

The Pinocchio Theory

"If you fake the funk, your nose will grow." — Bootsy Collins

Gamer

[This started out as an ordinary blog posting, but it grew to monstrous length (nearly 10,000 words), even as took much more time to write than I had originally anticipated. I apologize for the length, but I still think it is best to post it in full. I am groping here towards something that I have been trying to work out, and articulate, for a while. I don't think I have found it all yet, but I am getting closer, whatever the awkwardness of expression here].

I finally caught up with *Gamer*, by Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor. I came to this movie with admittedly high expectations, based on my love for Neveldine and Taylor's previous two *Crank* films. But *Gamer* far exceeded anything I anticipated. It is brilliant, in the way that only a sleazy exploitation film, made by directors [who describe themselves as "pretty A.D.D."](#) could ever be. Indeed, *Gamer* is absolutely contemporary; no film since at least [Southland Tales](#) has said anywhere near as much about the world we actually live in today. *Gamer* is one of those rare films that truly dares to be (in the Lenin phrase I like to quote) "as radical as reality itself." It remains a few steps ahead of any possible critical reflection that one might try to apply to it — including, of course, my own. And yet it seems as if almost nobody noticed the film's brilliance. *Gamer* got [mostly unfavorable reviews](#), and it [didn't do as well as hoped at the box office](#). Indeed, [Ignatiy Vishnevetsky's brilliant review](#), [Annalee Newitz' quick recommendation](#), and [Kim Dot Dammit's blog posting on the movie](#), are the only commentaries I have found that do justice to what is more commonly described ([as The New York Times put it](#)) as "a futuristic vomitorium of bosoms and bullets." As I will try to show, such a description is not in itself inaccurate — but it needs to be read as praise rather than opprobrium.

Gamer is science fiction. This means, not just that the movie is set in the near future, in a world whose technology is extrapolated from our own, but also that it explores the *futurity* that is very much a part of our actual present — the potential for change that is inherent within our presentness. Literally speaking, the movie takes place "some years from this exact moment" (as an opening title tells us). The world of the film is one in which the media — and especially the computer gaming environment — that we know today are taken to the next level. In the movie's near-future extrapolation, [spectacle](#), [virtualization](#), and "entertainment" in general have been pushed to their logical extremes. Everyone in the world, it seems, is addicted to MMORPGs (massively multi-player online role-playing games). But these games are themselves viscerally "real," in a way that is not yet the case today. The basic science-fictional ploy of the movie is to envision a form of gaming in which gamers control the actions, not of virtual avatars on a screen, but of real, physical, flesh-and-blood bodies: human "actors." In this way, *Gamer* combines, and updates, the two most prominent popular entertainment forms of the current

decade: massively multiplayer online gaming, and reality television. Conceptually, *Gamer* explores these forms of entertainment in order to think about freedom and enslavement in what Deleuze called the [control society](#), or in a world that — as McKenzie Wark describes it — has become indistinguishable from [gamespace](#).

There are two games that dominate the world of *Gamer*: *Society* and *Slayer*. In both of these games, the human actors who actually perform the physical actions of the game have no free will. Thanks to nano-implants, they no longer control their own bodies and motor actions. Rather, they are forced to take orders from the gamers “playing” them. Artificial nanocells are introduced into their brains; these cells reproduce, replacing the original, organic nerve cells with synthetic ones. Once you have undergone this procedure, you have an IP address in your head, and your body obeys whatever commands are transmitted to that address by the player who controls you. You say what they say, and move the way that they want you to move. Of course, this only works one way: actors can’t see or hear their controllers, but the controllers are able to live vicariously through them.

Society is a hilariously sleazy live version of [Second Life](#) or [The Sims](#), with gamers guiding their actors through scenarios of drug consumption, partying and clubbing, and (most of all) down ‘n’ dirty sex. Actors rollerskate through crowded plazas, crashing into one another; or they grope one another in crowded dance clubs; or they accost one another with corny pickup lines in bars. The gamespace of *Society* is visually garish, with hypersaturated colors, and with raunchy costumes and lurid, tacky interior decorations that egregiously shriek out their own “bad taste.” Our first view of *Society*’s gamespace is hilariously set to the satirical song “The Bad Touch” by Bloodhound Gang (“You and me baby ain’t nothin’ but mammals/ So let’s do it like they do on the Discovery Channel”). *Gamer* illustrates the relation between player and actor directly, by cutting back and forth between the “actor” Angie (Amber Valletta) and her controller (Ramsey Moore). Angie is ridiculously dressed in a white fur wrap, blue hot pants, pink platform boots, and an orange wig; she is reduced, basically, to being a sexbot in the world of *Society*. Her controller is a morbidly obese, wheelchair-bound man; we usually see him in extreme facial closeup, sweating profusely, consuming munchies, and licking his slobbering lips as he moves her into one degrading situation after another.

Society is all about sex as spectacle; but in reality, sex is subordinated to economics. The financial structure of *Society* is simple, and brilliantly capitalist: you can either be a consumer by paying to play, or be a worker by being paid to be played. As Vishnevetsky observes, *Gamer* is “the sort of movie that imagines what the working class would have to do in its fantasy scenario” — something that is left out of most [transhumanist](#) and [“exodus-to-the-virtual-world”](#) visions. On the one hand, consumers get a pornographic experience that is still vicarious (and therefore safe) for them, but more “real” than any mere simulation could be. On the other hand, the “actors” receive wages for what is the *ne plus ultra* of [affective labor](#): the production, not of physical objects, but directly of moods, feelings, and experiences. The sim-actor is not just selling the use of his or her “labor-power” for a certain number of hours (as is the case in classical capitalism as described by Marx); more than this, he or she is actually selling his or her “life” itself as a commodity. Of course, such a “biopolitical” mode of exploitation (which would seem to combine the worst aspects of slavery and of wage labor) is

increasingly the norm — [as Hardt and Negri argue](#) — in our contemporary world of post-Fordism, “real subsumption,” and immaterial or affective production. Today, profits are extracted from the whole texture of our lives, not just from the labor we perform during specific hours in a factory or an office. Behind both the consumer/player and the actor/slave, there is the billionaire software genius who created, and who owns, Society (more about him below). He not only makes immense profits from user fees, but also acquires massive amounts of economically-valuable data through the technology’s surveillance of everything that streams over the network, or that happens in the minds of the nano-implanted actors.

