



machete

VOL. 1, NO 4 JANUARY 2010

Margin of Utility

"Unless *suffering* is the direct and immediate object of life, our existence must entirely fail of its aim. It is absurd to look upon the enormous amount of pain that abounds everywhere in the world, and originates in needs and necessities inseparable from life itself, as serving no purpose at all and the result of mere chance. Each separate misfortune, as it come, seems, no doubt, to be something exceptional; but misfortune in general is the rule."

-Ludwig Fischer

The general public now draws its notion of art from advertising, MTV videos, video games, and Hollywood blockbusters. In the contemporary context of media-generated taste, the call to abandon and dismantle the museum as an institution has necessarily taken on an entirely different meaning than when it was voiced during the avant-garde era. When people today speak of "real life," what they usually mean is the global media market. And that means: The current protest against the museum is no longer part of a struggle being waged against normative taste in the name of aesthetic equality but is, inversely, aimed at stabilizing and entrenching currently prevailing tastes.

The abandonment of the "musealized" past is also often celebrated as a radical opening up to the present. But opening up to the big world outside the closed spaces of the art system produces, on the contrary, a certain blindness to what is contemporary and present. The global media market lacks in particular the historical memory that would enable the spectator to compare the past with the present and thereby determine what is truly new and genuinely contemporary about the present. The product range in the media market is constantly being replaced by new merchandise, barring any possibility of comparing what is on offer today with what used to be available in the past. As a result, the new and the present are discussed in terms of what is in fashion...

As long as the media is the only point of reference the observer simply lacks any comparative context which would afford him or her the means of effectively distinguishing between old and new, between what is the same

unworking with Cai Guo-Qiang

Cai Guo-Qiang has slowly risen up the chain of artists critics love to hate. His work is bombastic; his ideology is opportunistic; he designed the fireworks display of the Beijing Olympics, for Christ's sake. But sometimes in spite of the artist the work shines through. Consider his piece, *Bringing to Venice What Marco Polo Forgot* (1995), made on the 700th anniversary of Polo's return from the court of the Great Khan. "What Marco Polo Forgot," according to Cai, is the "Eastern spirit," which some traditional herbs placed on a canal boat were meant to represent in the work.

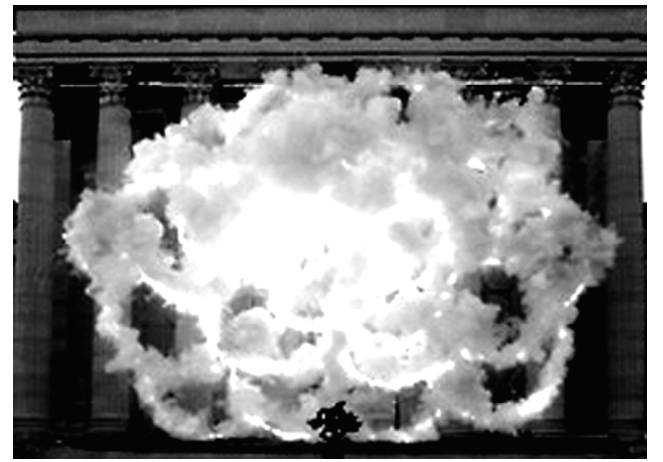
If it is critical fashion to mock pop art, then it is certainly also fashionable to mock pop spirituality as well. Slavoj *_i_ek* has, for example, taken to condemning what he calls "Western Buddhism," and "Western Taoism," which he says form the perfect ideological counterpart to contemporary capitalism. Laissez faire economics, in other words, go hand in hand with a "just let it be," live in the present attitude.

_i_ek's understanding of Buddhism and Taoism and their complicated cultural transmission is poor at best, but his point that certain forms of spirituality lack a critical edge is merited. As, indeed, are many critic's feelings that Cai's work is opportunist and that it participates in an art world gone overboard. But perhaps in the context of Cai's work, two wrongs really do make a right. At first glance, the Marco Polo piece can even be seen to carry within it *_i_ek's* message: Western capitalism and imperialism (the dominance of commerce represented by Polo's voyage) can only function with a spiritual attitude to accompany these means of production, an attitude which has moved from Protestantism to Taoism as *_i_ek* thinks Max Weber would now claim.

More than this, however, the piece calls into question the very categories of such an analysis. It is not just a question of "what Marco Polo forgot," it is also a question of scales. First, the scale of comparison between the huge system of global capitalism and the few traditional herbs on the ship which renders any thought that the herbs could cure one living in exploitative conditions risible. Second, the scale of Western understanding of Eastern religions, and what should be a slightly mocking idea that "the Eastern spirit" – a vague notion which erases any number of heterogeneous philosophical and religious practices – can be contained within a few plants.

