

SMUDGED LIST OF VISUALS

By Michael Ventura

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Lists may not be so dumb after all. Scholars now believe that lists were the earliest form of writing -- in fact, some think written language was originally invented for no other purpose than making lists. As life became more complex many things needed to be remembered and compared, the theory goes; in an oral culture this was difficult when a list's items couldn't be arranged as chants or rhymes. Writing was invented to deal with that complexity. There's a sense in which all writing can be seen, in its essence, as a list: listing events, listing nuances, listing ...

Well. It's a theory. Certainly one mental compulsion of our species is to list and compare. And year-end lists are compulsive enough, for sure. So here's my somewhat smudged list ... smudged in the sense that I see cinema and television overlapping, smudging, as never before. Important new cinema works like *The Circle* are shot with camcorders, while TV miniseries like *Band of Brothers* are shot with all the resources of cinema and shown in letterbox. In fact, several TV series (*The West Wing*, for instance) are now presented in letterbox. In the not too distant future "film" won't be filmed but recorded electronically, then electronically transmitted directly to theatres and/or homes, completing the blending of the mediums. Hence the following list, combining both:

1. The best movie I saw this year was originally released 20 years ago in a lesser, truncated form -- and was a great movie even then: Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now Redux*. Coppola's subject was not only war but the mystique of war, and how people possessed by that mystique will go against their best interests, against logic, and against every ethic they were ever taught, to surrender to the unique mode of behavior and judgment that is war: the compulsion to create and participate in hell-on-earth. That this can occur without much pretext -- that is, with as little justification as America had in Vietnam -- is even more frightening than the insane rationalizations of a Hannibal (or a Manson or an Osama bin Laden). Coppola's honesty scathes: He fully realizes and expresses war's horribly surreal grandeur and its ability to diminish and trivialize what we like to call "normal" life. He is not afraid to show that violence on such a scale is perversely beautiful -- beautiful in the sense that people are awed by it. Awe is no small state. In *Apocalypse Now Redux*, a far more disturbing movie than *Apocalypse Now*, Coppola portrays the darkest side of this most exalted human capacity: awe.

Any experience that causes you to question the terms of your existence is, almost by definition, awe-ful, religious. In that sense, 9/11 was for many a religious experience. The Coppola of *Apocalypse Now Redux* understands that the destruction of the World Trade Center was recognized as a defining moment not only for its violence but for its horrific grandeur. An indelible image was created by the collapse of the towers -- a mystique came into being, thereafter and forever to be invoked by Ground Zero. This grandeur, for the very reason that the image made the gruesome facts inescapable, had to be met with grandeur. That is, America felt its response must be commensurate not so much with the violence as with the image that would not go away, the towers collapsing. We needed a massive military response almost to *honor* the memory -- that is, the image -- of the

towers' destruction, and create an image of American power to set beside (like a twin tower) the image of American helplessness. All these nuances are explicit in *Apocalypse Now Redux*. Its thesis: that a private hell achieves grandeur only within collective catastrophe; and that a culture participates in such catastrophes to impart a sense of grandeur to all our petty little hells; and ... that it's all bullshit. A dodge. A horrible farce. The substitution of manic intensity for soulfulness. *That* is war.

2. *Band of Brothers*, produced by Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks. While *Apocalypse Now Redux* expressed war's inevitabilities, *Band of Brothers* (as solidly based on true stories as a dramatic presentation can be) was founded on unpredictability. Nothing I've seen has expressed so indelibly the randomness of violence. In war, collective victory is based on the intelligent mobilization of resources. But individual survival is based on nothing but happenstance: the unpredictable, indefensible equation of where you are in relation to where a projectile is aimed. If it's aimed at you, then no matter your skill or your courage you're a casualty. If it's not ... then no matter who or what you are, you survive. Not a pleasant lesson either for Darwinians or religious fundamentalists. War is both grandly archetypal and intimately personal. *Band of Brothers* charted personal fates within an impersonal catastrophe, and achieved the considerable feat of doing so without a whiff of sentimentality.

3. Ken Burns' documentary *Jazz*. Most Americans know nothing about jazz, yet jazz is the quintessential American expression -- a statement which expresses the fundamental American paradox: As most Americans (according to many polls) think the Bill of Rights too radical, so most Americans feel jazz is too obscure, chaotic, even antique. *Jazz* lays out the facts, legends, and above all the sounds of our classical music. Burns rightly presents jazz as the realization of both Jefferson and Whitman's America -- not the America that exists for consumption and profit, but the America in which *individuality supported by community, and community refreshed by individuality*, is more important than security, status, or power. Burns presented the music as well as its (our) history: an inestimable service. (And in our egocentric culture we do forget that a primary function of art is to serve.) This completion of Burns' American Trilogy (*The Civil War*, *Baseball*, and *Jazz*) is the most monumental act of American documentary filmmaking so far.

4. Something extraordinary happened to the musical in 2001. *Moulin Rouge* (directed by Baz Luhrmann), *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (directed by and starring John Cameron Mitchell, with songs by Stephen Trask), and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer's* musical episode (script and songs by series creator Joss Whedon, and broadcast in letterbox) finally made the leap Bob Fosse tried to inspire in seminal works like *Cabaret* (1972) and *All That Jazz* (1979). Their styles couldn't be more distinct, but they had one element in common (besides music and dance): *Moulin Rouge* was all bravura cinematic audacity; *Hedwig*, filmed in the simplest terms cinematically, found audacity in character and behavior; and the *Buffy* episode, as exquisitely crafted as these movies, audaciously applied a format straight out of Astaire/Rogers for a mock-gothic study of the characters' inner lives -- and, without prior announcement, the episode ran several minutes over its allotted hourlong time slot, something unheard of for television. These three works proved that once again, and in purely contemporary forms, filmed art is not only capable of breaking into song -- it *must* sing to achieve an immediacy for which words and pictures seem no

longer sufficient. The filmed musical grew during an economic Depression; now it's been revived in contemporary terms during a cultural small-d depression that is at least as profound and debilitating. The musical is nothing unless it essays a quality that has become suspect in all the arts: beauty. And, as Boris Pasternak wrote in a poem he attributed to his fictional Doctor Zhivago: "the root of beauty is audacity, and that is what draws us to each other."

5. The much-maligned and underrated *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*, directed by Steven Spielberg from a script by Spielberg and Stanley Kubrick. