Gracie, still from *The Medea Legacy*

ed or else women will face the wrath of their own bodies in the form of existential malaise for the rest of their lives. This liberal position is something we both felt is really reactionary and something that needed to be more heavily scrutinized in the public discourse. There is so much defensiveness any time anyone questions the two claims that make up the liberal perspective, it is almost always assumed that in criticizing the liberal perspective one is professing a kind of misogyny. That was why it was important to have all female characters in the film. If we had male characters, it would be easy to write off the positions of the characters as examples of misogyny. People accuse critics of the liberal position of being misogynists, I think, because they don't

like accepting the legacy of birth control within the last 50 years. The culmination of that legacy is that the concept of motherhood is changing. It is becoming conceptualized as more of a particular lifestyle choice than a phase of adult life for women. This is what it always should have been, this is progress. This is what is healthy for children, this is what is good for the promotion of gender equality, this is what is healthy for women and men. Any residue of the view that motherhood is a necessary condition of every woman's happiness is just wrong. That view is unhealthy, reactionary, and something that people, at this point in time, cling to because they are uncomfortable with how the conceptualization of motherhood is positively changing.

**LS:** You hear a lot of women talk about this broodiness that you feel at a certain age that makes you feel that you have got to have a child. Even women I knew that never wanted children got to the age of forty and started to think “Dong! By body needs to have a child”. Those women might think they want to have a baby, but they don’t really realize what that means. It’s true that if I hadn’t been able to have children, I would have been really upset. I have always been someone who loves children and wanted that experience. But there are some women who don’t

seem to love children and yet they still want the motherhood experience. They think they have to become a mother because their body is telling them to. But they don’t really think about it beyond that. Of course it’s a really strong urge. But women talk about men and say men shouldn’t heed their biological urges. Men may feel a biological urge to implant as many women as they can with their seed. Society accepts these male biological urges, but society also expects men to control those urges and settle down monogamously. With women society says

women can just do what their urges tell them to do because the urges are biological. There seems to be a double standard there. And yet what we are talking about is human beings.

**Q** Could you tell us a little bit about the four central characters and what you think they represent?

**GS:** Imogen represents the liberal view about motherhood. She’s confused because she wants to hold the claims that motherhood is a choice and motherhood is a maternal instinct that must be heeded or else women will be punished. She’s a bit con-

fused because I think she senses there is a tension there. However, she’s too afraid to actually examine that in more detail. She is an extremely unreflective character. She is also not aware of the fact that she doesn’t like being a mother. And largely she has had children because she just thought that’s what you do. Her children, in a way, are symbolic extensions of her career success. They’re not actually an element of her lifestyle that she enjoys. That’s why she is constantly finding ways of trying to get away from her children. That is why she’s always on the hunt for older nannies. She wants to spend as little time with the children as possible and she is completely unreflective about this.

**LS:** Imogen was based in on women of the late 90s and early 00s like Myleene Klass or the women from *Sex in the City*. She’s an example of that ‘have it all mother’, who can have a career and be a mother and be conventionally attractive to men all at once. Post-feminism, which is what we have now, celebrates the idea that women can have it all so it winds up celebrating that women can be shallow, aggressive capital-

ists like men. We celebrate that women can have a great career and earn loads of money and still have a baby, but only if the women remain conventionally attractive to men. I find this tendency really disturbing and you see a lot of it in women’s magazines. You see pictures of celebrities or very successful career women who have just had a baby and the nanny looks after the kid while celebrity mommy gets in a bikini two weeks later. There are bits of Imogen in a lot of young women. They may not be as privileged as her or as rich as her. However, they still feel they have to try to be a career woman and be beautiful and have a baby in order to be happy. They often wind up exhausted, attempting all three of those jobs at the same time.

**GS:** The Gracie character represents one half of the liberal view, namely the view that motherhood is a woman’s biological destiny. The irony is if you subtract the choice component from the liberal view, you get your standard conservative view of motherhood. Gracie is a proponent of that conservative view of motherhood. She is neurotic, she is overbearing, she denies gender

equality, she denies appropriate freedom for women and she denies appropriate freedom for her own child. She is also completely insecure and is choosing to be a mother under circumstances which, psychologically, she is unfit to be a mother in. Unlike Gracie, the two non-mothers in the film are very much in opposition to the conservative view of motherhood. They affirm only the choice component of the liberal view. Colette, the cultural studies academic, thinks that motherhood should be conceptualized as a choice by society because not all women should be mothers. Collette thinks motherhood is not simply a woman’s destiny but a specific career that has specific requirements, requirements that the majority of women don’t possess. She thinks motherhood, like being a surgeon, or a professor or a lawyer is something that only a select group of talented, capable, hardworking people should have the legal capacity to do. She thinks this is what children deserve so in a way, she is a child’s rights advocate. Collette thinks that the government should be involved in deciding who does and who doesn’t get to be a mother. She is dis-



Imogen and Man, still from *The Medea Legacy*

gusted by the fact that any woman can be a mother. She is disgusted by the fact that motherhood is seen as a right, because she thinks that if you look at what motherhood actually is, calling it a right is grossly unfair to children. If motherhood were a right then that would mean that child abuse was a right. If motherhood were a right that would mean mothers have a right to bring children into the world under almost any circumstance imaginable. She thinks that is absurd. So she rejects the idea that motherhood is a right very strongly. She thinks it is something that only a specialised class of people should do. In that way her views on motherhood are very elitist and very influenced by Plato. She is the most controversial character in the film because she is very arrogant and the things she says are quite shocking to the audience. On the other hand, to actually reject everything she says involves having to assert some claims that might make you feel uneasy. For instance, if you reject the idea that only a select group of people can be mothers you have to embrace the view that any woman should be able to be a mother. If you em-

brace the claim that motherhood is something any woman should be able to do then you have to affirm the view that psychologically damaged women who would, in all likelihood, psychologically scar their children should be allowed to be mothers. That's difficult. In general, if you look at all the variety of women that there are in the world it seems quite obvious that many of those women shouldn't be mothers for lots of different reasons. Children deserve better than just to allow any adult female the capacity to be a mother. On the other hand, having the government step in to decide who gets to be a mother and who doesn't is quite dangerous and scary. Everyone acknowledges that. What people often overlook is that psychologically damaged women raising children is also dangerous and scary. Collette is the one character in the film who doesn't overlook this.

**LS:** In the film it is supposed to be ambiguous whether or not she would ever have children. She never actually says she doesn't want children. She has lots and lots of views about how children should be raised and by whom.

And I think what we wanted her to be is one of these people who is an expert on child rearing, but who has never experienced motherhood and would probably never go near a child. And in my mind she represented all of these books that get thrown at you when you are a mother. There are so many conflicting child experts that are trying to guide you. So there was an element of that in her character. She is the self-identified expert on parenting even though she has never had a child.

**GS:** The character of Viv, the other non-mother in the film, is our radical feminist character. She is a journalist who thinks that the celebrity culture obsession over motherhood is just a product of women being duped by patriarchy. She thinks that motherhood is not something that an intelligent woman would ever want to do. She thinks that motherhood is a mundane waste of time where a woman is choosing to be in servitude to a child. A child, after all, could literally grow up to be anybody. For Viv, to choose to be a mother is to choose to devote your day to day life to a stranger. Viv would say that's degrading for women. Motherhood is some-



The mothers, still from *The Medea Legacy*

thing Viv has an active desire not to do because she values her freedom. She thinks the idea of helping a child develop basic skills all day is the most obnoxious lifestyle choice that anyone could ever possibly make. She doesn't like children and she likes men even less. She's a good guitar player though.

**Q** How was the style in which you made the film used to bring out the ideas?

**GS:** We chose to do the film as a mockumentary. In a way it is a parody of a mockumentary, because it is not funny to a large extent. It is more uncomfortable than funny. But it is

done in the style of a mockumentary. We chose to do it in that style because one of the things we noticed is in a documentary the audience tends to sympathise with the characters speaking to the camera from the moment the film starts. Occasionally the audience thinks the person speaking to the camera is crazy from the moment the documentary starts. In a mockumentary the person speaking to the camera is crazy in a funny way, but that is, again, normally established as soon as that person starts talking to the camera. With *The Medea Legacy* we wanted to do a film where people start out talking to the camera

and in some ways seem very reasonable. As the film progresses the things they say start to get more and more unreasonable. However because all the things they say are in conflict with each other there is a sense in which all of them are crazy. It is difficult for the audience to decide who is crazy and for what reasons. This creates an interesting effect in the psychological experience of the viewer. The viewer doesn't have the security of knowing that the camera is sympathetic to the characters like you do with a documentary. The viewer also doesn't have the security of knowing that the person speaking to the

camera is just a crazy, funny bit of comedy like you do in a mockumentary. That's something that the film does quite differently to both documentaries and mockumentaries. That is one of the things about the film that is formally unique. The found footage illuminates much of what the characters are saying in much the same way that the characters advocating a philosophical thesis illuminates their thesis. I think when you use found footage that relates to the subject of motherhood, you can really see how neurotic and unhealthy the way we view motherhood is. It is very rare that you can actually find footage of motherhood that is healthy and not completely neurotic. That is one of the reasons we wanted to use a lot of found footage in the film.

**LS:** The creativity really began to happen and the film started to take on a life of its own during the editing process. This was because we didn't use the traditional script-to-screen method. What we did was much more spontaneous. It is a really interesting way of filmmaking and things start to happen that you don't expect. You start to juxtapose images and

sounds and the meaning of the images can change. You get loads of different layers of meaning and you might have a happy image and then find a very jarring sound that makes the image look really sinister. We had Harry Scorzo's music as the core soundtrack and then we built sound effects and our own little electronic pieces that we put on top of Harry's music. Most of our electronic music consisted of little punctuations of noises that created atmosphere and tension. But we didn't want to make it tense in a traditional film way. We were interested in jarring and shocking people in ways they don't expect to be shocked by a film. A lot of the emotional content of the film is in the soundtrack and a lot of that content is non-verbal. There are a lot of jarring juxtapositions in the sounds and the images.

**Q What has been the response to the film so far?**

**GS:** This is a film that divides people. People tend to have very different interpretations of it. Many people have a pretty hostile reaction to it. A lot of people take the film to be a criticism of motherhood. We didn't intend for it to be a criticism of mother-

hood. None the less, I am in no position to say that a viewer's interpretation of the film is less correct than mine. All I can say is that from what I know of the film, the film was not created or intended to be an anti-motherhood film. If it was intended to be anti anything, it was intended to be anti the fetishizing of motherhood. But being against the fetishizing of motherhood and being anti-motherhood are not the same thing.

**LS:** The majority of women who are mothers who see it say that the film makes them feel guilty. This is interesting because we showed it initially to a group of largely female art and design students and they thought the characters were much too prescriptive and harsh and they really hated Collette. They wanted to throw things at the screen because they hated all those definitive viewpoints and that dogmatism coming from the characters. They understood that all the characters were not designed to be very likeable people. But the characters were also women that the audience wasn't used to seeing on screen, because you are not sup-



Group, still from *The Medea Legacy*

posed to see horrible women characters on film. So they were taken aback by it. Other test screen audiences, like a group of largely male analytic philosophers that we showed the film to, weren't so hostile towards the characters. They thought Collette was the hero of the story and they totally agreed with her. There has been so many varied reactions to the film that it is difficult to gauge what people think of the film. None the less, the reactions have thankfully provoked lots of discussions. One thing our screenings suggest is that women generally react very strongly to our film because it critically examines all the things that are

thrown at women on an ordinary WH Smith *Mother and Baby* magazine rack.

**Q Where do you think the future of filmmaking lies?**

**LS:** I have been reading Stanley Cavell and he talks about films doing philosophy. There is an interesting thing he wrote about the inception of early philosophy and how Socrates used to wander around and ask people questions in the Market place. Early philosophy was a living thing that was about dialogue, getting people to look at the world and through dialogue things were revealed. So I like that idea as a filmmaker,

where we're working to provoke thought in the same way that Socrates wanted to provoke thought. The discussion that happens afterwards is possibly more important than the film itself. It would be nice to do a film about the discussions about the film, because they are not comfortable and they do not tie everything up nicely at the end of the film. The interesting thing about making low budget films and being guerilla filmmakers...

**GS:** ...monkey filmmakers...

**LS:** ...we're more monkey filmmakers than Guerrilla filmmakers ...is that I think those budget boundaries



Medea, Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1969

can often really make you focus on what you really want to do in a way that if you have limitless financing you can't. To me it is very important that we have creative control. It is no good getting loads of money for a film if you then have to please the person who's funded it or you have to make a film that pleases what the biggest audience will like. That is when ideas get compromised. Luckily nowadays you can make interesting films that aren't necessarily targeted at mainstream audiences and you can find ways to distribute them. I haven't

seen a lot of British films that are controversial. They seem to be very safe and I think the way British film has been funded by the UKFC is such that you know they want to make money. So if the purpose is to make money then the films have to be nicely tied up at the end or not upset people when they leave the theatre. They have to be Richard Curtis films and have Keira Knightley and Hugh Grant and costumes. There is also a tradition of realism in British cinema that occasionally produces a good film. In the midlands we have Shane Meadows and I find

his work interesting and I am really glad it's made and I enjoy quite a lot of his films. But they are very much films that are about *this is how things are*, rather than *why things are the way they are*. They are not really philosophical films. They are very "*this is the working class, this is how they live, isn't it awful, but they are really alright people actually. Most human beings have good sides and bad sides. The end*". And I think we need to be getting more controversial and we need to be asking questions and provoking the audience in the same way that punk did. Punk doesn't answer questions, but it does try to break people out of distractedness. There are so many things that distract us in society, things that we see as wallpaper. I think we need to be shocked out of that complacency. We need to be shown things that make you go "Fuck!".

**GS:** I think there are lots of good political films that have been made in the last five years because of the Iraq War and the Bush administration, and the subsequent elections of Barack Obama and David Cameron. Those elections in the west have precipi-



Viv, still from *The Medea Legacy*

tated a whole host of films and filmmakers that are making films about political issues. The one area that I think I would like to see film get more courageous is in the uncomfortableness a film is willing to create in order to really illuminate it's subject matter. Cinema recently has explored the topic of terrorism in a way that would have been too uncomfortable for people ten or fifteen years ago and I think that is really good. But I would like to see cinema explore some other top-

ics with the same level of bravery and insight.

