

FILM COMMENT

Bombast: Notes on the Vanity Film

By Nick Pinkerton (/author/nick-pinkerton) on March 13, 2015

“Chosen humility can be truly regal, but vanity run to seed is not a pretty sight”

—George Bernanos, *Diary of a Country Priest*

“I got a big ego (Hahaha)
I’m such a big ego (Hahaha)
I got a big... (Hahaha) ego,
She love my big (Hahaha) ego,
So stroke my big (Hahaha) ego”

—Kanye West, “Ego (Remix)”

Echo and Narcissus, John William Waterhouse

I am not an easily shocked man. The recent news of Boko Haram pledging allegiance to ISIS, thus forming, in the words of my Saturday morning *G.I. Joe*, a “ruthless terrorist organization determined to rule the world,” for example, I took as due course. But the recent appearance of a trailer (<http://www.donotlink.com/e29q>) and 12-minute excerpt of something called *#AnnieHall* was enough to penetrate even my hardened carapace.

The above are teasers for an upcoming Kickstarter to finance a feature, the complete script of which¹ can be found at the *#AnnieHall* website (<http://www.donotlink.com/e2a1>). The proposed film, per the description provided there, concerns “A 40 year-old neurotic comedy writer [who] recalls his failed yet fun-filled romance with a millennial Jewish woman”—a 21st-century *Annie Hall* reboot that “flips pivotal elements” of the original “while updating jokes and pop-culture refs.” The key flip, as you may have inferred, involves the interfaith relationship of the central couple. Writer/director/star/garbage-person J.D. Oxblood’s answer to Woody Allen’s Alvy Singer is a Catholic Midwestern transplant called J.P. Porter, while Porter’s exotic *shiksa* is Minnie Wohl, “a nice yeshiva girl from Forest Hills” (Charly Bivona). (Bivona, per her official bio, has studied at the “Purple Rose Theatre Company in Chelsea, Michigan,” founded by native son Jeff Daniels in 1991, and named after Allen’s *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, in which Daniels starred.) The dead-unfunny trailer

is a *Cannibal Holocaust*-grade ordeal, though undoubtedly its most mortifying moment comes in the “kicker,” a horrifying, seemingly endless tonsil-jousting make-out at the Brooklyn Bridge Park, with Oxblood latching onto Bivona like an *Alien* face-hugger. (It in fact lasts only a couple of seconds.) It does not help matters that he’s wearing a suit with some of the widest pinstripes that I have ever seen.

If you are, like myself, a glutton for punishment, you can attempt a side-by-side comparison between the scripts for *Annie Hall* and *#AnnieHall*, the proposed feature, which follows the same scene-by-scene structure, with Oxblood providing his contemporary tweaks along the way. For example, in Alvy’s hookup with a reporter, now old-hat ho-hum oral sex has been exchanged for spanking, and the line “Sex with you is really a Kafkaesque experience” has been changed to “Having sex with you is very empowering.” This, it should be said, isn’t so far from the spirit of Allen’s work, as he’s often made a point of including scenes in his films where he exchanges rave postcoital reviews with a lover, and in some respects *#AnnieHall*, stripping Allen’s material of his charisma by providing his worst-ever “stand-in,” might be seen to underline the perceived solipsism of his own work, a matter which has been discussed clear to death.

#AnnieHall

One key difference between these projects, of course, is that in 1977 Woody Allen had compiled a significant body of evidence which suggested that people did, in fact, find him interesting enough to follow him along on a bit of navel-gazing while, charitably speaking, no comparable sample exists for J.D. Oxblood. Allen had directed six movies, starred in these and several others, released three albums of his stand-up comedy, and guest-hosted *The Tonight Show*. Oxblood, in the trailer for his as-yet nonexistent feature, edits himself into an appearance on *The Daily Show*. Allen essentially plays himself but, as the decidedly Allen-influenced Louis C.K. would do on *Louie*, he has downplayed his own success so that it won’t act as a barrier to audience relatability. Oxblood, again, is editing himself into an appearance on *The Daily Show*. It’s the difference between pretending to have less than you have and pretending to have more; neither is necessarily more honest, but one is a good look and the other, to say the very least, is not.