[Just in passing: it is precisely because *Gamer* is an action-oriented exploitation flick, rather than one that expresses the psychological interiority of its characters, that it is able to provide us with something like a [cognitive mapping](#) of the contemporary world system. The movie is somewhere between an allegory, and a concrete exemplification, of the way that, today, value is extracted from circulation (especially media circulation) as well as from direct production. Indeed, we might say that value is even extracted, as well, from the moment of consumption itself. In classical capitalism, consumption is the moment when value is destroyed, or when the object is extracted from the commodity chain because it is no longer being exchanged, but is instead actually put into use, and used up. But in the world according to *Gamer*, this is no longer the case. Even the player’s most private and solitary *jouissance* — as he gets off on his living avatar’s being penetrated, or as he is turned on as a result of witnessing a bloody murder right in front of her — is equivalent to a capture of energy, and of attention, that is monetizable by the company running the game. When Hardt and Negri speak of “immaterial labor,” they mean that the commodity produced is immaterial, because it is a process, or an attribute of existence, a quality or an atmosphere, rather than a thing or a physical object. But this is not to deny the materiality of the production process itself; which is to say, the physical and mental labor (the expense of time and energy) that produces this immaterial result. The material labor expended in immaterial production is aptly figured by that labor (sexual and otherwise) of the actors or bodies that are physically present in the world of the game, and compelled to perform the actions from which their players derive enjoyment.]

For its part, *Slayer* is a real-time combat game. Players decide where to move and when to shoot; but the actors whom they control are physically present in the gamespace. These actors use live weapons; they really kill and get killed. The gamespace of *Slayer* is rarely presented to us directly. We see it, most often, as a video feed, in grimy, desaturated colors, shot with handheld cameras, with lots of vertiginous motion, odd, canted angles, swish pans, and jump cuts, often overlaid with a heads-up display. From time to time, glitches disrupt the image, or interference patterns run across the screen. This kind of camerawork emulates the overall look and feel of combat computer games, although the visual field is much more fragmented than is the case in such games, and there is no literal use of the first-person POV that one finds in many shooter games.

[I am thinking here of [Alexander Galloway’s discussion of first-person shooters](#), which I commented upon [here](#). Galloway says that the first-person subjective shot works to increase involvement in games, whereas it is generally alienating in the cinema, because (my paraphrase, repeating my blog

entry on Galloway) computer games involve active movement through space, whereas films are more about the passive contemplation of space. According to Galloway, gamespace must be “fully rendered, actionable space” (63); the operator/player must be able to roam through this space at will (as is never the case in film, where the camera angles and shots are all determined in advance). This gameric sense of active space makes montage superfluous (64), and instead demands full freedom of movement. Now, it seems to me that Neveland and Taylor complicate this opposition between games and movies, in the course of making a movie that directly emulates the experience of gaming. The movie spectator has no first-person control of the action, so it wouldn't work to emulate the first-person-POV computer graphics of a shooter game literally on the movie screen. Games feel visceral because the player is directly involved in the action; that is why games have to offer something like an organized Cartesian space for the player to move around in, and this space needs to be presented as continuous, rather than being cut up by montage. But it is precisely by means of hyperbolic, hyperactive A.D.D.-style montage that a film like *Gamer* avoids being contemplative, and instead communicate a sense of visceral involvement that is analogous to what games provide simply by virtue of the player's involvement. That being said, it still seems to me (though this would have to be verified by a more careful analysis) that Neveland/Taylor's combat sequences are far more coherent spatially than are, say, the action sequences in the films of Michael “Fuck Continuity” Bay. But see my further comments on the cinematography and editing of *Gamer*, below].

Slayer is even more advanced than *Society*, as an exemplification of neoliberal logic. The “actors” in *Slayer* are convicts on death row; they are given the “free choice” of entering into combat as meat puppets controlled by gamers, instead of being immediately executed for their crimes. If a *Slayer* character survives thirty rounds of combat, then he (it is usually a “he”) will be pardoned and freed. Those convicted of lesser crimes may similarly “choose” to enter the combat zone as, in effect, NPCs (non-player characters). They are controlled, not by a gamer, but by simple computer routines; they only need to survive one round of combat in order to be pardoned and freed. Of course, no one ever actually manages to get their freedom this way. NPCs are always picked off pretty quickly in the course of a round: John Leguizamo's character for instance, is programmed to be a janitor, so he keeps on sweeping the floor regardless of all the mayhem around him, until he is hit by a stray bullet. But even the most skillful players/actors cannot really expect to survive a full thirty rounds. The game is rigged. (Its logic is somewhat reminiscent of that in Peter Watkins' prescient and chilling 1971 movie [Punishment Park](#), where people convicted of political crimes are offered the opportunity to engage in a survivalist game in the desert, instead of doing hard time. The difference is that, in *Gamer*, the convict's “choice” to take his/her chances in a game, instead of being punished directly, is revised in the direction of neoliberal management of life via privatized “incentives”, whereas it is linked directly to the repressive state apparatus in the earlier film. The victims in *Punishment Park* don't get to appear on TV).

The economic logic of *Slayer* also brilliantly exemplifies neoliberal governance. Money is generated not just from the gamers who pay to control the killers, but also from the millions of pay-per-view subscribers who watch the combat live on TV or on the Web. The film revels in its reaction shots of enormous crowds of yuppies, in cities around the world, watching *Slayer* unfold on enormous screens.

They cheer each spectacular display of violence, and react with baffled anger whenever something goes wrong with the feed. (They feel entitled. *How dare* mess with my enjoyment?). The money stream from *Slayer* not only leads to enormous profits for the billionaire software genius, but also subsidizes the entire, spiraling-out-of-control cost of the American prison system. In an age of [increasing prison privatization](#), this is more than satire. America spends more on prisons than it does on universities; the cost is financed by using prisoners as an “industrial reserve army” of virtual slave labor. In the world of *Gamer*, incarceration with enforced labor and a high mortality rate seems to be the one alternative, for the working class, to selling their bodies on *Society*. It makes perfect sense, ideologically as well as economically. Punishment is submitted to the “invisible hand” of the market, just as neoliberal dogma demands, by combining harsh punishment with media spectacle. Convicted criminals are deprived of all volition, and turned into meat puppets, precisely because they are held to be personally accountable for their crimes.

Society and *Slayer* are surrounded and reinforced by other forms of media; in the world of *Gamer*, nothing is direct or “unmediated,” and nothing exists outside of the mediasphere. For one thing, advertisements for the two games are everywhere in the “real environment” of the movie. The movie begins — after the opening company credits, some video signal-zapping and the title text “some years from this exact moment...” — with computer-simulated images of urban scenes. There are postmodern downtowns with skyscrapers, but also favelas and even ancient ruins. Vehicular and foot traffic whizzes by in accelerated motion. Quite wittily, these scenes are [apparently](#) cribbed from the movie *Baraka* (Ron Fricke, 1992), which drew contrasts between the peaceful rhythms of indigenous peoples at ostensibly home with the natural world, with the violent accelerations of life in the overdeveloped world. [*Baraka* is a film, [according to its director](#), about “humanity’s relationship to the eternal”; it’s a brilliant move by Neveland and Taylor to hijack Fricke’s hippie-new-age footage in order to depict a social order in which any supposed “balance of life” has been obliterated by consumerism, and nothing remains stable for more than a second]. The only constants in these opening shots are the things added to the source material by Neveland and Taylor: enormous billboards and electronic signs advertising *Society* and *Slayer* (or containing the names of Castle, the creator of the games, or Kable, their biggest star — I discuss both of these figures below). The signage first appears, dreamily, reflected in a puddle of water; then, hard-edged, aggressively pasted over every possible urban surface. All the while, Marilyn Manson’s cover of the Eurythmics song “Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This)” plays on the soundtrack (“Some of them want to abuse you/ Some of them want to be abused...”), reminding us of our status as either predators or prey in this updated-for-the-new-millennium version of Social Darwinism. We have been warned.

