

PROFILE - 01 JAN 2010

Film

BY STUART COMER

The best motion pictures and moving images of 2009



Stephen
Sutcliffe,
Despair (2009)

STUART COMER

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It's no secret that cinema's celluloid dreams gave up the ghost to the digital shift ages ago. **Hollis Frampton** – whose newly released collected writings, *On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters*, edited by Bruce Jenkins and published by MIT Press, was

a major highlight of 2009 – was already writing about the immaterial, ‘degenerate amoeboid shapes’ of digital media in the early 1970s.

But if the staggering number of 16mm film works at art fairs in 2009 was any indication, the return of the repressed and the revenge of the obsolete were in full swing. Galleries worldwide were awash with the sound of analogue stutters, clicks and whirs, seemingly counting out the sprocket holes to ensure that the end of the line remains indefinitely deferred. Perhaps **Rosa Barba’s** *Enigmatic Whistler* (2009) puts it most succinctly. Clear film-leader wraps around a projector placed on the floor, threatening to bind it in a celluloid stranglehold. Nevertheless the act of projection carries precariously on; a beam of light is projected free from the demands of recorded images, a defiant balancing act articulating the fates of objecthood and illusion.

The eloquent uncertainty of Barba’s cinematic endgame underscores what a volatile year 2009 proved to be for artists’ film and its heritage. Luckily, in London the situation for new production seemed relatively healthy. While the proposed merger of the British Film Institute with the UK Film Council caused concern in some quarters about the future of support for adventurous filmmaking in Britain, London spaces such as Chisenhale Gallery, Cubitt, Gasworks, the Institute of Contemporary Arts, Matt’s Gallery, the Serpentine Gallery, The Showroom, South London Gallery, the Whitechapel and the newly opened Raven Row rose up with a vengeance, producing, supporting and presenting impressive moving-image work by **Duncan Campbell, Harun Farocki, Omer Fast, Luke Fowler, Anja Kirschner & David Panos, Simon Martin, Michaela Melián, Rosalind Nashishibi, The Otolith Group, Hannah Rickards, Lindsay Seers and Stephen Sutcliffe.**

Across the sea, the threatened eviction of the Film-Makers' Cooperative in New York and the cancellation of the film programme at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art first raised outrage and then cash. Both institutions found benefactors as well as a large, vocal public determined to fight for the longevity and visibility of a history that continues to be inexplicably at risk.

Several New York spaces upped the ante. X Initiative opened in Dia Art Foundation's old Chelsea space with knock-out shows by **Derek Jarman**, **Luke Fowler**, **Tris Vonna-Michell** and **Keren Cytter**. Greene Naftali debuted a stunning four-screen restoration of **Paul Sharits'** 1975 film installation, *Shutter Interface*. **Ed Halter** and **Thomas Beard's** Light Industry set a new standard for programming energy, mapping out seemingly all of the permutations of cinematic invention with events ranging from screenings of **Klaus Wyborny** films and **Susan Sontag's** 1974 film about Israel, *Promised Lands*, to programmes curated by **Harry Dodge**, **David Joselit** and **James Richards**.

Richards, a young London-based artist shown at Swallow Street in London and 'The Younger Than Jesus' show at the New Museum in New York, signalled a renewed interest in the early analogue video antics of **Leslie Thornton** and UK Scratch Video pioneers such as **George Barber** and **Gorilla Tapes**. In a year when **Dara Birnbaum** was celebrated with a major European retrospective and London lost early videomakers **Tamara Krikorian** and **Tony Sinden**, Richards' dynamic cut-up approach offered a considered voice acknowledging these pioneers, as well as the abstractions of history.

Several other filmic moments that defined 2009: **Jack Goldstein's** Conceptual Pop at MMK Frankfurt and Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Berlin; **Akram Zaatari's** conflicted modernity at Kunstverein Munich and Galerie Sfeir-Semler, Beirut; new digital

documentaries by **Sharon Lockhart** (*Lunch Break*) and **Lucy Raven** (*China Town*); **Apichatpong Weerasethakul**'s haunting video phantomscape at Haus der Kunst, Munich, FACT, Liverpool and Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris; the return of 'termite art' in *Farber on Film: The Complete Writings of Manny Farber*; **Hilary Lloyd**'s liquid stillness at Le Consortium, Dijon; **Curt McDowell** at Margaret Tedesco's 2nd floor projects in San Francisco; **Tom Chomont**'s queer lyricism at Outfest, Los Angeles; **Mohammed Ossama** and **Igor Grubic** in the 11th Istanbul Biennial; and **Melvin Moti** at London's Lisson Gallery.

