

MeFi
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CATCH IT! T
PLAY





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The first thing I have to say is thanks:

Thanks to the great team of contributors, copy editors, artists and designers, the inaugural issue of MeFi Magazine came out great. It has some fantastic new work from favorite members, it has some expansions of classic comment anecdotes, and all the pictures we've missed since the mods canned the IMG tag.

I'd like to single out for particular thanks Brandon Blatcher and Limeonaire, without whom this issue would have never come together, and adrianhon, who spurred this all on with his post to MeTa.

This magazine came about because MetaFilter is a vibrant community, full of great artists and writers, and we wanted a way to tap into that and to celebrate it. Instead of a single theme or vision for this magazine, I felt like the best approach was to encourage broad tastes and high standards, one of the things that epitomize what I like about MetaFilter. We would have liked to include even more, but hopefully the website will help us make sure that all MeFites get the recognition they deserve.

I really can't overestimate the amount of good that MetaFilter as a community has done me personally, and I hope that this magazine helps give back in some small way.

[+],

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SCODY TAKES MANHATTAN

Scody (Sara Cody),

WHEN I GRADUATED from college, I moved out to New York to live with my then-boyfriend and try to break into publishing. The job market was terrible—it was the recession of the early '90s—and I was getting increasingly desperate for work. My résumé (such as it was) had been fancied up to show that I had “done PR” for various university organizations, which was simply a business-friendly way of saying I wrote music reviews for the radio-station magazine and made fliers for various liberal-lefty student groups.

Through my employment agency, this eventually landed me an interview for an entry-level assistant with “an emerging political media organization,” in the words of the agency rep. The agency wouldn't tell me specifically who the interview was with; I was only told to wear my interview suit (oh God, my ugly fresh-out-of-college suit: a shoulder-padded, double-breasted yellow-and-white pinstriped number) and bring additional copies of my résumé to a specific midtown Manhattan address.

I must stop here for a moment and explain that I had been on a lot of interviews in that awful suit by that time — editorial-assistant gigs, administra-

tive-assistant gigs, marketing-assistant gigs — and I had botched every single one of them in one way or another. I'd screw up the typing test (which is pretty much the main requirement for an editorial assistant), or I'd arrive late after having left my résumé on the train, or I'd be asked why I wanted to be a marketing assistant for a small manufacturing firm specializing in heating coils and I'd answer honestly that, actually, I didn't want to do any such thing; I was on my way to becoming a Famous Writer, but I needed a job in the meantime to pay off my student loans. I did not get any second interviews.

So I show up, dressed like a tall, unemployed jar of mayostard. And it's the Ailes Production Co.

Now, I know who Roger Ailes is; I had been the kind of girl in college who had a Lee Atwater dartboard in her dorm room. I grew up in a household where, as a small child, I was told that President Richard Nixon himself was throwing garbage at the feet of the crying Indian in the Keep American Beautiful commercial, for God's sake.

So. I consider simply ditching it, but I know that then I wouldn't be sent out for any other interviews by my job agency. So I decide that I'll go in and fuck up — you know, just be obviously poorly suited (as it were) for the job. Fine. It would be over quickly, I would maybe go poke



around the Strand for a while, then I'd go home. So I square my shoulders, take a breath, and walk in.

The interviewer loves me. I am, he says, "refreshing and irreverent" — indeed, I am "exactly what we're looking for." I can't lose. I keep putting all my money on double zero and I'll be goddamned if it doesn't keep coming up double zero. Finally, he stands up. Please let it be over, I think.

"I'd like you to meet someone," he says.

"Oh wow," I say.

I am rapidly led through a corridor that includes larger-than-life-size portraits of various Republican icons, including Presidents Nixon and Ronald Reagan; I suspect (but am being hustled down the hall too quickly to confirm) that these portraits include eyes that follow you as you walk past. And then I am ushered into the inner sanctum of Roger Ailes.

He extends his hand. Automatically (and to my immediate sense of self-loathing), I shake it. What could I say? What should I say?

"I hear you want to work for me!" Roger Ailes (Roger Ailes!) booms.

"Oh, I don't know if you want me," I laugh nervously.

"Aren't you charming?" Roger Ailes (Roger Ailes!) says. "You may be just what we need around here."

Inside my head, a voice is hollering: Think, girl, think! There must be some devastatingly clever way to mention Willie Horton! Some brilliant monologue to deliver about saving democracy from the oligarchs!

"Oh wow," I say.

Finally — I don't recall exactly how — I manage to escape. I reach the street and burst into tears right in front of the homeless guy I passed on the way in.

"Bad interview?" he asks gently.

"Great interview," I sob.

After I stop crying, I talk it over with the homeless guy. He agrees that it is a genuine conundrum: I desperately need the money (and my boyfriend had just been laid off from his job), but it would be the dirtiest of dirty money. "But I guess beggars can't be choosers, right?" I say. Pause. He looks pointedly at me. "Oh man I'm so sorry!" I say. Then he smiles. "Actually, sometimes beggars can be choosers," he says mysteriously. (I realize I'm making him sound like Ladies and Gentlemen, in the Role of the Wise Homeless Man: Morgan Freeman, but...it sort of is like that.) "You can choose to do with what comes your way."

"I know what you mean," I say.

I have no idea what he means. But I thank him

anyway and head home. By the time I arrive back at our apartment (in beautiful Paramus, N.J., where we had moved after my boyfriend's layoff) I have resolved not to take the job. I have choices. Principles! Solidarity forever! We shall not be moved!

My boyfriend is livid. "Of course you are taking the fucking job," he says.

Buh... buh... PRINCIPLES! Solidarity forever! We stood on the picket lines protecting Planned Parenthood and demanding our college divest from South Africa together, right, honey? It's where we fell in looooooove.

"I. Do. Not. Care. About. Politics. Any. More."

Now I am livid. "Well, I do!" I say passionately, finally working up to that speech I meant to give to Roger Ailes. "I will always care! I will always be on the side of the worker, the downtrodden, the oppressed! You were laid off because of the injustices of capitalism! As Paul Weller says" — and I should point out that my boyfriend at the time was as massive a Weller fan as I am (well, almost) — "They take the profits, you take the blame! You know what that means! It means we are at the mercy of capitalism and it's, like, totally unjust! I have made a vow to topple our racist-sexist-classist power structure if it's the last thing I do, and as God is my witness — "

"Then. Go. Topple. It. From. The. Inside."

Silence. My eyes widen. It is a total Lucy-and-Ricky moment. "Darling! That's a wonderful idea!"

"Luuuuu-cy!"

Yes! It's a marvelous idea! I will sabotage the system from the inside! I will feed Roger Ailes bad information, and smuggle out good information, and insert subliminal Marxist messages into news feeds to trigger a revolution, and Fred and Ethel will do an old vaudeville number and Paul Weller will want to hang out with us the next time he's in New York and it will be awesome.

I eagerly await the phone call for the second interview, spending days flitting from room to room listening to Billy Bragg and laughing maniacally at my cunning plan. Count your days, capitalism! For yea, surely they are numbered.