#AnnieHall, a sick-making piece of imposture, screams vanity project—but aside from the ol’ Potter Stewart “I know it when I see it,” I found that when I tried to formulate a comprehensive definition of what, exactly, defines a vanity project, I came up lacking. To stay a moment longer with the present example, one obvious difference is financial. United Artists, on the basis of Allen’s proven commercial appeal, were willing to entrust him and his collaborators with \$4 million dollars in order to make their movie. By contrast, J.D. Oxblood must pass his hat around to friends, friends of friends, and anyone else who might be drawn to his Kickstarter campaign in order to achieve his vision, such as it is. Leaving aside the matter of expressing the muse for the moment to take a strictly materialist view, we can separate the production of art—let’s call it “original content,” per a press release about Peter Berg’s new production company that I just received—into professional and amateur spheres. (The second term is not meant as a pejorative, but rather to be used in the original sense.) Original content produced professionally must seek to serve the profit motive. If the profit motive is not the principal incentive, either by necessity (nobody’s buying) or design (you’re not selling), original content that is being produced on the amateur level may yet be tradable in other forms of capital—self-esteem, intellectual distinction, or sexual peacocking.

That last form is key—I refer you again to Mr. Oxblood’s spit-swap ending to his *#AnnieHall* trailer, joining a storied tradition of men using the pretext of narrative art to pair themselves romantically with younger actresses, or otherwise to establish their undiminished virility. Oxblood, to his credit, establishes the age difference between his character and Minnie, and makes it an element of his film. Such is not the case in 2005’s *Double Down*, the movie that attracted a measure of cult recognition to its writer/producer/director/star Neil Breen. Breen has the bearing of a rumpled, beef-jerky-limbed Garry Shandling, though the way in which he presents himself to the camera suggests he fancies himself a rugged Jack Palance type. In *Double Down*, Breen plays a super-hacker, ex-fighter-pilot, and counterterrorism agent named Aaron Brand who went rogue after the government, fearing his growing power, assassinated his fiancée. In the film’s ongoing voiceover monologue, Brand pines for the departed “love of his life,” his lyrical longing (“Come back again... I am your spirit”) interspersed with cutaways to stock shots of bald eagles. I imagine that this must be what people who don’t like Terrence Malick movies see when they watch Terrence Malick movies.

Double Down

Brand tells us that he and his bride-to-be met when they were 7 years old, though apparently working as a government op puts some city miles on you, because when we see the fiancée in a flashback, she appears to be at least two decades his junior. Shortly afterward, we’re shown the killing itself, which occurs while Brand and his fiancée are bathing in some kind of outdoor spring, she presenting her be-thonged backside to the camera. After the deed is done, Brand floats next to her corpse in the pool, facedown and bare-assed in his abjection, such exhibitionistic effrontery being something of a unifying theme among the films discussed here.

According to various profiles tied to the 2014 distribution of Breen’s third film, *Fateful Findings*, the Las Vegas-based auteur self-finances his cinematic endeavors through his work as either a licensed architect, a real-estate agent, or both, according to what source you look at. The combined budgets of Breen’s corpus would likely be only a fraction of what went into the most famous vanity film of the 21st century, a hazy tissue of elliptical conversations and wobbly end-over-end pigskin-tossing titled *The Room* (03). The brainchild of California entrepreneur-turned-multihyphenate Tommy Wiseau, *The Room* offers a bit of a twist on the older-auteur/younger-starlet pairing, though in a fashion that ultimately serves to reinforce Wiseau’s narcissism. Wiseau’s character, Johnny, is oblivious to the fact that his “beautiful” bride-to-be, Lisa (Juliette Danielle), is cheating on him with Mark (Greg Sestero), his “best friend.” (I feel obliged to include both of the quoted designations, as they are repeated several hundred times in the course of the 99-minute film.) While Danielle and Sestero both appear to be a good quarter-century younger than Wiseau, this fact is never once addressed in *The Room*; Wiseau does, however, make sure to include ample footage of his impressively gym-toned, if knotty and oddly mottled, body.

