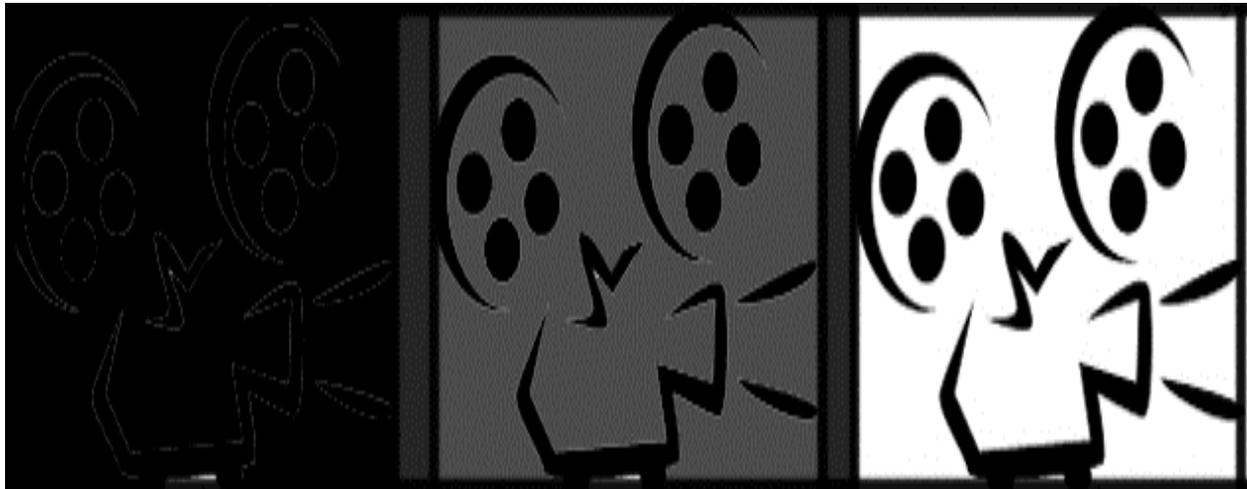# The Projector
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Critical and Cultural Resignifications

Introduction: Critical and Cultural Resignifications

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With the publication of our Spring 2011 issue, we would like to welcome Diane Carson, Heidi Kenaga, Simon Rushton, Martin Shingler, and Frank P. Tomasulo to our editorial board. We are pleased and excited to have them working with us as *The Projector* enters the next phase in its development. We would also like to extend our thanks to existing editorial board members Christina Adamou, Dyrk Ashton, Cynthia Felando, Tamar Jeffers McDonald, Travis Malone, Joerg Sternagel, Jamie Stuart, and Beckett Warren, who continue to assist us in getting each issue online. As we come to the end of our third year as a peer-reviewed publication, *The Projector* remains committed to providing a forum for scholarship that explores intersections between film, media and culture, and with the expansion of our editorial board we look forward to new possibilities in this endeavor.

The essays for our Spring issue examine shifting critical perspectives on established film forms, as well as shifts in the meaning of images and narratives over time, or across different versions of the same text. Genesis Downey's "The Blockbuster as Body Genre" intervenes in critical debates over the classification of films as blockbusters by suggesting that the visual and monetary excess associated with the blockbuster—high budgets, record-breaking profits,

saturation marketing campaigns, and spectacle on an ever-increasing scale—might be read as a parallel to the bodily excesses that Linda Williams associates with pornography and with the popular genres of horror and melodrama. Drawing on Williams's landmark essay "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," Downey argues that the "gross" excesses associated with those films that Williams terms "body genre" films are present in the modern Hollywood blockbuster in a slightly different form, with the ostentatious extravagance of blockbuster films contributing to their cultural devaluation, much as the extravagant displays of emotion, violence, or sexual pleasure in body genre films do, because they fail "to conform to middlebrow concepts of taste and art."

Downey uses James Cameron's 2010 film *Avatar* as a case study to illustrate this contention, examining the ways in which "the sheer scope of . . . spectacle" in the film is "geared to provoke the involuntary bodily responses that Williams identifies as part of the body genre, but that also easily belong to the blockbuster genre." At the same time, Downey also uses *Avatar* to argue that the depictions of bodily ecstasy and/or suffering that Williams locates as a central element within body genre films are also central to a large number of blockbusters that span generic categorization from science fiction to action films. In the case of *Avatar*, she asserts that the "spectacle of a woman bleeding, crying, or reaching orgasm" common to body genre films is replaced by a "metaphorical female body," in the form of Hometree "getting ripped apart by RDA bulldozers, blown up with incendiary missiles, and essentially raped for its mineral content," with the result that "victimization is still present and is still presented in a way that can generate a response from an audience body that has been primed with excitement and pleasure."

In "Performing Tricky Dick: Richard Nixon's Transformation into Popular Culture Caricature," Travis Cook looks at changing representations of Richard Nixon in U.S. popular

culture. Using portrayals of Nixon in the popular press over the course of his political career, as well as his representation in historical films such as Oliver Stone's *Nixon* (1995) and Ron Howard's *Frost/Nixon* (2008), and television series such as *Futurama*, Cook traces a shift in characterizations of Nixon from opportunist politician, to disgraced President, to parodic caricature. Examining the ways in which these changes in depiction reflect changes in public perception, and ultimately in the meanings attached to the figure of Nixon within U.S. culture, he argues that Nixon can be read as "a politician whose sometimes 'failed' public performances highlighted the artificial qualities of media society" during his years of public service, and whose "sometimes threadbare attempts to create an authentic, sincere, trustworthy public image can be seen as an inspiration for the increasingly stark caricatures of Nixon in film and television" today.

While Cook's essay looks at the changing significations attached to Richard Nixon over time, Lindsay Smith's essay "War, Wizards and Words: Transformative Adaptation and Transformed Meanings in *Howl's Moving Castle*" looks at differences in meaning across different versions of the same text, in this case Diana Wynn Jones's 1986 children's book, *Howl's Moving Castle*, and Hayao Miyazaki's 2004 film adaptation. Arguing for a reading of the Miyazaki film as a "transformative adaptation," Smith suggests that the film remains "more or less faithful to the book version" in terms of plot, "while simultaneously infusing it with new themes, issues, and possibilities" by shifting its focus to a war that carries resonances of U.S. military operations in Iraq. Through a close comparison of the two texts, Smith contends that "while Jones's book explores the crucial role that communication plays in preventing and ending conflict," Miyazaki's film shows that war becomes possible when open communication is lost. In

the transformed narrative, *Howl's Moving Castle* becomes a powerful and nuanced critique of the contemporary, international politics surrounding the Iraq War.

The forum of invited essays for our Spring 2011 issue is composed of a series of reflections on the effects Manny Farber's cult criticism and Parker Tyler's camp criticism have had on subsequent film critics and contemporary practices of film analysis. Working with Greg Taylor's account in *Artists in the Audience: Cults, Camp, and American Film Criticism*, the forum essays consider theoretical concerns raised by cult and camp reading practices. They also examine the usefulness of those practices as critical tools. Abigail Van Vlerah interrogates the role of the film critic in contemporary U.S. culture and questions the elite status Farber and Tyler claimed for cult and camp critics on the basis of their critical "recuperation" of mainstream (read: lowbrow) Hollywood films. While Tiffany Knoell reassesses cult and camp criticism in light of subsequent cultural studies work on taste-making, Alexander Champlin examines the influence of Dadaism on Farber's and Tyler's critical practices, an influence that, as he points out, is not considered in *Artists in the Audience*. He uses parallels between Duchamp's "Readymades" and Farber's and Tyler's view of film criticism as a (re)appropriation of existing cultural content for the purposes of artistic creation to argue for an understanding of cult and camp criticism as Dadaist projects.

Turning to contemporary analytic practices within the fields of film, media and cultural studies, Megan Thomassen locates the hierarchical nature of fan communities and communities of cult film connoisseurs in the tradition of Farber's and Tyler's approaches to film appreciation, which she argues reproduce "the same structures and hierarchies in their supposedly deviant or resistant" reading practices as the "homogenized" mass media texts they seek to critique. Conversely, Wonda Baugh and Stephen M. Boston apply camp readings to the contemporary

films *Rango* (Gore Verbinski, 2011) and *Paul* (Greg Mottola, 2011), in order to examine the continued usefulness of this strategy as a critical practice. Baugh argues that camp readings can provide an opportunity for ideological critique that aligns them with more recent cultural studies approaches to "negotiated" or "resistant" interpretive practices, while Boston traces the influence of both cult and camp criticism on acafandom, a contemporary critical practice that originates primarily from the field of media studies. While all of the essays collected for this forum provide different perspectives on Farber's and Tyler's critical legacy, they all take up the concern raised by Taylor in his conclusion to *Artists in the Audience* that Farber's and Tyler's desire to make culturally-oppositional art out of the criticism of hegemonic cultural productions has been coopted by "postmodern/vanguard culture, with its encompassing ethos of democratized artistry and empowered consumerism" (152).

The Blockbuster as Body Genre

Genesis Downey

"There is no accounting for taste, especially in the realm of the 'gross'"—Linda Williams

In the context of her 1991 essay, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," Linda Williams explores the use of the term "gross" as a way of describing cultural attitudes towards pornography, horror, and melodrama. Recognizing that gross signifies the rank, obscene, foul or tasteless, Williams focuses primarily on how the "gross" genres of pornography, horror, and melodrama illustrate the role that excess plays in reflecting cultural attitudes. Her point is that by categorizing certain genres as excessive, cultural collateral can in turn be denied (141).

Looking at Hollywood cinema twenty years later, it is possible to see a key link between blockbusters and Williams's analysis of pornography, horror, and melodrama. If gross is a way to describe excess, then blockbusters could arguably be classified as gross as well. That connection throws into relief another way of looking at the argument Williams makes about the low cultural status of what she terms "body genres" (144). If blockbusters contain parallels with the three body genres that Williams analyzes, then it is possible that those connections are the basis for blockbusters' low cultural status. Granted, blockbusters' wide audience and huge box

office ensure that there are distinct differences between the moderate visibility of pornography, horror, and melodrama on the one hand, and huge visibility of blockbusters on the other, but analyzing the blockbuster genre alongside porn, horror, and melodrama sheds new light on the ways that blockbusters fail to conform to middlebrow concepts of taste and art.

As a possible case study, *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009) works well to illustrate the connection between body genres and blockbusters because the film fits the quintessential definition of the Hollywood blockbuster. To date, the film has grossed over $2.78 billion worldwide (boxofficemojo.com). Its original marketing campaign plastered every surface with images taken from the movie. Television sets blasted the movie trailer hourly. Within days of the initial release, the internet was glutted with "How to speak Na'vi" websites that also sold T-shirts and sports cups. Later, some grocery chains had displays of DVD carousels devoted to the movie and tables set up with blue plates, blue forks, blue cupcakes (imprinted with tiny avatar heads), blue glasses, and blue napkins—all possessing the *Avatar* brand, and all designed for people prompted by the advertising to celebrate this *event*. The "event" in question was the release of the stripped down DVD only months after it had left the theater. The director's cut of the movie, containing footage deleted from the original theatrical release print, was scheduled for release November 16, 2010—just in time for the holiday season.

The retailers' invitation to celebrate was also a sly marketing tool. The marketing of the DVD release as an event is precisely what Julian Stringer has identified as a highlight of the blockbuster's "superlative nature"—i.e. these types of films are distinct "for the simple reason that they announce themselves as such" (5). The "super" quality that blockbusters possess is essentially synonymous with excess—as Stringer notes, that quality goes beyond the acceptable or previously established norm. But the superlative nature of the blockbuster experience also

stresses the role of spectacle in all aspects of the event. The spectacle on the screen complements the spectacle in the marketing and promotion, as in the case of the grocery store displays, which in turn highlight how the blockbuster becomes a cultural commodity that can be regenerated in as many different ways as possible (Schatz 35).