The call comes. They love me! They want to see me for a second interview! If they make me an offer, I should be prepared to sign a nondisclosure and confidentiality agreement and be prepared for stiff penalties (both civil and criminal) regarding the misuse of information! Also, I will need to pee in a cup for the drug test!

Oh wow.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I can't make it." MFM



Is God in Show Business Too?

The fable, most ironical, of *Zardoz*

Ambrosia Voyeur (Amber Bowyer)

FOR 37 YEARS, John Boorman's science-fiction opus *Zardoz* has divided audiences and critics alike. Opinion on the film is phenomenally black-and-white; Harlan Ellison, in the introduction to *Omni's* compendium on science-fiction cinema, derided it utterly as "yak dung." Vincent Canby's *New York Times* coverage of that year's science-fiction offerings concludes with a judgment of *Zardoz* as worse than a joke, "a piece of junk," but other reviewers, such as *Science Fiction Films of the Seventies* author Craig Anderson, have compared the film favorably in terms of its existential themes and photography to *2001: A Space Odyssey*, that sacred cow of the genre.

By what means, then, can this pronounced disagreement in reception be explained? The story of this flop is as multifaceted and prismatic as "the Tabernacle," the crystalline consciousness at the film's center. These facets are the film's industrial determinations, auteurial influence, generic style and message. Through careful examination of the relationship between the text and these extratextual considerations, *Zardoz* can be understood as a surprisingly self-referential and ironic objet d'art, with a message that transcends even the intentions of its author. The story's richest moments concern questions of agency in the relationship between an author and his creation, Arthur Frayn and Zed, but their relationship is also a commentary on Boorman's authorship of the film,

and symbolizes the extent to which a masterwork can overtake its creator, revealing more about him than it was designed it to do. As Boorman wrote in his memoir, *Adventures of a Suburban Boy*, "As I invented this possible future, I became entranced by its complexities and the old hubris reared up."

In the 1970s, a major resurgence in science-fiction cinema was under way, following the fallow spell of the 1960s. Stanley Kubrick's *2001* seemed to break down a barrier, showing awestruck audiences that considering the future's radical possibilities was as good a way to process the cultural traumas of the past and present as had been the intensely subjective, transgressively political, socially cynical films of the early '60s. And besides all that heavy stuff, the fanciful, sometimes downright surreal visual design was a spectacular trip! Suddenly, theaters were filling up with films that posed challenging questions about humanity, technology, sexuality and ecology in marvelous utopian and dystopian settings — any frightful taboo or anxiety could be explored in these hermetically sealed futures, safely contained, yet larger-than-life. Between the elegant but erudite *2001* in 1968 and the childish *Star Wars* in 1977, there stretched a golden age of intellectual science-fiction cinema, a remarkable boom of forgettables and classics of a futuristic, fantastic sort that *Zardoz* could call kin.

1968: <i>2001: A Space Odyssey</i> <i>Planet of the Apes</i> <i>Project X</i>	1972: <i>The Doomsday Machine</i> <i>Doomwatch</i> <i>Z.P.G.</i>	1975: <i>Dark Star</i> <i>Death Race 2000</i> <i>Rollerball</i> <i>The Stepford Wives</i> <i>The Ultimate Warrior</i>
1970: <i>Colossus: The Forbin Project</i> <i>Crimes of the Future</i> <i>The Curious Female</i> <i>Gas-s-s-s</i> <i>No Blade of Grass</i>	1973: <i>The Final Programme</i> <i>Sleeper</i> <i>Soylent Green</i> <i>Terminal Island</i> <i>Westworld</i>	1976: <i>Futureworld</i> <i>Logan's Run</i> <i>Tunnelvision</i>
1971: <i>A Clockwork Orange</i> <i>THX 1138</i> <i>The Andromeda Strain</i> <i>Glen and Randa</i> <i>Omega Man</i> <i>Silent Running</i>	1974: <i>Chosen Survivors</i> <i>Flesh Gordon</i> <i>The Terminal Man</i> <i>Zardoz</i>	1977: <i>Demon Seed</i> <i>Welcome to Blood City</i>

Though these films span a generic spectrum from family melodrama (in *Z.P.G.*, a family fights to keep its illegal baby) to apocalyptic horror (in *Chosen Survivors*, a postapocalyptic bunker is besieged by vampire bats) to comedic fantasy (in *Tunnel Vision*, the future is seen through the lens of what might be on TV), and though they come from vastly different industrial classes, from studio blockbuster (*Planet of the Apes*) to micro-budget exploitation picture (*Terminal Island*), there are also many commonalities among them that show coherence as a generic trend. These commonalities can be informative in examining the successes and failures of *Zardoz*. The films are all based in a world where certain fundamentals have been changed, maybe only by a few temporal or technological increments, or maybe to a terrific degree. The magnitude of this distance from reality and the present tends to anticipate the fantasticality of the predictions essayed. *Zardoz*, set in the year 2273, was promoted as “Beyond 1984, beyond 2001, beyond love, beyond death.” This claim to transcendence “beyond” such lofty limits is an indication of the quixotic extent of Boorman’s reach and a fair rubric by which to judge whether it ultimately exceeded his grasp.

Dystopian stories are usually concerned with the ontologies of humanity, society, and existence. The science-fiction fantasies of this time frame tend to be specifically concerned with the role of technology in society: its life-saving and life-extending potential; its superhuman information-processing capabilities; and its complicity in society’s decadence, introducing irresistible forms of stimulation. With cautionary tales about relinquishing too much autonomy to technology, these stories defend the sacred boundary between “us” and “it.” They also concern mankind’s inhumanity and failing stewardship of the planet’s ecology, including the specter of overpopulation (*Z.P.G.* stands for Zero Population Growth) and other anxieties surrounding myriad imagined threats to the sexual and social status

quo. They often appeal to the ascending youth culture in different ways, as in *Gas-s-s-s*, which explores a world where only young people survived an apocalyptic event, or *Logan’s Run*, wherein population control is effected by ritual killing of all who live to be 30.

These films also demonstrate a predominating concern with social structures, laws, ethics and pressures on the individual by the group. To a great degree, this theme is expressed formally with particular attentiveness to architecture and mise-en-scène, often featuring modernist and futurist buildings, furnishings and costume, oppressive in their scale and sterility. They frame actors in such a way as to make them seem diminished and powerless against monumental forces which would confine or define them. *THX 1138* epitomizes this dynamic, but it is also omnipresent in *The Andromeda Strain* and *Logan’s Run*, and in ways which likewise make comment on the oppressiveness of suburbia in *The Stepford Wives*, or on the other hand, comment on urban spaces in *Soylent Green* and *A Clockwork Orange*. Architecture is pressed into use as a symbol for the sacrifice of individuality to security — or perceived security — in nearly every film listed above.