I haven’t read *The Disaster Artist*, Sestero’s 2013 account of *The Room*’s production (written with Tom Bissell), and I didn’t need to in order to recognize Wiseau’s movie as a film à clef—the work of an embittered man who’d been fitted with the horns of a cuckold, or at least imagined himself to have been wronged, using the license of fiction in order to take his revenge on those whom he perceives as his betrayers. The film ends with Wiseau staging his own suicide—the ultimate solipsistic act—though here he’s allowed to indulge in the Tom Sawyer fantasy of gloating over the spectacle of the emotional devastation that his death inspires

(http://40.media.tumblr.com/7f83df09c90b98f9656dab81dbef76c4/tumblr_niqmboHMwK1rhjbado1_1280.jpg), as mourners heap themselves onto the body of too-sensitive-for-this-rotten-world Johnny, realizing all too late the error of their ways. Engineering this sort of spectacle would be embarrassing for an artist of any age, though it is doubly so because Wiseau is (conservative estimate) pushing 50 here, and it's not without reason that "Die middle-aged, leave a Bowflex-toned-but-sort-of-weird-looking corpse" isn't a saying in common usage—if you're to lose your youthful glow in outliving Chatterton (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Chatterton), the silver lining is that you're supposed to get wiser. (A dispensation must be made for artists, such as Vladimir Mayakovsky and Yukio Mishima, who managed to elevate self-destruction to the level of performance art.)

The Room

For Wiseau, when Tommy/Johnny dies, all light goes out of the world with him, while Breen, to borrow the title of Allan Dwan's final film, depicts himself as The Most Dangerous Man Alive. In both cases—the martyr fantasy, the "vengeance is mine" posturing—there is a messianic impulse at work, and of my favorite movies of last year takes the delusional self-importance of the vanity film to its logical extreme. This would be Nick Corirossi's brazenly off-putting *Hector.LA* (<http://www.hector.la/>), or, as it is titled onscreen, *Henry Jaglom's Nick Corirossi's The 5th Belief*. Made in the form of a vanity movie project from the turn of the millennium that has survived, at least in compromised, fragmentary form, to the 32nd century, it stars Corirossi as "Nick Corirossi," a balding sleazebag making a trash movie with the stated intent to "get pussy," though as it happens, the eventual parents of the world's savior meet on his set, and the film in which they appear somehow survives as the lone relic of human civilization as we know it. (Parodying middle-aged men playing half their age, the 27-year-old Corirossi plays middle-aged.) Corirossi's touchstones include Jaglom, a marginal filmmaker who has for years eaten lunch off the fact that he used to eat lunch with Orson Welles (the logo of his Rainbow Films company, featuring Welles, is among the pieces of found footage employed here) and self-promoted new projects on a billboard at Sunset and Downey, and Eric "Enter the Void" Schaeffer, whose YouTube series "Eric Schaeffer: Life Coach" I will link here (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TsRfd0Qj4vY&app=desktop>) without comment.

When you're working without promise of a paycheck, you open yourself up to a certain amount of suspicion, and so any amateur effort runs the risk of being tagged a vanity project. And where self-absorption is expected or at the very least tolerated from the young, the films I've addressed thus far have in common the odor of midlife crisis—a sudden decision to launch oneself as a filmmaker without any previous track record, blowing the bankroll on cast and crew instead of the stereotypical sports car.² If you are a bored teenager making movies just for the fun of the thing, your amateur efforts fall under the auspices of backyard filmmaking, a phenomenon that I have written about in the past (<http://blog.sundancenow.com/weekly-columns/bombast-118>). If you begin making self-financed movies starring yourself and your cohort of friends in your twenties or even into your thirties, with or without the prospect of financial gain, you will be safely working in the moderately respectable established tradition of American independent filmmaking—though this doesn't come without increasing attendant risk of being accused of narcissism, as in the cases of Swanberg, Dunham, et al. When you start making movies in middle age, using your personal fortune, you haven't even got the excuse of heedless youth, and the risk of appearing a creeper is high.