**LS:** I think we are entering an age where, politically, things are happening. This is breaking people out of their complacency and I think there are a lot of films that are starting to reflect this. A lot of narratives that we have created in the Left need to be re-examined. We need to be taking a look at ideology again. Concepts, things we believe, and things we take for granted we need to actually be more critical of.

We need to ask ourselves, "is this a good way of thinking?", and "is this a good way of being?". I think filmmaking should be provocative and should be shaking people out of complacency. You can show people how things should or shouldn't be through film and you can play with that and hopefully the audience starts to question other aspects of their lives and become politically engaged. That is what I think is exciting about this particular time: Guerrilla-monkey filmmaking is back!

# On the (Endless) Road: Space as Isolation In Gus Van Sant's Own Private America

Matthew W. Mishory

*"I've been tasting roads my whole life," hustler Mike Waters observes in the symmetrical bookends of Gus Van Sant's My Own Private Idaho, "this road will never end...it probably goes all around the world." A circuitous camera movement reinforces his dialogue, staging Mike center in the empty frame, alone in an endless wheat field, its perspective vanishing points disappearing into the horizon. As he collapses into characteristic narcoleptic seizure, the camera retreats dramatically by crane, leaving Mike behind on that endless road, a symbol not only of his life but also the fate of drifters everywhere, outcasts left to fall through the cracks of late capitalist society.*

*My Own Private Idaho* is a film of empty space, a meditation on isolation, alienation, and the American frontier. Through subversions of screen, diegetic, editing, and sonic space, Van Sant shapes both an unconventional narrative true to his avant-garde roots and a distinctly American variation on the "kitchen sink" social melodrama. Time lapse, vacant compositions, colour, camera movement, unconventional suture (as termed by theorist David Bordwell) editing, and complex sound layering rein-

force a circular narrative (with neither end nor escape for its protagonist) and underscore Van Sant's central thematic preoccupation: in an uncaring, class-based social order, inherent underdogs such as Mike stand little chance. Tragically and inescapably, they will never leave that endless road as it stretches through the untenanted Idaho plains.

The film's space, particularly editing space, and unconventional treatment of the suture fracture the episodic narrative. Episodes, each set apart with a title card, relate to one another through parallel editing patterns. Van Sant forgoes establishing shots for close and medium compositions that disorient the viewer and suggest a sameness to the film's several settings. Indeed, a formal pattern emerges, based on Mike's narcoleptic seizures: each time he collapses, he experiences a flashback to the childhood home he hopes to rediscover, wakes up in a different place, and promptly commences a distinct phase of his life. But as familiar compositions and editing patterns suggest, re-beginnings are illusory. With each escape, the realities of Mike's life follow; he fails to get off the road that quite literally "goes all around the world." A memorable sequence in



Still from *My Own Private Idaho*

Rome begins not with an establishing of the Eternal City, or even with a shot of Mike and Scott in an airplane to causally link their presence abroad to a trip to the airport. Instead, the episode opens with a tight close on Mike sprawled on a street corner, mid-seizure. No visual clue identifies the street corner as Roman; an establishing shot comes much later in the sequence. Location will make no difference to Mike. Homeless in Rome as he was in Portland and Seattle, he is unable to find his mother, whose trail he loosely follows. Nor is he able to escape his profession. In a composition that parallels an earlier sequence in Portland outside an adult bookstore, Mike is shown waiting for "dates" behind the Roman coliseum.

Through screen and diegetic space, the film conveys isolation -- alienation in a disconnected and fragmented modern world. Mike is often framed alone in vast, empty fields; people and objects are obscured through windows. Frequent

non-narrative cuts to a distant Mt. Hood, endless fields, the unending road, time lapsed clouds, and farm houses, suggest both Mike's fragmented psyche and a love of rural life. At its core, Mike's quest is to find his very own "home on the range." The famous campfire scene, elevated by River Phoenix's now signature performance, places the film squarely in the realm of the queer revisionist Western, some fifteen years before *Brokeback Mountain*. In the iconic scene in the adult bookstore, Van Sant breaks the "fourth wall" as inani-

**“ the film conveys isolation -- alienation in a disconnected and fragmented modern world ”**

mate objects in the diegetic space (photos of Scott, Mike, and the other young men whose faces grace the covers of pornographic magazines) come to life to directly address the audience. Through trick pho-



Still from *My Own Private Idaho*

tography, hustlers become, quite literally, living commodities. Capitalism has compelled them to sell their bodies.

The opening and closing bookend scenes best illustrate Van Sant's use of symbolic space. The picture opens with a long shot of Mike on the road, cuts to a long distance wide angle of the road as it stretches to a central vanishing point at the horizon, closes to an iris, and finally cross-cuts Mike's collapse onto the pavement with mountain and empty field shots and time lapse of the sky above the road. The film ends in similar fashion, with a circling camera movement as Mike reflects that "this road will never end" followed by a dramatic crane out to leave his limp form tiny and alone in frame. Just before

end titles, a forlorn and distant shot of the abandoned farmhouse symbolizes Mike's unattainable dream of returning home. Editing space is used to reinforce this isolation. Important symbolic iconography (the farmhouse, time lapse of the road and clouds, the mountains, the vast expanses of the land) appears frequently in causally unmotivated edits, an ever-present reminder of Mike's loneliness and inevitable fate. A final title card offers a sarcastic salutation borrowed from consumerist popular culture, the fast-food take-out bag: "Have a nice day."

Sound design and Van Sant's treatment of sonic space further isolate the film's fringe-dwelling characters and accentuate major thematic elements. In an

early scene in the Chinese restaurant, the complex sound mix creates an extraordinary three-dimensional sonic space that buries its street denizens in a din of chatter, clinking utensils, wild sound, and music. Sound conventions of classical Hollywood cinema are ignored; conversations and noise fade abruptly in and out, à la Godard, and sound perspective shifts constantly without adjustments in volume to position the viewer within the space. Unmotivated cinema verite-style edits between medium shots of hustlers as they recount stories of abuse and assault disorient further. Van Sant's formal experiments are firmly grounded in his humanism; the perplexing clatter and skirts of sonic perspective draw the viewer directly into the fragmented experience of outcast life. Recalling *Streetwise*, the landmark documentary about homeless youths in Seattle, the boys in the Chinese restaurant discuss their dreams. One hopes to become a rock star.

Van Sant crafts a clever soundtrack; music distinguishes the many off-beat and fringe characters to which he gravitates. Jazz announces the middle-aged John and his "Dutch boy" fantasy. Strange electronica accompanies Hans's eccentric dance routine. An English lute introduces William Richert's Bob Pidgeon, who both queers and modernizes Shakespeare's Falstaff. And poignantly, drifter Mike wanders to the music of the American frontier. Yodeling and banjos underscore his memories and treks down deserted highways. One tune has particular significance, a folksy rendition of "America the Beautiful." It is this song (and its yodeling preamble), so central to the American folk music tradition, that begins and closes the film, as Mike collapses on the road "that goes around the world." Not all is beautiful in contempo-

rary America, and Van Sant's film highlights the inherent and unjust gaps in the social fabric, as outcasts such as Mike (a homosexual with narcolepsy and no support system to speak of) are left to fall through the cracks. But there is beauty too, and Van Sant finds it in his misfits, in the unconventional family that Mike and Bob and their fellow squatters have created, a world presented in stark contrast to the neatly-kept houses and designer suits of the aristocratic family the Favor's. The city is a place of dubious commerce in *My Own Private Idaho*, and Van Sant's bursts of traditional American music celebrate the road, the frontier, and a rural simplicity advocated with Marxist intensity.