In the world of *Gamer*, *Society* and *Slayer* are also the primary focus of television news broadcasts, which are ubiquitous in the film and which seem to have no other subject of interest. In this way, the film’s exposition is handled largely by infographics flashing across media screens. The talkshow host Gina Parker Smith (Kyra Sedgwick), who will apparently do anything in order to get a story, scores by arranging an exclusive interview with the billionaire software genius Ken Castle, inventor of the brain nanotechnology that makes the games work. Castle, despite (or rather because of) his teasing reclusiveness, is a pure creature of media: the world’s greatest celebrity as well as its richest man

(Society and Slayer have made him wealthier than Bill Gates). Castle is played by Michael C. Hall, best known as the star of the Showtime TV series *Dexter*. But whereas Hall is introverted and tormented in *Dexter*, here he is extroverted and slimy. A condescending, self-congratulatory smirk never leaves his face, not even when he is sucking on his trademark lollipop. Castle clearly thinks that he is smarter than everybody else — and he revels in this fact. He is slickly mediagenic and “charming” (in a way that can only be described as if “in quotation marks”), like a sleazy lounge lizard who has suddenly realized all his most extravagant, megalomaniacal dreams, and can make anybody do whatever he wants (both because of his money; and literally, because of his technology). His insinuating voice, with a slight, just-folks “hillbilly” twang, is a pure media manipulation effect — a performance with nothing whatsoever present behind it. Castle’s “just-folks” populism, and his steely contempt for his inferiors (which pretty much means everybody apart from himself) are two sides of the same coin. In embodying the character of Castle, Hall pretty much steals every scene he’s in — as the actors playing bad guys in genre pictures tend to do.

Castle is an extrapolation, if not directly of Bill Gates or Steve Jobs, then certainly of the nerd-turned-entrepreneur, control-freak billionaire type that they exemplify. Indeed, Castle might well be described as the living personification of [“the new spirit of capitalism”](#), with its emphasis upon flexibility, innovation, and entrepreneurial initiative, and upon networking rather than vertical command. This new spirit places a hipster veneer upon what still ultimately remains a form of authoritarian management, in which networked manipulation works more effectively than a hierarchical chain of command ever did. In other words, Castle is the “human face” of software-based capital, or of affective capital, in the society of control. For this is precisely a form of governance, a regime of accumulation, that *requires* a “human face,” in order to exemplify its new managerial style. In the 1960s, IBM was seen as the ultimate soulless corporation; its bureaucratic computers were the negation of everything human. Today, to the contrary, it’s impossible to imagine Apple without Steve Jobs — his minimalist, perfectionist aesthetic, and his showmanship, are essential components of the personal computing, communicating, and entertainment devices that Apple sells. Castle plays a similar role, as the face behind Society and Slayer.

Castle is the human face of the new capitalism, therefore. Except for one thing: Castle himself is not quite human any longer. We learn near the end of the film that he has turned himself into a cyborg, replacing 98% of his own brain with his synthetic nanocells. The difference between Castle and the “actors” in Society and Slayer, however, is that Castle’s artificial nerve cells are able to transmit orders and exert control, whereas everyone else’s nanocells are engineered only to receive orders and to compel obedience. “I think it, you do it,” Castle says. With his nanotech, he is able to make people “buy what I want them to buy, vote how I tell them to vote, do pretty much damn well anything I figure they ought to do” — without their even being aware of it. The control of other peoples’ minds and bodies in gamespace is only a prelude to, or a test run for, the control of other peoples’ minds and bodies in all other areas of life as well. Gaming — like other media forms and aesthetic forms before it — is a kind of cutting-edge space in which to experimentally implement, and to explore in advance, the social arrangements (of power and resistance, or of capital accumulation and of the friction that interferes with that accumulation) that are subsequently deployed throughout all of society. [Today we can say of

gaming what Jacques Attali said of music: “its styles and economic organization are ahead of the rest of society because it explores, much faster than material reality can, the entire range of possibilities in a given code. It makes audible the new world that will gradually become visible, that will impose itself and regulate the order of things.”]

Gamer has been criticized by some reviewers and bloggers because — in quintessential genre fashion — it shifts attention away from the system and to just one evil individual; thus implying that taking that individual down is enough to liberate everyone. In this way, the movie would be guilty of leaving the system itself intact. But I think that such a reading is itself too simple: it ignores the way that the figure of Castle precisely embodies and condenses the “system itself”, that is to say, the whole regime of [flexible accumulation](#) (or of what I might prefer to call expropriation with a smirk, or a smile). One way that today’s media “personalities” differ from nineteenth-century fictional characters, or from twentieth-century selves with interiority, is that media personalities today function so directly as personifications, or embodiments, of impersonal, impalpable, and unrepresentable forces. Indeed, this is not anything really new. It is what Marx already said about capitalists in his own time: that they were not real individuals, but personifications of capital. But such a situation of *personification* and *personificationis* far more widespread today than it was in Marx’s own time. Where the nineteenth century, in both its fictions and its social life, generally presented characters with Lukacsian typicality (and this is the form of fictional character that most Marxist cultural critics, trapped in their own nostalgia, still tend to prefer), and the twentieth century emphasized depth psychology and interiority, the twenty-first century rather presents “personalities” as shells within which social forces are (temporarily) contained, or as screens and interfaces through which these forces exert themselves upon, and affect, the world. Castle’s brain interface is a way of embedding commodity relations directly in the flesh; and he himself is the cybernetic, neoliberal regime of control and accumulation, embedded directly in the flesh. Just as, according to Deleuze and Guattari, philosophers must develop “conceptual personae” in order to dramatize, and thereby fully work out, their ideas, so capital today must generate *entrepreneurial personae* in order to fully realize the accumulation of capital at which it aims. In this sense, the genre tendency to personify social forces in individual figures is a necessary procedure; and a genre film like *Gamer* is accurate to condense its social commentary into such figures.]