The style of costume and architecture seen in *Zardoz* are atypical among the movies of this period. John Boorman avows that his intent was to portray a future that incorporates the past: “I wanted this combination of past and future... When you see futuristic films, there’s no evidence of the past, but really the past is always in the present... Rather than have something that was completely futuristic I wanted to show that... the future will include the past.” The two settings of the *Zardoz* diegesis, the Vortex and the Outlands, are conveniently archaic in different ways. The Outlands are a wilderness where the Brutals and the Exterminators live in Stone Age desperation. The Vortex is much more civilized and complex, a force field-enclosed utopian

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archive of learning. There, all the great works of art and knowledge were long ago stored and are protected for a pointless and interminable posterity by the Eternals, who no longer procreate or die. The settlement within the Vortex (and everything shot by Boorman for *Zardoz*) comprises ordinary English manor houses and other buildings of varying historical age — Tudor, Victorian, etc. — with purposeless appurtenances, for example,

ing crystalline structure represented by reflections upon reflections, a set of simple mirrors and projections, an artificial-intelligence technology literally composed of individuals. “I am the sum of these people,” it proclaims.

These various architectural choices have industrial motivations, but they also set an appropriate backdrop before which *Zardoz*’s experimentation in generic collage proceeds. They bombard the viewer with confusing clues about whether *Zardoz* is a fantasy or a fable

“He comes along and thinks he’s created a masterpiece while in fact it’s a piece of second-rate hackwork, but he expects to be lauded to the skies and told he’s done better than a regular SF practitioner could have. This condescending attitude is half the trouble—they say people who like SF are idiots, so we’ll make an idiot picture.”

large inflated balloons on their roofs. Not only does this architectural shortcut match Boorman’s reverent, if less than fantastic, imagination of a future with history, it also aligns with the story’s parameters (the Eternals’ role as guardians, curators and protectors of all the best of culture — in this Vortex’s case, English culture) and works within the film’s industrial constraints ingeniously. For after all, the film was being made for less than \$1 million on a negative pickup arrangement with 20th Century Fox, and all of this could be shot within 10 miles of John Boorman’s house in Ireland. Expenses were spared. Boorman carefully guarded his budget, as it was truly his own, a loan taken out in his name to produce and deliver the film.

Instead of great mechanized technological centers, as are seen in *THX 1138*, *The Andromeda Strain* and other films, *Zardoz* instead features feminized, agrarian industries — baking and weaving — that are both portrayed convincingly by inexpensive set pieces, and lend support to the sense of matriarchal social structure that Boorman designed for the Vortex. The scenes that engage the Tabernacle, which functions as “television, radio, telephone, teaching machine, ballot box, and computer,” as cinema scholar Marsha Kinder put it, a unifying social technology, are among the most creative and artful in the film. As John Brosnan recounts in *Future Tense: The Cinema of Science Fiction*, one reviewer actually published the time in the film that the most spectacular of these came on-screen, so that the rest of the film’s “unfortunate morass” could be skipped. Architecturally, the Tabernacle is no monolithic machine or metal monster, but rather a beautiful, perplex-

ing or a science-fiction story, and the film’s engagement with many themes at once without a clear cautionary message about any of them exacerbates these unfulfilled genre expectations. The ways in which *Zardoz* thus confidently diverges from the generic norm in architectural design comment on its attitude toward the amnesiac futurism promoted throughout the genre. Even films that warn against overtechnologized cultures fashion the future as either a glossy, glamorous place or a devastated wasteland. *Zardoz*’s middle ground, a paleofuture in which history is treasured, in which glossy utopia and carnal dystopia go hand in hand, defies the trend and conveys a message from outside the genre’s parameters about those parameters’ significance.

In this way, *Zardoz* stands as an enactment of the contradictory attitudes held by cinema of this era toward nostalgia and nostalgic modes of representation. In a broad sense, films were leveraging nostalgia, not for its own sake, but as a way to experiment with genre and create formal qualities imbued with referential significance, complexity and irony. *Zardoz*’s historically inflected futuristic style is extraordinary within its genre, but shares inspiration with some of the era’s other complex cinematic works, such as *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Day of the Locust*, and *Murder on the Orient Express*. All of these works, including *Zardoz*, use romantic, imaginary versions of history as veneers that can then be stripped away to reveal real dramatic concerns.

Zardoz complicates this trend by doing the same with techno-utopianism. On two levels of the story, nostalgia and desire for the future are held up, but only in order to crash violently down. The Eternals’ cloister

among all the treasures of history and wisdom is shown to be smothering (literally so, in a scene where May envelops Zed within a ceremonial veil and uses her mind-reading power to effectively rape his memory, so strong is her desire to consume the past), and the techno-utopia of the genre's typical story structure is shown to be an empty promise (represented physically by the Tabernacle, the crystalline structure Zed penetrates and breaks). The film's plot shows both the premises of nostalgia and futurephilia to themselves be futile, bloodless fantasies helpless against the transcendent power of an individual in the present.

Through this strategy, the film demythologizes its own genre's usually unself-conscious production style that produces nostalgia for the brilliant future, beneath which dystopian tragedies lurk. Demythologizing a genre in its renaissance is unseemly and provocative for a film, and renders it resistant to commercial interests and viewer investment. This aspect of *Zardoz* finds little address in contemporary reviews or academic analyses thereafter, and little appreciation to this day. Its stylistic assault on science fiction has often been taken as condescension.

Science-fiction novelist and Hugo Award-winner John Brunner averred: "I think the guy responsible for the film despises science fiction. He comes along and thinks he's created a masterpiece while in fact it's a piece of second-rate hackwork, but he expects to be lauded to the skies and told he's done better than a regular SF practitioner could have. This condescending attitude is half the trouble — they say people who like SF are idiots, so we'll make an idiot picture."

On the contrary, *Zardoz* doesn't condescend to the genre or show a poor understanding of its state. It's clear that generic science-fiction conventions and their critique have to be deployed together to present the agnostic, visceral message of *Zardoz*. Whereas nostalgia and science fiction in cinema both allow for escapism, *Zardoz*'s complex textual demands work against these effects, ultimately nostalgizing the naïveté of these literary and cinematic practices in a completely noncondescending fashion.

The peculiar mix of futuristic technology and agrarian classicism of the utopian Eternals also carries through to their costume, which is almost completely androgynous: knit vests and loose trousers for men and women alike. In keeping with science-fiction cinema tradition, which almost never realistically portrays sexuality and usually attires characters in hypergendered or androgynous costume because it is "absurdly removed from the context that equates known clothing styles

with precise limits of decency or daring," notes film critic David Thomson, the mildly effeminate uniform of the Eternals alludes to their diminished sex drive, even though it is revealing of their bodies. As Thomson explains, "That is because the genre has itself abandoned the intimacy and agency of clothes."

Although, again, there are plot-based explanations for the irrelevance of gender in the Vortex, as sexual desire has vanished long ago along with the need for procreation, since life is renewable. This androgyny is really only set up as a folly to be disrupted by Zed, the potent Exterminator hero, the walking phallus, the acolyte of the gun god. Besides the Eternals, in their Grecian-hippie attire, and the Brutals, who wear serflike rags, there are also the Exterminators, who depopulate the Outlands as religious duty to Zardoz, wearing hypermasculine military garb: loincloths, tall boots and bandoliers. Eternals who've turned against that community's principles, Renegades—whose punishment for that crime of dissent is to be aged and yet remain immortal and frustrated but senile—are tellingly costumed in more recognizable dress: the tuxedos and party dresses that loudly signal "nostalgia" on their decrepit, doddering frames.