Veneklasen/Werner's new space in Berlin will house the first major gallery exhibition of work by filmmaker **William E. Jones**. Building on a career that has rigorously explored the conjunctions of bodies, capital and control, his recent projects seek out more radical possibilities for images, archives and immateriality and offer so much more than the lazy appropriations of appropriation that seem to saturate most contemporary practice.

Homeworks V in Beirut promises a chance to consider more seriously the politics and possibilities of images and their circulation through time, space and cinema. I look forward to many more revelations from my seat in the Metropolis Cinema – HQ for many of the events – and to visiting the new Beirut Art Center. I also eagerly await **Yto Barrada**'s exhibition at Beirut's Sfeir-Semler. Barrada's Cinémathèque de Tanger in Morocco has become one of the world's most vibrant prisms for viewing cinema's past as it refracts into a complex and promising future.

RAJENDRA ROY

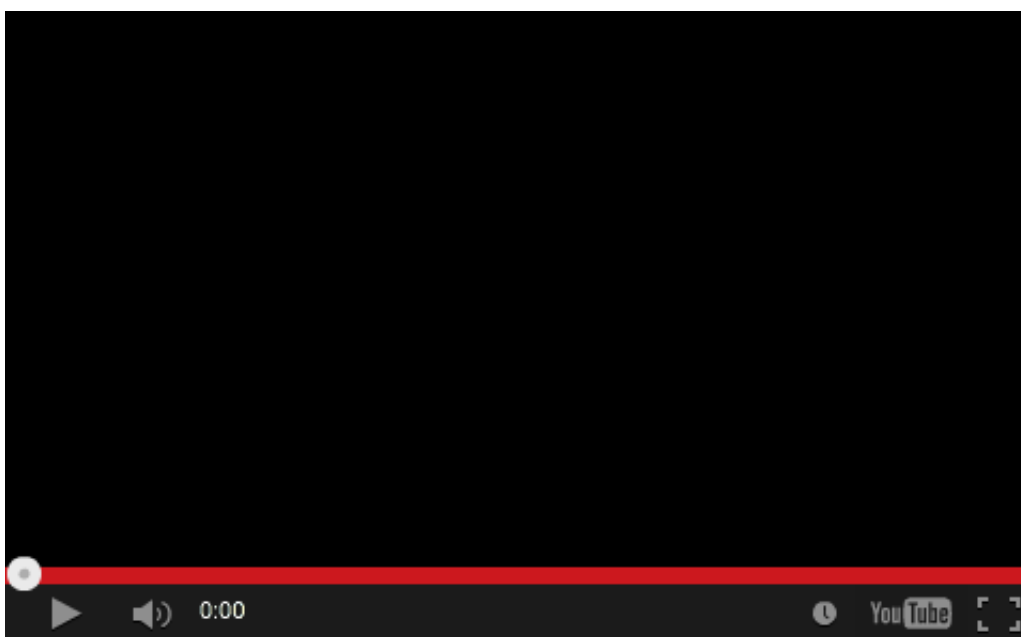
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In looking back at the cinematic landscape of 2009, I came to recognize that the films that resonated all did so because they invoked the fact that this was a year of closure. It was the last year of the first decade of the 21st century; one that started with a misplaced sense of paranoia, culminated mid-decade with reason-crippling fear and appears to be ending by a slamming of the 'restart' button. It saw the last month of the Bush era and thus, possibly, the last year of the war in Iraq. It was the last year that the American independent film movement, which began more than 20 years ago, could honestly be said to be stable in any sector. Long-time festival directors departed suddenly, and countless independent producers watched the last of their funding dry up, leaving projects (and careers) in limbo. And yet, with all of the closure that 2009 brought, it remained a fertile year for filmgoers. I've selected a series of pairs of (loosely) thematically related films that best captured the moods and cinematic strengths of the last year.