In terms of its narrative, *Gamer* is entirely a genre film: everything that happens in the course of the plot is something that we have seen before, and that we have come to expect from other movies. Specifically, *Gamer* could be described as a combination of *Running Man*, *Escape From New York*, and *The Matrix*. The movie presents an oppressive virtual reality, within which an ultra-macho protagonist has to fight his way out of a situation in which everything has been rigged against him. The working-out of this plot is entirely formulaic and as-expected, up to and including the requisite happy ending and triumph of the macho figure. However, the movie’s adherence to these genre norms is so perfunctory as almost to be sarcastic. The macho action protagonist, Kable, is played by action star Gerard Butler (best known for his starring role as Leonidas in *300*). But in *Gamer*, Kable is sketched out so minimally that Butler can barely be bothered to go through the motions required for the part; he is so inexpressive as to make Clint Eastwood look like a wild overactor in comparison. (Or perhaps I

should say, to make Jean-Claude Van Damme look like a miracle of thespian subtlety in comparison; except that we now know that [Van Damme really is such a miracle](#)). *Gamer*'s adherence to genre norms, both in terms of the plot and in terms of the requisite displays of jiggling breasts, loud explosions, and hyped up macho insults (such as those that one crazed killer — who of course is black — addresses to the white Kable at one point), seem to be little more than a framework upon which Neveldine and Taylor are able to hang their delirious inventions. Or better, it is as if the film's genre normativity (in terms of plot, character, gender, etc.) expresses and exposes the way that neoliberal ideology explicitly forecloses any possibility of social change. As the neoliberal mantra puts it, "There Is No Alternative"; any alteration of social arrangements is literally *unthinkable*. *Gamer*'s strict adherence to genre norms is its way of deliberately figuring (and thereby calling our attention to) this foreclosure.

[This is the reason why "science fiction" has today come to be pretty much the equivalent of social realism. In one sense, the most intense aspect of our lives today is our sense of futurity, of continual innovation and continual product turnover; and yet this futurity has no other content than "more of the same" (or of what Ernst Bloch called "sheer aimless infinity and incessant changeability... a merely endless, contentless zigzag"). Thus, we are always being urged to upgrade our computers, which fall quickly into obsolescence through the force of Moore's Law; we are always looking for the next fad, the next cool thing, to such an extent that all fads and fashions seem to exist simultaneously. This urgency without change, or novelty without difference, is an expression of the commercial product cycle that dominates all aspects of our lives; it is the equivalent, on the level of content, of genre-conformity, as an expression of the claim that "There Is No Alternative", on the level of form. As with every other aspect of its production, the strategy of *Gamer* in this regard is not to offer a critique, but to embody the situation so enthusiastically, and absolutely, as to push it to the point of absurdity.]

Kable has been framed for murder — actually, he was forced by Castle to kill his best friend, in an early test of the nano-powered mind control — and now he is imprisoned, and a player in *Slayer*. He isn't aware of this in his confinement, but he has become an international media star — almost as famous as Castle himself — because he has survived so many battles, coming closer than anybody else to "winning" the game and getting his pardon and release. And so, of course, in traditional genre movie fashion, we the audience of the movie find ourselves rooting for him, and we even "identify" with him. But this attitude is itself figured within the movie, since it is the very condition of celebrity that the movie dramatizes. If we are rooting for Kable, we are doing this together with just about everyone (aside from Castle and his flunkies) within the world of the movie.

However, what it means to "identify" with the protagonist of a movie is definitely in need of redefinition here. After all, within the diegesis of *Gamer*, Kable is not an autonomous agent — just as characters in fictional movies are not autonomous agents. When Kable is fighting in *Slayer*, he is in fact being "run" by 17-year-old Simon (Logan Lerman), a narcissistically self-involved player whose every gesture expresses his affluent, privileged background. Simon can pretty much do whatever he wants; but evidently, this is only the case because his (unseen) father has paid for his high-tech gaming room, as well as for his *Slayer* account. (So much for Oedipus; the world of *Gamer* is one in which Deleuze and Guattari's anti-Oedipal vision has become the norm). Simon himself has gotten a certain degree of

Web celebrity, thanks to his skillful and successful “playing” of Kable; even though it’s Kable whose body is placed at risk, and whose charisma during videocasts of “Slayer” is what really appeals to the viewers.

In between Slayer sessions, Simon munches on peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches, as he lies around in his 360-degree media room. He casually enters into video-chat conversations with girls who flash their tits at him, or otherwise proposition him over the Web; and he buys heavy-duty assault weaponry online (rejecting anything that strikes him as too “gay”). The film’s portrait of Simon is counterpointed with its portrait of the unnamed gamer who plays Amber in Society. But where that player is linked with Amber by means of cutting from one to the other, Simon’s relation to Kable is expressed by shots in which Simon appears within the combat action right alongside Kable; we see Kable’s moves miming Simon’s own gaming gestures. This synchronization creates a sort of dance effect (which is picked up later in the movie, as I discuss below). In addition, as the film goes on, the relation between Kable and Simon is changed. Rebel hackers make it possible for the conversation between Kable and Simon to work both ways, so that Kable can talk to Simon, and hear back from him, rather than just taking implicit orders from him. Eventually, Simon is reluctantly persuaded to set Kable free from control, so that he can act in the game for himself; at this point, Simon is reduced to the role of a passive spectator, somebody who (like us) is simply along for the ride. All in all, the play of identification and distance in the film is immensely complicated. We need to triangulate between our own attitude towards Kable, our own attitude towards Simon, the attitudes of audiences in the diegesis towards both Kable and Simon, and the changing relationship between Kable and Simon themselves. In this way, *Gamer* negotiates between the cinematic media regime, and the post-cinematic one centered on computer games.

I have already mentioned that *Gamer* is set “some years from this exact moment.” This phrase is apt, and indeed precise, because of the way it envisions futurity as a heightened present. The movie’s ever-so-slight extrapolation from the real world of 2009 is to posit the future as involving an even greater heightening of real-time immediacy, of the “here and now”, than we in fact experience today. That is to say, *Gamer* is hyperbolically *actualist*, or *presentist*. It takes place, not so much over a span of time, as in a series of “exact moments,” of hypermediated, heightened and intensified Nows. Each sequence of the film is a thin sliver of pure present, without any thickness of duration. Retentions and protensions are reduced to the bare minimum; memories and desires only exist in an extremely compressed and foreshortened way. Bergson would say that here the past subsists only in its most “contracted” form. In the world of *Gamer*, memory is so flattened and reduced as to be drained of all emotional resonance. It only exists as so much computer data, accessible more easily by security forces and large corporations than it is by ourselves. This condition is literalized at one point in the film, when the rebel hackers hook up Kable to a computer, so that his blocked traumatic memories — of the murder Castle forced him to commit, and about which he explicitly affirms that he doesn’t have anything to say — can be played back to onlookers in the form of a surveillance video. Is there any better figuration for the ways in which the obsessive storing and cataloging of personal memories — through computer archives of photos and videos, [lifeblogs](#), and other such prosthetic devices — is inseparable from a

certain commodification (or “alienation,” in the strict Marxist sense rather than the looser existential one) of the past, and of our “mental privacy” itself?