Zardoz is a deliberately uncomfortably funny film, which on one hand seems to expect the audience to take Sean Connery in a loincloth as unremarkable, but plays his later attire in a wedding dress for laughs. The film often leaves the viewer to wonder whether they are getting the joke, whether the film is meant as parody, and though this uncertainty is perhaps unpleasurable, it is not a mistake, and serves its purpose in the end. By contrast, consider *Sleeper*, which hangs the content of a Woody Allen comedy — including slapstick pratfalls and preoccupation with the plight of nebbishy men desirous of glamorous women — on the bones of a dystopian science-fiction film. It presses the futuristic set pieces and props into comedic duty by parodying them, as when Allen's character is encapsulated in a magic cocoon that is clearly nothing more than aluminum foil, while it satirizes 1970s society. For example, the people of *Sleeper*'s future are appalled to learn that Allen's character is accustomed to eating such horribly unhealthy foods as wheat germ and organic honey:

Dr. Aragon: Oh, yes. Those are the charmed substances that some years ago were thought to contain life-preserving properties.

Dr. Melik: You mean there was no deep fat? No steak or cream pies or...hot fudge?

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Paper Lion

Unicorn on the Cob

I used to write love poetry.
My words of adoration surrounded you
formed a body for the numen
of light that emanated so strongly...
My words sought to build a body of love
and define the beauty I felt.

It formed all too briefly;
the strength of your will
danced away from it. Shivered, danced,
and shattered the body of compliments
so hastily made.
My words of intent found no purchase.

I used my words to cry out to you.
My need, my pain, sought to pierce you.
But I was just a paper lion...
My roars a mere tremble, impotent
against your laughter of silence
at the blows my insults dealt.

Your words, spoken hastily, unplanned,
easily found their mark in me;
Turned inside out, my heart
plainly yours, my soul lying bare
for all to see, weaknesses and joys
skimmed visibly across the surface.

The words left unsaid, the roaring silent,
dealt the greatest blow. The power of words
to cajole, comfort, condemn and define
always ruled me. You knew this.
A refusal to trade in my currency of choice
defused the emotion I'd felt.

Scarred, alone, I write again. For me.
To define what was, what will again be.
To try and make sense, to pay penance,
a trail of clues leads me back to myself
with an all-too-clear understanding:
My words of love have become a sentence...

We Floated Billy

Text and Photo by Devil's Rancher (Chris Vreeland)

AFTER THE GIRLS next door moved out, I waited a week or two before meeting the new neighbors. I had been busy working late, and forgetting everything about myself, as the divorce was still fresh, and to be at home alone pained me. There's two of them: Jinn, a young, dark and exceedingly shy Hispanic, a disillusioned refugee from our local commune; her roommate Rak, is more talkative, and is often in the front yard with his dogs. I wondered what our landlord was thinking when he rented to this misfit the first time I saw him, but it didn't take two minutes for me to see past the flame orange dreadlocks, and the overalls cut off mid-calf above the silver spray-painted jackboots, to a genuinely nice guy. Despite my initial concern about having to share a washer and dryer with their sort, they have turned out to be genuinely good neighbors who don't throw loud parties and keep a nice house.

Rak, it turns out, is an artist. I pulled into the driveway early one Saturday and saw Rak in the yard, busily erecting a small metal sculpture amid the shrubberies. I stopped for a minute to be neighborly and to admire the piece, which he described as, "Just yard art, like the one in the tree, over there." When I looked to my right, a plastic silver child floated on his back three feet off the ground, supported by wires that hung from a bicycle-wheel-weather-vane thing, attached to the tree. A picture of utter peace.

As I looked at this child suspended, supine in the tree next door over the next few days, I tried to cipher what I recognized about it. It evoked a feeling from my childhood — perhaps a dream I'd had, or an experience, long forgotten. Crowded out by space and time.

My memory came to rest at last in the Houston suburb of Pasadena. This was a midpoint of my parents' zig-zagging existence that defined my childhood, which makes it hard to assign places and times to events

that happened between the ages of eight and fifteen; I think I was ten at that time.

The singular strangeness of floating Billy was not merely the fact that it actually happened, but the surroundings, and the personalities of the children that contributed to this event. Pasadena is a flat, hot and smelly place. The stench from the refineries hung oppressively low (to borrow from Poe), but it was by no means a House of Usher. It was a conservative working class town, and seemed to be made up almost entirely of construction and refinery workers, their housewives and children. It was summer while we were there, and the cicadas buzzed incessantly throughout, ebbing and swelling their drone with the heat.

Four doors down from the house of my grandparents, with whom we stayed those few months, lived the Farleys. I don't recall Mr. Farley's first name, though it might have been Bill. His wife, Faye, kept a neat if somewhat tacky home, where the large console TV remained interminably on. Their two children, Brett and Debbie, were my main playmates at that time, and I recall being a bit enamored of Debbie; she was perhaps two years older than me, and beginning to sprout breasts. Brett was my age, and we spent many afternoons together at the local swimming pools or riding our bikes in the flood-control ditches.

Brett wasn't around the day we floated Billy, it was all Debbie's idea. The Ringleader. Kids get bored in the summer, and that day, the six of us holding a quorum at the Farley residence were just casting about for something to do.

As we went from room to room (it was way too hot outside), not finding much to get into, Debbie suggested, "Hey, I heard about this really neat thing you can do. You lay someone on their back, and everybody chants, 'You are as light as a feather' and if everybody really believes it, we can lift them up with our fingers." After the obligatory rounds of "yeah, right," she convinced us to go ahead and try. Billy was chosen for the experiment because he was the smallest of the bunch, the easiest to believe a featherweight.

We made the necessary preparations: closing the curtains to make Debbie's room as dark and as séance-like as possible, and clearing a space on the floor. We may have lit candles. Billy was laid out flat on his back, with his arms at his side. Debbie had the head. Two others had opposite shoulders, me and the other kid, the legs. Billy's job, of course, was to believe that he was indeed as light as a feather and then float on command. We each placed our index and middle finger of each hand underneath him and proceeded to chant, and be-



lieve. The minds of children, uncluttered by adulthood, and unencumbered by the dashed hopes and unfulfilled beliefs that accumulate over a lifetime of disappointments, went to work.

Yogic masters and transcendentalists speak of a place where, through intense meditation and a lifetime of study and contemplation, the mind can overcome matter. For children, it's a lot easier than that. We repeated the phrase, perhaps for as long as a minute, then when Debbie had everybody's assurance that we were all "of the body," so to speak, she gave the command, and up he went. We raised him twelve, perhaps eighteen, inches off the floor with no effort whatsoever. I've thought and thought around the number of fingers, where they were positioned, the musculature and exertion required

to lift a person, albeit a small one, and absolutely none of the physics work. But he hung there, suspended and still supine, as if supported by a board on wires, and not just twenty fingertips. The laws of gravity shattered, Newton's apple returned itself to the tree.

