REPORTERS, WOMEN, AND THE THIRD WORLD IN *1980s* FILM

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There's a moment in the 1983 film UNDER FIRE that lays bare its female protagonist's body as well as the film's central preoccupation. Russell Price (Nick Nolte), an American photojournalist on assignment in Nicaragua, stands above Claire Sheridan (Joanna Cassidy), another American reporter, as she sleeps and repeatedly photographs her nude back with his camera. His response to her duplicates his response to Nicaragua: he turns the woman and the culture into static photographic images. He stands apart from, and in this case above, the terrain that fascinates him. He expresses his detachment succinctly: "I don't take sides; I take pictures."

Price's voyeuristic scrutiny of Claire's body and of Nicaragua makes visually explicit a tradition for maintaining Western patriarchal dominance. His authority rests on his control over representation and interpretation of women and the non-Western world. Two sets of power relations at issue in contemporary culture are evoked: between the First and the Third World and between men and women. Constructions of gender and nationalism intersect in an obvious way in what I call Third World investigation films: Western films such as UNDER FIRE that combine two cinematic genres: the reporter film and the action/adventure set in the Third World.1 Other examples are THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY (1982), LAST PLANE OUT (1983), THE KILLING FIELDS (1984), SALVADOR (1985), CRY FREEDOM (1987), and DEADLINE (1987). What I will argue here is that in this set of films (with the exception of THE KILLING FIELDS and CRY FREEDOM, which emphasize a somewhat different set of concerns), Western constructions of national identity reveal less anxiety than those of masculine identity, thereby upholding male dominance more forcefully than cultural dominance.

Third World investigation films revolve around a Western male reporter protagonist "covering" Third World civil strife, and spectators are positioned to adopt his cultural outsider's point of view. As a journalist, drawing on a tradition of newspaper reporter films, he investigates a situation, typically increasing his knowledge as the narrative progresses. Interpretation becomes a central thematic concern as the reporter tries to make sense out of a con-

fusing situation.

Action/adventure films contribute the convention of placing a Western, usually male, protagonist in the center of Third World settings. The mise-en-scene surrounds him with cliched signifiers of the Third World as mysterious, inscrutable, exotic, sensual, corrupt, and dangerous. Dissolution is always a possibility for the protagonist in this literary and cinematic tradition where "going native" means indulging one's most deeply repressed desires. It is in this unstable setting, in the action/adventure tradition exemplified by INDIANA JONES AND THE TEMPLE OF DOOM, that the hero reinforces his ego boundaries and proves his cultural superiority by defeating his enemies and completing his mission. Heroism in a slightly more subtle form occurs in Third World investigation films when they end, as they often do, with the reporters' daring escape from a turbulent country.

When the films begin, the reporter typically is seen arriving in a foreign country, where he's confused by strange, often dangerous, sights and sounds. In most of the films, the reporter's unease is a response not only to violence and to a new culture but also to a woman, who usually appears not long after his arrival. The films, therefore, construct a Western masculine subject threatened by his initial inability to comprehend both an unfamiliar culture and an unfamiliar woman. To dramatize the protagonist's crisis, the films consistently conflate the landscape with the woman, regardless of whether she is in her native land or is another Westerner. The landscape and the woman merge visually as the primary objects of the camera's obsessive scrutiny, a scrutiny that is controlled diegetically by a male gaze. There are frequent shots from the reporter's point of view as he observes his new surroundings. Often, we view the country and its people framed by the window of a car as the reporter drives (or is driven) through cities, villages, or the countryside, watching from a sheltered remove.2

The reporter's initial detachment from his surroundings places him, and the spectator, in a voyeuristic relationship to the culture, and voyeurism also characterizes his initial relationship to the woman he encounters. Each of the films establishes that the reporter is fascinated by the woman, and the narratives often withhold information about her so that she is represented as a mysterious enigma. At the same time that the reporter investigates the political situation he's assigned to cover, he also investigates the woman. In DEADLINE, for example, Don Stevens (Christopher Walken), a special correspondent sent on short notice to Beirut from Paris, where he was covering fashipn shows, spends most of the narrative confused about the identity and loyalties of a mysterious woman Guy Hamilton (Mel Gibson), in THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY, tries repeatedly to reach Jill Bryant (Sigourney Weaver) by telephone, and when she refuses to take his calls, attends social events solely for the purpose of encountering her. In the other films as well, the woman and the culture are the unknown entities that propel the narratives, which extend the promise that they will deliver explanations for both mysteries.