Rather than *_i_ek's* simplistic notion that "Eastern" attitudes are maintaining the status quo, Cai's projects point to the incommensurability between the scales of the spiritual and the material which, more than any critique in language, questions the assumption that spiritual calm can be fully achieved in a chaotic and unjust world. As well, and perhaps even against the artist's intentions, the work once again stages the difficulty of intercultural hermeneutics, and reminds us that the world becoming more closely connected does not mean it becomes more readily understandable as well.

I write "against the artist's own intentions," because for Cai the piece does not seem tongue in cheek at all, and the question of scale, I imagine he would reply, is a mistake, since it fails to grasp the ways in which the whole of "Eastern philosophy" (his phrase) is encapsulated in Chinese medicine. As he put it in an interview with the *Brooklyn Rail* responding to how he incorporated "Eastern" ideas in his work: "The example of Chinese medicine as a discipline, from the philosophy to the methodology to the execution, is a good one. Everything is within one system." This may be the case, I would want to reply, but the will to know and the actual knowledge of something (the totality in this case) are not the same thing.



Fallen Blossoms, 2009 (image from PMA website)

Should one visit Philadelphia's Fabric Workshop before March 1st to see Cai's *Fallen Blossoms*, a collaborative project between the Workshop and the PMA, it might be useful to keep such things in mind. As one watches five weavers "from the ethnic Tujia clan" live at work, or reads about "Chinese adages" (I can only assume they mean Mandarin), or learns about the "proverbs" of "Eastern philosophy," the way that all such contained works do their own unworking – that is to say, refuse, by their very nature, any attempt to contain them – might be the show's saving grace.

-Avi Alpert

Noir After God: Werner Herzog's *The Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans*

"I think there are specific times where film noir is a natural concomitant of the mood. When there's insecurity, collapse of financial systems—that's where film noir always hits fertile ground."

-Werner Herzog

The ingredients are simple: an overlong, unnecessarily awkward title that manages to make itself unfamiliar while at the same time announcing the film's uneasy status as a remake of some sort; a mediocre script, filled with leaden dialogue and unlikely coincidences, upon which unrestrained and irresponsible improvisations are unleashed; an actor of unhinged genius surrounded by B-movie character actors and interesting non-professionals; a freshly devastated landscape that provides a politically charged setting without requiring any overt political references at all; a seemingly willful indifference to plot, genre conventions and cinematic style in general. From all this, Werner Herzog, the most proudly film-illiterate of contemporary masters, as well as the most politically unsophisticated, has crafted the most politically potent and entertainingly unpredictable American genre film in years.

It may at first seem surprising to find the usually jungle-bound director dabbling in noir, the most urban of genres, but Herzog manages to update the B-noir tradition with a blunt sincerity that would be impossible for almost any other contemporary director. Because he doesn't need to bury his sincerity in layers of irony and winking pastiche, he can shrug off the over-aestheticized contemporary approach to noir and return the genre to a time in which tonal unevenness and apparent lapses in good taste were inseparable from thematic and aesthetic complexity and philosophic reach. With *The Bad Lieutenant*, Herzog has made a genre film in the true sense: genre not as a historically frozen tradition to be revered and replicated, but as a loose mode bestowed by the past to forge new ways of discovering the present. Beyond the fetishized stylistic tropes (the black and white cinematography, the hard boiled dialogue, etc), film noir was always the genre that explored the conflict between desire

and the law in a world of corrupt morality and collapsing social structures, where desperation and crime are the only ways to survive the present. Emerging in the morally and socially troubled post-war period of the 1940's in the US, film noir unearthed blasts of buried cynicism and nihilism within a society still clinging to a Christian worldview. This often resulted in a schizophrenic split in the films between the forces of desire and the law, which were pitted fatalistically against each other, with tragic and destructive consequences (the notion of forbidden fruit is crucial to the noir plot, as in the figure of the femme fatale). Justice in film noir often worked itself out as the ambivalent, even bitter, affirmation of the inevitability of the law over the hazards of forbidden desire. With *The Bad Lieutenant*, Herzog re-configures the central thematic concerns of noir and merges them with his own cinematic vision to create another of his cinematic testaments to "ecstatic truths."