After fifteen or twenty seconds, Billy requested that we return him to the floor. So slowly, gently, we did. A few comments of "cool" and "neat" were bandied about, but I guess because we were unaware of the difficulty, we were unimpressed by our achievement. No one expressed much amazement, and with the completion of Billy's floating, we all just sort of disbanded, and wandered off our own ways. So far as I know, we never even spoke of it again. Children, becoming adults, stepped out, alone, into the heat and light of the day. MFM



LOVE FOREVER, A.N.

EmpressCallipygos (Kimberly Wadsworth)

I WENT THROUGH an ugly-duckling stage when I was fourteen; I was wallflowery, shy, awkward. At least around boys. Around my friends, I was fine — particularly Sue and Kathy, who'd been my main posse since we were twelve. But with boys, I would hover in the background, watching them meekly. I didn't know — or care — enough about clothes or makeup or hair to make a visual impression, so none of them ever looked back at me. On the few occasions I tried talking to a guy, I'd babble out something really nerdy, and his puzzled looks just made me slink back to the corner again, depressed that boys weren't paying attention to me.

Sue and Kathy tried cheering me up — there was nothing wrong with me, they insisted. Guys would notice sooner or later — maybe someone was out there pining over me already, but he was also too shy. Sue got especially concerned when I said once that maybe I didn't dress “sexy” enough. “Like Corinna,” I said, pointing her out at lunch one day. “Look at all the guys around her.”

“The guys are all around Corinna because her skirt is slit up to her hoo-hoo,” Sue retorted. “And besides, look at those guys. You've got Steve Bergeron, Troy Lavisky, and that guy from choir who does armpit farts during the

tenor solos. Would you really want them looking at you anyway?"

Kathy and Sue did help — a bit. Then an hour later I'd remember that oh, right, they both already had boy-friends. And I'd end up depressed again.

Then about a month into the school year, the school secretary called during my French class and asked me to come to the Principal's office. Everyone looked at me in surprise — I *never* got called to the office. Even the teacher, Mrs. Mustard, had a confused look as she was writing out my pass. When I got to the office, I meekly squeaked, "Someone asked to see me?"

The secretary just beamed, and handed me a long white box. "Someone brought this here for you," she said.

I opened it. Inside were three long-stemmed roses.

"This is for *me*?" I asked the secretary. She pointed out the florist's receipt — I read my own name carefully printed there. Then reread it. "Wait, who did this?"

"Well, the florists' delivery guy brought it," she said. "You don't know who it's from?"

I checked the card. It was the "roses are red, violets are blue" poem, and was signed only with "A.N." "Do you know who that is?" The secretary asked.

"...No."

"Looks like you have a *secret admirer*!" The secretary chirped, and sent me back to my class. I was in such a daze that her words didn't really sink in until I was about to walk back into French again — I stopped to look down at the flowers and my name on the receipt one last time. Yep, they were really for me, and yep, someone sent them secretly — that was a secret admirer all right.

Wow.

I walked into French wide-eyed, the box in my arms, and class screeched to a halt as everyone huddled around me to look — studying the roses, reading the card. Even Mrs. Mustard was excited — "*That's* why they called you down?" she asked, beaming at me. I just nodded shyly, smiling back myself.

I carried the box the entire day — I was too afraid to crush it into my locker, and I still wanted to keep looking at it. Everyone pelted me with questions. Did I know who they were from? No. Did I see who brought them? No. Did I have any clue? Really? No. Sue and Kathy kept crowing, "See? See? We *told* you!" but I was too giddy to do much but grin back. I took the roses home, kept them in a vase for a week, dried them after that, then saved the card in my scrapbook and thought that was that.

Then a few weeks later I got called to the office during French class again. As she was writing my pass, Mrs. Mustard teased, "More roses, huh?" I just giggled, thinking nah, it couldn't be. But secretly hoping maybe it was.

And it was. It was the same delivery; same florist, same "A.N." on the card — this time A.N. quoted a lyric from The Doors — and the same order, three long-stemmed roses. This time I smirked as I strutted back to French class, threw open the door, held up the box and crowed, "Check *this* out!"

Then I got another delivery a couple weeks after that. And then another one a few weeks after that.

For the whole of my freshman year, I periodically got flowers from "A.N." Every time I got called to the principal's office, everyone would laugh and say, "Again?" as I head out the classroom door with a grin. Every time people saw me in the halls with the flowers they'd ask if I had any idea who it was from, or they'd stop me and offer their own theories. I'd listen and nod, basking in the attention.

Sue seemed especially happy for me. "I told you," she teased, "all this time someone's been having these hot fantasies about you." Whenever she saw I had another box, she'd burst out singing one of her favorite cuts off *Born To Run* — "Hey little girl is your daddy home/did he go and leave you all alone..." I'd just blush at her teasing. But to be honest, the idea that I could actually inspire such ... well, passion, in someone was a huge rush.

Except I didn't know who the hell it was. My friends offered to do the legwork to find A.N. One of my friends somehow got a copy of the full student registry, but the only A.N. in the school was a girl in the ESL class who'd been out sick since Halloween. Sue said she'd call the florist, but the next day she reported that A.N. had paid cash and the florist didn't get his name or address. In February, when A.N. sent me one of the school choir's singing valentines our teacher just said that he'd been sworn to absolute secrecy about who A.N. was, even though Kathy and Sue and a couple of my other friends dragged me before him to plead my case. "Look at Kim, Mr. Rosoff!" they pleaded. "Look at this face! She *needs to know*!" Mr. Rosoff stood firm, and I giggled, basking in the attention.

The last week of school, A.N. sent a cryptic set of notes scribbled on cafeteria napkins — they were in

CONTINUES ON PAGE 16

a code that spelled out one last impassioned message. Sue and Kathy and I spent three hours analyzing the handwriting, and even demanded samples from some guys we knew. But school ended without us finding out who A.N. was.

Everyone scattered to summer jobs and vacations, and the fuss died down. Now and then I'd think about the notes from A.N., and look around me, checking whether someone else was looking back. I never saw anyone. But I'd smile, knowing he was out there somewhere.

Sometime that August, right before school started up again, I went to check the mail and saw a bundle on the grass at the end of our lawn. I thought it was trash — but it was a bouquet, from the same florist, addressed to me. It was dozen roses instead of three — eleven red, and one pink. "You're one of a kind," the card read. "Love forever, A.N."

That was the last I heard from A.N.

For the next three years, people kept asking, "Get any roses lately? Did you ever find out who that was?" No, I'd say. I kept trying to find A.N. for the next couple years, but got distracted by schoolwork and homework — and more involved with flesh-and-blood people. But sometimes, I'd check out one of the boys I had a crush on — and then get a hopeful thought that "*Maybe he's A.N.,*" and I'd be bold enough to flash him a smile. Or I'd hear "I'm On Fire" and remember "*He's out there somewhere.*" By the time I graduated, I'd given up the search, content to just let A.N. be "out there somewhere."

Still, I kept wondering. All through college, and after, I would tell people my story, and they'd incredulously ask "You never found out who it was?" I'd wonder anew myself whenever I heard "I'm On Fire." Early on in college, I finally gave up being a wallflower — and though having a flesh-and-blood lover was better, I couldn't give up wanting to find A.N.