The retailers' saturation marketing technique exemplifies Douglas Gomery's point concerning the perceived singular nature of the blockbuster. He states, for example, that although blockbusters may appear to be single products, they are, in fact, a structural component "at the core of the mighty vertical integrated media conglomerates which define our cultural world" (81). In other words, the marketing, the distribution, the branding, the spectacle, and the blockbuster itself all work together in order to shape how that as-large-as-possible audience consumes the product. Excess, whether stressed in the content of the film or the display of a grocery table piled with *Avatar* cupcakes, makes very good marketing sense for the Hollywood system. Still, excess can also be a hindrance when it comes to the blockbuster. As Linda Williams notes, there are four aspects of excess that help to clarify why the genres of porn, horror, and melodrama have such low cultural status. For those genres, excess, particularly bodily excess is manifest in "body spectacle," visual and aural forms of ecstasy, involuntary bodily response, and perversion (Williams 143-150). For blockbusters, those four elements are arguably present as well. Of course, there are ostensive differences in the way blockbusters manifest these four aspects. In contrast to pornography, one might consider the amount of exposed (albeit blue) skin in *Avatar*. In contrast to horror films, we would need to factor in the naturalistic ground of the many anguished screams and dismembered bodies in *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998). Reckoning with traditions in the horror film and melodrama genres, we would need to sort out connections and contrasts with the cringe-inducing chest

bursting scene and the empowered/triumphant female victim in *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979).

However, bodily excesses are arguably all present in these blockbuster films (and in the

blockbuster more generally) in some form or another.

If one takes into consideration the fact that blockbusters are by their very nature a sort of

chimera made up of multiple genres, it is possible that the points Linda Williams makes about

pornography, horror, and melodrama pertain to blockbusters as well. For example, blockbusters

do not operate as one isolated, coherent unit in the same way any genre film often does not fit

into one clearly defined genre. There is always overlap, and because of this overlap, the

blockbuster's intended audience might be just as easily moved as the intended audiences that

Williams analyzes. Moreover, since the blockbuster is designed to have a broad appeal it is

actually quite possible that all of the body genres overlap within the blockbuster. The big budget

erotic thriller, for example, uses many of the same elements that Williams focuses on when

discussing porn (in particular, the ecstatic body and the visual and aural signifiers of erotic

pleasure). The main difference is the way successful erotic thriller blockbusters get framed in

public debate and marketing—i.e. as timely, yet controversial, social metaphors possessing an

indeterminate critical status. Indeed, as Rebecca Feasey observes, negative cultural assessment

is bound to not only the subject matter but also to how that subject matter gets framed by media

outlets and audience members (174-175).

The significance of audience response becomes readily apparent if the big budget erotic

thriller is deemed unsuccessful. For instance, the film is far more likely to get assessed as soft-

core porn if marketing campaigns emphasize the erotic components. Feasey highlights that

process in her analysis of *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992) and *Showgirls* (Paul Verhoeven,

1995), which shows how marketing and controversy affect audience reception, and demonstrates

the ways in which it is not always easy to differentiate between the marketing taglines of the erotic thriller blockbuster and its "straight-to-video skinflick counterparts" (qtd in Feasey 168).

In the case of films like *Showgirls*, the parallels between body genres and blockbusters are apparent, not only because of the similar marketing techniques, but also because Williams stresses the role that the female body plays in body genres. It is the female's coerced, uncontrollable emotional state (a victim of her own emotions)—whether as *viewer* or *viewed*—which also contributes to the negative cultural assessment of the melodrama, pornography and/or horror film. Since an important aspect of the blockbuster erotic thriller is to showcase the female body as coerced (in the case of *Showgirls*) and uncontrollable (in the case of *Basic Instinct*), the body genre and the erotic thriller clearly dovetail.

It makes sense that blockbusters share common ground with body genres. For Williams points out that the body genres are themselves actually best understood as offshoots of melodrama, a category which "can encompass a broad range of films [that are] marked by 'lapses' in realism, by 'excesses' of spectacle and displays of primal, even infantile, emotions, and by narratives that seem circular and repetitive" (143). In addition, the connection between blockbusters and body genres depends on the fact that the reiterative nature of the body genres' narrative structure (i.e. "everything has in fact already been done before") is arguably a key component of blockbuster narratives (Stringer 7). However, given the way blockbusters are marketed, the shared aspects of the blockbusters' and body genres' narrative structure becomes less important than the methods associated with the blockbusters' heavily-promoted "superlative" guarantee. In the case of *Avatar*, the high concept strategy very well could have been *Fern Gully: The Last Rainforest* (Bill Kroyer, 1992) meets *Dances with Wolves* (Kevin Costner, 1990), but with the superlative benefit of being shot in 3-D and possessing cutting edge

digital effects. Indeed, positive reviews of the film rarely focus on the narrative at all; instead the emphasis is on the spectacle on the screen (and the technology that produced it).

So what happens in a movie like *Avatar¸* where the cinematic female body is not only computer generated, but is also not the one victimized by her own ecstasy? What happens when that violence gets deflected onto the *setting* and therefore the metaphorical body takes the place of the purely physical feminine body? There is a precedent for this kind of geography-rendered-as-conquered-female (often at the hands of a militaristic male conqueror), particularly in colonialist literature, and *Avatar* stresses this trauma throughout the film. The metaphoric body replacing the physical body may be represented in a slightly different manner on screen in *Avatar*, but the effect is relatively similar. Whether it is the spectacle of a woman bleeding, crying, or reaching orgasm or the metaphorical female body (i.e. the ancestral setting of Hometree on Pandora in the case of *Avatar*) getting ripped apart by RDA bulldozers, blown up with incendiary missiles, and essentially raped for its mineral content, is incidental. Victimization is still present and is still presented in a way that can generate a response from an audience body that has been primed with excitement and pleasure.

In the case of *Avatar*, the role of "forced ecstasy" (Williams 145) is also quite revealing in the way that the audience is forced to respond to the sheer scope of that spectacle. The sweeping vistas of Pandora, the use of extreme long shots, and the computer generated imagery are all geared to provoke the involuntary bodily responses that Williams identifies as part of the body genre, but that also easily belongs to the blockbuster genre. Indeed, common responses to *Avatar* refer to the film as "stunning," "visually moving" and "immersive"—all terms that focus primarily on involuntary bodily responses (rottentomatoes.com). Responses such as this are created and sustained with every cringe-inducing aerial attack, every involuntary flinch at a 3-D

explosion, and every awe inspiring detail of pulsing vegetation, floating mountains, and flaming alien horses. In fact, in discussing the blockbuster, Julian Stringer quotes a review taken from the *New Republic* stating that the role of the spectacle is "to gorge the senses" (qtd in Stringer 7). Perhaps coincidentally, Stringer's observation about "engorgement" and blockbusters sounds fairly close to Williams's analysis of how the body genres force sense reactions in the audience. In addition, Williams's key point that these reactions and spectacles found in the body genres reinforce the assumption that there is a lack of "proper aesthetic distance, a sense of overinvolvement in sensation and emotion" (145) could just as easily be applied to the ways in which blockbusters rely so heavily on spectacle in selling the film, as well as the fantasy found *within* the film.

That connection between body genres and blockbusters seems to include another: perversion as a method of cultural problem solving. Williams uses psychoanalytic models of perversion to show that each of the body genres manifests some form of perversion, whether it be sadistic (porn), sadomasochistic (horror), or masochistic (melodrama) (150). These same perversions can be seen within the blockbuster, due to the overlapping generic characteristics of blockbusters as a whole. For example, the blockbuster erotic thriller aligns more closely with sadism due its stronger alliances to porn, while blockbuster tearjerkers (coded as "chick flicks") display elements of masochism. In discussing the way perversion works in horror films, Williams stresses Clover's point that there is an "oscillation between masochistic and sadistic poles" because the pleasure of the (male) viewer "oscillates between identifying with the initial passive powerlessness of the abject and terrorized girl-victim of horror and her later, active empowerment" (qtd in Williams 149). Oscillation between identification with weak and then later empowered victims can be found in a variety of blockbusters ranging from *Aliens* (James

Cameron, 1986), to *Once Were Warriors* (Lee Tamahori, 1994), to *The Exorcist* (William

Friedkin, 1973).

Even a blockbuster like *Avatar* relies on sadomasochistic touches, although the actual

victimized body, as stated earlier, is the planet itself. In this film, in true horror genre fashion, the

brutalized body rises above its own victimization and literally becomes the victimizer. The trees,

the animals, the earth itself act as one cohesive unit in order to defeat the mercenary threat.

Focusing on that development, the role that perversion plays in the body genres (and

blockbusters) becomes evident. Williams states that the reason perversions are used in the body

genres is not merely to provide pleasure for the audience, but also to act as a kind of transference

that allows audience members to process cultural problems because "each draws upon related

sensations to address its problems" (153). The environmental fantasy that *Avatar* constructs is a

wish for the earth to actively protect itself from its rapists. By using the same brutalizing

techniques found in the horror genres, a blockbuster such as *Avatar* could thus be viewed as

"brutality fixes brutality."

If it is understood that the Oscars are the epitome of middlebrow taste, it is possible to see

why *Avatar*, the biggest grossing film of 2009, would not win any of the major Academy

Awards. On the surface, its superlative nature should have been enough to make it an Oscar

contender. It cost the most, made the most, contained the most up-to-date technology, had the

best saturated marketing strategies and was directed by a super-auteur who had already

established himself as "king of the world" when his previous blockbuster was deemed a "film"

rather than a "movie" (Roberts 159). Cameron already had the cultural cache to win. But that

status is never guaranteed. As Stringer points out, "just as being a best-seller does not

automatically make a book culturally valuable or culturally worthless, movie blockbusters

possess no intrinsic cultural status" (8). Greg Taylor echoes this sentiment when condemning the culture industries as a whole for not being "reliable arbiters of inherent value," in large part because a film's "lasting cultural impact" can only be ensured "contextually, through hype and appeals to nostalgia" (155).

Since middlebrow culture determines what is culturally valuable within the U.S., the blockbuster must also comply with middlebrow expectations to be deemed worthy of recognition. Gillian Roberts focuses on the role that perceived quality plays in this negotiation "between the accessibility of low culture and the prestige of high culture" (157). *Avatar* lost at the Oscars because it did not cater to middlebrow tastes. By relying so heavily on the "gross" characteristics associated with body genres, *Avatar*-as-blockbuster failed to achieve the same cultural status as Cameron's previous Oscar winning blockbuster, *Titanic* (1997). To win, blockbusters must suppress their connections to the excessive elements of the body genres' melodramatic narrative structures and forced emotional responses. That might be one reason why, despite their gross popularity, blockbusters as a genre remain regulated to the masses and are not classified as "art" by the middlebrow.

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Performing Tricky Dick:
Richard Nixon's Transformation into Popular Culture Caricature

Travis Cook

Present day popular culture is one that is simultaneously created and surrounded by performance. According to Raymond Williams, "we have never as a society acted so much or watched so many others acting" (Williams 3). Since the mid-twentieth century, public performances and dramatized narratives in the media have become an increasingly visible and mutable aspect of American culture. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the case of Richard Milhous Nixon, the 37th President of the United States (1969 – 1974). A politician whose sometimes "failed" public performances highlighted the artificial qualities of media society, Nixon fits the role of what Williams calls the "improbable but plausible figure" that presents itself to "the public eye" (Williams 9), and his sometimes threadbare attempts to create an authentic, sincere, trustworthy public image can be seen as an inspiration for the increasingly stark caricatures of Nixon in film and television.

As president, Nixon presided over one of the most turbulent times in American history, serving through events such as the opening of China, the SALT talks with Russia, and the

beginning of the end of the Vietnam War. More to the point, it is difficult to find a politician who "can match the captivating force that Nixon exerted – and continues to exert – on the culture of the United States" (Frick 7). However, this lasting attention is more often for negative reasons; for many, "Watergate and what it symbolized are called to mind whenever Richard Nixon's name is mentioned" (King 111). Nixon's image as a dark and mistrustful personality with a "flawed character and darkly complex story . . . made him a popular figure for [writers] and audiences alike" (Pattillo 55). Nixon's rise from "unheralded beginnings to the pinnacle of success" echoed the American dream (Kirchberg 1), yet his public image sometimes revealed the contradictions of popular American myths. With Nixon's public appearances also seeming to expose contradictions in Nixon himself, he has often served as a popular figure of caricature that is filled with symbolic potency, a straw man whose image represents not only a twisted, corrupt figure, but also a tragic example of the dark side of the American dream.