Herzog sets his contemporary noir in the poverty-stricken ghettos and the bleakly luxurious hotels and casinos of decimated post-Katrina New Orleans, where violence, crime, and corruption seem natural to the point of banality. The film begins with a superb tracking shot following a snake slithering through floodwater, and Herzog returns to images of water and fish throughout. However, this seemingly religious imagery actually serves to establish a world that has completely left Christianity behind, and to link it with a pre-Christian world in which dichotomies such as Good and Evil or Sin and Redemption make no sense at all. There are no references to Christianity in the film, the only references to religious ceremony are pre-Christian pagan (a voodoo funereal) and post-Christian secular (Alcoholics Anonymous). The snake and fish are not biblical creatures but are among the prehistoric beasts that roam amidst the post-civilized wasteland of New Orleans, along with the iguanas and alligators.



The decidedly post-Christian world Herzog establishes also defines the odd relationship of his *The Bad Lieutenant* to Ferrara's *Bad Lieutenant*. At first the two films seem to have little to do with each other, but in fact Herzog's film reveals itself to be more of a cosmic antidote than a remake. Ferrara's *Bad Lieutenant* is a character study and Catholic drama about an anguished cop, addicted to gambling and drugs, investigating a brutal case (the rape of a young nun) that forces him to confront the unbridgeable gap between corrupt human law, with its brutal, meaningless earthly justice, and unattainable divine law, with its silent, promise of higher justice. Unlike Keitel's character, Cage's drug addicted policeman is not presented as an anguished soul split by good and evil, but as a unified, complex whole in which 'good' and 'bad' are inextricably

intertwined to the point of being inseparable. It is indicative of the differences between the two films that Keitel's anguish is spiritual and unlocatable, while the pain plaguing Nicolas Cage's is physical, in his lower back. For Ferrara the soul is something that must be wrestled over for eternal salvation, whereas in Herzog's world the soul dances, until it is snuffed out.



Herzog redefines film noir's usual conceptions of justice, desire, and the law for the post-Christian present. *The Bad Lieutenant* gives us no reason to believe in the law as force of good, or even as a coherent force of any kind at all. The law is only a means of navigating through a lawless world. Having a badge to flash and a Magnum .45 sticking out of the front of his pants, merely provide the means for Cage's Lt. McDonagh to maneuver through the wasteland of New Orleans, searching for clues to his murder case and for drugs to consume. The opening sequence of the film, in which McDonagh mocks then un-heroically rescues a prisoner drowning in a flooded jail cell during Hurricane Katrina, establishes that in the midst of catastrophe and social collapse being a man of the law confers no necessary moral authority and simply gives one license to do whatever one wishes. Although McDonagh doesn't seem to believe in the law, he does possess a kind of instinctual fellow-feeling for other people. Any notion of justice in the film is routed in this instinctual fellow-feeling. All of McDonagh's 'good' acts are driven by this fellow-feeling, which is more animalistic than human. They are not motivated by any discernible code of ethics or any real belief in the law, which he breaks openly and gleefully throughout the film. He is a bad lieutenant but that doesn't mean he isn't a good man in his own way. Thus, in the film the law is meaningless and acknowledged as such. Some sort of justice may be achievable, but the law cannot be relied upon to deliver it.

Unlike most noirs, in *The Bad Lieutenant* there is no object of desire, no femme fatale, nor is there any real fantasy of escape from the unfulfilling circumstances of the present. In the film, desire is stripped to its most basic condition, as reflected in McDonagh's addiction. Drugs offer only temporary bliss and relief, with the condition and promise of more temporary bliss and relief to come, which is to say they offer only transparent desire itself, infinitely renewable and ultimately insatiable. The classic noir plot acknowledges the overwhelming reality of desire but ultimately affirms the inevitable (if crushing) power of the law: desire leads to an unraveling that the law must halt, to a void that the law must deny.

Herzog reverses this logic. In *The Bad Lieutenant*, the law attempts, hopelessly, to mask the void, to which desire always returns us and forces us to acknowledge. In the film, desire and the law don't pull in opposite directions and tear McDonagh asunder, since, for Herzog, they are both ultimately problems of the void, and he sides unambiguously with the truth of desire over the false meaning provided by the law. One must uphold and enforce the law whereas for Herzog true meaning is something that one must seek out tirelessly and abandon oneself to recklessly.

McDonagh doesn't consciously attempt to transcend the law by adherence to a higher personal code of morality (his fellow feeling is more instinctual),

and what is different.