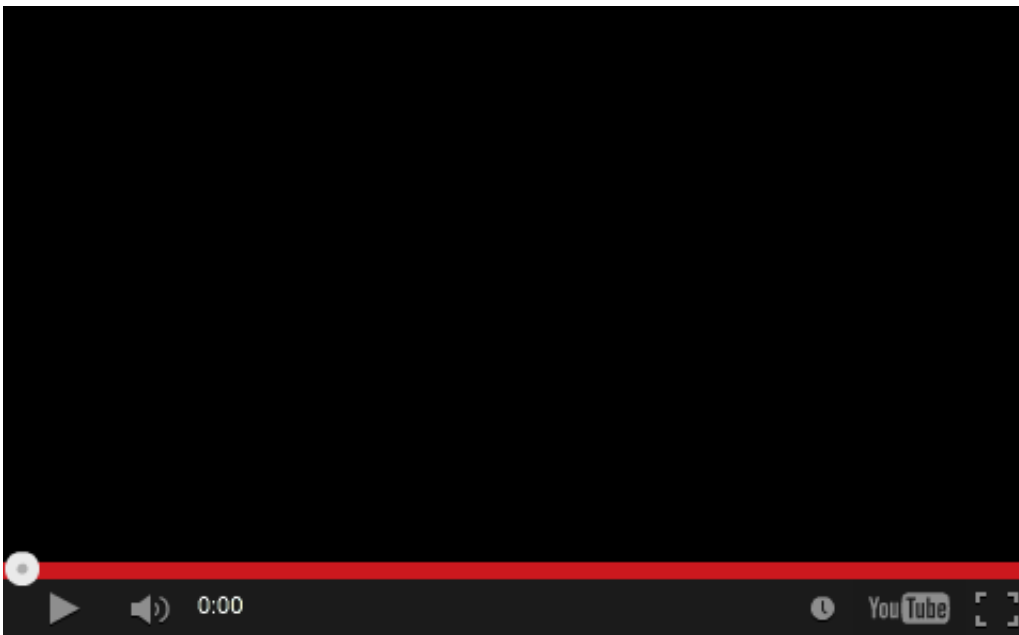


1. 'Warriors will be warriors, and they'll always end up lost.'
Inglourious Basterds, **Quentin Tarantino's** intricate World War II fantasy, moves beyond mere revenge porn thanks in large part to the tour-de-force performances of Michael Fassbender, Mélanie Laurent and Christoph Waltz (the latter of whom reinvents the Nazi-baddie on screen). I know *The Hurt Locker* was made in 2008, but it could only really exist as a work of cinema in a post-Bush world and was released in 2009; the politicization of our war in Iraq would not allow for a full and open appreciation of **Kathryn Bigelow's** exhilarating exploration of Staff Sergeant James' choice for war. It's the film of the year.



2. 'Girls will be girls, but only after they reclaim their vaginas.'

Antichrist: the confluence of **Lars von Trier**'s genius as a filmmaker and pathology as a misogynist is on spectacular display. Thank god(dess) for Charlotte Gainsbourg and the ferocity with which she tackles her role, never flinching when plowing across the glorious celluloid borders of sanity and good taste. *La Teta Asustada* (The Milk of Sorrow), directed by Golden Bear winner *Claudia Llosa*, starts with the end of a life wrecked by violent misogyny, and proceeds to show us the way out of fear and self-loathing for her cursed progeny. Many saw the vagina-protecting/mutilating potato as a magical-realist flourish. I saw it as a cold, hard invader, a destroyer of dreams, screaming to be buried in the earth of a scarred terrain alongside the mother who taught her daughter to fear herself.



3. 'Boys will be boys, until they get it out of their system and grow up a little.' With *Where the Wild Things Are*, **Spike Jonze** has fashioned what must be the most authentic point-of-view picture dealing with boyhood since **François Truffaut** and *Les 400 Coups* (The 400 Blows, 1959). His 'Max' lives in a desperately frustrated fantasy world, propelled home by the slow realization that he is big enough to know that he needs people. **Todd Phillips'** *The Hangover* is the funniest movie of the year, and still, a little sad. Not only a 'whodunnit', but a 'wha'dwedo?' – in the most

entertaining fashion, this film explodes expectations and confirms every bride's worst fears. At the same time it exposes 'acting out' for what it is: a reason to come home.

FILM

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