To fully understand Nixon's transformation from public figure to caricature, it is useful to look at three stages of representation of Nixon in popular media. The first stage concerns his actual political career, encompassing his run for the California Senate in 1950 through his eventual fall from the Presidency and grace in 1974. In that stage, his manipulation of the media and those around him served as the bedrock of his image as a calculating, paranoid figure. The second stage involves representations of Nixon as a dramatic figure in historical fiction, specifically in the films *Nixon* (Oliver Stone, 1995) and *Frost/Nixon* (Ron Howard, 2008). In the third stage, Nixon's image becomes a symbol of unchecked power and decadence in work such as Alan Moore's graphic novel *Watchmen* (1986-1987), the book's film adaptation (Zach Snyder, 2009), and the popular television show *Futurama*. Because of the sizable body of evidence presented by the television show, this analysis will focus on the show's use of Nixon as

found in the *Futurama* film *Into the Wild Green Yonder* (Peter Avanzino, 2009). The sixty year span of these representations shows the ways in which Nixon's complex, contradictory public image has evolved into more simplistic caricature.

Nixon as Historical Figure

From the very beginning, "Nixon considered his image just as important as policy," and he has stated that "concern for image must rank with concern for substance" (Stapleton 130). In his earliest political actions, Nixon can already be seen as a political opportunist. In the 1950 race for the U.S. Senate seat representing the state of California, he ran as the Republican candidate against Helen Gahagan Douglas, Democrat and wife of actor Melvyn Douglas. Having already gained notoriety in the U.S. House of Representatives as a member of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), he had a record of attacking people's political backgrounds. It is a popular view that he used this form of manipulation to gain personal advantage. Indeed, the Alger Hiss case stands as an important springboard for his rise to power and fame, and in the subsequent Senate campaign, he "wasted no time in brandishing the liberal Douglas a left-wing extremist" (Kirchberg 34). By striving for success, even if it meant discrediting people, Nixon appealed to the "widespread support for the myth of mission" (Frick 33). Playing to the era's fears of Communist takeover, Nixon won the 1950 California Senate election by 600,000 votes. It is important to note that Nixon believed that press coverage of his actions as a HUAC member and Senate candidate meant that he had been "permanently blacklisted . . . in the eyes of what he referred to as the liberal East Coast press" (Kirchberg 33). While Nixon would attribute problems in his public image to the media's bias, and the press

would identify Nixon himself as the source of the problem, the reality was that many of Nixon's

contemporaries came to see him as "a slick liar" who deserved attack.

At the same time, it was his successful use of television that gave Nixon traction with the

American public. This was most effectively demonstrated by his televised speech in 1952 that

addressed allegations of a secret "slush fund" he had purportedly used for personal expenses

(Kirchberg 35). Though he called it the "fund speech" (Feeney 42), it has since been

remembered as the "Checkers speech" (Monsell 15). Nixon began by addressing Americans as

"a man whose honestly and integrity have been questioned" (Monsell 15). Seated off to the side

was his wife, Pat Nixon, who offered moral support at important times. Nixon made note that Pat

had never been on the government payroll, even though she was "a wonderful stenographer"

(Monsell 15). Never using cue cards or the loose collection of notes beside him, Nixon divulged

his family's "entire financial net worth in front of a national television audience, a practice

unheard of in the political arena" (Kirchberg 36). Not content with merely reassuring his

supporters, Nixon sought to earn an even greater degree of kinship by discussing a gift from a

wealthy Texas businessman. Nixon explained:

> You know what it was? It was a little cocker spaniel dog in a crate that
>
> they sent all the way from Texas . . . and our little girl – Tricia, the six year
>
> old – named it Checkers. And you know, the kids love that dog and I just
>
> want to say this right now, that regardless of what they say about it, we're
>
> going to keep it. (Kirchberg 36)

The public support Nixon received that night was overwhelming, and the speech was, for

the moment, an overwhelming success. However, it also provoked a divided reaction among

critics. Of specific interest is Darryl Zanuck's remark that it was "the most tremendous

performance [he'd] ever seen" (Feeney 42). The speech had reduced serious allegations about an illegal fund into "a piece of melodrama, a bit of sleeve pulling, something undignified and mawkish: an address about a dog" (Feeney 42). Three years later, Nixon acknowledged that "he had staged the show" (Monsell 18).

One might note that Nixon had a background as an amateur theatrical performer, and that he had first met his wife at a tryout for a Whittier community theatre production in which they were both cast (Monsell 7). His theatrical background may indicate that Nixon understood enough of stagecraft to manipulate audiences. For example, Nixon "proved" his integrity by using his "daughter and a cocker spaniel for an alibi" (Holst 70). In terms of performance, it was already possible to see that Nixon would play any role required. The speech also gave rise to the public's sense of "Nixon as man on the make" (Holst 70). The situation made defensive behavior something to be expected but his performance created the impression that "anyone [who was] capable of such self-righteousness and cant cried out for investigation" (Feeney 42).

In the years following Nixon's terms as president, Stephen Ambrose observed that the "Checkers speech" was uncomfortably similar in terms of theatricality to the "I'm not a crook" speech, which again featured Nixon defending himself against attackers (Feeney 41). When Nixon was elected President in 1968 and again in 1972, attention focused on the ambiguous meaning of his speeches and public appearances. By 1972, Walter Kerr of *The New York Times* remarked that Nixon "seems an actor to me in the sense that his gestures and inflections have an adopted rather than a reflexive air about them; he is conscious of the role he is playing and he has tried to train himself to its needs" (Monsell 9)

When the Watergate scandal broke, Nixon defended himself continually. On 17 November 1972, he finally appeared to crack when talking to reporters he likely believed were his enemies (Kirchberg 129). Conveying authentic frustration, he stated:

> In all my years of public life, I have never obstructed justice. And I think, too, that I could say that in my years of public life, that I welcome this kind of examination, because people have got to know whether or not their President is a crook. Well, I'm not a crook. (Kirchberg 129)

The way this last line is remembered is important when considering Nixon's public image. Often, the sentence is remembered as "I am not a crook" (Feeney 42). However, Nixon's delivery is more conversational and the contraction signals informality and authentic feeling. As Mark Feeney notes, by using the phrase "Well, I'm not a crook," Nixon was trying to tell reporters something (43). However, "I am not a crook" is what is remembered; and its staccato rhythm appears to be an artificial slogan designed to sell something (Feeney 43). For Feeney, the fact that the line has been misremembered alludes to Nixon's public image as an untrustworthy character; he observes that "it's the latter we . . . remember Nixon as having said, [because it] reveals something about our fundamental assumptions concerning him" (Feeney 43). In other words, by the 1970s Nixon's public image as an untrustworthy character had become so dominant that even his ostensibly authentic public appearances came to be viewed as evidence of ulterior motivations lurking just beneath the surface.

Indeed, Nixon was "dogged through much of his national political career with questions about his moral character" (King 110). Dubbed "Tricky Dick" during the 1950 Senate campaign, the very moniker described Nixon as "shifty and untrustworthy" (King 110).[1] Nixon's fear and recognition of the power of celebrity speaks to his consciousness of the power of image. He

"often remarked [that] his own lack of movie-star glamour" stood in sharp contrast to "the

Kennedys abundant possession of the same" (Feeney 44). An important incident is the famous

televised debate between Nixon and John F. Kennedy, where Nixon's sweaty brow and pale

complexion is believed to have cost him the debate in the minds of television viewers. The

debate is later referenced to establish Nixon's paranoid concern in regards his own personal

appearance on-camera in Ron Howard's *Frost/Nixon*.

Feeney argues that what prevented Nixon from securing a positive public image was a

lack of "a fundamental characteristic of Hollywood stardom" (44). He notes that Nixon never

possessed the sort of cultural immunity that allowed stars to "do whatever they wanted and never

have to pay for their actions, while movie stars, or [the] Kennedys, have a license for license"

(Feeney 44). As late as 1992, Nixon was known to complain that the Kennedy clan "thought

because of who they were that they could get away with anything" (Feeney 44). To a large

extent, Nixon tried to match his public life to the image created by Kennedys, an image guided

by a dramatization of the Presidency that matched Hollywood conventions. As a consequence, he

seems to have continually sought to transform himself to portray a role for which he was not

entirely well suited.

Nixon in Historical Drama

Nixon has been the subject of so many works of fiction that an entire book, Thomas

Monsell's *Nixon on Stage and Screen*, is devoted to them. They include Emile de Antonio's

documentary *Millhouse* (1971), the opera *Nixon in China* (1987), the screen comedy *Dick*

(Andrew Fleming, 1999), and the portrayals in *Watchmen* (2009) and *Futurama* (2009). More

traditional cinematic historical dramas include Oliver Stone's *Nixon* (1995) and Ron Howard's *Frost/Nixon* (2008).

While Oliver Stone's *Nixon* portrays Nixon as both hero and villain, from start to finish Nixon is the tragic center of the 1995 film. Stone implies that the magnitude of the loss of Nixon's identity is on a biblical scale; quoting the Book of Matthew, the film begins with a title card asking, "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" By placing Nixon as the tragic center of the narrative, Stone creates a narrative that does not use Nixon to critique of the consequences of unchecked power but instead explores Nixon's story in ways that lend support to the American Dream.

The opening scene reveals Nixon cowering in his chair as he awaits the delivery of one of the famous Watergate tapes. Lit by firelight, hiding in shadows, and shrunken, our first impression of Anthony Hopkins's Nixon is that he is a dark man, filled with self-loathing, hiding away from the eyes of the world in a massive, empty mansion. By waiting to reveal his face until the last second, the film builds tension and suggests that Nixon is a sinister figure. Stone took a great deal of time casting the role of Nixon. His decision to cast British actor Anthony Hopkins taps into pop culture associations: four years earlier, Hopkins had gained fame through his portrayal of the serial killer Hannibal Lector in *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991). Although in the four years between *Silence of the Lambs* and *Nixon* Hopkins had appeared in *Howard's End* (James Ivory,1992), *The Remains of the Day* (James Ivory, 1993), and *Shadowlands* (Richard Attenborough, 1993), the character of Hannibal Lector is such a potent popular culture figure that it gives a sinister dimension to Hopkins's characterization of Nixon.

The fact that Nixon, a historical figure, could be essentially equated with a familiar fictional character says something about how his public image had become transformed and reduced to caricature (Feeney 332). In other circumstances, an actor playing a historical figure would face a series of problems. First, the familiarity of the public figure would ensure that too close an imitation would lose any validity because it would be mimicry. Alternatively, if the actor's performance was not close enough to the public image, the result would seem to lack verisimilitude. However, in this case, Hopkins's physical presence captures Nixon's public image through the use of hunched shoulders, the familiar hair, and tightly clenched-in elbows.

As Oliver Stone's film progresses, it makes various comments about Nixon's life as having fulfilled some aspects of the American dream. It shows Nixon's humble beginnings in a Quaker homestead and his ideal courtship of his wife, Pat (Joan Allen), who Nixon refers to as "Buddy" throughout the film. At the same time, even in his interactions with Pat, Nixon appears to be a performer who fails to maintain an aura of authenticity. When Pat confronts Dick after he loses the 1962 election for governor of California, she threatens to leave him. Aware that without her he is unable to function, Nixon promises never to run for office again. However, the film soon shows him preparing for another office run. In other words, Stone emphasizes the image of Nixon as a callous manipulator who will do anything to get what he wants.

Later in the film, Nixon exclaims to his wife, "We are gonna win this time!" just before claiming the Presidency. With Nixon draped in a red, white, and blue flag following his electoral victory, the film suggests that the American Dream has come true in the most vivid sense. However, in this moment the film also taps into the established view of Nixon as an untrustworthy public figure, for the image of Nixon and the flag rings false. Rather than gaining power from his association with the American Dream, Nixon seems to lose legitimacy because

his claim to natural, authentic leadership seemed forced and artless. Thomas Monsell observes that "artful falsehood is more [powerful] than artless falsehood, because fewer people can see through it" (208). Stone's portrayal of Nixon's victory highlights Nixon's failure to achieve the "artful falsehood" and reveals instead Nixon's inability to create an aura of truthfulness because of the public's longstanding sense of Nixon as flawed, manipulative politician.

Hopkins's Richard Nixon longs for the performance required by politics, and for the personal rush he gets from it. At one point, Nixon states "I miss the pure acting of it. I gotta get back in the arena!"[2] As if to emphasize the fact that politicians engage in public performances, in Stone's film when Nixon debates his actions in Vietnam, he is told by Henry Kissinger to "play the madman" so as to intimidate his enemies. By the last third of the film, Nixon stops referring to himself as "I" and instead calls himself "Nixon." By this point, Hopkins's Nixon has transformed into a critique not of the corrupting influence of the American Dream, but rather what happens when people reach too far to achieve their goals.