In fact, only the museum gives the observer the opportunity to differentiate between old and new, past and present. For museums are the repositories of historical memory where also images and things are kept and shown that have meanwhile gone out of fashion, that have become old and outdated. In this respect only the museum can serve as the site of systematic historical comparison that enables us to see with our own eyes what really is different, new, and contemporary

...the very idea of abandoning or even abolishing the museum would close off the possibility of holding a critical inquiry into the claims of innovation and difference with which we are constantly confronted in today's media. This also explains why the selection criteria manifested by contemporary curatorial projects so frequently differ from those that prevail in the mass media. The issue here is not that curators and art initiators have exclusive and elitist tastes sharply distinct from those of the broad public, but that the museum offers a means of comparing the present with the past that repeatedly arrives at conclusions other than those implied by the media ... today's museums are in fact designed not merely to collect the past, but also to generate the present through the comparison between old and new.

-Boris Groys, ART POWER

Time and time and time again, the people discover that they have merely betrayed themselves into the hands of yet another Pharaoh, who, since he was necessary to put the broken country together, will not let them go. Perhaps, people being the conundrums that they are, and having so little desire to shoulder the burden of their lives, this is what will always happen. But at the bottom of my heart I do not believe this. I think that people can be better than that, and I know that people can be better than they are. We are capable of bearing a great burden, once we discover that the burden is reality and arrive where reality is... Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death... It seems to me that one ought to rejoice in the fact of death...But

white Americans do not believe in death, and this is why the darkness of my skin so intimidates them. And this is also why the presence of the Negro in this country can bring about its destruction. It is the responsibility of free men to trust and to celebrate what is constant – birth, struggle, and death are constant, and so is love, though we may not always think so – and to apprehend the nature of change, to be able and willing to change. I speak of change not on the surface but in the depths – change in the sense of renewal. But renewal becomes impossible if one supposes things to be constant that are not – safety, for example, or money, or power. One clings then to chimeras, by which one can only be betrayed, and the entire hope – the entire possibility – of freedom disappears.

- James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

If school is a factory, art departments are industrial parks in which the creative spirit, like cosmetic shrubbery or Muzak, still “lives.” Photographic education is largely directed at people who will become detail workers in one sense or another. Only the most elite art schools and university art departments regularly produce graduates who will compete for recognition as fine artists. Nonetheless, the ideology of auteurism dominates the teaching of the medium’s history at all levels of higher education, even in the community colleges. This auteurism actually oscillates in and out of view, sharing prominence with its opposite, technological determinism. Students learn that photographic history is driven by technical progress, except in some cases, when history is the elevated product of especially gifted artists, who are to be admired and emulated. Very few teachers acknowledge the constraints placed on their would-be “auteurs” by a system of educational tracking based on class, race, and sex.

Thus, most of us who teach, or make art, or go to school with a desire to do these things, are forced to accept that a winner’s game requires losers. One can either embrace this proposition with a social-Darwinist steeling of the nerves, or pretend that it is not true while trying to survive anyway. Otherwise, we might begin to work for a method of education and a culture based on a struggle for social equality.

-Alan Sekula

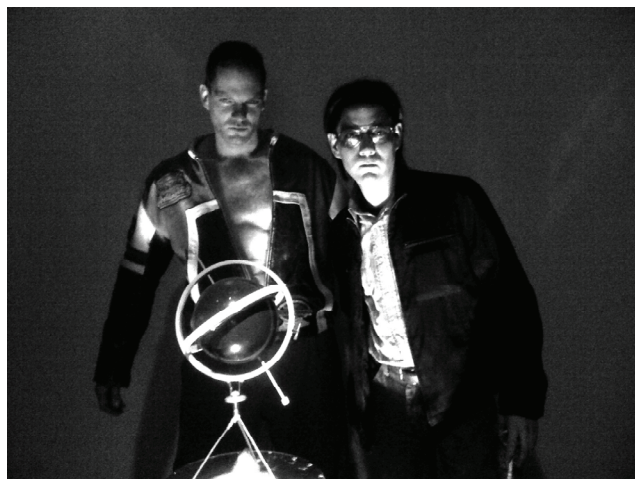
nor does he fall from grace through deviance from the law brought on by external or internal pressures (desperate social circumstances or desperate personal desire - often conflated in noirs). Instead something more peculiar occurs: McDonagh transcends the law through a kind of gleeful abandonment to his desperate situation, to the void of desire; he transcends the law and achieves justice through a regression into an anarchic child-like state, which revolves around immediate gratification and relief. In this sense, McDonagh achieves a kind of grotesque grace in symbiosis with his environment. He masters his surrounding as an unrepressed and irrepressible anarchic force running wild in a destroyed landscape thrust into chaos by the dual forces of ferociously indifferent Nature and hopelessly inadequate Civilization. Unleashed by the effects of copious drugs, Cage’s ‘bad’ lieutenant discovers ecstatic truths in post-Katrina New Orleans in a comparable manner to Kinski’s ‘mad’ characters in the jungle in Herzog’s earlier masterpieces.

