

The Drink Tank 217



Garcia@computerhistory.org

Movies and Me

I recently went through all the programme books from Cinequest ever since I started attending in 2001. I went through and I marked up all the feature films I've seen at the festival. 143 of them, not including the thousand or so short films I've watched. I went through and found that there were fewer countries that I thought represented on that list. There was the US, Canada, the UK, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Japan, the Philippines, Spain, Italy, Israel, Russia, Serbia, Ireland all represented. If you added films I've seen at other fests, you get countries like France, India, China, Sweden, Norway, Belgium and Brazil. Add DVD and regular in-theatre viewing and you get about 35 more countries. That's a lot of viewing.

Movies are a universal language, in a way. It's storytelling, plain and simple. Film became a massive hit, spreading across the world, even into the poorest nations on Earth within 25 years. Film spread faster than the telephone. Maybe it's because every nation on Earth has people who have stories to tell. I find the ways that people tell stories to be fascinating. The Danes, they can't tell a light story. Everything, even their light and fluffy Summer Blockbusters, are layered, with intensity and often a moral ambiguity that makes for thought-provoking and entertaining viewing. India produces big musicals, largely because that's the only way they can sell music as there was never a good method of music distribution and movies did that very well. The films of Hong Kong are stylish, fast, brash. Japanese films are hard working, typically with an intense layer of tradition. Mexican films are scattershot, often with dark humor streaks you can see from space.

At some point in my life, I'd like to make movies. Yes, I've made several shorts, and I love doing that, but I'd like to set down a script, get some folks interested, and make a feature film. I'd like to think that I have a few good stories to tell and enough of a visual palette that I could put a vision together that would be enjoyable, complex and entertaining. It's a long way off, if it'll ever happen, but it's fun to think about.

It's getting easier to make movies. It's getting no easier to get money enough to make them. Cameras are cheaper, you can put together entire kits of lights, sound equipment and camera packages for less than the cost of a camera back in the 1980s. It's amazing how much prices have come down. Still, people want to get paid, locations want to get paid. The writers want to get paid, which is something I really don't understand. It's cheaper to actually make the thing, but it's no cheaper to get people to work on making films. Such is the trouble.

My latest source of inspiration has been Avant Garde and Experimental Films of the 1920s and 30s. I love the dark, grainy wash that sprays across the screen. The iris that so many of these films employed, giving us a circle or oval of image, but reminding us that we're looking into a world that's not our own is what's made me happy. Getting the sense of peering into that Sno-Globe is weird. There were some great films from those days. There were people who would buy cameras, get friends together and then make a movie, sometimes shooting miniatures on the kitchen table. It's just like the filmmaking of the





last decade, movements like the 48 Hour Film Project have brought us to the point where folks can simply make their movies on the thin with friends.

The results that those folks from the early days of Experimental film were amazing. Films like *The Life and Death of 9413: A Hollywood Extra*, *Distant Mirror*, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, *Bi-Location* and others really show that there was an amazing amount of talent

that wasn't able to break into the system. Today, films end up on YouTube that make you wonder if we've actually managed to return to that same point. In 1924, you could get a short film shown on any screen, there was no sound to be considered so you could show a film made on your 16mm or 35mm cameras brought for 12 dollars by Eastman-Kodak. Today, you've got the Web. Go and look at the trailer for *Green Lantern* that was fan-made. It's amazing, beautiful, perfect for a film that's not going to get made. *Grayson*, a film from a few years back, was much the same.

I want to get in on it. I want to be able to make films, but I've got a sad lack of ability to make films beyond the story phase. That would also indicate that I should simply write stories, though I've proven that's not a good idea. So, I need folks who know what they're doing to make it happen. And that means being able to pay them, and that means bringing in money.

Kinsey: Have you seen it? *The Twilight Zone*?

Peggy: I don't think so; I don't like science fiction

Kinsey: I'll pretend I didn't hear that.

It just gets worse when I spend the day watching *Mad Men*. There's a series that makes you want to be a storyteller. The relationships are complex, the dialogue snappy and the setting rich like *Twelve-Hour Stew*. It's impossible not to get in on it. I start watching and I have to keep going forward, have to watch the rest of the series. The series is the story of Ad Men from the early 1960s, all of them working at Sterling-Cooper, writing copy and drinking and having sex and smoking and making pitches. Don Draper is the main character, a man who has changed his life a couple of times.

Donald Draper is a character of complete and total moral ambiguity. You root for him, you want him to succeed, but at the same time he's petty, deceiving, vengeful and honestly unreliable. On the other hand, he's handsome, brilliant, a loving father, and most importantly of all, he can tell stories. I think that's why we love him; because he can tell stories. No villain can tell stories and make you actually feel. Watching the final episode of season 1 when Don makes the pitch for Kodak's new Slide Projector, I am almost always moved to tears. It's a story he tells using photos of his family and wife, but if you've watched the rest of the season, you know that he's constantly trying to get away from them, cheating on his wife and now he's selling that the slide projector enables him to experience the perfection that is his life over and over. It's slimy, but he's so engaging.