The more recent film, *Frost/Nixon* (2008), contains both performance and narrative choices similar to those in Stone's epic biopic. However, *Frost/Nixon* deals less with historical events and more with the perception that the world is a site of performance and of dramatization. That focus emerges from film's representation of the Nixon interviews conducted in 1977 by David Frost. The film makes the interviews appear to be artificial, pre-scripted events. The topics to be discussed are given in advance to Frost and Nixon so that they can prepare. The conversations are then filmed in the comfort of the California Republican's suburban home. The film thus makes the point that there was little truth to be discovered in the interviews concerning Watergate or Nixon's Presidency. The film's recurring theme is that modern media cheapens and distorts truth in order to create its own fictional world (Edelstein). This idea echoes Williams's

view that public figures are like actors on the "public stage." Tellingly, *Frost/Nixon* presents the interviews as "championship boxing match" rather than a quest for truth (Edelstein). Frost and Nixon are both looking for a comeback, and by portraying the interviews as a continuation of Nixon's pursuit of the American Dream, the film shows Nixon aiming to be a "Great White Hope," even though by this point in his career he was "dead in the water" (Edelstein).

Like Stone, director Ron Howard had earlier tackled American historical narratives in films such as *Apollo 13* (1995). In *Frost/Nixon*, he again tries to make a drama out of American history. The film, scripted by Peter Morgan from his original play, makes it seem as though Frost has led Nixon to reveal more than he had in the past. (In the actual interviews, Nixon was able to deflect every revealing point with a meandering comment.) The film's portrayal of Nixon becomes caricatured in several ways that are similar to Stone's *Nixon*. Here played by Frank Langella, Nixon's dialect is much darker, and it more closely resembles the Nixon caricature in the more recent depictions in *Futurama*. However, Langella's physical performance features mannerisms similar to Hopkins's. The jabbing gestures and hunched shoulders create a tight performance that resides inside itself, rarely venturing into an outside sphere of movement. The addition of a prosthetic nose comes more from political cartoons than it does from anything based in real life. [3]

Like Hopkins's portrayal of Lector, performances in Langella's career are evoked in his casting as Nixon. When confronting his aide Jack Brennan (Kevin Bacon), Langella remains concealed in shadow, hiding from the light of public image. This vampire-like image perhaps recalls Langella's portrait of Count Dracula in the film *Dracula* (John Badham, 1979). For some audience members, Langella's thick accent retains enough of Dracula to draw attention to Nixon's almost vampire-like tendencies that involve using others to support his public

performances. In tracing the evolution of Nixon's public image, it is telling that both the Hopkins and Langella versions of Nixon can elicit comparisons to such demonic creatures as vampires and serial killers. At the very least, that association serves to suggest an aura of sinister intentions about Nixon's character without actually stating it.

Langella's Nixon is acutely aware of the cameras before him. In the first interviews of the film, he uses these to start rehabilitating his public image. By relaxing, yet dominating the conversation, Nixon not only makes himself look good, he also makes Frost look like a vain, smiling fool (Edelstein). Later in the film, Frost finally turns to Watergate. Langella begins in a relaxed, conversational fireside pose, preparing to make eloquent, charismatic comments. His gestures are pointed but grounded, and they have a sense of ease about them. However, Michael Sheen's David Frost is able to cut off Nixon's sense of ease by revealing that he has information about the Statute of Limitations that affected the Watergate hearing. Countering with "you have, you say," Langella is no longer at ease, shifting forward and trying to regain his momentum. With each subsequent beat, Langella peels back a layer of Nixon, revealing a darker soul through which both Nixon and Frost, and by extension the audience, seem to be "glimpsing, for a minute, the abyss" (Edelstein). At the end, Nixon is reduced to a closed posture of being trapped; his performance as a trustworthy character with nothing to hide has failed. Yet even here, Nixon never apologizes. He refuses to grovel and never once says the word "sorry." This Nixon is someone who refuses to back down until the very end, a depiction that mirrors entrenched public perceptions about this public figure.

Nixon in Popular Culture

     An even much more caricatured version of Nixon's public image can be found in Alan Moore's 1986 graphic novel *Watchmen*. In the story, an alternate timeline in which superheroes exist has placed America firmly in a hyper-paranoid Cold War era in the 1980s. The establishment and subsequent disbanding of vigilante groups has led to their marginalization and use as government agents that carry out dirty missions. One superhero, the only one to feature superpowers in the traditional sense, maintains a tepid world peace, forever keeping the doomsday clock at "Five Minutes till Midnight."

     In this alternate reality, the presence of the superhuman Dr. Manhattan has led to a scenario where the U.S. has won the Vietnam War. This major turning point in American history is alluded to by The Comedian, another costumed superhero, when he mentions that "losing this war might've torn this country apart" (Moore 2.13). Shortly thereafter, Nixon lands in Saigon, giving his traditional V-fingered salute for victory (Moore 2.13). Capitalizing on the U.S. victory in Vietnam, Nixon uses it to secure his own victory in the next presidential election.

     In the graphic novel, readers learn that immediately after the U.S. victory in Vietnam, there is an effort to create a constitutional amendment allowing presidents to run for multiple terms unopposed. The amendment is successful, and Nixon is elected to a fifth term of office. The idea that Nixon would have abused his Presidential power shows the degree to which the caricatured image of Nixon as power hungry character has shaped perceptions of Nixon. In this future, Watergate has never happened, and Nixon retains the aid of confidants Gordon Liddy and Henry Kissinger (Moore 10.3). When they discuss plans to delay bombing the USSR, Liddy suggests bombing Russia in advance. Consistent with the public image of Nixon as overly paranoid, Nixon responds by attacking Liddy for being loyal to the CIA rather than to him.

Interestingly, the representation of Nixon's physicality is somewhat mild compared to other portrayals. There is only a minor hunch in the shoulders, and the nose is not as pronounced as it might be. That choice might be due to the fact that the book was published at the height of the Reagan era.

By comparison, the film adaptation of *Watchmen* (2009) does not minimize caricature but instead seems to revel in it. The use of Nixon in this film is intended as a satire; Nixon's nose is comically large, and there is an accent that might have been drawn from a late night comedy sketch. Portrayed by Robert Wisden, a series of low angle shots make him into a powerful, threatening figure. The hunch in the shoulders and the shaking jowls, moderately used in *Nixon* and *Frost/Nixon*, is in full force here, as are several other negative Nixon stereotypes. When Kissinger and Nixon discuss their options after Dr. Manhattan has fled the Earth, in a war room scene that perhaps recalls moments in *Dr. Strangelove* (Stanley Kubrick, 1964), Kissinger tells him to hold the threat of annihilation over the USSR, a prospect that Nixon replies to with glee. Again, the phrase that they must fear the "madman Richard Nixon" is used, with the chilling implications that this time there will probably be an opportunity for the madman to come unleashed. There is almost a childish delight in Nixon holding his finger over the doomsday button, saying first, "we can't let these fuckers think we're weak!" and then later, "I say when doomsday is approaching." These statements are indicative of depictions that highlight the public image of Nixon as mad for power. Other events in *Watchmen* echo the negative associations with Nixon's image: The Comedian, now serving as a government agent under Nixon, becomes the second shooter at the Kennedy assassination in Dallas; he also kills Nixon's Watergate opponents, journalists Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein.

Perhaps the most striking visualization of Nixon's public image as a power-mad politician is conveyed by his reaction to the pronouncement that an attack by the USSR would destroy the entire East Coast. Rather than show any concern for his country, Wisden's Nixon proudly announces: "The last gasp of the Harvard establishment. Let's see those fuckers think their way out of this!" Rather than caring for America, he is more concerned with beating the East Coast liberals who snubbed him when he was in public office. That type of backlash against his critics again plays on the image of Nixon as a resentful figure who never learned how to carry himself as a magnanimous public servant.

By placing these stereotypes into a mainstream film format, the film perpetuates the popular image of Nixon as a power-mad, corrupt dictator who would stop at nothing to rule the universe. By representing Nixon as a dictator, the film suggests that he belongs to a wave of corruption that has destroyed or at least tarnished the American Dream. Unlike *Nixon*, in this filmic representation, Nixon is not a victim of circumstance or a casualty of ambitious overreaching. Instead, this Nixon has achieved everything he desired and is thus an example of how the American Dream can be corrupted by selfish desire.

The transformation to caricatured, fictional figure is illustrated even more clearly and more literally in the cartoon series *Futurama*. Set in the year 3001, the ability to preserve talking heads in formaldehyde jars has resulted in people such as Leonard Nimoy and Lucy Liu continuing to exist 1000 years in the future. No head is more popular, however, than the talking head of Richard Nixon. In this future, specifically as represented in the full length feature film *Into the Wild Green Yonder*, Nixon has been elected President again. Nixon has reanimated Spiro Agnew's body (sans head) and is carted around by Secret Service minions at his beck and call. The Nixon head features nearly every caricatured physical and verbal characterization ever

attributed to the President, including the pointed nose, shaking jowls, and a deep growling vocal expression punctuated by grunts of excitement and rage (generally voiced as "Ha-roo!"). This version of Nixon leans closer to the filmic *Watchmen* in style and tone, with Nixon's head none too shy about toying with national security and secret operations. For example, Nixon's image as a politician who saw himself as above the law comes through in a conversation with the robot Bender:

Bender: We'll need to authorize a wiretap.

Nixon: As many as you like!

Bender: Well, I only need one.

Nixon: Let's call it six.

At another point, Nixon's inner thoughts reveal that the one secret he has kept all these years is that the moon landing was staged on Venus. This fictional detail is grounded in Nixon's public image as a politician who tried and failed to keep secrets. Such brief comedic moments are common occurrences throughout the TV series on which the film is based, and at any given point, Nixon's head is concealing another dirty motive from the rest of the world. The fact that the head is an isolated figure in its final triumphs reflects the image of Nixon as a public figure who mistrusted those around him. The symbolism of the head cut off from the body, and from things such as the heart and soul, highlights Nixon's image as a heartless purveyor of backroom deals. Nixon's perceived lack of humanity is reflected in the fact that as characterized here he no longer knows any ethical limitations as an authority figure in a corrupted future. This Richard Nixon has buried the "memories of his less-fortunate days" with his body and moved onto an all-encompassing reign as galactic dictator (Kirchberg 98).

Although the series is sprinkled with allusions to history, such as Nixon being served by the headless or spineless body of Spiro Agnew, the dramatic narrative of *Futurama* picks and chooses what aspects of Nixon to convey, embellish, or overlook. As in *Watchmen*, this conception of Nixon serves both a comedic and satirical function, using Nixon's public image as a vehicle for both humor and social commentary.

Conclusion

By examining representations of Nixon in popular media forms, it is possible to see the distinct set of characteristics that make up his public image. These include the visions of Nixon as a paranoid, corrupt, twisted politician and a tragic character caught in the contradictions of the American dream. His public image includes the ideas that he was unable to embrace support and was forever fighting the entire world, and he has been seen as a politician who regarded himself as an island amidst a sea of friends who would "come and go, depending solely on whether their support would benefit their own interests" (Kirchberg 37).

There seems to be a certain ease in shedding Nixon's actual persona in favor of the caricatured image because his public appearances often revealed forced or failed performances. One question that arises is how the different periods of Nixon's public life colored the public image that developed over the course of his political career. While a life in the public eye might have contributed to his image as an untrustworthy character, the unwitting transparency of Nixon's various public performances likely made Nixon's attempts at authenticity seem like "artless falsehoods." Nixon was ineffective at creating a seamless public image, and his failure provided an abundance of images and ideas to use against him. With a complicated public image already established in the Cold War era, Nixon's escalation of the Vietnam War turned him into

a lightning rod for protestors and critics, who seized upon him as a dishonest manipulator of

public trust. The events surrounding Watergate confirmed that image in the public eye, even

though Nixon struggled against it. As a study in public images, one way to read Nixon's

transformation into a caricature of villainy and deceit is to see that evolution as an attempt to

keep "artless falsehoods" out of public performances.

<u>End Notes</u>

[1] Nixon kept a long list of enemies, as was famously publicized, and it is important to note that this list did not include just politicians and journalists; others making appearances on the list were celebrities such as "Carol Channing, Steve McQueen, Barbara Streisand, Gregory Peck, Bill Cosby, and Joe Namath" (King 111).

[2] Not only does this quote play off of the title of one of Nixon's many autobiographies (Nixon, Richard M. *In the Arena: A Memoir of Victory, Defeat, and Renewal*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991.), it is originally found in a famous Theodore Roosevelt quote, showing both Nixon's awareness and manipulation of the presidential stage.