Gus Van Sant was a painter and designer before becoming a filmmaker, and his use of light and colour within the screen space suggest a fine art background. Drab, dimly lit expanses of urban blight are accented with bright primary colours, as Van Sant finds moments of great beauty and hope within the context of a class-segregated and alienating society. Drawing from Godard's cinematic interpretation of Mondrian's theories of primary colours in art (most notably in *Pierrot le feu*), Van Sant accentuates his listless, naturally-lit interiors and overcast city expanses with splashes of yellow, red, and blue. In the devastating final act, as Scott's limousine passes Mike, post-betrayal, hunched on a street corner, a medium-wide shot reveals a perfect Mondrian composition. Mike, wearing blue, crouches against a red wall as he sits on a yellow-painted curb. This colour scheme is often recreated throughout the film. When industrialist Mr. Favor consults with his aides, his menacing desk is framed to reveal a blue tie and red and yellow folders at opposite ends. A strikingly similar composition can be

found later in the hotel room, with primary colours often accentuating Van Sant's despondent and typically under-lit sets, awash grays and browns. This dreariness extends, albeit in more sanitized form, to the dejected drab abodes and dark wood-paneled offices of the film's upper class. A

**“ Through trick photography, hustlers become, quite literally, living commodities ”**

notable exception is the residence of the wealthy woman who pays Mike for sex. Though a seizure prevents him from performing his end of the deal, she is one of the few characters to treat him with dignity. Consequently, her bedroom is a sea of red tones and colourful trim set apart against a backlit white wall. Splashes of colour are similarly injected into the common room of the abandoned hotel, where hustlers and the downtrodden congregate, their merriment in sharp contrast to the reserved world of the Favor's. Scott's motorcycle, both means of escape and symbol of Mike's love for Scott, is painted bright yellow, anticipating the “amber waves of grain” of the rural countryside. Indeed, the sun-drenched prairie, photographed so lovingly by Van Sant, overwhelms the dingy, overcast urban streets, the waste-strewn curbsides that are so often Mike's last refuge.

Van Sant's sympathy for the outsider and fascination with parallel social spheres in American society come to bear dramatically in the climactic third act double funeral scene. Every element of spatial organization is used to distinguish Scott's elite realm from that of Mike's underclass. Physically, the two are connected in the diegetic space, as both

the funeral of Mr. Favor and that of Bob Pidgeon take place on a common lawn. A series of shots from Scott's point-of-view (he is, after all, a traveler between spheres) connect the happenings, with editing space reinforcing Scott's Shakespearean role as traitor. Sound, colour schemes, and camera movements create a direct visual dichotomy between the interconnected spaces. Wild accordion melodies, chanting and off-key singing punctuate the hobo

funeral. The sonic space is three-dimensional and chaotic, with sound emanating from every corner. In contrast, the Favor internment is conducted in passive silence; only a few scant priestly incantations break the deathly spell. The sonic space is distinctly flat, intruded upon only by the distant caterwauling from Bob's funeral, a reminder that another world exists, unseen and ignored. Bland, homogeneous colours mark the Favor funeral: black garments, pale faces, an immaculately manicured lawn. The mourning vagrants, by contrast, are multi-racial and brightly-clad (many in Mondrian-inspired reds, blues, and yellows), their “cemetery” over-run with stagnant weeds and decaying leaves. The misfits stomp and dance and carry on; the Favor's and their guests sit in silence. The accompanying camera movements are also distinct. Gentle pans, tilts, and fixed shots frame the bourgeois, while Van Sant's camera circles the impassioned outcasts in shaky hand-held. The rich are already dead; the poor, enraged and alive. It is with them our sympathies lie.

This being Van Sant, there are also fish. They appear everywhere in *My Own Private Idaho*; amphibious symbolism infiltrates both the diegetic and editing space



Still from *My Own Private Idaho*

of the film. Van Sant is a very careful collector of objects; his manipulation of mise-en-scene is telling. When Mike is picked up by the unidentified wealthy woman in the first act of the film, she leads him to her bedroom. A cut to a close-up as he passes reveals porcelain fish figurines arranged on the mantelpiece. A telephoto lens curves space, exaggerating their size and prominence in the center of the frame. Later, when Mike and Scott visit Hans in his hotel suite, a lingering establishing shot reveals a painting of a red fish set against a white canvas. The set is lit to disclose its presence. And throughout, the conventional suture flow of editing is repeatedly interrupted by causally and spatially unmotivated cuts to salmon struggling upstream. This motif is established in the film's opening sequence, with a shot of the river serving as *coitus interruptus* in a series of close-ups on Mike as he receives

oral sex from a client. In an instance of beautiful symmetry, the final sequence, a mirror of the opening, begins with the same salmon, struggling upstream.

A river is, after all, a sort of a road. Placed as it is in an unmotivated (The stream is not revealed through an establishing shot to be spatially located adjacent to the surroundings of the previous or subsequent shots.) position in the editing space, the final shot of fish swimming upstream takes on expository significance. The literal transcends, and this single symbolic image so beautifully intimates Van Sant's diagnosis of a vacant, capitalist society, a new forlorn frontier where every fish in the river, large or small, bound like Mike forever to the road, struggles against irrefutable odds toward the inevitable nothingness that is so much at the heart of space in *My Own Private Idaho*.

# Christ kid, you're a weirdo!

## Rolf de Heer-o of Cult Cinema and his Bad Boy Bubby

Melanie Hay

*Cult cinema encapsulates those films that 'normal' society finds too much to handle, although they tend to gain an ever-loyal following of cinema nerds, eccentric bohemians, sicko-fiends and those with an obsessive taste for alt. Bad Boy Bubby very much fits into this category because all in all, Bubby is one of those little video nasties that'll change your life if you give it the time, although most find it a struggle to stomach it all the way through. Most cinema goers want to see Tom Hanks in a Tom Hanks movie narrated and produced by Tom Hanks, FEATURING Tom Hanks. This kind of cinema is useless, it serves to fill our minds with fodder, offers up unbelievable and dim-witted characters and storylines injected to the brim with whimsy and saccharine, however, viewing might be understandable if used for light-relief or if you've had a lobotomy.*

Bubby is raw to the core; it creates its own world not unlike the best of all cult films – *Eraserhead* by David Lynch. Industrial aesthetic, dark, void of caring, compassion and humanity, it is the perfect dystopia. Fans of *Bad Boy Bubby* don't want to be saved, don't want to be fooled, don't want to be merely entertained, they want to be made to think and to feel, no matter how hard it is to endure and for their weird and often times morbid film-taste buds to be excited. Fans of cult cinema are the hard-



Still from *Bad Boy Bubby*

core patrons of the cinema nerdery world. Cult doesn't necessarily mean avant-garde, but it does normally mean weird as fuck. In contrast, the term 'indie' - in a contemporary sense - is a buzzword meaning, 'This will appeal to hipsters'.