In accordance with the narrative investigation of the woman and the culture, the camera scrutinizes both her body and the setting. THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY and SALVADOR, like UNDER FIRE, include photographic scrutiny of the woman in their diegesis as well as in their "objective" camera positions. SALVADOR includes a sequence of a young boy snapping photos of Maria (Elpedia Carrillo) as she lies unclothed in a hammock. In THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY, Billy Kwan (Linda Hunt) take frequent photographs of Jill Bryant and displays them, along with photos of impoverished and crippled Indonesians, on the walls of his bungalow. In the same film, a Western photojournalist showing his latest photos to other Western reporters holds up a photo of a bare-breasted Indonesian woman and says, "Beauty among the squalor. I did that with a 200 millimeter." The reporters jokingly debate whether the photo is pornography or art, and Billy Kwan responds mockingly, "It it's in focus, it's pornography; if it's out of focus, it's art." Perhaps the most revealing conflation of woman and land occurs in another conversation between the same group of Western reporters. One reporter announces, "I've secured me a portion of Indonesia," to which another responds, "So have I; she's waiting for me up in my room." The first reporter continues, "A beachhead of tranquility, a private domain, a haven: I have taken me a bungalow." Here in succinct form, and with a dose of irony that comments on its own discourse, the film conflates a woman and the Third World terrain and reveals the Western patriarchal desire to possess both.

Thus, a tradition of associating women with nature is made manifest in the films, and its roots in male anxiety over the desiring-production of the unconscious becomes apparent. What the gaze observes in the films is seductive and mysterious and steeped in violence, a projection of desires repressed by fear. Certainly in these films it isn't making a commitment the male characters fear, it's being neglected. Their greatest fear, it seems, is that they might be unable to understand, much less control, events around them. What they seek, then, is confirmation, or, to put it another way, a mirror. They need to be recognized, even admired, by the woman and the culture in order to reexperience the mirror stage of development when, as infants, they acquired a unified sense of self by recognizing their reflection and imagining that everything in the world would respond like a mirror to reveal their presence. The reporters' desire is a narcissistic one for constant affirmation of self in everyone and everything they see. Rather than fear that their voyeurism will be detected and their gaze returned, they fear that it won't be returned.

Although they're usually politically and romantically uncommitted when the films begin, like Russell Price behind the shield of his camera, they align themselves with a woman and a cause by the end. In SALVADOR, Richard Boyle (James Woods) proposes marriage to Maria and increasingly supports the El Salvadoran rebels. In UNDER FIRE, Russell Price gets close to Claire Sheridan and to the Sandinistas. In THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY, Guy Hamilton woos Jill Bryant and becomes more sympathetic to the Communists. In LAST PLANE OUT, Jack Cox (Jan-Michael Vincent) romances Maria (Julie Carmen), but, in a departure from the pattern, he supports his old friend President Somoza from the beginning and retains his loyalty even after he learns that Maria is working with the Sandinistas. The reporter's narrative goal in all the films is to comprehend the unfamiliar and overcome his inconsequentiality.

In the process of conflating woman and culture, a contradictory construction of female sexuality emerges in the films. On the one hand, by association with a volatile war torn location, the woman is constructed as a site of instability, an association typical of film noir, where female sexuality -- via the femme fatale -- consistently embodies extreme danger. On the other hand, women in the films are associated with a growing sense of the reporter's commitment as he begins to assume responsibility for his actions and relinquishes the illusion of unbaised journalistic objectivity. Because his romance with the woman accompanies a parallel commitment to a cause, the films equate women with responsibility and assign them the stereotypical role of redeeming irresponsible men.