[3] This inclusion particularly shows how the screen portrayal of Nixon has taken on a life of its own, even making physical changes that fly in the face of historical photographs and other such records, readily available. In this instance, a manipulated version of the truth is more likely to be remembered than recorded fact.

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War, Wizards, and Words:
Transformative Adaptation and Transformed Meanings in *Howl's Moving Castle*

Lindsay Smith

Hayao Miyazaki's 2004 adaption of Diana Wynne Jones's children's novel *Howl's Moving Castle* broke the record for the largest theatrical release for any film—animation or not—in Japan, screening in one out of every six theatres in the nation and earning a worldwide box-office gross of $235,184,110 (Cavallaro 157).[1] A critical approach to the film, with special consideration to its source novel, allows for a study of Miyazaki's version of *Howl's Moving Castle* as a transformative adaptation. While the film retains many elements from its source text, from the fire demons to the eponymous moving castle, it also adds a new component to the story: war. In the book version, the protagonist, Sophie Hatter, is a young woman working at a hat shop who is cursed to look like an old, withered crone by the villainous (and beautiful) Witch of the Waste. Rather than face her friends and family, the elderly Sophie exiles herself and ends up living with the lecherous Wizard Howl in his moving castle as she attempts to free herself from her curse (a goal eventually accomplished in the novel through Sophie's resolution of a conflict between her sisters and their lovers). Miyazaki retains Sophie's curse and her refuge with the Wizard Howl as the film's backdrop, but makes a war raging through the country the conflict to

which the reversal of Sophie's curse is tied. In this way, while Jones's book explores the crucial role that communication plays in preventing and ending conflict, Miyazaki's film demonstrates that the loss of open dialogue can lead to war. The film thus transforms the narrative of *Howl's Moving Castle* into a critique of the contemporary, international politics surrounding the Iraq War.

The film version of *Howl's Moving Castle* illustrates an approach to adaptation that moves beyond "borrowing," what film critic Dudley Andrews describes as the "casual appropriation of stories, ideas, or situations" (113). It also eschews the process of" intersecting," in which a work is recreated as closely as possible in another medium. Instead, Miyazaki takes a more controversial approach to textual adaptation: transformation. "Adaptors," critic H. Porter Abbott argues, "if they are good at all . . . steal what they want and leave the rest" (112). As this essay will examine, a transformative approach to adaptation allows Miyazaki to remain more or less faithful to the book version of *Howl's Moving Castle*, while simultaneously infusing it with new themes, issues, and possibilities. At the same time, as this essay will also argue, the transformative approach to adaptation encourages critics to move beyond a mere study of how a book and a novel differ when analyzing the adapted text. Instead, by requiring critics to familiarize themselves with both works, the analysis of transformative adaptation opens up a critical space in which the focus can shift to the "possibilities of connection between [source text and adaption]," and, as Abbott argues, the "creative symbiosis" in the works. In the case of *Howls Moving Castle*, this not only makes it possible to consider what, if any, connective tissue remains between the novel and the film in the form of themes or motifs, but also the ways in which those remnants, where they do exist, are transformed to alter the meaning of the narrative.

In a 2005 interview with *Newsweek*, Miyazaki commented on the radical departure the film takes from the book, saying "the film was profoundly affected by the war in Iraq" (Gordon 62). Producer Toshio Suzuki has also commented on the influence the Iraq War had on the adaptation, stating "When we were making it, there was the Iraq War . . . From young to old, people were not very happy" (Cavallaro 170). That sense of pervading gloom, of knowing that there was a war happening overseas that Japan could be dragged into as an America ally, seeped into the film. In 2003, when animators began to work on *Howl*, Japan officially announced its support for the American invasion of Iraq. Later that same year, the United States Ambassador to Japan, Howard Baker, informed the Japanese Prime Minister that the United States (expecting the war to end shortly) was requesting that Japan begin training troops to send to postwar Iraq in an active show of support for the United States (Ennis). The Japanese "unhappiness" over these events of 2003 had, by 2010, with the removal of active combat troops in Iraq, turned into bitterness; military relations have remained strained, with members of the Japanese government asserting that Japan "gained nothing" by involving itself with America in the Iraq War (Ennis). Japanese civilian support for the Iraq War was small from the outset. It was considered unwise, and the Japanese felt pushed into supporting American military operations more than they cared to (Ennis). In Miyazaki's film, this sense of foreboding is captured in the first glimpse that viewers catch of *Howl's* war-ravished world when Howl slips into the magical doorway that transports him to different places based on the color of the doorknob. Aptly, "black" leads to wherever the latest outbreak of warfare is taking place.

In the novel, the magical black knob on the ever-changing door allows Howl to step into twentieth century Wales, at a time contemporaneous with the book's 1986 publication. In fact, in the novel the doorknob leads not only to different places, but different dimensions, exploring the

idea of parallel worlds. Whereas the film plays with this idea by allowing Sophie to travel in

time, rather than *space* across parallel planes of existence (the film keeps the story confined to

one world), beyond the black knob there is only the violence of war, an ominous landscape

characterized by fires burning on the edge of the darkness. Miyazaki's process of adaptation is

not merely a process of abrupt change, however. Rather, the parallels created between the novel

and the film allow for a comprehensive understanding of what is being portrayed in the film to

children, the target audience.[2] In retaining the doorway with the black knob, but changing its

destination, the Iraq War slips through that same doorway into Ingary (Sophie's country,) and

becomes the moral center of Miyazaki's version of the story. This injection of political

commentary into the film is explicitly suggested in comments made by Marco Muller, the

director of the Venice International Film Festival, upon its first international screening at the

2004 Venice Biennale, when he described *Howl* as "possibly the strongest anti-war statement we

have in the entire festival" (Cavallaro 170).

       Despite the different destinations that lay beyond the sinister black doorknob in the novel

and movie, though, each holds the potential of leading the reader and viewer to the same

conclusion: senseless conflicts can only be avoided, and resolved, through open communication.

Peace—with oneself, with others, and with countries—is all possible if effective communication

is allowed to step in as a positive force in relationships. Likewise, both the movie and novel

avoid utopian idealism by depicting, through the active steps the characters take to resolve the

war and their personal curses, that communication is only effective when it is transformed into

thoughtful action. The plots of the movie and the book thus intersect in their portrayal of the

redemptive power of language and words to restore conflict, but Miyazaki's version also goes on

to depict a world where communication, corrupted by the media and the government, leads its citizens to destruction.

War and Children's Comprehension

      Upon the film's release, many critics were quick to dismiss its focus on war, ignoring the violence (such as burning cities or bloody footprints). For example, reviewer Rob Mackie wrote for UK's *The Guardian* that the film had "nothing to alienate our kids—it's the sort of colourful, simple, charming cartoon that Disney would once have put out, but with a fresher, cleaner look and less sentimentality" (Mackie). This interpretation ignores how, in Miyazaki's film, war is the driving force of the story, and that it becomes the all-consuming, corrupting agent by which characters and countries are destroyed, and through which people forego the single most rational and compassionate power they possess: the ability to communicate.

      At the same time, for some American audiences, the film was a timely comment on the wars overseas, wars that, with the growth of twenty-four hour news networks, invaded their homes and sense of security. Strikingly, in a study that was conducted between April and December of 2003, when *Howl* was in production, researchers interviewed forty-eight American children whose ages ranged from five to twelve to determine what they knew of the Iraq War, and more crucially, how. Their results indicated that "Children are political in that they are aware of government-related occurrences and are capable of forming political opinions," that "most children understand war by age 8," and further, that 74.2 percent of the American children had received their information on the war from television (Svitak 230-231, 237). Although the significance of including a violent air raid in an animated movie may have been lost on some movie reviewers, this study indicates that children were, despite their age, keenly in-tune with the adult world around them. Children not only knew what war was, but they also knew that it

was impacting their lives, and they could often describe particulars about the conflict (such as who was fighting, and where). Thus, it is possible that the allusions to the Iraq War made in *Howl's Moving Castle* were not lost on the children (or the adults) among its American audiences.

The study also concluded that depictions of war on television (such as in news reports) impact how children understand the world and lay the groundwork for grasping the politics of their own country as early as the age of five; even in entertainment, the opinions and themes in any given film could serve as propaganda to a developing mind, sculpting how one views the world, even if this manipulation was not the intent of the work (Svitak 230). In this sense, *Howl's Moving Castle* might be read as anti-war propaganda, demonstrably teaching children that war is bad, and that adults should instead seek peaceful resolution to their conflicts. This may explain why the film was only moderately successful in the United Sates, grossing just under five million dollars. In discussing what forms of adaptation are successful, Abbott notes that "Audiences set limits on what is acceptable and unacceptable" (125) and that departures from cultural norms often find outlets for reaching mainstream audiences in times of cultural shifts, often through the adaptation of earlier works which provide pre-constructed settings, plots, and characters to play out contemporary themes. By the time of *Howl's* release in America, the surge of American patriotism that had followed the attacks on September 11, 2001 was beginning to recede as war dragged on, and *Howl's* implicit critique of the Iraq War perhaps stung families facing the reality of rearing their children in a time of international conflict.

Violence Manifested

Certainly, as Abbott suggests, "the creative leeway between script and performances . . . is enormous when adaptation crosses media boundaries" (112), but Miyazaki begins his film the

same way Jones opens her novel: one day Sophie is working at the hat shop, when she finds herself inexplicably cursed by the Witch of the Waste, and transformed into an old, wrinkled woman who is unable to tell anyone about her curse. Sophie then sets out for the land of the Waste, a slow journey made more difficult by her sudden transformation into an old woman. She comes upon the Wizard Howl's moving castle, a structure that is to unsettling everyone in Ingary because of its uncanny habit of getting up and moving to wherever it wants to go. Soon, Sophie meets Howl himself. In the book, he is a dashing young wizard characterized by his vanity and lechery; in the film, he is no less handsome, but he now has become a tortured soul, burdened by war.

As expected from a transformative adaptation, it is at this point in the plot that the stories diverge as Miyazaki becomes "a new author in his own right" (Abbott 112). The novel finds Sophie working out the relationships of her two sisters while trying to keep up with Howl's love life. The tone is light-hearted until the explosive final showdown with the Witch of the Waste and her fire demon. In Miyazaki's film, on the other hand, Sophie is introduced to the violence of a war she has only heard about soon after entering the moving castle. The mobility of the castle creates a new outlet for experiencing the immediacy of a war that seems to be happening everywhere all at once; the ability to actually *go* to where the war is taking place removes the façade that the war is merely happening elsewhere, and instead brings the characters into direct conflict with reality. In invoking the Iraq War in its representation of Ingary's war (described by characters in the film as "senseless" and "idiotic"), the film performs a similar function for viewers, providing them with an account of war that more accessible than the televised news reports on the fighting taking place in Iraq at the time.

As the movie demonstrates early on, war invades every aspect of human life, beginning with the surrounding natural world. Ingary, with its imagery based on the countryside of France, is a world that exists in soft blues and peaceful greens. However, as war encroaches on the environment, the film literally grows darker as the story moves from peace to chaos. In contrast to the environment that becomes a helpless victim to the fires that consume it, the film depicts war as something that happens not only *to* people, but *because* of them. It sweeps people away, it terrorizes them, and worse, it takes good people and transforms them into something evil. In short, it is a curse on the people, transforming them inwardly the way that Sophie has been outwardly changed into a feeble old woman.

Indeed, in the novel, it is a literal curse that is plaguing Howl, and the language used to describe the effect it is having on him seems to have been appropriated by Miyazaki for the way in which war begins to change people in the movie, moving from the macrocosm of nature to, as producer Toshio Suzuki describes, "the personal lives of the characters" (Suzuki). Howl's curse is twofold in the novel, but only one element is retained for the film. Miyazaki limits the curse to the result of Howl trading his physical heart to the fire demon Calcifer for the amplification of his magical powers. Paying a price for becoming the greatest wizard in Ingary, Howl's lack of a physical heart leaves him incapable of loving anyone, including himself, and dooms him to eventually wasting away into a shell of a human being. Calcifer, having become friends with Howl, intervenes by urging Sophie to find a way to break what he calls the "contract" between himself and Howl, because he doesn't want to destroy the wizard. However, whereas the novel presents Howl's transformation after the curse as entirely *inward,* having only to do with his character, in the film he is literally mutated by the curse.