If Wiseau and Breen's films have value—and they do—it's because while failing to pull off the most routine plot machinations, they achieve something else through virtue of their mere existence, representing gate-crashing incursions into show business by individuals who haven't been vetted through official channels, and never, ever would be. These films might be classified as a species of outsider art, or art brut, produced by men who, while seemingly completely out of touch with popular culture, nevertheless are compelled to produce a distorted version of its formulae, men who look in the mirror and see a matinee idol looking back.

Fateful Findings

Where filmmakers working in the shadow economy of the independent tradition have some sense of community, with attendant obligations and social pressures, *The Room* and *Double Down* are works in which seemingly no checks or balances have been applied to their creators' most haywire impulses. In a recent interview, the filmmaker Albert Serra (<http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/24042/1/why-hating-filmmakers-makes-for-great-films>), a deeply boring Catalan whose soporific burlesque of cocksure alpha confidence has won him several admirers, states: "Like me, [Buñuel] was not coming from the world of cinema, and he would never talk about other filmmakers. Buñuel stands alone. And this is what I want to achieve. I don't like other filmmakers, I'm not interested, and I hate all filmmakers that came from the academy." The director of *Story of My Death*, of course, knows the rules of the game he's playing backwards and forwards, and it is for this reason that he is presently enjoying a 10-day stand at the Tate Modern—the figure from outside "the world of cinema" that he's describing is someone closer to Tommy Wiseau. There has been some debate over what the title *The Room* means, though to me it must apply to the airtight, locked chamber of Wiseau's mind, where nary a ray of self-consciousness penetrates.

The pathos of the disjunction between ambition and perceivable reality, as evidenced in the cases of Wiseau and Breen, is a subject of considerable allure—the success of works like *Ed Wood* and *American Movie*, both of which concern outsiders lacking the financial resources of our subjects at hand, speaks to this fact. And so, naturally, plans are now in place to make a major motion picture of *The Disaster Artist*—though I am perhaps being overhasty in using the word "major," for James Franco, the current poster boy for overreaching mediocrity along with Joseph Gordon-Levitt, is slated to direct the movie, and per some reports is also planning to star as Wiseau, opposite his brother, Dave, who would play Sestero. There is a conceptual gambit to be read into this, as there always is with Franco. Per the critic Michael Koresky, in a recent exchange: "Joseph Gordon-Levitt and James Franco share a disturbing egotism that nullifies whatever minor talents they have (Franco can be very funny; JGL can feign genuine likability). Not to always bring it back to Ethan Hawke (but why not?), but when he takes on genre garbage he throws himself into it whole hog and actually elevates it, whereas Franco treats them like high-concept experiments and ends up condescending to it." In addition to the various film projects that he has directed since 2005's *The Ape*, Franco has produced fiction, essays, gallery exhibitions, and mixed-media theater, and throughout the course of doing so has been accused of using his fame to create opportunities for himself that he does not, by any available evidence of merit, deserve, just as Wiseau used his personal fortune to give himself the big break that no casting director in his right mind would have ever given him. Here we might conclude that the vanity project has something to do with power and privilege, though in this, again, it resembles the entire moviemaking system, only more so.