As for desire — or even simple anticipation of the future — it is entirely instrumentalized in *Gamer*, and reduced to a question of mere technique. Kable’s actual name is Tillman: but his name has been changed, against his will, to a flashy tag for media-publicity purposes. Shut up in solitary most of the time, he is entirely unaware of being a worldwide media celebrity. In the real-time combat game setting of *Slayer*, as he struggles to make it through a round of play, all he can afford to feel (let alone think about) is how to avoid the dangers of the next thirty seconds or so. Where can I hide? In which direction should I shoot? Can I get my controller to turn me around when I need to? The only desire at work here is the one to survive; the only anticipations are those required for immediate short-term planning. Any further temporal horizon is unthinkable. Tillman tries to remember his wife (Angie, whom we have met in *Society*), and their daughter, from whom he has been separated as a result of his arrest. We are reminded, again and again, that his hope of rejoining them is the only thing that keeps him going. “I am always there for you” is even tattooed on his arm. And yet he can barely call his wife’s and daughter’s images to mind. He doesn’t even have a picture of them, until one is surreptitiously passed to him. Memory and anticipation are both exceedingly weak, when compared to his real-time situation of confinement and battle. Either we see Kable fighting for his life; or else he is sitting blankly adrift in the white-out of the dazzlingly sun-lit desert, or trapped in the confines of his dark and narrow cell. In none of these situations is there any opportunity for wide-ranging reflection, or for expansion beyond the confines of the immediate present.

The “presentism” or “actualism” recorded and embodied by *Gamer* — together with its consequent instrumentalism — of course results from the media glut that we already experience on a daily basis. Our social life is so overpacked and overstimulated and hypermediated, that we can only feel it in the immediate instant. (Indeed — [as Richard Grusin and Jay David Bolter argue](#) — the spacetime parameters of our contemporary social life are defined by the play between hypermediation and immediacy). The affective tone of the movie (and indeed, of the “real world”) is that of a society-wide attention deficit disorder (the “A.D.D.” that Nevelandine/Taylor attribute to themselves). The past and future are hazy, because they seem utterly out of reach. Futurity, no less than pastness, is brutally compressed and foreshortened. As it is for Tillman, so it is for all of us. Too much is going on Right Here, Right Now, for us to be able to focus on anything from Before or After.

However, it is important to notice that the system of [“communicative capitalism”](#), which confines us today, is not totalizing or seamless. There are always glitches, loopholes, and exceptions. And *Gamer* takes particular account of these moments of incompleteness and interruption. Indeed, its genre plot would be impossible without them (since then Tillman would not be capable of confronting Castle and overthrowing him). Within the world of *Gamer*, people are always concerned about the “ping” — the delay of several hundred milliseconds, even under the best of circumstances, between the moment that a command is given by a player, and the moment that the command is actually executed by the actor. Kable remarks that it is still his own hand which pulls the trigger, even if he has no say in the decision as to when to shoot, and in which direction. In the context of real-time combat, such as occurs in

Slayer, half a second might well make the difference between surviving and getting killed. Indeed, Castle plans to eliminate Kable by introducing a player into the game who is faster than Kable because he is not controlled, but acts on his own initiative (and who is sufficiently psychopathic that he will like nothing better than to kill Kable).

In addition to the ping, there is always also the possibility of network failure or interference. This is what allows the Humanz, an underground hacker group (whose leader is played by the rapper Ludacris), to intervene in network transmissions. At various points throughout the movie, they interrupt news broadcasts, commandeer the screens on which Slayer is playing, or cause Society to crash and go offline for a while. The Humanz try to spread the message that Castle's system is oppressive and a threat to freedom. They also negotiate Kable's freedom from his controller Simon, and eventually engineer his escape from prison and from the world of Slayer. But the most important thing about the Humanz is the way that their own technology is incomplete and ad hoc. They cannot destroy Castle's control system, but only circumvent it temporarily by in effect parasitizing it, using its own techniques against it. They have little influence upon Kable/Tillman's final encounter with Castle; all they can do is broadcast this confrontation to a worldwide public, which still values Kable's media stardom. That is to say, there is no going back on the network and its circuits of celebrity and control, and reverting to a supposedly clearer and more honest state of affairs. The only way out is the way through. The only possible oppositional strategy is one of embracing these control technologies, generalizing them, and opening them up. This is the very strategy that Nevelandine and Taylor adopt in *Gamer*, by fully embracing the very logic of entertainment and involvement that they are satirizing, and making an "exploitation" film whose hope is to draw audiences in, rather than "alienating" them. In the twenty-first century, [cognitive estrangement](#) doesn't work any more as a subversive strategy (if it ever did); what's needed is rather a strategy that ups the ante on our very complicity with the technologies and social arrangements that oppress us.

In all of this, I still haven't mentioned what really makes *Gamer* work: which is how the "look and feel" of the movie resonates with its generic and technological content. *Gamer* comes from a place where art film meets pornography-of-violence sleaze, and pretty much everything in between these extremes just drops out. As an "exploitation" film, *Gamer* embraces the logic of control and of gamespace, which is also the dominant logic of entertainment programming today (as [Sebastian Franklin](#) puts it, "a composite of film editing and computer programming is the emblematic cultural mode of the present day"). *Gamer* embodies and instantiates this composite logic, and turns it against the audience. The film is crass and satirical, and it disclaims any sort of high-minded critique; in this way, Nevelandine and Taylor are beyond cynicism. Their exploitation strategy disables in advance any critical scrutiny — but by that very fact it also disables any sort of ideological appropriation.

That is to say, *Gamer* doesn't just describe the situation of neoliberalism's "world of entertainment"; rather (or in addition) it fully embodies this situation, with a sort of gleeful reveling in its crass excesses. There is something at work here, which all our theoretical language of critique, and negativity, and ideology, and so on, is utterly unable to describe. I want to say that in some very deep sense, *Gamer* exposes what Adorno might call the "truth" of neoliberal society, or what Žižek might

call the “obscene underside” of consumerist enjoyment; and indeed, it also exposes the basic exploitation of labor, driven by the imperatives of capital accumulation, that orthodox Marxists would (rightly) say lies behind these ideological and affective processes. But it does all this without “estranging” us from the spectacle it offers us in any way, and without establishing any sort of critique or moral condemnation. *Gamer*, like many important works of recent years, is doing something that does not fit into the languages of critique and negativity that we have inherited from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. No recourse to Brecht, or the Dadaists and the Surrealists, or the Situationists, etc., etc., is of any use to us in understanding what’s going on here. And yet the gesture of a film like *Gamer* needs to be distinguished, in some sort of way, from the gestures of (say) *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*. This has something to do with the way that *Gamer* takes the premises animating *Transformers* (which are the dominant premises of the society we live in) more seriously and more literally than *Transformers* itself does — and thereby it “unmasks” the hypocrisy and stupidity of *Transformers*. But my language here (or my recourse to Žižek’s notion of “overidentification”) is still too crude and imprecise. It is inadequate to account for what is actually going on.