Just as in the book, the film gives audiences a glimpse of what the curse has done to others before they begin to anticipate the hideousness of the monster Howl will change into (although hints are dropped that beneath Howl's handsome exterior, a hidden, monstrous form is lurking). In the book, we learn that the Witch of the Waste, was, in fact, exactly like Howl—she was once young and beautiful, before she gave part of herself to a fire demon who made her powerful, but who after time devoured her and became the true antagonist of the novel. The foreshadowing of a similar fate for Howl is suggested by the insect-like creatures swarming in drones that audiences learn were once wizards like Howl. Rather than be consumed by a fire demon, these wizards have been consumed by their own use of what is essentially black magic (magic used for violence) and have thus been reduced from men to beasts.

In this way, Miyazaki adapts Jones's consequences of the curse in the novel and gives them physical form in his film. As Dani Cavallaro points out, "More disturbing still is the fact [that] in dramatizing the magician's successful attempts at vanquishing the military machinery, *Howl* highlights the non-human nature of the goopy creatures that drive it, while at the same time unsentimentally exposing the fate of real human troops and civilians in the raided town" (171). Cavallaro's observations accurately highlight the nature of war in the film; when it ends, utopia does not take its place. Instead, the after-effects remain. That point is conveyed by the film when Howl painfully grips his arm where black feathers have begun to push their way up through his skin, a physical representation of what is equivalent to post traumatic stress disorder. Fighting against the wizard mutations, we are shown, encourages Howl's transformation into something even more frightening than the mutations.

Miyazaki builds on the idea that war is a transformative force by taking Howl's inner psychological state as a soldier and depicting it as a physical, bodily metamorphosis. Miyazaki

moves beyond "good" and "evil" as the dividing forces of conflict in the film; these states are not static, but flowing and interchangeable. For example, the film suggests that the insects were not only once human, but therefore, once *good,* and now, because of the violent acts they have committed, they have become evil, a descent that Howl himself is experiencing. "After the war," Howl says to Calcifer that the insects "won't ever recall being human." Describing the way characters engaged in combat for the sake of helping others (specifically, to protect their country, friends, or family) are still unavoidably contributing to bloodshed, A.O. Scott, in his review of the film for *The New York Times,* notes that *Howl's Moving Castle* manages to depict "the catastrophic irrationality of war and other violence," while at the same time considering "the moral complications that arise from ordinary acts of selfishness, vanity and even kindness" (Scott). This is an objective worldview that clashes with the American ideal of troops who "protect our freedom," and supports Miyazaki's unflinching depiction of the disaster left behind in the wake of combat as a commentary on the Iraq War. Perhaps gesturing to the "preemptive strike" justification of the Bush-Cheney doctrine, the movie creates a scenario in which even the act of opposing an obvious evil creates that same evil in those attempting to do good.

A Message for a New Generation

    Howl's Moving Castle, as a critique of American violence in Iraq, exposes the callousness of wars waged with disregard to "collateral damage" through the graphic depictions of the destruction inflicted on civilians in the film. Its climactic battle pits Howl against both sides in the conflict, his country's soldier-wizard mutations (now attacking Howl, the defector) and the enemy nation's airships, as he fights to deflect falling bombs from landing on Sophie's hometown. Ultimately, he fails. Sophie's hat shop explodes into flames as the small town is systematically bombed by war planes. The countryside turns black with smoke in a scene that

invokes the infamous bombing of Dresden during World War II. Miyazaki's film stresses the senselessness of armed conflict by depicting the destruction of this innocent world. By doing so, it conveys the idea that it is not *who* or *what* a nation is fighting for or against that is bad, but instead, the problem is that the nation is fighting at all.

Howl's Moving Castle is thus a counterstatement to the American administration's argument for waging its War on Terror, a position that was being actively promoted to the nation's youngest citizens at the time of the film's release in the U.S. In 2003, for example, former President 'George W. Bush, speaking to a group of elementary school children, said

> It's very important for the schoolchildren here to listen to what I'm about to say. You're probably wondering why America is under attack. We're under attack because we love freedom, is why we're under attack. And our enemy hates freedom. They hate and we love. We differ from our enemy because we love. We not only love our freedoms and love our values, we love life itself. Our enemy hates innocent life. (Bush 1632).

Miyazaki's film presents children with an alternative message: both sides in any war are responsible for the death of innocent life, and moreover, both sides are fighting for their lives in the conflict. The film's alternative worldview openly contradicts the American government's justification for the Iraqi invasion. Viewed as a message to a new generation of children growing up in a time of war, Miyazaki's film presents violence as meaningless, where dyadic divisions of "us" and "them" are irrelevant because all sides will be swept up into futile conflict. Underscoring the pointlessness of war, toward the end of the film, Howl and Sophie stare off across the flower meadow at a battleship in the distance. "Still looking for more cities to burn," Howl remarks. Sophie turns to him and asks, "Is it the enemies', or one of ours?" and in a

moment that captures the ethos of Miyazaki's message, Howl replies, "What difference does it make?"

That sentiment is driven home in the film as the senselessness of conflict goes on. Immediately following this line, Howl reaches out his hand to use magic against the battleship saying, "Those stupid murderers. We can't just let them fly off with all those bombs." Even his act of resistance against "those stupid murderers" will turn him into a creature even worse than what they have already become, though. This is underscored by the fact that after his intervention he clutches his hand, where the bizarre black feathers have begun to sprout again. Violence thus makes Howl indistinguishable from the transformed wizards even if he feels he is acting morally in attacking them because their actions contradict his worldview. We see a similar moment of violence turning Howl into the very thing he is fighting against in the novel; it is during a brief but heated battle Howl engages in with the Witch of the Waste. Jones describes the monsters as follows:

> It was a long, black, clawed thing, half cat, half sea lion, and it came racing down
>
> the wall toward the quay. Another burst out of the wave as it smashed into the
>
> harbor, long and low too, but scalier, and came racing after the first monster.
>
> (Jones 235).

As this battle continues, Sophie asks, "Which is who?" to which Michael (renamed Markl in the movie) replies, "No idea" (Jones 235).

It seems clear that Miyazaki has built upon this motif tremendously in his adaptation; the act of somehow remaining true to yourself in a chaotic world becomes the ultimate goal. Deeply unhappy with the transformation she has been forced to undergo, Sophie spends the entirety of the novel and movie trying to get back to her original self. Her sense of identity is taken away

from her first by the Witch of the Waste, and then again by the war; both of these two forces exert pressure on Sophie to enact some form of de-humanizing change. According to Suzuki, "Miyazaki is fundamentally interested in exploring the qualities that make people human and enable them to retain their humanity in a world brutalized by bloodshed and greed" (Cavallaro 170). Even against the futility of war, Miyazaki allows his morally good characters, trapped in the violence of their own actions, to display "the viability of constructive emotions in a destructive environment" (Cavallaro 170). Ultimately, the war is ended in Miyazaki's *Howl* when Madame Suliman, a witch with the status of Commander of War, decides to "put an end to this idiotic war." Her decision is arbitrary and without reason. It is preceded only by her comment that "The game is over. Get me the prime minister and the minister of defense." Her command emphasizes the absurdity of the entire affair. In the end, it is nothing more than a game for the people employed in the bombing of another's nation. This senselessness heightens sympathy for the characters whose "constructive emotions" (Sophie's perseverance, Howl's determination) are the only things that keep them alive.

A Mediated War, An "Idiotic" Conflict

Both the novel and the film versions of *Howl's Moving Castle* convey the idea that war is the force by which relationships, countries, and even personal identities are broken down and destroyed. They also suggest that it is humanity's willingness to communicate with one another that can begin to set everything right again. The very fact that the Japanese animated movie was adapted from a British children's book speaks to the ability of language to cross cultural and political boundaries. However, as the film shows, people's ability to openly communicate does not remain untouched by war; like everything else, it too becomes altered.

In the film, war has not only transformed the people of Ingary; it has also altered how they communicate *about* war by stifling open communication. In what can perhaps be seen as a critique of the American media's role in selling the Bush administration's plans in Afghanistan and Iraq, the film includes people in the background reading newspapers in addition to snippets of civilians discussing what they read therein. For example, as Sophie leaves her hat shop after being cursed, the sweeping musical score almost obscures the dialogue spoken in the background. Two citizens whisper, "They say their prince is missing, and they're blaming us." Communication has been twisted; no one knows what has really been said, but the already confused message is then disseminated and altered further by the media.

Sophie walks on after the dialogue, past the tanks that role into her town for the military parade, past the citizens celebrating a victory that means nothing. Later, in the coastal town of Port Haven, a warship makes its way into the harbor where Sophie is buying food. Billows of black smoke pour out of its bowels, where holes from cannons have torn through the hull. The warship presents a stark contrast to the pastoral countryside, for it is a dying, dirty thing from which men jump into the water to escape. Suddenly, bombs drop from the sky and explode. Someone cries out "An enemy airship!" Fliers come falling down from the sky, and a voice of authority shouts "Ignore the fliers, they're enemy propaganda!" The scene is reminiscent of what was billed as United States' "propaganda assault" that took place in 2002, when the United States engaged in "psychological warfare" by dropping 480,000 of pamphlets in Iraq (Esterbrook). The pamphlets, which were designed to coerce the Iraqis to not attack U.S. forces, warned that "Coalition air power can strike at will. Any time, any place. The attacks will destroy you at any location of Coalition choosing. Will it be you or your brother? You decide"

(Esterbrook). Another phrase cautioned the Iraqis to "Think about your family. Do what you must to survive" (Esterbrook).

The audience of *Howl's Moving Castle* never finds out what is written in the pamphlets. Viewers are never told what is on those fliers, whether it is a plea for understanding or a declaration of the evils of Ingary, and likewise, the civilians are explicitly discouraged from reading them. Whatever the message is, it is stifled, and the only one allowed out to the people is the message that the government has allowed, dictated in turn by the media. Later, Howl's apprentice rushes in to tell the now infirm Witch of the Waste, who has become another member of the moving castle, "The newspaper says we won." But the Witch, stepping into the role of a wise old woman, replies "Only idiots believe what they read in the newspaper." Meanwhile, the fighting begins again. The Witch is correct; only an idiot would believe the war had been won during an air raid. She then turns to Howl and says, "We need to have a heart-to-heart chat." "There's nothing I would like more than that," he responds, "But right now, there's a war going on." The implication of his words is that communication—true, open, honest "heart to heart" communication—cannot exist at the same time as conflict. Conflict ruptures the civilians' sense of normalcy, carving a path for the government to invade their lives and stifle effective communication.

The Redemptive Power of Words

A critical examination of *Howl's Moving Castle* as a transformative adaptation reveals the ways the film builds on the themes of Jones's novel to create its allegorical critique of U.S. policies concerning the Iraq War. Jones's novel stresses the need to use open communication to understand not only one another and implies that if people can manage this, they can avoid personal and international conflict. In the novel, as the curse on Howl progresses and he draws

closer to the day when it will come true, words (the building blocks of verbal communication) become the only way of understanding what is happening to him. Not only is it words, but they are words that some readers will recognize, for Howl is not a native to Ingary in the book—he is from England, and his curse is outlined explicitly in John Donne's poem "Song": "Go and catch a falling star, / Get with child a mandrake root, / Tell me where all past years are, / Or who cleft the Devil's foot. / Teach me to hear the mermaids singing, / Or to keep off envy's stinging" (77).

Howl spends much of the latter half of the novel puzzling over the poem, trying to understand it; he is continually considering its language and possible meanings, and just as Miyazaki takes Howl's metaphorical transformation and makes it literal in the film, Jones takes Donne's rhetorical argument and makes its meaning literal in the magical world of Ingary. Donne's poem "Song" is meant as a joke; all of the instructions are meant to be as impossible as the final one: that of finding a faithful woman (a sarcastic note from a jaded young lover). The events of the poem become the steps to fulfilling the Witch's curse on Howl in the novel, though, beginning with "go and catch a falling star"; fire demons, we learn later, all begin as falling stars and die on impact with the ground, a fate that the demons can avoid if caught and saved from collision. Howl, who has already completed the first of the tasks by catching Calcifer when he was young, gives up on understanding the rest of "Song." Still, he is sure that he can learn something by referencing texts from his own world in an attempt to use communication to return him to his old self even as the day of the curse's fruition comes closer. Sophie, who understands little of England and less of British literature, watches as Howl grapples with these texts, searching for the words that will help him unlock his curse:

> Sophie glanced at him and thought of the curse. Howl may have been thinking of it too.
> He picked the skull out of the sink and held it in one hand, mournfully. "Alas, poor

Yorick!" he said. "She heard mermaids, so it follows there is something rotten in the state of Denmark." (Jones 248)

The *Hamlet* reference is lost on Sophie, as is Howl's snide comment, "We can't all be Mad Hatters" (Jones 174). Here, the effort to communicate meaning is present but it is one-sided. Howl does not attempt to help Sophie understand his meaning, and so she is unable to help. The idea implied here, that problems can be solved by open communication, is repeated throughout the novel, not only on a grand scale but also on the literal level of Sophie and Calcifer's contract, which is also incorporated into Miyazaki's film:

"Tell me how I can break your contact," Sophie said.