Rolf de Heer, the creator of Bubby, has a strong history in counter culture film-

making. Originally from Holland he moved to Australia when he was 8. Now aged 59 he has garnered critical acclaim and has been coined as "one of Australia's few genuine film stylists"<sup>1</sup>. He has been making art house movies since 1984, the first being a movie entitled 'Tale of the Tiger'. In 2006 he was chosen for the "Un Certain Regard" special jury prize at the Cannes Film Festival. He worked at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation for seven years and in 1977 was granted entry into Australia's Film Television and Radio School and has gone on to make more than a dozen films of different genres, generally low budget yet

successfully gaining substantial international recognition. He has made 17 films to date with *Bad Boy Bubby* being his most unpopular popular venture thus far.

The titular anti-hero in de Heer's bad trip dystopian hell is a strange one indeed. He enjoys wrapping cats in cling-wrap until they suffocate, repeating or emulating anything anyone says or does to him and nightly sex frolics with his mother, although 'enjoy' might be the wrong word as Bubby knows nothing else under the captive eye of his Medeaesque matriarch. The flat in which Bubby - a scruffy, gangly, unshaven, wild blue eyed mid-30's man-child - is trapped and has grown up in all of his life is an utter hovel. Peeling plaster, dingy grey brown walls covered in dirt, filthy floorboards, a shredded mucky couch and arm chair and a wooden brown table with two chairs. Also adding to this IKEA selection is a cross hung on the wall next to the dining table. Whenever Bubby does something wrong or is given an order by the matriarchal monster he is told, "*Jesus is watching*". Bubby, quite literally, has the fear of God in him and does what

he's told to the letter. On one instance, he is ordered to stay put in his chair until Mother gets back and if he moves, "*he is watching*". Bubby proceeds to do so for what seems like endless hours, even in complete darkness, to the point of urinating through his chair. Mother gets back from doing Motherly things such as picking flowers and buying new knitting needles to discover Bubby has pissed himself while hoping Jesus doesn't notice his

**“ Bubby is human-shaped memory foam, a blank canvas covered in dirt smears ”**

faux pas. Mother proceeds to beat Bubby senseless but rewards him later on when she's feeling horny and forgiving. Bubby never leaves his homely cesspit for fear of the 'poison'. When Mother leaves she always takes with her a gasmask with a hacked off breathing tube. Bubby has been brought up to believe that if he goes outside he will breathe in the poison and die thus keeping him an almost willing prisoner in his pigsty pantheon where he can torture bugs and cats to his heart's content. But one day Bubby's reality shatters once his long lost father, a.k.a Pop, turns up on the doorstep demanding to be back in their lives.

Through this frenzied coming-of-middle-age story Bubby manages to leave home, denounce God, pisses off feminists, robs a gas station, tries Pizza for the first time, has sex with someone who isn't his mother \*high five\*, goes to Prison, gets a girlfriend, joins a pop-rock band and becomes famous. Our Bubby is not a procrastinator, that's for sure!

Bubby is human-shaped memory foam, a blank canvas covered in dirt smears.



Still from *Bad Boy Bubba*

One can only imagine what must be happening in Bubba's mind as he bumps into various situations on his first outings. He hears music for what seems like the first time and is completely mesmerised. He manages to stumble his way into beds, cars, vans, homes, venues, restaurants and shops only to be rejected, molded against his will or used by each person he comes into contact with. Because of his inability to be able to hold a decent conversation with a female without grabbing her breasts, he ends up in jail where hallucinatory bagpipers play to the cellmates and where rape is what is expected of you. Bubba slowly starts to realise that life is short, death is final, God is a terrible thing and that maybe the world is a terrible thing too, but he can't undo what he's done. He has to 'face the music'.

The strong theme of sound, sex and religion keeps creeping up one way or another no matter who he meets. At one point Bubba wanders into a church and meets a Scientist who is playing the church organ. The Scientist then goes into a long one-sided discussion about how "...it is our job to think God out of existence" whilst meandering around a chemical plant with ol' Bubberz. The impact of Bub's upbringing is stingingly obvious to us viewers, but those he encounters seem utterly oblivious to how strange Bubba actually is. Bubba has no personality of his own, he is a mix-mash of quotes, rants and sounds that he's heard from people he's encountered or abuse he has experienced. He repeats and imitates which gets him in trouble more often than not but strangely works massively in his favour in the right contexts.

It is strikingly questionable whether Rolf de Heer is either insane or trying very hard to come off that way by making this cacophonous religi-fuck-fest-abuse-crime-spree-rock-opera but it's more than that. Yes, it's obvious his aim was to make this film as weird as possible, but in no way is it trite, hipster or confused. It is a story of realising that we only have one life, and no matter how messed up we are it is in our blood to make the best of a bad situation. No matter how bad things get there's always hope. But never hold hope in religion, and never hold hope in humanity. Hold hope in yourself even if you're beyond hope. Bubba is as deranged as you can get, his upbringing clearly utterly dysfunctional and beyond abnormal yet we get to see Bubba grow as a human being throughout this film and it is an utter joy and hilarious wonder to see. It is a truly

allowed to look at the previous cameraperson's work on the film. What we get is not ramshackle; in fact, it is disjointed yet never feels out of place or badly made, instead we see each scene with fresh eyes, just how de Heer intended. In order for us to get a sense of what it was like experiencing the world Bubba-style they put little microphones underneath the actor's wig so that we heard the world from Bubba's perspective, from hearing church music through headphones to block out arguments, to walking along the street and hearing the traffic roar by, to when he's on stage shouting through a microphone. The overall effect never feels jarring in terms of technique but completely translates the noise which rattles through Bubba's veins. Sound has always been an integral part in de Heer's filmmaking and he believes "...

*sound is 60 percent of the emotional content of a film [...] cinema is an audio-visual medium!"*<sup>2</sup>

**“No less than 30 cameramen and women were used to shoot different parts of the film”**

Nicholas Hope, who was plucked out of obscurity to portray Bubba, is utterly astounding in the role and his

unique take on the adult embodiment of a child stepping out into the big bad world for the first time compared to the simplistic whimsical portrayals of childlike adults portrayed by Dustin Hoffman in *Rain Man* or Peter Sellers in *Being There*. There is a ripe anger in Bubba that he purges in the most absurd of contexts showing the rage and neanderthal-esque personality traits and behaviour he has acquired due to his upbringing.

Despite a small budget, de Heer didn't sacrifice style for content, nor did he do the reverse. No less than 30 cameramen and women were used to shoot different parts of the film to convey different aspects of Bubba's experience. None of them were

acting ability and complete emersion in his character does tend to outshine the rest of the cast. The supporting characters/actors fit comfortably into their roles in this forcedly uncomfortable film, yet it is our Bubba who is quite obviously the main attraction. The characters who share his world are the aptly named Angel, a dowdy Care Worker who gets Bubba's intense attention every time she's seen intermittently throughout the film. Rachel, the girl with cerebral palsy who falls deeply in love with Bubba who acts as her interpreter, and the band whom he shackles up with, who kind of take care of him until he crashes the stage and rants out all the horrific things people have said to him upon his escape

from Matriarch Manor. I found Rachel's performance particularly heart-wrenching as the severely disabled girl who cannot speak unless it is via Bubby interpreting for her. The pain in her eyes seers through the screen as she confesses to Bubby that she loves him. As he cradles her in his arms, he cries for her pain as he is in love with someone else. The emotions are utterly raw and completely believable in this moment, and it is here that we start to empathise with who Bubby was, is and who he is becoming.

