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Is a Ticket Required for Each of the Apocalypse's Horsemen?

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"We look at the present through a rear-view mirror.
We march backwards into the future."
— Marshall McLuhan

In the overplayed *Allegory of the Cave*, Plato's moral takeaway is that watching shadows on walls blinds us to the realities of the outside world. Don't worry. I'm not offering any kind of enlightened stance that watching shadows on a screen is an apt metaphor for ignorance. On the contrary (certainly nowadays), I prefer to duck into the vampire dark and impishly gaze at what plays out across fifty feet of lenticular silver. As film critic Pauline Kael put it, "Where could we better stoke the fires of our masochism than at rotten movies in gaudy, seedy picture palaces in cities that run together, movies and anonymity a common denominator?"

Moving from the 20th century into the chaotic 21st, cinema struggles to compete with television's recent renaissance. Hollywood faces yet another artistic problem not seen since the rise and fall of American New Wave. What function does watching movies serve in 2017, when even TV must compete with live-streamed selfie stories, and vacant multiplexes resemble vast abandoned malls in the post-apocalypse?

As studios bleed relevancy, hope is felt in the burgeoning indie film ethos that thrives in worldwide festivals and outdoor screenings. It's been ninety years since the advent of motion pictures with sound, and moviemaking is far from dead. We have more cinematic retrospect than ever before. Has our gaze expanded along with it, or has it atrophied to sniping egoism?

Railing against 'bad films' is no doubt a favorite American pastime. I tend to avoid canonized opinions of the critical establishment, while

relishing in what Kael fondly dubbed 'trash.' A loss of interest in movie houses has bred a loss of interest in reclaiming one's own experience. Contrary to where we are in this moment—when identity politics and groupthink seem to have all but eclipsed the expressions of the individual—films still address the sole observer: the cloaked voyeur left alone in the dark to wander futuropolis landscapes.

While going to the movies may not serve as the great escapes they once were, they still can act as magical mirrors-on-the-wall. And like the Evil Queen, we're starting to resent their revelations, as if we've forgotten that we're watching shadows in the first place. Instead of losing ourselves in the hypothetical fantasy, we, the savvy filmgoer, demand from them some justified reflection of what (we think) we want to see.

What have celluloid visions of the past shown us about our present—in this foul year of our Lord—and, whether hopefully or poignantly, what have they shown about where we're headed?

I wish to dumpster-dive through a few 'garbage' visions (to use the parlance of our times) in an attempt at gaze expansion. Mainly because these films struck unfavorable nerves in their initial releases, and because, as Philip K. Dick wrote, "There was a beauty in the trash of the alleys which I had never noticed before; my vision seemed sharpened, rather than impaired."

John Carpenter's *Escape From L.A.* (1996) was the first transgenerational dystopian sequel I was privy to. The exquisite way in which it has aged is contrasted by its gruesome rendering of an iconic city. Its predecessor, *Escape From New York* (1981), has an auteurist grit, mirroring the rundown, real-life streets of a defunct NYC (I'll get to that later), whereas *Escape from L.A.* reads more commercialized camp during a time when L.A. was still rattled from the Northridge quake.

I remember eating out of an official Snake Plissken™ popcorn bag at our local United Artists chain. 'Snake is Back' copy hovered over a mean-mugging, leather-clad Kurt Russell on a motorcycle amid burning palm trees. The film was prescient, not only in its satirizing of big studio action, and the overall yuppification of noir, but in its colorful mosaic of characters: the comic relief chicanery of Map to the Stars Eddie (Steve Buscemi); the long-haired, tsunami-surfing beach bum, Pipeline (Peter Fonda); Bruce Campbell as the botox-crazed Surgeon General of Beverly Hills; and Pam Grier as Hershe Las Palmas, formerly known as Carjack Malone – who pointedly checks Snake's transgender ignorance when Snake keeps referring to her in her old moniker, "My name is *Hershe*, do you understand, Plissken?" The film's true antagonism, however, lies with the fanatically-religious U.S. President (Cliff Robertson) who condemns his own daughter to death in exchange for the remote control to global domination.