The orange eyes glinted at her and looked away. "I can't. Part of the contract is

that neither the Wizard nor I can say what the main clause is." (46)

If only they could speak to each other openly, if they were not restricted by the curse in the same way the government restricts communication in the movie, they could help each other. Powerless and bereft of the ability to communicate, though, they are left to haphazardly attempt to understand each other's plight. They ultimately get nowhere, just as Howl fruitlessly attempts to make sense of "Song" (of which he has lost the last stanza, and has since forgotten the joke involved in it).

In the end, both the novel and film insist that the only way to survive any traumatic experience—whether it is, like Sophie, suddenly being turned into an old crone or, like Howl, being thrust into battle—is to work together to create open communication, in relationships and between countries. Once open communication is achieved, *then* it is time for action – and action is necessary, as is made clear in both Miyazaki's adaptation and Jones's novel. Just as action devoid of communication leads to war and communication without action leads nowhere, both

the novel and film version of *Howl's Moving Castle* illustrates a simple (if idyllic) solution. As difficult as it may be to implement, they each make the case for communicating and then acting in the best interest of all parties.

Sophie discovers this in the most unusual way. At the end of the novel, in a development only hinted at in the film, it is revealed that Sophie has a peculiar, latent magical ability: she can talk life into things. Her newly discovered magical power almost enables her to save Howl. Even though her words are enough to give life, she fears that words alone might not be enough and knows that she must *do* something as well: she must turn communication into thoughtful action. At the climactic moment in the novel, with Howl's life on the line, Sophie and Calcifer have the following exchange:

> "I shall have to break your contract. Will it kill you?"
>
> "It would if anyone else broke it," Calcifer said hoarsely. "That's why I asked you to do it. I could tell you could talk life into things . . .
>
> "Then have another thousand years!" Sophie said, and willed very hard as she said it, in case just talking was not enough . . . Kneeling down beside Howl, she carefully put the black lump on his chest in the leftish sort of place she had felt hers in when it troubled her, and pushed. "Go in," she told it. "Get in there and work!" And she pushed and pushed. The heart began to sink in, and to beat more strongly as it went. (Jones 324-325)

Thus, communication and action based on love and understanding are enough to redeem the quite literally heartless wizard Howl, and enough, as Miyazaki and Jones both suggest, to provide guidance for children (and even adults) looking to stay true to themselves in a violent world. Sophie communicates directly to Howl's heart, and it responds by beating; this channel of

communication guides her to performing the right action ("and she pushed and she pushed"), which successfully (and magically) pushes the beating organ back into Howl's chest. In doing so, Sophie frees Howl and Calcifer from the contract while simultaneously breaking Howl's curse. In the film, she then kisses the scarecrow—the object that Calcifer assumes she has talked life into—and it transforms into Prince Justin, the ruler of the nation currently at war with Ingary. Delighted to be able to speak again (having also been cursed by the Witch of the Waste, and thus silenced as well), he rushes off, eager to end the conflict with his country now that he can communicate again.

Although Miyazaki's film introduces contemporary politics with a dose of criticism of the Iraq War into his adaptation of *Howl's Moving Castle*, the film nonetheless builds on Jones's motifs and creates a cohesive message across both works, constructing a bridge between the two that allows for a deeper understanding of each. Hayao Kawai writes in his work *The Japanese Psyche: Major Motifs in Fairytales of Japan* that "One of the characteristics of the Japanese people is the absence of a clear distinction between exterior and interior worlds . . . the wall between this world and the other world is . . . surprisingly thin one" (Kawaii 103). As this analysis of Miyazaki's *Howl's Moving Castle* has sought to suggest, so too might film critics consider an adaptation and its source work. Even with drastic changes to plot and the addition of new elements, in the end, there need not be a wall, the traditional "unbridgeable gulf" in adaptation studies that separates them as distinct works (Abbott 113). Rather, as in the case of the film version of *Howl's Moving Castle*, themes and motifs of the source text can be transformed, but it is only by considering the adaptation in conjunction with the source text that critics are able to observe how these transformations can also transform the meaning of the narrative—in this case, how Miyazaki's radical changes in situation and setting transformed a

twentieth century children's book into a political allegory rooted in 2004 that speaks directly to a

new generation of children whose lives—like Ingary—had been changed by a new era of

international conflict.

End Notes

[1] Diana Wynne Jones passed away on March 26, 2011 after a long struggle against cancer.

[2] It is worth noting that in Japan (and in the last two decades, in the United States, as well)
animation is not considered, by virtue of its form, exclusively for children. Instead, animation is
enjoyed by all ages, with mature films directed at older audiences. However, Studio Ghibli has a
long standing history of producing films aimed specifically at children, and its partnership with
Walt Disney in the United States as the distributor of its films has focused on this target
audience. For *Howl's* distribution, Disney marketed the story as essentially a coming-of-age tale
in which Sophie must embark upon an adventure to meet Howl, the male hero, who will free her
from her curse (a decidedly different portrayal of what actually occurs in the film).

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Forum on the Legacy of Cult and Camp Criticism:
Reflections on Greg Taylor's *Artists in the Audience: Cults, Camp and American Film Criticism* (Princeton University Press, 1999)

Forum Editors:
Cynthia Baron and Rosalind Sibielski

The forum takes up points raised by Greg Taylor in his analysis of the influence of Manny Farber and Parker Tyler on film criticism in the U.S. It examines the effects of Farber's cult criticism and Tyler's camp criticism on contemporary practices of film analysis. The essays collected here also consider theoretical concerns raised by cult and camp reading practices, as well as examine the usefulness of those practices as critical tools.

Forum Essays

Abigail Van Vlerah, "Critiquing the Critics"

Tiffany Knoell, "Reassessing Cult and Camp Criticism"

Alexander Champlin, "Cult and Camp Criticism as a Dadaist Project"

Megan Thomassen, "Who's the True Queen of *Star Wars*?: Fan Hierarchies and the Objectives of Film Criticism"

Wonda Baugh, "Camp Criticism as Ideological Critique"

Stephen M. Boston, "From Cult and Camp Criticism to Acafandom"

Critiquing the Critics
by Abigail Van Vlerah

While reading Greg Taylor's *Artists in the Audience: Cults, Camp, and American Film Criticism,* it becomes apparent that we need to understand the role and background of the film critic. Taylor's work looks at film criticism from a particular period—specifically from the work of Manny Farber and Parker Tyler through Andrew Sarris and Pauline Kael. In essence, he explains that these critics took a "low-brow" art form and turned it into high culture. As such, the film critic played an important role in leading the way toward the elevation of film as an art form. Because film continues to be a malleable art form, though, it is necessary to continue criticizing not only film, but also film criticism.

Taylor's discussion gives rise to issues surrounding early film critics. In the first part of his book, we see Taylor offering descriptions of film critics who, at times, seem like they do not enjoy film at all. As a cultist, Farber disdained most forms of art for profit. He did not limit this disdain to movies, but also took offense with the works of Jackson Pollock and other artists who he felt were turning art into a business. While Farber's view may seem tinged with jealousy, it is also apparent from Taylor's analysis that Farber truly believed that he was elevating the status of movies by applying his mark to them through his reviews. But why Farber? Was his appointment a conscious choice to sell subscriptions to the publication for which he served as film critic? Perhaps inserting an oppositional figure boosted readership by creating controversy. Unlike other movie critics who "could simply assess Hollywood films for entertainment value," Farber sought to change the intrinsic and artistic value of movies. What becomes evident through looking at Farber historically is that he made film criticism into a discerning field through the perception that by engaging in his form of elite criticism, we (and American movies) become better.

What this form of elitism does in turn is assume that we want our films to take on the role

of "vanguard" art. Critically important to this discussion is the question raised by Taylor. He asks "does the film critic evaluate or analyze? Today we associate the former with journalism, the latter with highbrow or academic writing. Yet if academics must start with at least an implicit value judgment . . . so journalistic reviewers must also analyze" (31). Taylor may be attempting to blur the line between academics and journalists, but this juxtaposition of film studies and journalism shows film scholars' desire to set themselves apart from mainstream consumers of film. This calls attention to the need for discussion about the role of film critics. Perhaps historically film critics made more of an impact on movie going audiences, but with today's marketing strategies, it seems like film trailers and rating systems have a greater impact on the success of any film. If we are looking at film for entertainment value, like the general public, then critics like Manny Farber and Parker Tyler seem obsolete. The purpose they seem to serve, at least according to Taylor, is the further niche-making of film as a form of high art.

This highbrow-lowbrow binary seems unnecessary. Films will continue to be produced and enjoyed regardless of their quality. We can continue to see film simultaneously as entertainment, as a product to be sold, and as a form of art. The integration of camp and cult criticism further accentuates this point. But given the history of this binary, we should continue to critique the critics in order to understand on which side of the debate they find themselves. What is important is not who does the criticism or how they criticize, but rather the context in which they write.

Reassessing Cult and Camp Criticism
by Tiffany Knoell

As someone who worked as a media critic before entering higher education, I found myself both chuckling and cringing at the discussion of the patron saints of cult and camp

criticism, Manny Farber and Parker Tyler in *Artists in the Audience*. Taylor devotes chapter three

to Manny Farber and he is a sour pill to swallow. The quoted letter at the beginning of the

chapter summarizes the larger community's relationship with Farber and it sets the stage quite

plainly for a critic who was adversarial at almost every turn. He disdained the taint of

consumerism and middlebrow culture and viewed cult gestures as an assault on mainstream

culture (32). Where some critics, (such as most journalists) would provide pragmatic

recommendations, Farber recast the role to suit his own designs (31).

      According to Taylor, "…film cultism emerged in the postwar climate as a means of

valiantly expressing difference within an expanding culture of sameness" (33), but in his

descriptions of Farber's approach the quest to express difference seems very close to pure

obstinacy. This obstinacy seems to have eventually driven Farber from the critic's chair –

depriving studios of what Taylor describes as "an irritable, nonpaying customer" – as the movie

industry and their audiences evolved and Farber found his domain on the margins of culture

invaded (47). The image of Farber forlorn is reminiscent of Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The*

Meaning of Style and its discussion about the reclamation of subcultures and their eventual

absorption into the mainstream. The transformation of the edgy into commodities was the very

idea that Farber loathed and it is little surprise that his parting shots about the middlebrow

consumer was that they were "commodified zombies" (48).

      However, as much as I disliked the curmudgeonly tendencies of Manny Farber, I can

understand the aims of cult criticism and the fostering of connoisseurship. These ideas are both

closely tied to tastemaking, which continues to be a hotly debated issue in the present moment.

With the tensions between highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow tastes coinciding with class

tensions, the discussion of cult criticism should remain in the academic and public eyes for some

time to come.

At the same time, Oscar Wilde and Parker Tyler might have been excellent conversation partners, given the opportunity to meet across time and compare notes about the use of culture's raw materials for the crafting of something new. Taylor describes the camp approach as encouraging "the critic to 'complete' the work creatively, actively reworking and augmenting its material into a new aesthetic form" and I think that both Wilde and Tyler would extend that mandate to audiences as well (51). Between cult criticism and camp, I think that the idea of the "homemade challenge" to mainstream media has been taken to heart far more by audiences who use music, movies, literature, and television to comprise individualized "grab bags" of materials (51, 53). Tyler once said "What material is not good enough for creative transmutation?" and Wilde seemingly answered when he suggested that "anything will serve [the] purpose" (58). It would be interesting to hear Tyler's response to the current environment where pastiche and mashups are commonplace and anything is considered fair game. I suspect he might be involved in remolding the cultural clay into something new in this way as well.