**“ it completely lights up your heart and sends sparks through your spine ”**

*Bad Boy Bubby* does not fit a mould; it is not concerned with what an audience wants, it is there to tell you a story and a story that will unnerve you on some level or another. It's also there to entertain your socks off and twiddle those nodules of your brain that secretly loves feasting your eyes on this sick shit. It is an extremely enjoyable, funny, intelligent and brilliantly made film that challenges the viewer on all levels - it is free-reign creativity at its most delusional. *Bad Boy Bubby* is not solely made to shock, as most people accuse it of, but to show that de Heer himself is not afraid of tackling the subjects at hand and still making the film less of a tragedy and more of a black comedy/commentary on societal norms.

*Bad Boy Bubby* caused total uproar on its release due to the admittedly upsetting torture of cats in scenes where one cat is tied to a chair and shouted at, “*Be quiet ya little cunt*”, amongst many other occurrences of cruelty to animals and insects. Those scenes still make me wince even though I've seen this film countless

times. Surprisingly, the controversy and backlash didn't seem to hinder it gaining many awards such as four 1994 Australian Film Institute awards; Best Director (Rolf de Heer), Best Actor in a Leading Role (Nicholas Hope), Best Original Screenplay (Rolf de Heer) and Best Editing (Suresh Ayyar). It was also nominated for Best Film (Rolf de Heer) and Best Cinematography (Ian Jones).

The term 'Indie' is somewhat of a buzzword in the film industry and even though I'm (embarrassingly) drawn to it, I find myself turning evermore cynical when mainstream actors do interviews and talk about going back to the little cinema. “Oh, we're big Hollywood actors but we can play horrible messed up characters with heart too”. This is bullshit compared to what *Bad Boy Bubby* is. Being Bubby would be a complete career destroyer for the likes of Cruise, Hanks or DiCaprio. They wouldn't touch that stuff with a bargepole and most CERTAINLY their management and agent wouldn't let them either.<sup>3</sup>

There's something just so wonderful about boundary-crossing when it's not contrived in the slightest, it completely lights up your heart and sends sparks through your spine. This is what I want indie cinema to be, whereas contemporary indie cinema seems to be all about awkward shoegazing teenagers saying and thinking cool things, losing virginities and is always some sort of rotation of a John Hughes film but tries its hardest to be as edgy as possible for the salacious new tween generation. But still I've yet to see them being forced to lose their virginity to their parent or torturing animals, and if so, it would be shot so perfectly with some smooth grainy-voiced teen talking in a

morosely “Oh isn't life so banal and desensitised” tone over it that it would lose all truth and brutality that comes with the eerie silence, physically 'ugly' characters and utter wasteland aesthetic that *Bad Boy Bubby* smashes into our faces.<sup>4</sup>

'Indie cinema' nowadays is not cult, it never will be. There's too much money in it, it's too slick and it has a demographic, it's not about filmmaking or creativity but about providing hipsters and teenagers who's favourite book is *Catcher In The Rye* with quirky fashionista icons (\*Cough\* Joseph Gordon-Levitt \*cough\*) and witticisms to quote to their thick black-rimmed spectacled chums. *Bad Boy Bubby* is alive to give the insane or socially-fucked up hope, it's the real deal, it's also there to challenge the mainstream perceptions of what we accept to be the norm in our society and it does so in the most creatively crazy manner possible. It relishes every opportunity to fulfill its own carnal need to experiment wildly and because of this it is such a completely exciting and satisfying bite of cinema.

Cult doesn't mean you're the most reblogged on tumblr, it means that nobody got to see it because it was so subversive and/or queer that the majority of companies were too pansy to back it and give it the support it needed to flourish as a film. Only those who make it their purpose in life to search cinema like this out in order to revel at its honesty and creativity will reap the benefits.

*Bad Boy Bubby* is a proud part of cult cinema in its purest form; unnerving, unique, weird, ugly, honest, and most of all challenging. I'll be honest and admit that I still sort of enjoy those little indies. You know the ones: *Rocket Science*, *Me, You and Everyone We Know*, *Juno*, *Thumbsucker*, *The Squid and the Whale*,

*Garden State* and every single Amazon indie suggestion. Thing is, they've never compared to Bubby and I don't think they ever will, as much as they'd like to be included in the same genre, they're just not willing to be freak enough for the Bubby crowd, most certainly not weird enough to share the same shelf-space. Compared to fantastic subversive cinema from the 1990's and early noughties (*Bad Boy Bubby* was made in 1993) like *Slacker* (1991), *Gummo* (1997), *Welcome To The Dollhouse* (1995), Gregg Araki's *Teenage Apocalypse Trilogy* (1993-97), *Chuck and Buck* (2000), *Lost Highway* (1997), *Cecil. B. Demented* (2000), contemporary indie cinema is so damn slick, so tapped into its audience. Rather than filmmaking for its raw art of storytelling, indie cinema is now used for mainstreamies to try and garner a bit of cred with the tweens. It's a concern that they all merge into some sort of soup made of flies and sick spewed from the mouths of wealthy hipster yuppies. Whereas the directors who are still making the films I mentioned previously are leaning more to Midnight Movies influence and are more in the art house/cult sub-genre, the 'little indies's' heritage lies in films like *The Graduate* (1967), *The Breakfast Club* (1985), *Sixteen Candles* (1984), *Adventures In Babysitting* (1987), *St. Elmo's Fire* (1985) etc, but tries to pass itself off as something edgier whilst maintaining that heady mix of whimsy and normally shallow and clumsy soul-searching. Art house and cult they are not, for they are born out of a mainstream 'traditional' way of making films: Write a script, take it to Hollywood, hope for the best, get passed on to a sister company or a small film studio, one of them agrees to make it, it's made with a lot of input and money (although normally less than mainstreamies) behind

it and big teams and casts and so on and so on until the end of time. It is no longer independent. Independent and indie are two completely separate things now. The word 'indie' is merely a ruse, a simple lampoon, a ploy in order to make these films look like they have more credibility when you look at the cover. Cult cinema and art house is rarely afforded this kind of financial backing and support, thus the directors tend to have much more creative control, much more freedom and have to really utilise their creativity in order to have their vision realised. They gotta work with what they got. *Bad Boy Bubby* is the epitome of this.

Believe it or not you end up loving Bubby as a person, a character and as, arguably, one of the weirdest icons to ever grace our screens. I'm so happy I first encountered this nightmarish hidden gem as a child circa late 90's late at night on Channel 4 before it became an insufferable shit-feast compacted with *Hollyoaks* reruns and Davina McCall hosting nearly every program on their schedule. It's all so much different compared to the days of *The Shooting Gallery*, *Vidz* and late night alt films that if you happened to flick through the remote at 3am you were in for

a cerebral mind-splode. The idea of Bubby and the world he perambulates radiated throughout my childhood memories. I'm not sure if I was in shock and never recovered, or if I truly enjoyed it but I have a feeling it is most probably a bit of both. What I do owe to de Heer is a taste for the weird and wonderful and utterly grotesque in cinema which absolutely does stem from that late night Channel 4 showing of this marvelous underground cult film. I will never stop privately, somewhere in the back of my desensitised mind, thanking him for his horrifically glorious creation that is *Bad Boy Bubby*.