Let me try to put this another way. *Gamer* certainly has all the explosions and gratuitous sex and gratuitous violence that any viewer might want — the “bosoms and bullets” that the reviewer for *The New York Times* so deplored. Nevelidine/Taylor’s film is the bastard child of first-person shooters and Grand Theft Auto, as well as of the movies of Jerry Bruckheimer, Tony Scott, and Michael Bay. It exists in the same moral universe that these games and films do (which is to say, the moral universe that we are condemned to live in, like it or not). Not only is there lots of violence and sex, but often the violence and sex are played for cheap laughs and sight gags. For instance, at one point in a *Slayer* session, Kable rescues a woman in a hijab from certain death, by pushing her away from a spot where a bomb is about to land and detonate. However, just a moment later, the woman wanders back into the street, and is immediately flattened by an oncoming truck. Kable (or rather, Simon playing Kable) mutters something on the order of “at least I tried”, and then turns back to the combat at hand. This is clearly played for lulz, as they say on the Internets; and it arises out of the same cynicism that Bruckheimer, Bay, *et al.* always display in abundance. But there is something about the purity and extremity of Nevelidine and Taylor’s cynicism that distinguishes it from the attitudes of Bruckheimer and Bay, who in contrast might be said to lack even the courage of their cynical (non-)convictions. The excessiveness of Nevelidine/Taylor’s attitude is what accounts, both for the way that I am claiming some sort of a “critical” (though that is not the right word, and should probably be put, in the Derrida manner, “under erasure”) edge for *Gamer*, and for *Gamer*’s aesthetic cogency in contrast to the bloat and tedium of, say, the *Transformers* movies. Nevelidine and Taylor gleefully emulate the worst excesses of Tony Scott and Michael Bay, except that they provide us with a brutally compressed, miniaturized version of everything that is overblown and grandiose in the work of such high-budget filmmakers. Any ten minutes of *Gamer* is equivalent to an entire three hours of *Transformers* (with the added bonus that we are spared the irritation of having to endure the screen presence of Shia LaBeouf and Megan Fox, embodying straight white male teenagers’ narcissistic and sexual fantasies respectively).

[All this needs to be argued on the level of cinematic form — though I lack both the patience and the skill that would be needed to perform [a David Bordwell-like quantitative analysis](#) of how

cinematography and editing work in *Gamer*. But even a quick look shows how extreme *Gamer* is, in its embrace of (and even excess over) [what Bordwell calls “intensified continuity”](#): the post-1960s visual style in American (and some other) films that involves “more rapid editing... bipolar extremes of lens lengths... more close framings in dialogue scenes... [and] a free-ranging camera.” Bordwell claims that, with intensified continuity, “we are still dealing with a variant of classical filmmaking” in continuity with aesthetic practices codified by Hollywood in the 1920s at the latest. In effect, Bordwell denies that the New Hollywood of the 1970s is really all that different, in its aesthetic values, from the Hollywood of the studio era. And yet, when it comes to more recent (post-1990) filmmaking, Bordwell, like so many cineastes, has come to [deplore](#) the way that “the clarity and grace of motion seen in classic Westerns and comedies, in the work of Keaton and Lloyd and Ford and Don Siegel and Anthony Mann, gave way to spasmodic fights and geographically challenged chases. At first, the chief perpetrators were Roger Spottiswoode and Michael Bay. Now it’s nearly everybody, and journalistic critics have recognized that this lumpy style has become the norm” (see also [here](#)). I’m inclined to think that we have recently passed a threshold. At some point, “intensified continuity” jumped the shark, leading to a new stylistic norm in which “Hollywood action scenes became ‘impressionistic,’ rendering a combat or pursuit as a blurred confusion. We got a flurry of cuts calibrated not in relation to each other or to the action, but instead suggesting a vast busyness. Here camerawork and editing didn’t serve the specificity of the action but overwhelmed, even buried it” ([Bordwell again](#)). What Bordwell implies, but can’t quite bring himself to say, is that — when it is pushed to this absurd point — the hyperbolic “intensified continuity” of the new century does indeed mark a radical change in aesthetic regimes, even if 1970s Hollywood didn’t. Today, Michael Bay is the new D. W. Griffith (or the anti-Griffith). In adopting these new post-continuity stylistics, and pushing them to the max, Nevelandine and Taylor are suggestive as to what the new aesthetic regime might mean.]

In any case, *Gamer* offers us a continual cinematic barrage, with no respite. It is filled with shots from handheld cameras, lurching camera movements, extreme angles, violent jump cuts, cutting so rapid as to induce vertigo, extreme closeups, a deliberately ugly color palette, video glitches, and so on. The combat scenes in *Slayer*, in particular, are edited behavioristically more than spatially. That is to say, the frequent cuts and jolting shifts of angle have less to do with orienting us towards action in space, than with setting off autonomic responses in the viewer. But even in non-action sequences, Nevelandine and Taylor usually avoid traditional continuity-based setups. Consider, for instance, the scene, in an early part of the film, where Freek (John Leguizamo’s character) talks to a silent Kable. We do not see all of the actors’ faces, but only extreme closeups in which portions of the actors’ faces nearly fill the screen. There’s an alternation between shots concentrating on Freek, and those that show him talking, still in tight close-up, behind Kable’s face in profile. In these latter shots, there are even rack-focus shifts from Freek’s face to Kable’s, so that we end up with Kable’s face focused but in shadow, while behind it Freek’s face is front-facing but blurry. All this is intercut with blurry, soft-focus flashbacks to Kable’s memory of his wife and child, and then with a hard-edged flashback to the murder of Kable’s friend (played in reverse, and without Kable appearing in the image as the triggerman). It is only at the end of this sequence that we get an establishing shot of Kable and Freek sitting at the base of an enormous concrete structure in the desert (taken in such extreme long shot that the figures of

Kable and Freek are quite tiny). This kind of presentation, even in a non-action scene, makes it hard for us even to ground or locate the speakers can be located or grounded in relation to their spatial context.