There's also a character, Kinsey, who is basically me. He looks like Orson Welles, understands that he's the butt of the joke and lets himself be one.

And in one episode, the rest of the account men at the Ad Agency discover a script for a play in his desk. He wants to tell his stories too.

MICHAEL JACKSON: DANCING ON THE GRAVE

TARAL WAYNE



So the King of Pop, is dead. I don't mean Elvis... evidently he's been dethroned by the recent death of the child-god Michael Jackson. His recent death – likely brought about by the routine use of drugs prescribed to him by an obliging doctor in the best Hollywood tradition – has overwhelmed the media with fulsome, and *mostly* sincere tributes, personal pain and grieving. And yet...

I have just seen a drawing by an artist I usually find hilarious. It makes

fun of a gruesome, cadaveresque Michael Jackson moonwalking his way into the grave, while an off-stage voice cries “good riddance” to a child molester. Though I have no reason to go out *this* far in condemnation – the man has his good points, after all – I don't see any particular reason to be morbidly respectful of Jackson either. The excess of this cartoon can be blamed, perhaps, on the outrageous lamentations of the media. They *are* tiresome, and do call forth the cynic in anyone with a mind of his own.

Personally, I don't give a shit that Michael Jackson is dead. I didn't listen to his songs, and wasn't interested in his dance. Unlike a John Lennon or Roy Orbison, he had nothing to offer me emotionally or intellectually.

My take on Jackson is that he was for *most* of the public just a cultural artifact – like Elvis. His freaky personality, hang-ups, and oversized ego don't seem relevant to his artistry – nor are the alleged charges of molesting children. Sinatra was a rat, but Sinatra's song stands apart from his personal life. I don't know whether Jackson did, or didn't seduce young boys. However, I believe the charges must have some grounding in reality, even if all Jackson is guilty of is a really immature relationship with childhood. Whatever the full truth, **something** wasn't quite right.

As an pop artist I'd have to say that Jackson was a world class dancer. Fred Astaire had said so, and that's good enough for me, even if the evidence of my own eyes hadn't brought me to the same verdict. But as a singer, Jackson was rather ordinary. Jackson had a clear, high, musical voice, that obviously charmed millions of listeners. What he did with that voice, though, was conventional. He was not a cutting edge vocalist, unlike Elvis Costello or Tom Waits. He never challenged musical norms, nor went out on limb with a gesture that might lose a conservative listener.

Jackson was smart enough to hire the best directors in the video industry, and he danced his way through a series of over-produced, bloated musical spectacles. You have to grant they were memorable. But as pop music goes, his solo career amounts to two albums that were well received by critic, and four hit songs. Any of ten dozen bands in the last twenty years could say as much. Jackson was far from a “legend” by that standard.

But like fans of Elvis, his following is devoted. His fans have bought zillions of his

records, subscribed to his fan magazines, flocked to concerts, poured money by the ton into the Michael Jackson financial empire. But Michael Jackson was maybe less the King of Pop Music in his time than even Elvis was in his. Like that King, he was merely an icon.

Odds are, Jackson wouldn't even have been *that* much if it hadn't been for his youth., Until he grew up, Michael was the jewel in the crown of the Jackson Five. The heavily promoted and corporately-managed group was super-popular with black audiences, and when the Jacksons broke up, Michael easily crossed the racial barrier. But without the huge black following to begin with, could he have been a smash hit as just a Michael Jackson who was previously nobody? It's impossible to say, of course, but I'm skeptical. Jackson could easily have just been another Prince. His sales might have been good while they lasted, but no better than many another performer's. That Michael Jackson would have been nothing the cognoscenti of pop music need taken seriously. Must this one be taken seriously by anyone?

I certainly can't.

In the end, it wasn't the judgment of posterity, or a poor showing on the charts that destroyed Michael Jackson. It seems he destroyed himself. Too much Demerol and OxyContin to dull the "pain" of living. Perhaps this should be regarded as a tragedy, but how sorry can I feel for a man with fame, money, and everything he ever wanted, yet wasn't happy enough to keep junk out of his veins? I've had nothing in my life by comparison – no home, no car, no education, no vacations, no pension plan or insurance, no family, no opportunities – yet I manage to live. He could at least have done as much.



It's hard to understand the relationship between our generation and Michael Jackson. Yes, we know about his problems, but those images from his videos are what we all remember.

Chris at lunch the other day

And now, The Moment you've
All been Waiting for...!
THE DORK KNIGHT
The PUNISHER
BY DANN LOPEZ