There is a tease of restored order at the end of the film in which McDonagh appears to have reformed his wild ways and become an upstanding citizen. After toasting his new promotion by sipping sparkling water with his newly sober family, he drops off his pregnant girlfriend (presumably no longer a prostitute) at their large house and shares a kiss in front of the neatly trimmed lawn. He drives off into the sunset but then plunges immediately back into his ‘bad’ behavior, harassing clubgoers and stealing their drugs. If this comes almost as a relief, it is because the film has so thoroughly established a cinematic universe in which the restoration of order is antithetical to the only kind of salvation possible—one in which ecstatic truths reveal themselves in the void that opens when belief in the law has been abandoned. As Herzog himself says, “There’s such a thing as the bliss of evil. Enjoy it. The viler and more debased it gets, the more you have to enjoy it.”

-Mike Vass

A Little Reassurance in Barbaric Times...

For readers of Walter Benjamin or Craig Owens, one might expect allegorical treatments, especially of notions as historically charged as Utopia, to be melancholic. The chief virtue of Ronnie Bass’ video installation, *The Astronomer: Part I Departure from Shed* currently at Marginal Utility, consists in its steady refusal of this “postmodern” temptation.



Such sentiments, in my view, are too easily amenable to the ideological consensus concerning the ‘end of utopias’—the slogan of a historical sequence (since the 1980s) that has seen the crippling rise of a market fundamentalism intent on dismantling all breeds of socialism, except of course when it comes to the perennial exception, the rich. The steadfastness with which Ronnie Bass’ astronomer desires to depart and the vulnerability of his blanket-draped companion in the face of this exigency (a projection at least in part of the astronomer’s own anxieties) is refreshingly committed to a Utopian impulse that draws almost naively on the proto-socialist

imagination of Fourier or Saint-Simon.

Conveyed through a lyrical ballad sung by Ronnie Bass himself, the story depicts the near failure of a couple to escape when they had the chance. We do not know what has taken place or why, but we know that it is time to go and that the necessity of departure is imminent. Indifferent to the spectacle of calamity, the story focuses rather on the human, all too human, emotion of fear. Although we know that the astronomer must be in possession of some knowledge that necessitates escape, Bass does not focus on his role as amateur scientist, as the tinkerer in his shed. Rather, he attends to the Astronomer’s capacities for fraternal consolation, whose tone is infinitely removed from the patronizing tone of the man of knowledge.

The astronomer remains the committed figure of the one who soberly gazes out towards other worlds. Yet, it is not the power of scientific judgment, but courage and fortitude that prove decisive. He thus seems to add a crucial nuance to the importance of Engel’s recognition that Socialism “stands on the shoulders of Saint-Simon, Fourier and Owen, three men who despite their fantasies and utopianism are to be reckoned among the most significant minds of all times, for they anticipated with genius countless matters whose accuracy we now demonstrate scientifically.” For Bass it is not lack of science, but cowardice, an emotional deficit, which nearly thwarts the departure.

It is precisely the courage to imagine that the astronomer must muster, which is to say, summon from his fearful comrade. The blanketed character, fluctuating between references to Cousin Itt from the *Addams Family* and Linus van Pelt, Charlie Brown’s blanket-dependent best friend, is less a figure of the uncanny than a symbol of the childish need for security—a refusal to see, whose basis is emotional rather than the result of a lack of knowledge.



This apparently fatal flaw is neither treated grandiloquently or sentimentally. It does not prove tragic. The courage is mustered for the departure and, even if it may be too late, the characters set out on the voyage without any kind of melancholic lament. We are left with a sentiment of hope in severely muted tones. Stripped of its rhetorical flourishes and its pseudo urgency, the figure of hope with which Bass leaves us seems to be a potent antidote to the recent high engineering of this utopian motif by the Obama campaign. Who on the eve of the anniversary of Obama’s inauguration does not now see the campaign’s rhetorical abuses, to borrow a phrase from Frederic Jameson, “as the mere lure and bait for ideology (hope being after all also the principle of the cruelest confidence games and of hucksterism as a fine art).”

-Alexi Kukuljevic

If you believe you have

GENIUS

or if you think you have only

A BRILLIANT INTELLIGENCE

write the machete