1 Cat Hope (2004) - *Hearing the Story: Sound Design in the Films of Rolf de Heer* Retrieved November 15th, 2010 from [http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/04/31/sound\\_design\\_rolf\\_de\\_heer.html](http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/04/31/sound_design_rolf_de_heer.html)

2 Ibid

3 However, in the case of Kidman working on *Dogville* is an exception to the rule for example. Kidman completely suspends her celebrity status to play a character that is raped, belittled, molested and used in every way possible. She ventured out to make a film that her mainstream fans would obviously not be comfortable with and kudos to her for that. This wasn't some whimsical little indie where the actor says some deep stuff then the film is over, but working with Von Trier, the king of destroying women on film, and putting her talents and wants for portraying a character that is deeply abused by not one person, but a whole town is nothing less than brave. She ventured completely out of what is expected of her and out of her celebrity safe-zone and thus she and *Dogville* are exempt from this critique.

4 Actually, a film named *Spanking The Monkey* (1994) does exactly this. Contrived indie incest. Such an utterly dreadful film.

# The State of Independence

## 5 Filmmakers at the Cambridge Film Festival

James Marcus Tucker

The last issue of *One+One* was launched in September at the 31st Cambridge Film Festival with a panel discussion around the issue of independence. The panel, which I was honoured to host, consisted of Irish Filmmaker Sean Garland (Nokotaheart), British Filmmakers Ron Peck (Nighthawks & Cross-Channel) and Jason King (Bad Company), artist/filmmaker Sarah Turner (Ecology & Perestroika) and *One+One's* founder/co-editor Daniel Fawcett (DIRT). All panellists had work showing at the festival, and so the issues on the table were particularly relevant to all – especially in light on the recent announcement about the UKFC's eminent demise.

What came from the discussion was at once unsurprising (the ambivalence felt towards the UKFC for example) and yet inspiring. The discussion not only explored the reasons for the state of current British "independent" cinema, but aimed at finding a consensus toward a new way of working for filmmakers and towards a totally new concept of independence; an independence not only of finances, but of thought.

## Panel Discussion Transcription

**Q James Marcus Tucker: Why did you become a filmmaker?**

**Ron Peck:** I grew up at a time when there were so many very exciting manifestations of cinema. I mean when I was 14 or 15 there was still new films by directors like Antonioni, Fellini and Godard. There were a lot of independent American films, and there were emerging new forms of distribution, so cinema was the medium. It was a medium about which everyone interested in the arts was engaged. I grew up in a time when notions of cinema were expanding. And that was where I really wanted to work and felt I could work.

**Daniel Fawcett:** Before I started making films I was a painter and my approach to filmmaking is probably quite similar in that my drives are quite personal and I use

film as a tool for personal exploration of ideas and situations in my own life. One of the reasons I enjoy film so much is the sense of community and the feeling of family that you get when you are working with other people. I do see filmmaking as an exploration...the finished film is more of a presentation of the document of what was discovered on the journey rather than an exact pre-planned thing. I am willing to risk making what might be considered a bad film in order to have a pure process.

**Sean Garland:** Pure storytelling, just the love of pure storytelling. I used to write a lot of short stories when I was a kid. And I painted a lot of narrative type pictures and I was always trying to tell a story and then there is always just the love of cinema. I was constantly in the cinema as a kid so you kind of know already what you want to do before you're 15 or 16 as you

spend most of your time sitting in the dark watching films.

**Sarah Turner:** I was more interested in the cultural diversity that was embodied in a particular type of politically radical cinema. I trained as an artist and that's my background. I have to say that was very gender driven, it was a pretty male dominated context and in the 70's and 80's - that was when the whole generation of women came through...so there was the influence of feminism but also all kinds of radical theory - in particular queer culture that moved in the Filmmakers Co-op at the point I was around that scene.

**Jason King:** I think similar to Sean really, storytelling. My background before I moved in to cinema was singing in a band and I was always writing and I gradually moved in to making films. My aim has been to show something you have seen before but in a new way. It appeals to me that you can take something and tilt your head slightly and show it again - so I guess that's what leads me on I suppose.

**Q James Marcus Tucker:** In reference to independence, One+One is really committed to exploring what that actually means - the term "independence". Independent from what, independent from whom? So for you Daniel, what does that term mean, what does it embody?

**Daniel Fawcett:** I think independence is something that gets thrown around with filmmakers - I think a lot of filmmakers call themselves independent just because they haven't got funding. I don't think that's true independence necessarily. Well that one type of independence, but a lot of these filmmakers that call themselves independent are only so financially, not in their thinking and their process. I don't think they are really embracing the

opportunity that they have there. A lot of these filmmakers, really, are making films with the industry in mind, as sort of calling cards into the industry which I think is such a shame because I think that we are in a position now with filmmaking where films can be made without money and they can be made independently.

**Sarah Turner:** Transformation and challenge and innovation...they are linked, and certainly the emotionally transformative process of working with people which is not to do with a financial transaction, but is to do with some absolute desire of creative realisation on every single level; and people who are enfranchised by that trust. When people are enfranchised by that trust, it is transformative and people do beautiful things and make beautiful work in that context. The other thing I wanted to say about this idea of independence is that it needs to be re-examined. Aesthetic is a brand. Independence is a brand. It's a brand of a particular calling-card culture. I mean Sundance Film Festival calls itself a celebration of independent film but of course it is a celebration of people getting their features to be distributed by companies like Miramax. It's not a celebration of thought and difference.

**Ron Peck:** I was giving thought to this rather difficult word 'independent' in a way, because in some respects Stanley Kubrick worked as an independent, and I looked again at a film called *Zabriskie Point*. Now if that isn't independent I don't know what is, but it was made within MGM for huge amounts of money. Somehow Antonioni could work for MGM and produce something unlike anything I have ever seen made in America. I also thought maybe this term "independent filmmaker" is particularly important in a British context. I'm not sure, I may be wrong but I don't think of Italian in-

dependent film or French independent film in the same way and I think it's because those countries and other European countries especially have, and it's an awkward term, an art cinema, and I'm not sure this country ever did in the terms it was understood in France or Italy or Germany. And I think with digital technology, in a way, say as Derek Jarman's work on Super8 opened up an area of working with a different level of technology for serious work (and got it shown in big cinemas), I think digital technology makes it possible to work much more individually, much simpler.

**Jason King:** I see independence as a tag really and I try to avoid it. I'm just doing my thing and trying to make a film how I know, and trying to experiment and do something different. I don't know how comfortable I feel being tagged with the label "independent filmmaker" as I'm not sure if I am an independent filmmaker. I'm not sure what I am really. I'm somebody experimenting and entertaining people and that's it really.

**Sean Garland:** Very similar, just a re-iteration. I don't like the term independent. I don't know what it means anymore because, like Ron said, that whole landscape is changing with digital technology. I mean, everything has become so organic and instinctive, you can view your footage minutes after you shoot it. It's a very exciting time at the moment. There are a lot of people who say it's not, and I think I heard the comment yesterday in a film we watched that all we can do is go back to the masterpieces and re-churn out those images and ideas. But I don't believe that. I actually think now...I know they are difficult to find sometimes, but I think now filmmaking is more interesting and exciting than it has ever been.

