

## Beyond the Action-Image: Mike Bouchet's Schizophrenic Time Machine

By Colin Gardner

“Sometimes it is necessary to restore the lost parts, to rediscover everything that cannot be seen in the image, everything that has been removed to make it ‘interesting’. But sometimes, on the contrary, necessary to make holes, to introduce voids and white spaces, to rarify the image, by suppressing many things that have been added to make us believe that we were seeing everything. It is necessary to make a division or make emptiness in order to find the whole again.” – Gilles Deleuze<sup>1</sup>

Mike Bouchet and Orson Welles might seem, at first glance, to be strange conceptual bedfellows but they have one fundamental formal tenet in common: the foregrounding of false movement and continuity all the better to accentuate the immanent presence of direct time within the cinematic image. In *Filming Othello* (1978), his documentary on the making of his 1952 Shakespeare adaptation, *The Tragedy of Othello: The Moor of Venice*, Welles bemoaned the project's tight budgetary constraints and the constant need to improvise, whether through the utilization of found sets, perpetual globe-trotting from location to location, and a radically discontinuous shooting schedule. “Iago steps from the portico of a church in Torcello, an island in the Venetian lagoon, into a Portuguese cistern off the coast of Africa,” he notes. “He's across the world and moved between two continents in the middle of a single spoken phrase. That happened all the time. A Tuscan stairway and a Moorish battlement are both parts of, what in the film, is a single room. Roderigo kicks Cassio in Massaga and gets punched back in Orgete, a thousand miles away. Pieces were separated not just by plane trips, but by breaks in time. Nothing was in continuity.” Of course, as is typical of films driven by causal action and character

psychology, the final edit helps to smooth out such spatio-temporal anomalies and irrational cuts to provide a least a modicum of narrative continuity, what Gilles Deleuze, in his Peirce-ian taxonomy of the cinema, calls the action-image, a cinema ruled by the sensory-motor schema. However, Welles's own looming presence as a self-reflexive master of cinematic fakery – remember *F for Fake!* - guarantees that we are also fully aware of this false movement as well as the autonomous visual and sound images (*opsigns* and *sonsigns*) that it makes possible.

In contrast to Welles's often vain struggle with his producers to construct a coherent final narrative from broken fragments, Bouchet approaches false movement from the other end of both the narrative and budgetary spectrum. In his “New New Age Film Festival” (2008) – a collection of forty feature length “films” (technically theatrically projected videos) screened over the course of a five week schedule in a traditional film festival programming format – and his recent widescreen magnum opus, *16x9 Action Film* (2007), Bouchet begins with the completed films (usually medium-to-high budget commercial Hollywood “product”) and then proceeds to edit them together in various spatial combinations so that the hegemony of the action-image (and its concomitant clichés) is undermined through a combination of formal fragmentation and audio-visual overdetermination. For example, most of the forty films in the “New New Age Film Festival” are binary constructions, where two different films – often with complementary or dialectically opposed narrative content (e.g. a blaxploitation comedy and a psychological drama; a Bernie Mac baseball film paired with an historical epic about the Battle of Thermopylae) - are conjoined using a wide variety of video and audio effects. These include conventional split screen (50-50 bifurcation, more elaborate alternations of

between three and sixteen vertical panels, polygonal or spiral “banding”), superimposition and the straightforward swapping of the audio and visual source material. Each combination is then trimmed in length so that both films begin and end at exactly the same time, as if edited for a commercial television time slot (once again, we are reminded that time is also money). Far from creating an abstract viewing experience in which affect and psychology are drained out of the new narrative multiplicity, the films allow for a wide variety of emotional and conceptual responses, particularly in relation to non-linear temporality. Plotlines, although stretched and strained, are still relatively easy to follow, despite the constant interference and disruption of the simultaneous image and audio tracks. This has much to do with Hollywood’s formulaic adherence to the three-act structure of conventional realism, so that certain plot twists and narrative crescendos tend to coincide and overlap from film to film, producing a mutually reinforcing composite narrative structure. However, despite this centripetal tendency, our highly developed multi-tasking perceptual skills also allow us to discover and exploit new narrative contiguities and (dis)continuities, a sensory-motor schizophrenia that discloses latent subtexts on different planes or sheets of memory that become raw material for a more creative narrative line-of-flight in which time itself emerges as the dominant formal trope of a new, ever-changing Whole.

