

5-13-2010

A DECADE OF NOT TRYING



The care and feeding of chestnuts

We called it “the chestnut,” my editor Steve and I, and we put it at the end of the end credits of *Absence*, my thesis project in my 4th year at York University’s Department of Film and Video. A word about *Absence* – I hated that film. *Hated it*. I’d gone to film school to make *my* kind of movies, and spent three years trying to do so against ever-mounting disdain from the York U faculty. In my final year, I was all ready to tear through a short horror movie called *The Storm* – but I got stuck with *Absence* instead. What the fuck did I know about directing a teen drama? What does *any* 21-year-old know about writing and directing realistic dramatic scenes? We should have been making kung-fu movies.

As such, my movie-making can be neatly divided into two phases: everything before *Absence*, and everything after. Before *Absence*, before film school, before 1999, I might not have had one solid clue what I was doing anytime I picked up a camera, but I was *doing it* – and fast. After *Absence*, and after the liberal beating that York U’s idea of “filmmaking” had given me, I never made a movie quite the same way again. *In every single case*, I pulled something back. On *Bone Daddy*, the film was just a goof, a one-off (that became a two-off), nothing to be taken seriously. *VCR* was just something I wrote because someone had a spare video deck for me to smash. *Sensitivity* was just the shortest and easiest way to make a movie to fulfill the requirements of Meredith’s One Minute Film Festival contract. *Standoff* was just two guys beating each other up with stands. And so forth. Always the word “just” to downplay the description of the film. Always this *distance* – this doorstep in the pathways of my mind, keeping my commitment open a crack, keeping things from being fully *you are really doing this*.

“The chestnut” was the first doorstep. Unable to face the magnificent disaster of *Absence* as a working movie (i.e., it was not one), unable to face the sound of pity that would radiate from Vari Hall as that sad film’s sad end credits sadly rolled, Steve and I edited together our own trailer for *The Phantom Menace* – due in theatres four weeks later – and made it the final word of my film career at York University. They wouldn’t remember how grandly I had failed. They’d remember Obi-Wan Kenobi Jedi-kicking two battle droids to the hard floor of the starfighter hanger on Naboo.

I wish I hadn’t done it. It was stupid and disrespectful, but it was also me giving up without firing a shot – which was something I would do a lot of for the next ten years. I graduated from film school, and I never even once *tried* to actually do the thing I thought I’d spend my life doing. I made making movies my hobby, and even when I undertook that hobby, I’d leave the doorstops in my mind to make sure I’d never really *care* like I once had.

Once you let yourself off the hook it’s hard to get back on. Sometimes it takes a decade.

Matt Brown
May 13 2010

First Impressions, Part 2, version 1: **Who Is Matt Brown?**

"I watched it. And I thought: *this is stupid*.
Then I watched it again the next day. And I thought: *this is brilliant*."
- Felix Heeb, on VCR (Matt Brown, 2000)

I used to make fun of Matt Brown. I would sit at the back of my film production class with my two snarky cohorts and generally make clandestine fun of everyone in the class. But Matt was the prime target. Who was this guy? Or rather, who did this guy think he was? Coming to class with Robertson Davies tucked under his shoulder, making pronouncements about the difference between artifice and art... all of which would have been fine by us, except that he was constantly citing Spielberg and Lucas as the paragons of cinematic accomplishment. He was the prototypical film student, fan-boy, whatever you want to call it. But we were secretly glad to have him around, because he gave us an easy paint-by-numbers picture of everything we didn't want to be. Know thy enemy, and all that.

Well, I got to know Matt and his movies quite well in the following decade, as a result of which I say: Here's to being wrong.

The filmmaking entity known as Matthew C. Brown (hereafter *MCB*) is a recipient no longer of my artistic disdain but now of a grudging, bitter admiration, occasionally mixed with bafflement. And he is also now the locus wherein a number of my own personal intellectual battles can play themselves out. So I'd like to look at some of these questions as manifest in the life and work of MCB.

PRODUCTION EFFICIENCY

Let's be honest: moviemaking is an insidious infernal thing that approaches perfection asymptotically. The calculus of film production is not in tune with the real world. If you don't spend enough time on planning and making a movie, you might end up with something that falls short of its own potential... but conversely, if you were to truly spend enough time on the movie, *you would never finish it*. MCB has dealt with this problem by ignoring it, or at least by sidestepping it; he has made something like 840 films since he began at something like age 5. Is it that he doesn't care about quality? I wouldn't say so... rather that he generates and pursues ideas whose true realization can be achieved in the 2 hours or 2 days it takes to make them. And on to the next one.