The fact that it all comes to a head in Anaheim's ravaged Happy Kingdom by the Sea (wink wink) provided the eleven-year-old me a keen take of the illusorily paradisiacal city I grew up in. Not to mention the tongue-in-cheek innuendo of L.A. as one big corporate prison. As Mike Davis writes in *City of Quartz*, "In 'fortress cities' like Los Angeles, on the bad edge of postmodernity, one observes an unprecedented tendency to merge urban design, architecture and the police apparatus into a single, comprehensive security effort."

L.A.'s east coast counterpart has incited dystopias of its own, and not just from Carpenter. Consider *The Warriors* (1979) directed by Walter Hill, a visceral and in-your-face passage between underworlds as a New York gang traverses hostile territories to get back to their turf. The opening shot of the famed Wonder Wheel on Coney Island, wrapped in blackness, nothing visible but its pink neon outline, is a hypnotic suggestion. The long, ensuing opening credit sequence immerses the audience into an altered state, rendering New York at once familiar and alien.

Early critics overlooked its lurking mysticism. Despite its stark resemblance to a bankrupted New York in the late '70s, *The Warriors* was disregarded as implausible, superficial and hyperbolic. Suffice to say, it wasn't taken seriously as higher art, or as a reflection of its times. Its notorious incitement of gun and knife violence at showings in Southern California and Boston didn't help, and it was quickly relegated to the low-brow limbo of trash cinema. The notoriety did help box office sales, however, and it quickly gained popularity among youth, despite zero efforts for marketing on the part of Paramount. "What made it a success with young people," Hill reflected, "is that for the first time somebody made a film within Hollywood, big distribution, that took the gang situation and did not present it as a social problem."

Cartoonish as it may have seemed in 1979, I wouldn't bat an eye if a blogger today – in the heightened paranoia of terrorists and immigrants – has already penned an Alex Jonesian diatribe about some Hollywood occult conspiracy of a near-future in which gangsters outnumber cops and overtake America: "The black character in the beginning is wearing a keffiyeh!" probably followed by "And did you notice how Cyrus (the charismatic gang leader who summons all of the city's gangs in a bid to take it over) looks an awful lot like Barack Obama?"

If *The Warriors* was released in 2017, the right would take it down for its obvious promotion of gang violence and anarchy, and the left for its obvious use of homophobic and misogynistic language. Both would be missing the bigger picture in this *Anabasis*-inspired odyssey. Not just in the sense of ignoring New York's rich history of gangs and organized crime, but, more intimately, of our own projected fears of being outnumbered and behind enemy lines, just trying to make it to friendly shores.

What of our hopes?

Equals (2015), helmed by millennial director Drake Doremus, is emodystopic futurism for the Prozac® generation. Its atmosphere illustrates a drab, pill-induced homogeny; a not-so-subtle jab at the brave new world imposed on us by pharmaceutical giants in recent decades. Set in a post-war future in which a series of bombs have destroyed 99.6% of usable air and land on Earth's surface. The 'civilized' survivors live harmoniously in what's dubbed the Collective, a cultish community where emotion-based desires are considered an ancient vestige of humanity's past, and 'inhibitors' are taken to suppress such primitive aspects. Think *Equilibrium* (2002) sans all the *Matrix*-style action.

Though the film was criticized for its plodding pace, this is what mirrors the emotional stonewalling the main characters – played by

Nicholas Hoult and Kristen Stewart – struggle against, as well as the creeping 'disease' (Switched-On-Syndrome) that has infected and forced them to feel for one another. The slow burn pays off, as its charged third act tugs at the heart more than a film like *The Fault in Our Stars* does in its entire 2hr and 13min run. With a bit of luck, *Equals* will be remembered as one of the more stoically optimistic millennial narratives.