In *Little Men* (2008), for example, Bouchet presents a straight superimposition of Keenan Ivory Wayans’ infantile comedy, *Little Man* (2006) with Bennett Miller’s Oscar-nominated *Capote* (2005), the story of Truman Capote’s research into the 1959 Clutter Family killings in Holcomb, Kansas for his best-selling “non-fiction novel,” *In Cold Blood*. On a superficial level, Bouchet’s title draws an obvious allusion to the two films’

lowest common denominator, namely the small stature of their respective leads. *Little Man*'s entire joke revolves around a 2-foot-6-inch tall ex-con named Calvin (Marlon Wayans' shaved head "grafted" on the body of a nine year old boy), who commits a jewel robbery with his dimwitted sidekick, Percy (Tracy Morgan) but accidentally drops his loot – the Queen Diamond – into the purse of a Chicago suburbanite, Vanessa Edwards (Kerry Washington). Inspired by the equally brain-challenged prompting of his hoodlum boss, Walker (Chaz Palminteri), Calvin attempts to retrieve the diamond by disguising himself as a baby and getting Percy to drop him off as an abandoned child on the doorstep of Vanessa and her husband, Darryl (Shawn Wayans). Calvin's corollary in *Capote* is the 5' 3" eponymous writer himself, and Bouchet has considerable fun collapsing the two identities together in a series of composite scenes where Capote's literary but affected, high-pitched Southern drawl segues with Calvin's street-wise, hip-hop bravado to create a strange mutant form that is both man and child, black and white, gay and straight, linked ultimately by the fact that both men are, in their different ways, con artists striving to scam their way into procuring their prize – the Queen Diamond and the ultimate confessional piece of literature. This physical and psychological connection is forged by often serendipitous and accidental visual coincidences, such as a high angle down on Capote lying in bed superimposed on a similar shot of Calvin in his cot, creating an almost perfect eyeline match. This structural and formal connection is cemented seconds later when Calvin is "abandoned" on the Edwards's doorsteps at the exact moment that Capote appears on the doorstep of Alvin Dewey, the investigating sheriff (Chris Cooper), painting both as devious supplicants with a secret agenda.

However, there is a third “little man” in *Capote* – the crippled and stunted Perry Smith (Clifton Collins Jr.) – who, along with Dick Hickock (Mark Pellegrino), was responsible for the brutal killings. On an obvious level, the composite narrative connects Smith with Capote, drawing out the writer’s less than innocent fascination with his subject, not only in terms of a writer attempting to befriend his protagonist in order to gain a deeper insight into his background and the underlying causes of his latent violence (only to abandon him once the seemingly endless appeals process delays the completion of his book), but also a less than subtle homosexual attraction. Bouchet’s juxtaposition expresses the latter in almost slapstick terms when we see the two handcuffed killers being taken into custody and Capote’s almost hypnotic exchange of glances with Smith. This is superimposed on a childish prank as Calvin yanks hard on the nose of one of the Edwards’ friends, taking him off guard and pulling him forwards, thereby physically manifesting what Capote is thinking and feeling as he watches Smith from the assembled crowd. This attraction is further reinforced when Capote visits Smith in his jail cell, asking solicitously after his welfare as Calvin takes great enjoyment in breast feeding from one of the Vanessa’s girlfriends. In this way, illicit heterosexuality – a man masquerading as a baby - provides an disjunctive affective inroad into a barely concealed homosexual attraction across and between two points of otherwise disparate presents as the identities of the three ‘little men’ start to mutate and transform across time and space.