By the end of the film, however, the narrative has mediated this contradiction. At first the woman is unfamiliar to the reporter protagonist, and, seen from his point of view, she appears mysterious and threatening. But as the film unfolds and the reporter becomes romantically involved with the woman, he simultaneously possesses her body and her "story," making her transparent. Thus, her threat is eliminated. He finds assurance that she wants, and perhaps even needs, him. Guy Hamilton seduces the aloof and reluctant Jill Bryant and, even after he betrays her confidence, they reunite at the airport to flee Indonesia together at the end of THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY. Richard Boyle convinces the skeptical Maria to marry him by agreeing to give up alcohol and other women and go to confession in SALVADOR. Jack Cox wins over the Sandinista fighter Maria so that she allows him to board the final plane leaving Nicaragua even though her Sandinista friends are determined to capture him in LAST PLANE OUT. In the last shot of Maria, she stands with lowered rifle -- her phallic threat negated -- gazing with longing at Cox as he boards the plane. Unlike the other films, in UNDER FIRE Claire Sheridan doesn't resist Russell Price; however she does conform to the role of representing moral obligation by encouraging Price to support the Sandinistas. DEADLINE never establishes a romantic relationship between Don Stevens and Sarah, but, in conventional fashion, she urges him to support a cause.

The films diminish the threat posed by an aloof woman, but in SALVADOR and LAST PLANE OUT, where the reporter becomes romantically involved with a local woman, rather than with another Westerner, he's unable to bring her to the United States. He cannot control the difficulties that arise from their cultural differences. While the films are consistent in their representation of gender relations, ending with masculine authority, three of the films

acknowledge that their own generic discourse on cultural power is problematic. UNDER FIRE, THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY, and DEADLINE raise questions about the reporter's ability to interpret an unfamiliar culture without first having a thorough knowledge of how historical contexts have informed current events. They express skepticism about the reporter's, and the film medium's, reliance on the observation of surface appearances, which rests on a visual theory of knowledge in which "I see" means "I understand." According to Walter J. Ong, our technological culture is marked by an "addiction to visualism" [3] and ocular vision has become "an analogue for intellectual knowledge."[4] Moreover, what is suppressed in the correspondence between seeing and knowing is that interpretations are produced in cultural, historical, and personal contexts which always shape the interpreter's values.

Observers who interpret foreign cultures without thorough study of how history has shaped current events there will more than likely produce interpretations that reflect their own cultural presuppositions and personal concerns. But their narcissism can't be fully indulged when their gaze is deflected by elements that refuse incorporation into their desires. Guy Hamilton, in THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY, for example, relies on Western cliches and recycles superficial metaphors when reporting on conditions in Indonesia, as Jill Bryant points out to him when she characterizes his report as melodramatic. He's unable to account for events, and when he tries to push his way through a military roadblock to enter a government building, he's hit in the eye by a soldier's rifle butt. He retreats with a detached retina, his blindness made explicit, and has no choice but to flee the country, having failed to comprehend or alter events in Indonesia.

UNDER FIRE, THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY, and DEADLINE also interrogate the conventional assumption that photographic images transmit the truth (although all three films retain a conventional representational style of realism). Surface appearances, instead of revealing the truth in conventional Hollywood style, are shown to be contradictory and illusory. THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY uses the Indonesian puppet play as a metaphor for film: both cast light and shadow on a screen and in both, it is up to the spectator to construct meaning.[5] The film also examines the multiple interpretations elicited by photographs. Like the puppet play, photos in the film are understood on the basis of interpretive conventions, cultural conditioning, and individual desires. As Billy Kwan tells Guy Hamilton when describing the puppets, "Krishna says...all is clouded by desire, as a fire by smoke, as a mirror by dust; from these, it blinds the soul." Kwan's words return later, after his death, to run through Hamilton's mind when he finds himself alone and helpless with both eyes bandaged.

DEADLINE emphasizes the figurative blocked vision that results from television mediation when Don Stevens refuses to leave his hotel in Beirut and gathers information for his reports from video monitors. He provides cliched commentary to accompany the video his cameraman brings him, and after the cameraman quits in disgust at Stevens detachment, Stevens borrows old outtakes of street violence from another journalist to use in his next report.

UNDER FIRE is concerned with the process from pro-filmic event to photograph to signifying image with the potential to alter events. Russell Price agrees to photograph a dead Sandinista leader as if he were alive. His photograph has a series of results, some unexpected, indicating that the significance of an image lies in how it's interpreted and that images have the power to cause events. In effect, the film suggests, images are events. Price learns that the decision to snap a photo is not always innocent, and its consequences are beyond his control, but he nonetheless shares responsibility for those consequences.