**Q James Marcus Tucker:** Obviously we are aware of what's happening with the UK Film Council. So I would like to know your thoughts on not necessarily what will happen - although that would be interesting too - but what you as filmmakers would like to see, in a perfect world. Any new avenues that could open up or perhaps new ways of working, new processes that could be explored in the changing landscape of British cinema after the UK Film Council.

**Sarah Turner:** I feel very ambivalent about the Film Council generally. Whilst a big part of me feels like congratulating their demise, another part of me feels that it is very unhelpful to do that at the moment, because we have to be quite careful and quite rigorous about defending and arguing for support for a form of production. I think the Film Council spent far too much money on basically subsidising the British industry to become a facilities house for Hollywood. You know sadly we are living in the UK and it's a more commodified form of entertainment and also that notion is always collapsed together as if...entertainment is unquestionably used...is it entertaining? No-one ever asks or un-picks what entertaining means. My idea of an entertaining film is one by Marguerite Duras or Derek Jarman - a film that troubles and challenges me, or moves me and that's my idea of entertainment.

**Ron Peck:** I think when the Film Council was created, other places closed down to make way for it and it kind of coincided with changes inside television. Television used to be a place you could go to for certain slots for support of different kinds of work. I don't know really what can replace that. I am intrigued by how it's possible in France, for example, for such a much wider range of filmmaking to be possible.

I think it's because there is a blanket subsidy of all filmmaking so each filmmaker is more liberated - has more reward back, has more help. I asked one French filmmaker where he went for funding for development and he said he didn't need to go anywhere because he got money back from every single television showing and cinema ticket sold. So I think that's a way of empowering a filmmaker to make his or her own decisions and stand or fall on those decisions.

**Jason King:** Yeah I agree with everything people have said...these crazy films with obscene amounts of money, they should stop that and make lots of films for a million pounds instead of insane amounts. We should increase the appetite of audiences to watch British films and distribution sorted where cinemas will give priorities to us as British filmmakers - like what they do in Denmark and France and let's make sure that 50% of our films here are British films.

**Sean Garland:** I just find that no one takes risks - funders don't take risks, they need those little safety boxes, they need to get you in for that interview and there's not enough risks. It's also like they need the template. I have just found that throughout the years I have stopped asking for funds because I don't seem to tick those boxes, and for someone that wants to reach those audiences that I was talking about earlier - it's a quandary.

**Daniel Fawcett:** I think the relationship between the people with the money and the creative people always has been a difficult one and I think it always will be. I don't think that is ever going to change because the motivations for each party are completely different. We can talk about what they should and shouldn't be doing but I think the best thing we can do

as filmmakers is minimize the amount of energy that we are giving to them - they don't deserve our energy and money doesn't deserve our energy either. I would like to say that I could envision a funding body that would give money to risk-taking projects and creative projects but I am not going to hold out for it. I think that the best thing we can do is put our energy in to things that are more worth while.

**James Mackay (From Audience):** I remember when I was young and I started off making films, I remember that there was something that happened with these organizations - like British Screen, the Arts Council and the British Film Institute - which was called trust. You went and talked to them, and they listened to you, you didn't tick any boxes, you didn't have to justify commercial gain, they treated it as if you were a serious filmmaker, you had proven that's what you were doing and that's what you are capable of doing, and they would support you and there was a sense of trust. That's completely lacking now, they start off with this position which is hostile to the filmmaker.

**Ron Peck:** I think you are absolutely right - the word 'trust'. It seems to me that even with some of the film schemes for low budget or short films, the sheer number of hoops the filmmaker is expected to go through; mentoring sessions - at least four or five levels of those, I mean there is no trust and it seems to me that if you don't trust the filmmaker, don't give them the money. The kinds of funds a place like the Film Council has had access to for production, when I think how much more widely that could have been spent, how many more things could have been done. Now that there is a line being drawn under the Film Council, I think it will be interesting to see how film journalists and

historians will look back at what was accomplished in those ten or twelve years, compared to what was accomplished by, say, the British Film Institute with , I don't know, 5% of the funding.

**Q James Marcus Tucker: I find the issue of exhibition on television interesting as well. Ron you said about Channel 4 being so supportive once. I wonder, why has it changed? They were showing these independent films on television and this was, for me, where I would see it in the eighties or nineties. Would Sarah's film *Perestroika* have been on in the nineties and if not now, why not?**

**Audience Member:** Reality TV is cheaper.

**Audience Member:** The cultural landscape has completely changed and television doesn't represent the cultural division.

**Sarah Turner:** Channel Four was enormously important in the independent sector. Extremely diverse forums came together and lobbied for the inception of Channel Four who radically influenced the channel's programming and then of course the channel utterly changed the landscape for those filmmakers and their

lives, but also those younger generations who had access to that work on terrestrial television. And now there are many websites where you can download many experimental films and see them. The only thing I think is different from doing that is that there was that experience, which again is why cinema is so important. That we have this emotional and cultural collective experience and we're transformed by that collective experience. Something also about television, you couldn't constantly download it from BBC iplayer or whatever. It was something that was absolutely of that time and of that moment and generated whole networks of discussion. The internet, as valuable as it is, has led to increasing atomization of our social and cultural infrastructure. And that is really problematic. So television is becoming irrelevant. I know my students don't watch television at all, and if you are interested in cultural cinema, why would you watch television? Channel Four does not show anything that doesn't have English as a first language. They won't show films with subtitles now before midnight, whereas you used to watch incredibly radical stuff in quite early evening.

## End of Transcription.

*All films at the festival were a testament to the fact that filmmakers can produce challenging and innovative work with scarce or limited resources. By utilising what they had at their disposal - affordable digital technology, the natural landscape, the willingness of both friends and strangers, or more importantly their unflinching resolve to commit to their principles, the filmmakers in this year's Microcinema were able to create unique, uncompromising work. Daniel Fawcett's film DIRT, for example was the cheapest (in monetary terms) out of the panelists contributions, and yet the scope and ambition of his project inspired everyone who attended the screening and following Q&A. Quite rightly, whatever happens with the future of state film funding, the energy we give, as artists, to the money-men needs to pale in comparison to our vision which is, thankfully today, achievable with millions or none. As Sally Potter once told me during a Masterclass, you don't have to go wide to go deep. And you don't have to have money to make films.*



**One+One** is a self-published independent journal with a team of writers who are active participants in a non-profit, non-commercial venture. We are self-funded and write for the love of our subject rather than for personal financial gain.

We encourage a wide variety of articles whether autobiographical, journalistic, historical, philosophical, socio-political or whether they are manifestos or interviews. However the perspective of the filmmaker or the critical re-invention of film, as a theme, is of central importance. All articles should cover at least one of the topics listed below.

- Critical examinations of filmmaking; its craft, process or social context. This may concern either independent self-financed filmmaking or the film industry and film-funding.
- Social issues in films.
- Film as part of a “Revolutions in Progress”
- Underrated or under-acknowledged filmmakers or acknowledged filmmakers who have radically and experimentally broken boundaries in some way.

We are looking for proposals, from writers, filmmakers and theorists who are interested in breaking new ground, in unique discussions and challenges.

The word count is negotiable but we usually look for articles under 3000 words.

A 300-word proposal should be sent before an essay idea is finalised.

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