Cult and Camp Criticism as a Dadaist Project
by Alexander Champlin

Reading Greg Taylor's discussion of Manny Farber and Parker Tyler as avant-garde in their production of artistic expression via criticism of mainstream Hollywood, I cannot help but be reminded of Marcel Duchamp. I wonder why, if Taylor suggests that Farber's and Tyler's critiques were such a break from American Surrealism, Duchamp, one of art history's most famous Surrealists and later Dadaists, is almost left out of the discussion. Taylor writes, "In appropriating popular culture for their own purposes, vanguard critics could actually use the functionalism, accessibility, and sameness of mass-produced popular culture to their own benefit,

hurling aesthetically rich craft artifacts back in the abstract expressionists' faces" (Taylor 20).

This description of Faber's and Tyler's contribution sounds very much like Duchamp's

motivation for his Readymades, which Duchamp had already introduced by the time Farber and

Tyler began working as critics in the 1930s and 1940s.

The idea behind Dadaism and the Readymade was a critique of aestheticism associated

with traditional art. What Duchamp did was take ordinary objects—a toilet, a bottle rack, a snow

shovel, a bicycle wheel, etc.—and without any serious modification present them as art. The

suggestion was that highbrow aestheticism was arbitrary. In this sense, for Farber or Tyler to

appropriate popular cinema in their artistic projects by re-positioning film as an artistic object in

order to challenge the aestheticism of expressionism is a kind of Dadaist project.

Accordingly, their cult/camp approaches to cinema may seem revolutionary from a film

criticism perspective; however, for avant-garde art it seems like this approach would not have

had as much significance. Indeed, it appears to owe a great deal to the artistic project of Dadaism

which emerged several decades earlier, and which is marked by much more exemplary entries.

Furthermore, if it is the case that this mode of critique proved to be a significant deviation from

traditional film criticism (as opposed to artistic expression), this aspect of Farber's and Tyler's

contribution to film criticism seems to demand further examination.

Taylor does a great deal of work indicating the connection between cult and camp

readings of film and the artistic movements that they responded to; however, at least in the first

portion of the text, the weight of their contribution to film studies is less emphasized. Taylor

begins with the useful example of MST3K (Mystery Science Theater 3000) as a popular work of

film criticism or spectatorship informed by Farber's and Tyler's critiques, but it is not clear how

we get from these artistic appropriations of film (in the service of a discourse between highbrow

and middlebrow artists) and the popular form of reception and critique referenced by MST3K. That is, although Farber and Tyler may have been exercising their taste in movies as a challenge to highbrow taste, they were still primarily involved in a discourse among the artistic elite. As Taylor acknowledges, Farber and Tyler were appropriating mainstream (read: lowbrow) cultural product for the sake of a highbrow engagement, presumably excluding all others including the original, general audiences of the films. The question this raises is: how do these highbrow artistic discourses become significant as popular modes of reading film and is it fair to exclude the general film consumer from the history of this pattern of spectatorship until years later?

Who's the True Queen of *Star Wars*?: Fan Hierarchies and the Objectives of Film Criticism
by Megan Thomassen

In *Artists in the Audience*, Greg Taylor raises some very interesting questions about film criticism namely: What is the point of film criticism and what are the most useful ways to do it? He also asks "Does the film critic *evaluate* or *analyze*?" (31). Taylor notes that we usually associate evaluation of films with journalism and analysis of films with academic writing. He points out, though, that journalists must do some analysis and that scholars must make some value judgments.

These observations bring to mind questions about the creation of hierarchies of film viewers. In his analysis of both Farber and Tyler, Taylor notes that they are not interested in creating a level playing field where every viewer can be an excellent analyst or critic, but that they were interested in being the premiere tastemakers through their own particular and esoteric brand of criticism, which "used culture as raw material" (58). This resonates with scholarship on cult movies and their fans, where hierarchies within fan communities are often a focus of

analysis.

It seems from Taylor's book that even when people are trying to escape the homogenizing effects of the mass media or middlebrow art, they are still reproducing the same structures and hierarchies in their supposedly deviant or resistant communities. I can remember when I was in middle school one of my best friends and I had arguments over who was the true "Queen of Star Wars," based on who knew more trivia, who had seen the films the most times, etc. Conversely, as an adult film scholar I have been teasingly called bourgeois because I generally do not enjoy watching overly campy or cult movies, such as *Ninja Cheerleaders* (David Presley, 2008) or *The Room* (Tommy Wiseau, 2003). So, from Farber and Tyler to twenty-first century academics, the pattern seems to be similar—wanting to be the elite, or at least considered better, or higher, based on one's taste in media consumption.

As I mentioned earlier, Taylor notes that academics make value judgments when choosing which materials to study. I have certainly judged peers on this in the past, thinking: "About 200 people in the whole world have seen this film, why are you studying it?" And, at the other extreme, I have felt a sort of unspoken snobbery at times because I like to study action films, which some people view as non-artistic Hollywood junk. It gets back to the bigger question, why do film criticism at all? What are our goals? What is the desired outcome of our work?

As a final, rather random aside, I have to mention that Taylor's book kept reminding me of Ayn Rand's novel, *The Fountainhead*, which in many ways is also about taste-making and conformity in aesthetics. In the novel, the character Ellsworth Toohey is a New York intellectual who is constantly self-effacing, but who weasels his way into the elite groups of critics for every aesthetic undertaking—poetry, architecture, painting, etc.—and turns them all into his lapdogs.

That is not what Farber and Tyler were trying to do, obviously, but while reading Taylor's study of their impact on film criticism, I just keep getting the image of them, holed up in their NYC studio apartments, waging wars of words with other critics.

Camp Criticism as Ideological Critique
by Wonda Baugh

In *Artists in the Audience*, Greg Taylor discusses the critic's role in filmmaking. Influenced by Roland Barthes' *From Work to Text*, Taylor claims that viewers and critics actually create the movie as they are watching it. He uses *Mystery Science Theater 3000* as an example of critics creating new art out of old by speaking back to the text, mocking the "bad" movies featured on the show through sarcasm and inter-textual references, so that the show's commentary on the featured films becomes its own popular culture product. In other words, *Mystery Science Theater 3000* takes art and repurposes it. This is very much the way many people view movies in their own homes. It is also a decidedly different view of spectatorship than the notion, common to much early cinema studies scholarship, that movie viewers are passive audiences.

Pursuing this line of inquiry, Taylor argues that Oscar Wilde, much like Roland Barthes, "contends that the artist's original intention is of little concern to a critic who properly treats the work simply as a 'starting-point for a new creation'" (12). In this way, Wilde might be understood to anticipate film critics like Manny Farber and Parker Tyler, who believed that the audience-critic writes his/her own experiences onto the movie, and that the intentions of the moviemakers are irrelevant when it comes to interpretation. But what does this type of criticism look like in practice?

This weekend I went to see *Rango* (Gore Verbinski, 2011). The movie's plot was simple:

a lonely house-pet lizard ends up in the desert where he acts tough enough to become the sheriff. The residents of the desert believe that he can help them restore their dying ghost town by finding out where their water is going. The villain mayor has duped the majority of the town into selling their land and is stealing all of the water to create Las Vegas, a symbol of progress. Even while I was inside the theater watching the movie, I could not turn my critique off. The hero of the story was male and from the city (or at least a suburb); he was a stranger who saved-the-town. This works on so many levels to reinforce U.S. foreign policy, imperialism, and the oppression of the global south while it upholds the dominant hierarchy. Certainly there was a moral to the story about capitalism, greed, community and friendship . . . but tired tropes ruined the movie for me.

Clearly, not everyone who watches this movie brings my particular lens to this type of movie. I am certain that people think a talking lizard that learns to have self-confidence is a wonderful thing to share with their children. But for me, the consequences of this "low-culture" text being consumed by very young people are destructive in the long run. This movie relies on racist stereotypes of Native Americans and Mexicans (the "white" lizard is the hero). It relies on old tropes about women: they need saving. It also relies on images of disabled people as evil or old—the mayor is in a wheelchair, the one Native American walked with one crutch. For children who may have never met a person in a wheelchair, or maybe never even had a conversation with a disabled person—the notion that disabled people are deviant is unhelpful at best and insulting at worst. One day, maybe some filmmaker will use the awful images in *Rango* to create a montage about disability like Spike Lee did about representation of African Americans in *Bamboozled* (Spike Lee, 2000). I guess all of that is to say that I do believe that viewers and critics bring their own selves into the movies and that they cannot "turn off" or be

passive; in fact I agree that audiences participate in writing movies as they view them, and at times this can be a political act, as well as a creative act.

From Cult and Camp Criticism to Acafandom
by Stephen M. Boston

The term "camp" takes on a different use (and a different meaning) as it is explored in *Artists in the Audience*, especially the way Parker Tyler viewed it. For Tyler, camp

> facilitated creative, aesthetic discussion of popular cinema. Yet [he] took movies
>
> themselves even less seriously than Farber did—he openly regarded them as material for
>
> his own creative, psychological-mythic reverie. He was seeking only to add method to
>
> the movies' madness. The movies themselves were aesthetically *out* of control, an
>
> entertaining maelstrom of meanings and sensations that could be shaped only from
>
> without and after the fact, by the properly attuned critical spectator. (Taylor 51)

In this way, Tyler's conception of camp criticism encompassed the idea of "Hallucinating Hollywood," essentially the practice of seeing a film behind the film. In the simplest of explanations, hallucinating Hollywood was critics/audiences taking away meaning from a film that was not directly intended, and creating new conceptions from their own readings. Thus, where camp is now commonly viewed as an aesthetic sensibility based on bad taste and ironic value, Tyler saw it as a meaning-making practice.

Manny Farber's "termite" approach to cult criticism, on the other hand, glorifies the critic's heightened ability to dissect films and select appropriately the aspects and qualities of a film that make it have meaning and be of high artistic value. To burrow in and dissect small pieces of film for their value was the major concept of cultism. The goal was also to explore the way films referenced other films, either as evidence of auteurship or through homage to work by

other directors. Both of these approaches were very influential in film criticism. Both made a claim to being the most important. However, to effectively critique or analyze a film, one cannot stop at one approach. Indeed, there are possibilities for meshing cult and camp approaches to establish a better reading of a scene or an entire film.

For example, I recently watched the film *Paul* (Greg Mottola, 2011), a movie about an alien on earth that has been held captive for over forty years. Having escaped, he needs the help of two science fiction geeks to help him get to the space craft coming to rescue him while simultaneously trying to avoid recapture by the government. This film meshes cult and camp sensibilities, and seems to invite analysis through both cult and camp lenses. For one thing, bad taste and irony are at the forefront of this film. Comic Con, science fiction, comic book geeks, aliens, the government, and religion are playfully mocked and several ironic cultural references are placed throughout the film. Knowing the people and aura that surrounds Comic Con and science fiction also adds to the playfulness and "campiness" of the two main characters, with popular perceptions of fandom and geek culture used to characterize them both.

At the same time, though, using Tyler's conception of camp criticism, it is easy to see that there is definitely a film within a film here. *Paul* could be read as the story of two geeky men who had nothing going for them stepping up and making meaning out of their lives. It could also be read in terms of the theme of religion versus science and the question of which is the best approach to understanding life. One could equally read this film as a story of oppression, with multiple characters trying to break away from various forms of subjugation. Or one could just view it as a funny sci-fi, action-comedy. In other words, there are ways to read another narrative behind the one presented in the film itself.

In addition, there is the cultist reading of the film. I could dissect many moments of this

film and value small pieces for their aesthetic glory. However, I find it more meaningful to take the approach of appreciating the films' references to other films because *Paul* is was loaded with them. Whether it was *E.T.* (Steven Spielberg, 1982), *Blade* (Stephen Norrington, 1998), or the franchises started by films such as *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977), *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979), and *Star Trek* (Robert Wise, 1979), *Paul* was littered with sci-fi movie references, and, for me, this made the film wonderful. It brought excitement, meaning, and hidden laughter, as well as appreciation in this sci-fi comedy.

In closing, I want to touch briefly here on acafandum within this context. A new critical approach developing out of media studies, acafandom seems to have academic value if utilized correctly. As a critical practice, it provides spaces to write, do analysis, and give commentary on television and film inside and outside of academic journals. Much like Farber's cult criticism and Tyler's camp criticism, it also grants academic value to writing that is not necessarily deemed "academic" work. I fear that this new space of writing may become saturated as more and more people choose to write and rant, however it does open up new possibilities for new critical practices that take cult and camp criticism in new directions.