On another level, Bouchet’s film creates a strong contiguity between Smith and Calvin, particularly during a poignant but also highly ironical scene when the latter (who actually hungers for a hearty breakfast) is being fed baby food by the Edwards at the very same moment that Capote – who fears that the chief protagonist of his story may be dissipating

before his very eyes - is feeding Smith the exact same thing in order to nurse him back to life following a hunger strike. Even more heart-wrenching is the films' combined denouement, where Calvin, having turned against Walker, fends off his goons while bouncing around in a baby harness at the very moment that Smith is being strapped into his execution belts minutes prior to his hanging. It is here that the direct time-image emerges most profoundly as a form of "time regained," not only marking the moment that one life begins (as Calvin adopts his new family) and another ends (Smith's execution), but also at the exact instant that art itself is born as a becoming, through the manipulative apprenticeship of Capote the writer, the author of what will become his last novel, *In Cold Blood*, but also Bouchet the filmmaker, that 'forger' of false narratives compiled from the creative investments and machinations of others.

If *Little Men* turns out to be structured around the temporal potentialities of "what will be" through a simultaneity of possible becomings, *Office Job* – a fractured confluence of Michael Mann's *Collateral* (2004) and Alexander Payne's *About Schmidt* (2002) - offers a sober meditation on "what might have been" through the graphic and psychological depiction of parallel universes. Mann's thriller features a hired hitman, Vincent (Tom Cruise), who hijacks a taxi cab driven by Max (Jamie Foxx) in order to carry out a series of assassinations at the behest of Felix, a local Latino gangster (Javier Bardem) during the course of one night in Los Angeles. *Collateral's* action plays simultaneously with Jack Nicholson's retired widower, Warren R. Schmidt, ambiguously trying to come to terms with his daughter's forthcoming marriage to a dim-witted, albeit sincere loser as well as the realization that his own life has been largely wasted in an alienating marriage and a safely routine, dead-end job working for an insurance company. Schmidt ultimately

finds some form of emotional and existential redemption in his long-distance sponsorship of a six year-old Tanzanian boy, Ndugu.

In this case Bouchet resorts to a fourfold vertical “banding” in which the films run alternately across the width of the screen in the combination of *About Schmidt / Collateral / About Schmidt / Collateral*, the films’ formal “parallels” also suggesting certain psychological correspondences between the characters themselves. This is borne out by Michael Mann’s own published commentary on *Collateral*, where he argues that the film’s general theme expresses a clash of ideals between the two main characters. Whereas Vincent represents becoming, living in the moment and improvising his way out of trouble as the need arises, Max is safely sedentary, meticulously planning every move in advance, exemplified by the “Island Limos” company that he plans to establish once his nest egg is complete. Of course, as is typical of all action-image films, characters learn to grow psychologically and transform their situation for the mutual benefit of both the protagonist and the immediate community. *Collateral* is no exception: the extremity of the situation and the resulting violent encounters force Max to become more open to improvisation, culminating in a final shootout on a metro train when he kills Vincent, aided and abetted by his newfound ability to stay calm under pressure and adapt as the circumstances demand. In this respect, Max’s psychological and sensory-motor growth is contrasted with that of Schmidt, who represents an older, more calcified version of what Max might have become, had he not encountered Vincent on that fateful night. In contrast, Max and Vincent are more extreme versions of the necessary adaptability that Schmidt is in the process of discovering as he becomes slowly reconciled to his

daughter's life choices as well as the emotional gratification offered up by his unconditional generosity to Ndugu.

As in the case of *Little Men*, the film's often stark juxtapositions provide dialectical fodder for a deeper meditation on time, especially concerning matters of life and death. Thus, when Schmidt discovers his wife Helen's dead body sprawled on the floor of their house, Max and Vincent are riding in the cab discussing other forms of death: from the disinterested detachment inherent to the exigencies of Vincent's job as a hired assassin to the pogroms in Rwanda and the dropping of the atom bomb (one recalls Stalin's alleged remark that "One death is a tragedy. A million deaths is just a statistic"). Then as Helen (June Squibb) is wheeled out in a body bag, Max asks Vincent, cynically, "What are you doing? Are you just taking out the garbage?" as if to suggest, via audio-visual contiguity, that Schmidt, isolated in his own time frame, is feeling a less-than-guilty sense of release from his apparent "loss." Even more telling is the film's climax, which utilizes cross-cutting - that staple of the action drama, dating back to the silent features of D.W. Griffith - across and between the respective points of present of the two films to create an ironic commentary on both psychological and narrative catharsis. As in the closing montage of Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972), where the new Don, Michael Corleone takes care of "family business" by systematically executing his enemies at the exact moment of his Godson's christening, Bouchet offers the stark contrast of the drawn-out, violent shootout between Max and Vincent as Schmidt delivers an uncomfortable speech at his daughter's wedding, as if *Collateral's* visceral tension were creating an objective correlative of Schmidt's internal upheaval.