[I am looking forward to Sebastian Franklin's forthcoming publication of his work on what he calls "executive editing", which should help to clarify what is going on here. Bordwell is useful for explaining stylistic details, but he seems to me to be off the mark when he states that, in classical fight sequences, "the stylistic orchestration of the fight trips off optical, auditory, and muscular responses in our bodies, while the pauses give the movement a chance to echo"; whereas, in action editing post-Michael Bay, we get instead "a vague busyness, a sense that something really frantic but imprecise is happening." Bordwell, as a cognitivist, insists on reading the beautiful orchestration of motion through space and time in classical fight sequences as something that stimulates the human sensori-motor system in a certain way. But the real point is, that these classical scenes' articulations of time and space establish an ontological consistency which goes beyond mere sensori-motor stimulation. (Deleuze is getting at something like this when he writes of the gap or suspension between stimulus and response that is the point of articulation in movement-image films, and that grows to encompass the entire cinematic universe in time-image films). Whereas intensified continuity (or what I would see, in films of the last decade or so as post-continuity) is precisely that sort of filmmaking that abandons the ontology of time and space, and the articulation of bodies in relation to this, in order to instead set up rhythms of immediate stimulation and manipulation — the shots, and the way that they are edited, have only to do with their immediate visceral effect on the audience moment to moment, with no concern for any sort of pattern extending further in space and time. In other words, it is Michael Bay's cinematic practice that really conforms to Bordwell's cognitivist view of the essence of cinema, despite the fact that Bordwell deplores this practice. While the practice that Bordwell (rightly) celebrates for its cinematic mastery absolutely resists being understood in Bordwell's reductionistic terms].

In other words, *Gamer* exemplifies a regime of vision, and of narration, that is quite distant from older Hollywood norms. This regime implies, in a certain sense, a heightened reflexivity: as Bordwell says of intensified continuity, "gestures which earlier filmmakers would have considered flagrantly self-conscious... have become default values in ordinary scenes and minor movies"; and yet, even as "stylistic tactics...come forward," nonetheless "viewers remain in the grip of the action," instead of being "alienated" from it or made aware of its constructedness. Or, to put the point a little more straightforwardly: [as Bruce Reid puts it](#), Michael Bay's movies "not only flaunt every reasonable expectation of believability and internal consistency, they make no sense. Edits seem random, every rule of film grammar is tossed out the window, and the headlong rush of movement forward is all." Such a sort of filmmaking shouldn't work; and yet it does, as Bay's high box office grosses prove.

But what *Gamer* gives us — as I was trying to suggest above with my comparison between it and the *Transformers* films — is a version of what I am calling post-continuity that is as expressive as it is compressed and foreshortened. This is because Neveland/Taylor directly envision (as Bay does not) the politico-economic regime of control to which this sort of aesthetics corresponds (which it

expresses, or resonates with). Doubtless this can partly be attributed to Neveland/Taylor's low budget and guerrilla-filmmaking tactics (like their use of the RED digital camera system described [here](#)). But it is also evident in the ways Neveland/Taylor continually vary the stylistics of the film, depending on the expressive requirements of each scene. For instance, there is one sequence in the film which (in contrast to the scene I described above) does adhere to an entirely classical shot-reverse shot pattern. This is the scene in which Angie speaks to a male social-work bureaucrat, attempting to regain custody of her and Tillman's child. The bureaucrat sits at a desk in the middle of an absurdly large and empty room. There are long shots, at the beginning and end of the sequence, of Angie walking towards this desk, and then walking away (with the click of her heels on the floor highly amplified). In between, we get an alternation, following the rhythm of the conversation, of the two speakers (each of whom is shot, by the textbook, either in head-and-shoulders medium closeups, or in head-and-torso shots over the shoulder of the other speaker). Of course, the conversation goes nowhere; Angie is quite anguished; while the bureaucrat wavers back and forth between maintaining a "professional" demeanor as he refuses Angie's request, and letting his obvious contempt for her (as a Society stand-in, and as the wife of a convicted killer) shine through. At one point, he even bursts into "inappropriate" laughter, then quickly controls himself again. Because of the way the sequence is shot, and how it differs from everything else in the movie, the futility of making a human appeal to a bureaucrat, or of appealing to the instituted power system for any sort of justice at all, is equated with the futility and emptiness of the shot-reverse shot convention itself. Shot-reverse shot is nothing more than a formalist cliché; it implies a human reciprocity that does not exist in the commodified, mediatized world of the movie (and that also no longer exists in the world we live in).

This is just one example; but throughout the movie, the use of both textbook cinematic techniques and forms, and of the more extreme (and post-cinematic, video-inflected) techniques and forms that more recently have gained commercial currency, is always calibrated with a reflection on (or perhaps I should rather say, a demonstration of) the ways that these forms and techniques express and embody and instantiate different types of social interactions and relations. I could also mention the absurdist action sequence, where Kable/Tillman escapes from prison, and from the Slayer gamespace, by first drinking down an entire bottle of vodka, then puking and pissing into the gas tank of an "ethanol only" truck, in order literally to fuel his escape. We see closeups of Kable, shots of Simon composited into the gamespace, and even a shot from the interior of the gas tank, as it receives Kable's alcohol-laden puke. Embodiment, flow, the human-virtual interface, and the human-machine interface are all yoked violently together in the course of a short montage sequence. In little more than a minute of screen time, Neveland/Taylor demonstrate how and why all those discussions (which we were all so engaged in, in the 1990s) about cyberculture and disembodiment are obsolete — even as they also implicitly propose a scatological/micturitional psychokinetics to replace it. Vomitorium indeed...

And this leads us into the concluding sequences of the movie, in which Kable/Tillman finally triumphs over Castle. I can't really describe these sequences any better than Vishnevetsky, who evokes "the chiaroscuro of the mansion scene, which puts more or less everyone who's ever cited Jacques Tourneur as an influence to shame... the scene [then] transforms, over the course of a few minutes, into a song-and-dance number and then a fight (but of course the musical is the ancestor of the action movie),

then a bit of sci-fi special effects and finally a confrontation on a basketball court.” These sequences all take place in Castle’s castle (as it were), his mansion which is a cross between a high-tech wonderland (that even Michael Jackson might have envied), and a fortified bunker. The continually-changing chiaroscuro lighting, instead of concealing a woman-transformed-into-a-panther, prepares Tillman for, and sets off, a vision of his missing daughter, whom it turns out has been kidnapped by Castle: Tillman thinks that she is really there, but it’s only a 3D laser projection (of “pornographic” image quality, Castle says). Tillman then fights off Castle’s goons, and knocks them out one at a time, as they dance in lockstep to Sammy Davis Jr.’s version of “I’ve Got You Under My Skin,” lip-synced by Castle. In the final confrontation, Castle tries to force Tillman, through nanocell control, to kill his own daughter with a knife. Tillman resists, and asserts his freedom by finally turning the knife on Castle himself. Only this isn’t really a victory for free will over conditioning, since we see via montage that Tillman is only able to do this because Simon has come online to control him as well. Is “freedom” anything more than the decision between alternative, battling compulsions whose source is elsewhere? This is not the only moment in the film when Nevelandine/Taylor’s SF extrapolation touches on the dilemmas of contemporary neuroscience.