Then in 2003, Classmates.com and similar sites were starting up. I signed on to one, meaning to see about our 15th reunion — but one day I posted a notice on the discussion board: did everyone remember me getting the flowers back in Freshman year, and who may have sent them?

That night, I got a call from Sue. She and I had stayed in touch, and she was now married and living

back in our hometown. "So... I saw your ad on Classmates.com today," she said, carefully.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah... I have something to tell you."

She told me everything. How she got the initials "A.N." from two of the E Street Band members' middle names. How she took on an extra shift at her super-market job to pay for the flowers. How every time the flowers came she was so thrilled to see how happy I was she'd be tempted to tell me she'd sent them, but she'd also sworn to herself that she'd never tell me — and so that's the real reason why she was singing, because "If I was singing, then I couldn't talk."

She said that it hadn't been a romantic gesture. "I love you and all," she said, "but there are some parts of you I just *don't want to see.*" She explained that she'd just gotten so upset about how down on myself I was that she wanted to make me feel like the center of attention. She was terrified that I'd be mad now that I knew it wasn't a real secret admirer.

I instead told her that it was the most wonderful thing anyone had ever done for me — because it gave me and my confidence an enormous shot in the arm, and that had had a huge impact on how I carried myself for the rest of high school, and even the rest of my life. I'd even drawn a lesson from them: That even when you thought no one noticed you, you never knew when someone else might be secretly admiring you, and was too shy to come forward

Sue still feared I was disappointed it was her. But I honestly wasn't. Because back when it was happening, even though I didn't know A.N.'s identity, I contented myself with the thought that it was probably someone who really loved me, and really wanted me to be happy.

And it was. MFM

TASHKENT AIRPORT

Meatbomb

IN 1966, LARGE parts of Tashkent were leveled in a massive earthquake. The flaking paintwork and chipped floor tiles of Tashkent International airport look about 30 years old, and the style is bland, monolithic Soviet 70s, which suggests the structure is post-quake. But as you ride the creaking 30-year-old bus across the tarmac to the rusting, crumbling, bare metal frame of the terminal you can easily imagine that the earthquake was last week. This place is only one example of this most pathetic Soviet legacy to newly independent Uzbekistan: huge, half-finished and never-ending construction projects. Buildings so ugly, no one seems to really want them completed. Finishing them won't make them any better, and would add all those extra costs to furnish and heat them. Welcome to Tashkent, and mind your head.

Throughout Central Asia, procedures at airports seem haphazard, ad hoc, made up as the officials go along. It's as if they never put someone through customs before, never got people off a bus and onto a plane. Which of the 28 security officials will break away from the huddle in the corner to come over and ignore the x-ray machine? Will they ask for a customs declaration? (Oops, can't, seem to be fresh out of those.) Out on the tarmac, should the mob of redundant police smoke cigarettes to the left or right of the gangway? Checking boarding passes opens a whole host of other difficult choices and decisions; shall we rip them in half, giving the passenger a stub? Just collect them? What the hell, let's just let everybody on and see if there are enough seats for them. If not, the surly Russian stewardess can come and scream at the passengers until nobody gets off — after all, the only real problem is that the pilots have to squeeze extra close and personal past the standees as they board.

Tashkent offers a fairly broad selection of cheap crap to tourists, from extremely low-quality Chinese knock-offs of Disney stuffed animals to suspiciously new-looking Soviet-era badges and pins. The 8" bowie knives look like they are made in someone's basement on a rotary grinder. In lieu of jewels on the tin sheaths there are dabs of fluorescent ink from a highlighter. They would make a serious collector gag, but at about \$1-\$3 a pop, they are one of the more popular souvenir items. At customs, two bags with these monster knives go through the x-ray without a hitch. We collect our luggage and wait for the third of us to pass through — ooh, how exciting, the customs guy sees a knife!

"Have you got a knife in there?" he cunningly questions the third teacher, a sweet, wide-eyed, little 22-year-old, on her first trip out of Kyrgyzstan. She immediately says, yes, yes, it's just a souvenir. The customs guy takes it, sits there thinking and holding it in his hands, as if no tourist has ever left Tashkent with one of these cheesy knives until today, indeed as if he himself has never seen a knife before. Perhaps he is pondering whether or not it counts as a weapon. "Are there knives in there, too?" he asks, pointing to the two little carry-on bags that we are holding, that he has just cleared through security. He must have been too busy sitting in glum indolence to watch the screen when our bags passed through.

The other young teacher/potential terror threat takes her knife out and hands it over. I figure he'll be happy discovering two, and I might need mine if the stewardess starts picking on me, so I stay mum. "Let's just leave them," says the first teacher. We are all a bit antsy because we haven't yet realized that the huge clock in the main hall is broken, and that we have an hour rather than 14 minutes before departure.

What a perfect scam, I think to myself. The customs guys can collect these knives by the ton and then sell them back to the tourist hawkers. Maybe there are really only a hundred of these knives in Tashkent, traveling in a closed loop from Tashkent International to the stalls on Broadway, into the hands of the tourists who complete the circle, instinctively delivering them like carrier pigeons back to their owners in airport security. Eventually they will count as antiques, so the staff will be able to take them from those tourists who have had the foresight to stow their treasures in their checked-in luggage, too.

But it's not to be. After much deliberation in consultation with his colleagues, he decides we need to put the knives into checked-in luggage. He's getting soft. MFM



No Coffee Just a Little Shake Instead

Text and Photo by Flapjax at Midnite (Samm Bennett)

AT 2:45 PM on March 11, 2011, I was inside a very large, new and gleaming shopping mall in the small town of Matsuyama, Saitama Prefecture, Japan, moments away from receiving one of the small, complimentary cups of coffee that each shopper receives when entering the Kaldi coffee and imported foods shop. Though I despise malls, I do like a free cup of coffee, and Kaldi carries a Dijon mustard which is quite good and very reasonably priced. I was also expecting to pick up a small bar of Cote d'Or Belgian chocolate, which, along with the coffee, would be just the pepper-upper I needed. I would soon be returning to a small class-

room at the mall to make an appearance as a Bona Fide Native Speaker of English for the delight and edification of a group of young children and their mommies. It was my job as teacher (“entertainer” might be a more accurate descriptor, but that’s another story) that had me at a shopping mall 50 kilometers from Higashi Nippori, Tokyo — otherwise known as home sweet home. But there would be no mustard, no coffee and no chocolate for me that day. There would, however, be one of the five largest earthquakes in the world since modern record-keeping began.

Having resided in Japan for 16 years, I am no stranger to temblors, but this was no typical earthquake. The movement I felt underfoot was of a totally different order than I had ever felt before. The fact that one could actually feel movement while standing was the early indicator that this was, as the song says, the start of something big. The walkways of the mall’s second floor, overhead, were moving in curious, vibrating way. And the ominous, rumbling sound that the structure and the earth itself were making was apocalyptic. I stepped out of the coffee line and headed for the nearest mall exit, about 50 meters away from where I’d been standing.