Of course, the combined narrative doesn't end there. After the nuptials, Schmidt takes to the road in his RV and, accompanied by the voice over narration of his latest letter to Ndugu, he stops by a pioneer museum in the Mid-West and walks through the dioramas featuring the "sooners" and their covered wagons, meditating on his own existential place in the world - "What difference do I make?" – before subsequently lamenting his failure to prevent his daughter's marriage to "That nincompoop." All the while, *Collateral* is unleashing a wave of atavistic violence on the metro train, as Max and Vincent try to outmaneuver each other in a final shootout. The association of classic Western genre tropes with the pioneer dioramas is too obvious to miss, particularly as it suggests a direct correlation between the *blatant* violence of one scenario with the *latent* violence of the other, thereby indicting the manifest destiny of American expansionism as yet another variation of the Rwanda massacres. In this way, Bouchet's film jumps across the immediacy of time in the present tense to unleash historical memory (historical materialist time) as a violent becoming toward death.

Whereas the films featured in the "New New Age Film Festival" are trimmed to fit a pre-conceived time frame, all the better to disclose a latent temporality – historical and mnemonic - within the framework of a displaced and false movement-image, *16x9 Action Film* has a built in "degeneration" that realigns the spectator's response to time as a series of shifting points of present. The feature length video projection consists of 144 action films, ranging from *Rambo* and *Pulp Fiction* to *Mission Impossible*, which are played simultaneously in a widescreen, rectangular grid (16 films playing across the screen, 9 projected from the top down), much like a gigantic television production room, where the viewer has complete freedom to switch their attention from one image to the next, acting

as a surrogate technical “director.” In this case, the duration of Bouchet’s film is dictated by the length of the feature with the longest running time – 144 minutes – so that as each film reaches its closing credits and ultimately fades to black, its rectangular presence on the larger screen registers as a void or absence. Although the audio component is collaged from all 144 films playing together, creating a cacophony of noise akin to an amplified video arcade, certain soundtracks – most notably the James Bond and *Star Wars* themes – tend to emerge from the collective din to act as a recurring and binding leitmotif to the film as a whole.

Echoing *Little Men* and *Office Job*, the film also benefits temporally and thematically from conventional Hollywood action formulas – the films’ prevailing three-act structure, pre-credit teasers, recurring audio-visual tropes such as explosions, car chases, stuttering machine guns, skydiving – which help to create a consolidating counterpoint between and across each individual filmic rectangle. Thus, as our eye glides across the surface of the screen, connecting the fragmented points of present that constitute the cinematic grid, we are at the same time able to penetrate selected frames and activate the latent sheets of past (virtual memory) which lay buried within them. In this way virtual and actual, past and present, time and movement, become the basic raw material for a larger narrative becoming that is far greater than the sum of the collective, 144 component parts, producing, in short, a pure multiplicity.

Perhaps even more telling is the film’s self-reflexive response to its own built-in durational limits. Almost all of the films seem to end around the two hour mark – another index of Hollywood commercial exigencies, determined by mass-marketing – so that the overall widescreen image’s internal “decay” tends to accelerate within a tight, five

minute time frame as each filmic rectangle culminates with its closing credits and a punctuating corporate logo. In this way Bouchet reminds us that behind the spectacle of cinematic art lurks the virtual world of money (and time-as-money). In a strange irony, the artist thus works backwards from an extremely expensive finished product (financed by others) to arrive at the exact same point reached by the bankrupt Welles working from the opposite direction via scraps of incomplete scenes in a vain attempt (ultimately financed by himself) to cobble together a “complete” version of *Othello*. In both cases, to quote Federico Fellini, “When there is no more money left, the film will be finished.”

Colin Gardner is Professor of Critical Theory and Integrative Studies and Chair of the Art Department at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

---

<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Roberta Galeta, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989, p. 21.