The Ape

The case of Franco brings us, naturally, to another sort of “vanity project”—incursions of show business into other fields of artistic endeavor, with greater or lesser success. Only this week I was alerted to the fact that Val Kilmer was selling his original artwork online (<http://valkilmerart.bigcartel.com/>) at prices that are, let us say, somewhat disproportionate to the accomplishment of the work. Elsewhere I was reminded of the existence of Michael Madsen’s poetry, praised by Dennis Hopper, himself a photographer of note, as was the late Leonard Nimoy, who also released five albums on the Dot Records label of Nashville, Tennessee. Perhaps the most common celebrity sidebar is the musical project, the annals of star-rock having given us Franco’s band Daddy, Thirty Seconds to Mars, The Bacon Brothers, Dogstar, Thunderbox, Wicked Wisdom, Juliette and the Licks/New Romantiques, 30 Odd Foot of Grunts, *The Return of Bruno*, “MacArthur Park,” and forays into anodyne wet-blanket indiepop by Scarlett Johansson³ and Zooey Deschanel, just for starters. (It should be noted that in other cultures, for example the Cantopop and French traditions, for stars to have a musical project is the exception rather than the rule, and that Anglo-American celebrity may be an outlier in this regard.)

The more I look for a categorical definition of the vanity film, the more unsalvageable the term comes to seem—a distinction meant to impugn the motives of a creator, conferred according to one’s relative tolerance for the work in question. I toyed with the idea of reframing the discussion in the strictly materialist terms of star versus anti-stars, to wit: people pay money to see the star; the anti-star pays so that they can be seen. This construction doesn’t hold much weight either, for I doubt that many of the works I’ve been discussing were undertaken with the *intention* of losing the investment, as it is a particular function of narcissism to believe that one is as interesting to everyone else as one is to one’s self—as, indeed, some of the examples I’ve chosen have proven to be, thus transmogrifying the “delusional” anti-star into the star proper. Indeed there is something hypnotic about Wiseau’s screen presence—his Anne Rice-inspired sartorial sense, his odd shyness and incessant chuckling, as if at an inside joke known to himself alone—and why not? Wouldn’t you be laughing if you could blow a reported \$6 million with total disregard for a return on the investment?

These compunctions notwithstanding, I will put forth a tenuous definition of the vanity film. It is the work of an outsider which assumes the privilege of an insider, which asks “Why Tom Cruise and not me?”—then doesn’t stop to consider the myriad reasons why not. Rather than recognizing and working within the limitations imposed by the circumstances of its production which separate it from the Big Time, the vanity film refuses to admit to the existence of these limitations, as it denies the effects of age, and all laws of plausibility. It originates outside of show business, and embodies the egotism without which there can be no show business. “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity,” per Ecclesiastes—a statement which someone, I forget who, noted logically includes itself in the condemnation.

Dick Kent - The Maker Of Smooth Music



1. Among my favorite elements are the footnotes (“Reference: Slavoj Žižek- ‘Art of the Ridiculous Sublime, On David Lynch’s *Lost Highway*’), and the moments which betray the author’s feigned insider status, and desperate desire to be proximate to celebrity culture. (“Excellent place for a cameo, as Truman Capote did in Woody’s film.”) Oh, and there’s also this: (click to enlarge)

(<http://fgmxi4acxur9qbg31y9s3a15.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/assets/uploads/Nevermind.GIF>)

2. The history of art, it should be noted, has more than its fair share of late-blooming creators, men and women who abandoned the *métier* that they worked in for another largely or wholly unrelated, in midstream, as it were, and those who kept their day jobs. Literature perhaps offers the most viable examples, with Sherwood Anderson, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, George Eliot, Anthony Burgess, Muriel Spark, Raymond Chandler, Henry Miller, all having launched themselves in midlife.

3. Not so long ago I bore witness to Johansson performing New Order’s “Bizarre Love Triangle,” preceding the song with the “self-deprecating” aside: “Superstar karaoke, right?” Totally, ScarJo, I can see you *get it*. Regarding the other projects listed, they are the love-labors of, respectively, Jared Leto, Kevin Bacon, Keanu Reeves, Steven Seagal, Jada Pinkett Smith, Juliette Lewis, Russell Crowe, Bruce Willis, and Richard Harris.

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