ARTISTIC PURITY (The Third Hand)

Who are you making movies for? On one hand, if you make them for the audience, you're a sellout. On the other hand, if you make them just for yourself, you're a pretentious bastard. MCB's reason for making something is *he has an idea and he wants to make it*. So he does. It's not for you, it's not for him. It's just the movie that needs to get made, and-- oh, never mind, it's done.

AMBITION / ACHIEVEMENT part 1 (The Fire in my Pants)

Matt likes to analyze films in terms of "it achieves what it sets out to do; therefore it's a success" (hereafter *Keramidas's Law*). Which sometimes drives me nuts; if a movie set out to light fire to my pants, I would hardly feel like granting it a four-star review just because I left the theatre with flaming trousers. And yet I find myself applying this to his movies. And yet, and yet... there's something here. But it's not the whole story either.

AMBITION / ACHIEVEMENT part 2 (The Daniel-and-Demetre Trilogy)

The *Daniel-and-Demetre Trilogy* consists of three movies starring Daniel and Demetre: *Standoff*, *Guy in the Sky*, and *OMEGAHEDRON*.

Guy in the Sky is a conversation between Daniel and Demetre on a balcony. Two guys shooting the shit. That's exactly what it is, and that's all that it is. It's okay.

Standoff is two guys doing something unsavory in a field (I don't want to give away any more). That's exactly what it is, and that's all that it is. It is excellent.

Nobody likes *Standoff*. It's just two guys doing some stuff for no reason, they say. To which in response I invoke Keramidas's Law: but that's all it's supposed to be, and it succeeds brilliantly. But I think that Keramidas's Law is not enough here. Why is it that *Standoff*'s resolute this-is-all-I-am-ness feels like an *achievement*, whereas *Guy in the Sky*'s same solipsism just feels like a solipsistic movie about a couple of solipsistic guys? I'll tell you why: because movies are magic. Magic is unpredictable. And *Standoff*, in achieving exactly what it sets out to do, and *not one thing more*, somehow makes something else happen (possibly in your pants). It provides a horrendously dramatic scene, with zero explanation, zero backstory or character, and what you're left with is a dramatic void that shivers and trembles and threatens to form the outline of a shape, and this, I tell you sincerely, is messed up and awesome.

Not all of us are willing to go to the trouble of making things we don't understand in the hopes that something like this might happen. MCB understands that it's worth making one, or two, or five *Guys in the Sky* if every once in a while you end up with a *Standoff*.

And then there's *OMEGAHEDRON*, the final film in the trilogy, which I don't understand at all and I'm too scared to keep talking about it, so.

EGO / ADULATION

MCB has made a couple of movies -- *Bone Daddy 1* and *2* -- intensive, months-long productions which he actually *doesn't want to show publicly*. And that's not because they're failures; I would hazard an educated guess that they turned out pretty much how he intended. No, this means that he was spending a good deal of time and energy making something while a voice in the back of his head was saying, *Boy, you're getting what you hoped for, and you ain't gonna want to show this to nobody once it's done*.

Mind you, they're straight-up parodies, and this exhibitory reticence on his part is wholly understandable, due to some pretty serious political incorrectness. But then there's some of the other ones...

EXPERIMENTALISM

I hesitate to talk too much about *The VCR Decalogue* (in the same way that I hesitate to stare into the sun), but it's safe to say that *no film festival in its right mind would ever show this*. It's too irreverent for the experimental crowd, it's too incomprehensible for the comedy circuit, it's too *Lord of the Rings* for the video-art galleries, too *Jackass* for the cinematheques... it's basically too inexplicable for the neurons, and too something for the anything.

MCB knows this, and he must have known it when he was making it. It's clear he was following a program -- it's practically symphonic in its structure -- but what that program is *for* is anybody's guess. We only know that it contains axes and vaginas and smashing smashing and *The Price is Right* and already I've said too much, but once he set himself on this path (it's clear to me that) it became clear to him that he'd have to follow it to the end.