Gamer fulfills all genre expectations, even up to the defeat of the bad guys and (apparent) liberation of the world from post-Fordist mechanisms of control. At the same time, Nevelandine/Taylor don’t exactly leave us with exalted hopes. What they do accomplish, is to map out for us the system of audiovisual entertainment that one major facet of the control society within which we increasingly find ourselves enmeshed today. They don’t “critique” this control society — if anything, they gleefully embrace it. But they offer us something that is arguably better than critique: they provide a kind of map (both cognitive and affective) of contemporary entertainment/gamespace, pointing up its extensiveness, its affordances, its limitations, and the degree of our unavoidable complicity within it.

[Most serious film critics (the ones I respect, at least) tend to prefer [“small, modest, humane, novelistic movies”](#) that go against the entertainment and publicity tide; or else, they cling to [“contemplative cinema”](#), the long-take, long-shot, sparse-dialogue style that has become a staple of the international festival-and-art-house circuit. Now, I admire the beautiful films of Bela Tarr and Tsai Ming-liang as much as anybody; and I am moved by the humane, heartbreaking, neo-neorealist political vision of films like Kelly Reichardt’s *Wendy and Lucy* and Ramin Bahrani’s *Chop Shop* as well. But I think that there also needs to be a space for critics and theorists to come to terms with films like *Gamer*, that are fast, cheap, out of control, and knowingly exploitative. Such films are, in their own cheerfully perverse way, in touch with the urgencies of the moment, and with the social Real, in a way that contemplative cinema and modest, humanist cinema are not. These films have their own aesthetic merits, which should not be overlooked out of cine-nostalgia.]

 Steven Shaviro / December 15, 2009 / Film

78 thoughts on “Gamer”

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kvond

April 17, 2010 at 8:36 pm

SS: “Castle is an extrapolation, if not directly of Bill Gates or Steve Jobs, then certainly of the nerd-turned-entrepreneur, control-freak billionaire type that they exemplify.”

Steve, finally saw Gamer and enjoyed its highly flawed extreme. An additional reference to your above which you may have missed and you may want to incorporate later. Castle is not so much Bill Gates/Steve Jobs, but rather much more Steve Jobs/Joe Francis:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joe_Francis

Also, I don't know if you agree, or if the name had strong antecedents, but the name “Tillman” I read with resonance with “Pat Tillman” the ultimate real world “weekend warrior turned real soldier turned ideological victim/hero”.

Thanks for your wonderful review, it ended up pushing me to watch the film.

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John Maus

December 3, 2010 at 3:26 am

Thank you very much for this important post. Two of the many interesting questions it raises: why are “these” films over-looked by most so-called critics? And, is there even a place today for (what you called) “contemplative cinema” or “modest, humanist cinema?”

It is the very same (or even worse) with music: Zizek, Deleuze, Badiou, Nancy, et al., are constantly worrying themselves over 19th–20th century “heroes” like Wagner, Schoenberg, Boulez, etc., but you’d be hard-pressed to find one mention of the Beatles or the Sex Pistols in any of their writings. I don’t understand this. I mean, doesn’t “human being” presently find itself in the world you explain so clearly in the post above? That is, /not/ the world of early to mid twentieth century Europe, and of all the wonderful culture that fostered, but in the world of pop. Right alongside you I would be the first to praise the magnificence of a Weerasethakul (or of a Schoenberg, for that matter), but situated as a “thirty-something,” “white,” “American” “male” (I’m actually reminded of that passage from Debord’s reflections on “Society of the Spectacle” from 1988, where he speaks of a whole generation having come up now, whose horizon of possibility was dictated by the spectacle) I can’t help (and I’m following Nietzsche’s imperative here) but /smell/ something a bit rotten about (in the sense of “at” or “around”) someone, similarly situated, who would mold their work after Tarkovsky or Parajanov, /instead/ of the films “they grew up on”; or someone, similarly situated, who would (as critic) bother themselves over Mallarme or Messiaen, /instead/ of “Robocop” or “Night of the Living Dead.”

Last night’s episode of Psych (which was, itself, a parody of “Twin Peaks”) staged an interesting encounter between this would-be “high” (Tarkovsky, Twin Peaks, Messiaen, etc.) and this would-be “low” (James Cameron, Psych, Cyndi Lauper, etc.) (and I can’t believe some still think these terms have any meaning beyond those given them by capital [i.e., as “cultural” capital]). In it, Psych (in the guise of its lead character), asks Twin Peaks: “Is there a film or television show you guys /have/ seen?”

The task for artists is to make a minor or an intensive use of a /major/ language, precisely as Neveldine and Taylor have, isn’t it? And the task of thought—to raise itself to the level of the not-yet posed in and through these minor or intensifying uses? Otherwise, we’re kind of just being snobs playing right into the hands of capital. I wouldn’t expect anything more from the NYT, but from my favorite thinkers too?!

Pingback: [Crank \(Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor, 2006\)](#)

Pingback: [Who are the best film critics, and what makes them good? - Quora](#)

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Rebecca Schwarz

April 13, 2012 at 9:38 am

Thank you for this fantastic essay. I was reading the reviews by all the haters, then I found this. I enjoyed the movie and it took me a while to figure out why. It took me even longer to write a post about it. For me Gamer is good fun, but also has elements of what I consider a modern fairy tale in that the characters must navigate some very real dangers that we all face –the dangerous magic of technology and the dark woods of mass media...

<http://curiousworlds.blogspot.com/2012/04/movie-gamer-as-modern-fairy-tale.html>



James

October 2, 2012 at 3:16 pm

The entire premise of the film is unrealistic – if it were possible to control a criminals brain, forcing them to fight to the death, it would be equally possible to re-introduce criminals into society and control their brains to stop them committing crime. Therefore the entire film nullifies itself with it's own fictional technology. Also the acting and plot were poo.



Aaron

December 31, 2012 at 5:13 pm

James, you unrealistically presume the state, or the interests which comprise the state, have any interest in preventing crime and rehabilitating criminals. The criminal justice system, as indicated in the above article, functions primarily as a means of control and secondarily as the aggregator of surplus cheap labour.

The acting supported the character concepts, but as a consequence of the firmly delineated plot, these concepts were limited in scope. In light of that codependent relationship, however, it would be difficult to argue that either acting or plot was lacking without failing to grasp any element of the film.

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