I didn’t run, which I’d always thought I would do in such a situation. Perhaps somewhere in the back of my mind there was the idea that one didn’t want to induce group panic and start a stampede. I don’t know. But I did walk quickly and with determination, faster than anyone around me. I passed 25 or 30 people in the rather crowded mall. Many were still looking around and looking up, moving much slower than you’d think they would considering the very real possibility that the building might come down on their heads. Some were frozen in their tracks: immobilized by fear? Again, I don’t know. But I do know the last leg of the journey out of the mall was the scariest: an enormous, two-story-high glass atrium. The vibrating movement of the big plate glass panels was clearly visible. Here I did physically and verbally urge two people in front of me to get out. I didn’t push them, but I firmly touched their backs and said, “GO! GO!” They were moving way too slow, and were blocking the door!

The relief I felt upon getting out, and especially passing that glass deathtrap, was enormous. But by that time only about a minute had passed. There was still a whole lotta shaking going on. Standing in the parking lot, I saw the asphalt move like swells on the surface of a large body of water. It felt like I was standing on a raft. The lot was full of cars, many of them rocking back and forth on their wheels. Once or twice I knelt down to put my hands on the ground for balance, and to better

gauge just how the earth was moving under my feet. Looking back at the mall building, I was amazed to see how much it was, well, rippling. The glass panes were bending, the whole structure was waving: again, as if it was liquid. It looked a bit like solid objects can sometimes appear when seen through heated air, like the air above a fire. The “solid” world was in a state of flux, and it seemed that anything was possible.

By the time a few more minutes had passed many people were in the parking lot (probably about 150 to 200 souls outside that particular exit), but there were still a surprising number of people inside. Incredibly, some people were stepping back in when it was far from clear that the temblor was all played out. Perhaps they had friends or loved ones inside, whom they needed to locate. I gave it a good 15 minutes or so before going back in, and that was only to collect my things and get out of there. I found the young Japanese woman who was teaching the classes with me that day outside the mall at another exit, nearer the classroom. I borrowed her mobile phone to try to reach my wife, but, of course, mobile service was out. I told the teacher that I was outta there — that the next two classes, if they were going to happen at all, would have to happen without me. Setting off toward the train station (as if there’d be any trains until the next morning), I found a pay phone along the way. I reached my wife, who was fine, and heard news that our daughter was also fine. This was how you spell RELIEF. Big, fat, shiny relief, wrapped up in wrapping paper that says “relief” all over it.

After learning that there were no hotel rooms available around the nearest train station (already snapped up by people faster and smarter than me), I set out for a 24-hour “family restaurant” called Gusto, where I stayed the night. Like a king in his castle, I had my own cozy little booth and ordered a salad, a plate of German sausages and a beer. With Skip James and Captain Beefheart playing on my iPod, I dozed on and off throughout the night. I was woken now and again by general discomfort or the numerous aftershocks, some of which shook the plate glass windows of the restaurant.

Trains on the Tobu-Tojo line resumed service early on the morning of March 12, and I grabbed one back home to Tokyo. There have been aftershocks consistently since returning, and we assume there will be plenty more in the days and weeks ahead. We’ve got our hardhats at the ready, emergency supplies and whatnot. This morning I enjoyed a delicious cup of coffee, and plan to take a walk to Ueno today with my family, where we’ll buy some Cote d’Or chocolate, if the shop is open. Life goes on. MFM

Dr. Aragon: Those were thought to be unhealthy...precisely the opposite of what we now know to be true.

But this broad style of comedy was lighter and less biting than most of what was on offer at the time, and for that reason, *Sleeper's* use of science-fiction dystopia to goof on is inconsequential nostalgia. Parody is nostalgic because it makes fun of an old form or aesthetic norms, but it also embraces them. The simplicity of *Sleeper's* embrace of dystopian style as a tool of parody serves as an informative foil to *Zardoz*, which has a more complex and embroiled relationship with its style and a darker sense of humor.

In the 1970s, the most distinctive branch of comedy film was black comedy, and the similarity between its aims and dystopian science-fiction fantasy's is striking. Dystopia, it can be argued, is really just a subtype of black comedy. Both deal with "what is, could, and should be," says film expert Drew Casper, and wage war against "the ways social structures oppress," and in their portrayals, bend realism to "make the real and ideal one." In dystopia, it's just that all the absurd human behavior has been going on before the narrative begins; the insane race is well under way and far out of control.

Zardoz needs to be seen more than once. Only then can one become aware of the nuances of structure that Boorman has erected

If black comedy is built on iconoclasm, *Zardoz* as a black comedy takes it to a grotesque extreme. The Brutals, the Eternals, the Apathetics, the Exterminators, the Renegades...character is derided by these blanket categorizations, and real identification or even differentiation is almost completely absent from the film. The absurd degree of caricature isn't laziness, or "not properly thought through," per Brosnan; rather, it is a jab at the plot-driven genre conventions of dystopia, and one of the ways *Zardoz* begins to reveal itself as a self-reflexive allegory addressing something altogether larger than just technology, sex and the future.

This self-reflexivity and self-awareness is meant to be introduced by the character Friend, an Eternal who looks after Zed once he enters the Vortex, having stowed away in the commuting god's head that was designed by another Eternal, Arthur Frayn, to subdue and control the Exterminators and Brutals and transport their offerings of grain back to the needy Eter-

nals. Since Zed is a stranger, Friend provides him with expository detail about the Vortex and the Eternals, but rather than do so in a tone that relates to the audience a tale of caution or the folly of a hubristic culture, he is droll, bored with the whole ridiculous affair. This attitude of derision from a character within the film for the premises of the film is experimental and off-putting to say the least, but for an attentive reader of the film this is the tip-off, the beginning of *Zardoz's* sly metamorphosis from dystopian fantasy to blackly humorous and self-reflexive agnostic parable.

As Anderson explains, "*Zardoz* needs to be seen more than once. Only then can one become aware of the nuances of structure that Boorman has erected. *Zardoz* is annoying after only one viewing; it becomes an iconoclastic film after a second go-round, a disturbingly truthful and revelatory experience after three sittings and a monument to expression of individual ideas after the fourth sit-through."

Many fascinating forms of self-reflexivity are presented throughout *Zardoz*, commenting on the film medium; the role of narrative, perception and belief in culture; and the auteurial imprint of a creator. The most obvious and yet possibly the most deceptive of these is the first image of the film: the prologue, which is delivered in direct address by the disembodied head of the character Arthur Frayn and which describes the forthcoming story:

"I am Arthur Frayn...and I am Zardoz. I have lived 300 years, and I long to die...but death is no longer possible. I am immortal. I present now my story, full of mystery and intrigue — rich in irony, and most satirical. It is set deep in a possible future, so none of these events have yet occurred...but they *may*. Be warned, lest you end as I. In this tale, I am a fake god by occupation — and a magician, by inclination. Merlin is my hero! I am the puppet master. I manipulate many of the characters and events you will see. But I am invented, too, for your entertainment — and amusement. And you... poor creatures, who conjured you out of the clay? Is God in show business too?"