This is the paragon of some sort of practice. Maybe this is what "experimental cinema" truly means; the movie was made not in the service of some deeply ingrained ideology or practice, but because he (as far as I can tell) had no idea what he was doing, or why. And let's clarify: "he has no idea what he's doing" does NOT mean he doesn't know how to make movies, or videos, or films. It's not about lack of skill set. His skill set is doing fine. I mean the phrase in a much more literal sense. It's that he is using his skills in service of something *that he doesn't know what it is*.

STOOPID IS AS STUPID DOES

Spencer Parsons once said of video artist Ben Coonley, "His work may be stoopid, but it's not stupid."
(I'm pretty sure that's verbatim, but don't quote me on that.)

THE EXCEPTIONEERS (a parenthetical)

Not all of MCB's productions are 2-hour specials; some of them take months. Not all of them are stoopid; some are very considered. Not all of them are made without ambition or ego; some of them he'd really like to show at the Worldwide Short Film Festival. I'm just trying to make some points here.

THE VCR DECALOGUE

Everyone knows that old parlour game where you ask, "If this movie was a Deadly Sin, which Deadly Sin would it be?"
The VCR Decalogue is ONE HUNDRED PERCENT WRATH

If I didn't know him, I would think from *The VCR Decalogue* that Matt Brown was insane. Or at least an "outsider artist"; somebody who pursues the elaboration of his own personal mythology so doggedly that there's no sense of what this might mean to anybody else. I do know him, and he's not insane, but maybe the glory of watching this 10-in-1 movie is that we feel, for a moment, like we have touched the face of insanity. It's wrathful but toothless, a cuddly Mogwai kind of insanity you can put in your pocket and take home. (You don't have to worry about feeding it after midnight because it's so purposelessly alien it doesn't even have a digestive system.) Is this the sort of thing we need these days? Is it the inoculation our culture needs? I don't know. But I'll take it.

- Daniel Cockburn, May 2010

A Decade of Not Trying

1. **Burn (2003)**

More of a camera test than an actual movie, *Burn* chases Mark Brown through the parks and streets of Toronto.

2. **First light (2004)**

A discarded effort for the 2004 One Minute Film & Video Festival, whose theme was “firsts.” A look back at the 2003 blackout.

3. **Growth (2004)**

A movie written in 22 minutes and shot in 20 minutes. Produced for Full of Rage Productions’ “Mosquito Moe Challenge.”

4. **Verbose (2004)**

Appropriating an idea by Dave Tebb, Chris MacLean, and Daniel Cockburn. The definition of the word “verbose,” in thirty seconds.

5. **Gay PSA (2003)**

A joke I thought of in the shower and shot before my hair dried. A message about coming out.

6. **Pizzazz vs. Megatron (2007)**

A YouTube video shot on my computer’s webcam. My two favourite ‘80s cartoon villains throw down.

7. **Standoff (2006)**

A movie that everyone, including Werner Herzog, dislikes – except me, Daniel, and Demetre. Two men meet in a field for a fight to the death using stands.

8. **Guy in the Sky (2009)**

The spiritual follow-up to *Standoff*, a single scene conceived to be fast, cheap n’ easy, which ended up taking me nearly a year to get off my ass and complete. A movie about men and the paper planes they make.

9. **OMEGAHDROD (2010)**

The third part of the Daniel/Demetre trilogy, involving a space station on fire at the bottom of the ocean. Not my idea.

10. **Sensitivity (2003)**

My father’s favourite movie that I’ve ever made, ever. My entry in the inaugural One Minute Film & Video Festival, whose theme was “neighbours.”

11. **Miss December (2004)**

A discarded entry for the 2004 One Minute Film & Video Festival, whose theme was “firsts,” which I would argue is a precise carbon copy of *Sensitivity*.

12. **More Things (2006, directed by Demetre Eliopoulos)**

Demetre’s entry in the 2006 One Minute Film & Video Festival, whose theme was “growth.” I appear in the film, but otherwise lazed out of any responsibility.

13. **Addendum (2003)**

As with *Verbose*, appropriating an idea by Dave Tebb, Chris MacLean, and Daniel Cockburn. The definition of the word “addendum,” in thirty seconds.

(intermission)

14. **The VCR Decalogue (2000-2010)**

The end of ten long, generally wasted years smashing VCRs and throwing things out of windows. Man meets technology, and does not like it.

“Man’s reach exceeds his imagination...!”

- The Great Danton