UNDER FIRE, THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY, and DEADLINE problematize cross-cultural representation and interpretation, throwing into doubt the West's ability to comprehend Third World countries without first having thorough knowledge of historical complexities. Additionally, they question the Western imperialist tradition that considers it essential to intervene in the affairs of Third World nations. Yet the films don't extend their critique to the protagonist's relationship with a woman; despite his initial unfamiliarity with her, he inevitably, and without much difficulty, understands and dominates her. His gaze becomes a controlling one when directed at the woman at the same time that it proves incapable of comprehending and controlling the full range of cultural complexities. Therefore, Third World investigation films may appear at first glance to express

overwhelming anxiety over unstable Western cultural authority, but closer examination reveals that some of the films allow for Third World autonomy. Gender relations, however, receive less flexible treatment.

It's interesting to speculate that economic factors have contributed to the disparity in how American cultural products represent male as opposed to Western power. Multinational corporations, and the international networks they establish, provide persuasive incentives to come to terms with the existence of other cultures and create international coalitions. There are, however, few, if any, economic incentives to encourage men to relinquish male dominance. In fact, the international sensibility promoted by multinationals shows signs of relying on male partnership aligned against female otherness.

A Pepsi-Cola commercial broadcast recently to announce the release of a new Madonna video, "Like a Prayer," encapsulates the alignment. It shows an aboriginal man joining a white man sitting in a bar in a solitary shack located in the desert and equipped with a large satellite dish. A male narrator announces that wherever you are in the world, you'll be able to see the premiere of Madonna's new video, and in the bar the two men turn their gaze to a television set, where they see Madonna begin to perform. The commercial presents men from two distinct ethnic groups joined in friendly camaraderie. What they share is a desire to scrutinize the spectacle of a female body that has been commodified for them and exists throughout the commercial in a separate diegesis framed by the technology of television. It's a fantasy of international harmony but also one of voyeuristic desire fulfilled by the packaging of women.

Pepsi's subsequent denouncement of Madonna's video suggests that women, even working within the commercial mainstream, can still resist absolute control over how they're represented and interpreted. Ironically, Pepsi's response to the "Like a Prayer" video, under pressure from the American Family Association, reveals the limits to its corporate vision of racial harmony: apparently it's acceptable to the Pepsi Company for a white man and a black man to sit together at a bar and nurse their Pepsis while watching Madonna sing on television, but it's something else entirely when Madonna kisses the feet of a statue of a black saint who comes alive and embraces her and she, as Madonna herself said in an interview, "reaches an orgasmic crescendo of sexual fulfillment intertwined with her love of God."6 Madonna's video contains similar racial and gender ingredients as the Pepsi commercial, but the outrage provoked by her configuration of those ingredients reveals that it is still an era of living dangerously for women who transgress patriarchal boundaries.

ENDNOTES

1. I've written a longer analysis of how Third World investigation films represent Western anxieties about its threatened cultural dominance: "Comprehension and Crisis: Reporter Films and the Third World," in Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema, Ed. Lester Friedman (University of Illinois Press, forthcoming).

2. Cars don't always protect the reporter from violence in the films. In THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY, Guy Hamilton and Billy Kwan are forced to leave their car in the middle of an anti-American demonstration, where they are attacked by angry demonstrators. In UNDER FIRE, when Alex Grayson (Gene Hackman) leaves his car to ask a group of soldiers for directions, they shoot him. In DEADLINE, Don Stevens is driven through Beirut blindfolded, denied the conventional privileged sight provided by a car.

3. Walter J. Ong, Interfaces of the Word (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 126.

4. Ibid., p. 123.

5. Carolyn A. Durham has written an excellent analysis of how THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY treats the relationship between sight and knowledge: "THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY; Can Vision Be a Model for Knowledge," Jump Cut 30, March 1985, pp. 6-8.

6. Madonna quoted in Stephen Holden, "Madonna Re-Creates Heself--Again," The New York Times, Sunday, March 19, 1989, p. 12.