Cut to black. The film opens on a misty moor. Title: "A Film by John Boorman." The montage is too delicious to ignore, and immediately another floating head appears, angry in countenance and made of stone. Thus, straightaway, the film posits itself as a fiction and the audience members as possibly unreal as well. The casting of Frayn in this task is critical. As he attests, he is a fake god (to Zed's Exterminators, who know him as

“Zardoz”), manifested again as a floating head, though this time made of stone in monumental proportion and concealing his puny human frame inside. But as such, he has no innate ability to transcend his own diegetically limited reality. Boorman’s withdrawal of Frayn from his fictive milieu and employ of him as commentator on his own story is done in a fantasy of ultimate authorship. “The relationships among Arthur [Frayn] the magician/narrator, Zardoz the stone godhead, Zed the brutish protagonist, and John Boorman the filmmaker are unclear; their ego boundaries are not sharply defined,” volunteers Kinder.

Ironically, the prologue was not something Boorman intended in the first place, but rather was a fix demanded by Fox, who had deemed the film incomprehensible as submitted. Boorman’s self-reflexive and provocative prologue, spoken by his proxy Arthur Frayn (misheard, uncoincidentally, by critics of the time as “Author Frame,” notes Kinder) hardly made the film easier for audiences to take, but it does add another layer to the fable’s onionlike structure of illusory realities, and suggests that creation and autonomy may be mere matters of perspective. The beginning’s ambiguity is serendipitously integral to the film’s agnosticism regarding who is the ultimate Maker. “Who is really getting inside of whose head?” asks Marsha Kinder.

The in-film nods to its own fictional quality are almost too many to list, but here are some interesting examples: Zed is introduced as pointing a gun directly at the camera, asserting his role as a threat to the sense of security audience members might have enjoyed in a straight genre picture. When Arthur Frayn is represented in projections by the Tabernacle, his signature painted-on mustache (already an indicator of phonicity) changes into painted lines from his mouth downward to his chin, like the hinged jaw of a ventriloquist’s dummy, casting doubt on his claim in the film’s prologue that he is “the puppet master.” When the Eternals share their amassed knowledge with Zed, it is conveyed unto him in the form of beautiful, colorful projected images and data, evoking the cinematic experience.

The horrifying hive mind of the Eternals is shown not only as a threat to individuality and sexuality, but most specifically to adolescent masculinity. The breach in the narrative that unravels to reveal this subtext, unlocking the reactionary and distinctly auteurial reading of *Zardoz* as a male melodrama, is Friend’s damning transgression. Friend treats Zed with some affection, like a pet, but May and the women who are the leaders in the Vortex see him differently: “The monster is a mirror. And when we look at him, we look into our

own hidden faces. Meditate on this at Second Level.” (Meditation at “Second Level” is the way The Eternals merge consciousness.) Friend resists participating this way and relinquishing his individual point of view: “I will not be one mind with you! I know what...I know what May wants with Zed. No! No. The Vortex is an obscenity! I know...I know that I hate all women. Birth. Fertility.” Friend is then forced to submit to the community’s mind control and is forced out, punitively aged but still immortal. This “extraordinary farrago,” as Boorman calls it, this confused mishmash of notions of sex and power, can be untangled by focusing on the simplest level of the story, the journey of Zed, the macho ur-man at the film’s center, the “slave who can free his masters,” as Kinder puts it, the iconoclastic hero.

With a name that both builds on that of Ed from *Deliverance* (Boorman’s former hero of male melodrama) and alphabetically signals “the end,” Sean Connery’s character emblemizes Boorman’s overarching vision of potent masculine personality, the timeless “Boormanian hero.” Zed’s initial victory over the parameters bounding him in his discovery of his deity as a sham is depicted by his emergence from a large carton of grain onboard the floating godhead of Zardoz. He rises from the surface in a way Boorman directly associates with the hand that rises from the lake in *Deliverance* and the sword that rises from the water in *Excalibur*. It is a portentous moment of transcendence, and one Boorman portrays the same way across his films. Boorman also remarks in discussion of the film that “people speculate now about [males] having any purpose anymore,” and it’s clear that Zed stands for a reassertion of that purpose. To what ends? When Zed has destroyed the Vortex, he makes a mate of Consuella (an Eternal) and instates a new era of nuclear family.

This victory of violent sexuality over social progress is reactionary and an end that is a fantasy of returning to the primal beginning, which relegates *Zardoz* to the status of a film about the stasis of eternal revolution more than evolution; transcendence; or going “beyond” love, death or *2001*. As Kinder notes, Boorman shows his total inability to go beyond the all-too-human insecurities about potency and agency and fascistic belief in the natural attraction of opposites by revealing his continued fixation on them. His proxy, Frayn, claims to have engineered this revolution, though it results in his own death, and espouses the unsatisfying ethos of the film when he quips along with Friend, “We’ve all been used! And reused! And abused! ...And amused!” But audiences were not so blasé about this ironic fatalism, having seen the strings manipulating even the puppet

master and having been implicated as mere pawns by the same charlatan.

Boorman's attempt at transcendence is shown to fail, and he falls on his own sword, because it seems to be his own arbitrary gender concerns — e.g., why should technology and society be seen as oppressively feminizing structures? — that define and limit the story's form, yet fail to motivate its effect. Although the film concerns itself centrally with the reinstatement of vitality via a penetrating reintroduction of masculine agency, the *deus ex machina* of Zed's ur-human potential to overthrow his makers on the basis of his sheer desire (witness the scene wherein the Apathetics are roused from their catatonia by the mere taste of his perspiration), that desire is presented on-screen but never designed to be felt by the audience. For all its nudity, the film is profoundly unerotic, its sexual images "mechanical and mundane," as Kinder puts it, a trait it reiterates ironically from science fiction, but does not convert.

As has now been made clear, the Achilles' heel of this film's composition is self-conscious stylization, so its approach to titillation and masculine desire is writ large. The Eternals desire study, study of Zed, claiming that in all their access to art and knowledge, one mystery has eluded them: arousal. How a flaccid penis is prompted to become an erect one mystifies them, preposterously. The Eternals subject Zed to a pornographic display

on screens, but to their chagrin, what arouses him is Consuella in person. Boorman's romanticism of male desire as transfiguring is impotent. As Kinder notes, "He is incapable of turning us on in spite of ourselves." The Eternals and Zed greatly enjoy watching Zed's memories of violence, suggesting Boorman's sensibility that there is no arousal without power. Zed says it is when he enacts violence that he is "one with Zardoz." Sneers Kinder, "Presumably, Boorman hopes we in the outer theater will respond like Zed and become one with Boorman," yet even in his portrayals of violence, Boorman is chaste and uncharismatic.

If there is any doubt that Boorman envisioned himself as a crucial part of this fable of maker, creation and transcendent self-made man, it is surely assuaged by the confession from the man himself that the giant head of Zardoz, the fake god, was modeled after him, and the handprint on the cave wall that is the final image of the film is his own. He makes his mark by crafting the consciousnesses in the film after his own image. "Is God in show business too?" the film asks its viewers. Though it means to present an agnostic, humanist fable, the film shows that clearly, there is a God, an overmaster, because it must be he who, as Arthur Frayn describes the creative role, "bred and led" Boorman to bring himself low by the sin of hubris. MFM





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