Compare this to *Gattaca* (1997), a more tense and stylish thriller about an ambitious man, played by Ethan Hawke, whose dreams of space travel are stifled by genetic discrimination. Its throwback to elitist eugenics ideology is complemented by an impeccable art deco style, in set design and wardrobe alike. Slicked hair, pencil-skirted suits and demure Peter Pan collars in a futuristic setting of ultra-clean lines and cool color palettes remind us fashion is more cyclical than linear. It's a story of controlled identity – and of steering one's own destiny as it is of confronting failure – that crystallized the human genetic engineering debate in the years after its release. It offers a different kind of hope than *Equals*: an anti-romantic sentiment that places humanity's redemption among the cosmos, rather than in each other. (On a side note, I'm looking forward to director Andrew Niccol's upcoming *Anon*, starring Clive Owen and Amanda Seyfried about total government surveillance and de facto self-censorship.)

Quantum of Solace (2008) directed by Marc Forster, though stylistically nowhere near the realm of trash, is considered the lesser of the Daniel Craig-Bond franchise. But why? One could attribute it to the fact that any follow-up to *Casino Royale* was sure to come up short, or that "Another Way to Die" by Alicia Keys and Jack White proved the most subversive of Bond themes, putting a sour taste in the mouths of true fans. Digging deeper, though, the 65% Rotten Tomato score is more symptomatic of *Quantum's* conspicuously indicting plot. The film's infrastructure may be large-scale, but its ethos is purely indie.

On a mission for his revenge, Bond squashes a faux-green energy corporation's attempt to stage a coup d'état in Bolivia to seize control of its water supply. Intellectual leitmotifs and geopolitical realism is matched by an array of sleek action sequences, each of which corresponds to the four classical elements of earth, water, air, and fire. *Quantum* was perhaps much too clear a reflection for the audience to enjoyably confront. The homage to *Goldfinger*, à la murdered Bond girl Strawberry Fields lying on a bed covered in crude oil, drips with the symbolism of our current environmental plight. Forster explained the film's central theme in *Sunday Tribune*:

"I thought the more political I make it, the more real it feels, not just with [the Cochabamba Water War in] Bolivia... but with all these corporations like Shell and Chevron saying they're green because it's so fashionable. During the Cold War, everything was very clear, the good guys and the bad guys. Today there's much overlapping of good and bad. It isn't as morally distinct, because we all have both elements in us."

Forster deviated from the Bond tradition of giving the main villain some physical anomaly, wanting Dominic Greene (played by Mathieu Amalric) "not to look grotesque, but to symbolize the hidden evils in society." Uncanny considering nine years later, President Trump pulls out of the Paris Climate Agreement as oil and coal industries still vie for economic dominance.

However uncanny, shadows do not represent reality as much as they do played-out scenarios in which we fail to heed the deep cries of our subconscious Other. Sensational bloggers will bemoan the death of film, but our suspended disbelief and stalker desire for some quixotic wisdom continues to draw us; moths to a psychic flame. Sometimes the flame burns as we strain for a hint of premonition; some faint outline of our fate from the dance of shadows on the wall. When we do—rarely is it pleasant. Danny Boyle's all too forgotten *Sunshine* (2009) portrays a team of astronauts sent to reignite our dying star in a last attempted gasp to salvage humanity's sense of future. Like the crew, it seems, we'd sooner tear each other apart in the cosmic dark, at once claustrophobic and expansive.

Perhaps we'll soon see a revival of those gaudy, seedy picture palaces of old. Though the way developers are mechanistically turning everything into a luxury strip mall continuum – sure to be ramped up in Trump's America – I wouldn't hold my breath. It's a grim moment not only for the future of America, but for the future of film in America. That doesn't mean there isn't anything to glean from their whirring frames. In an era of alt-facts, they may be all we have to glean from.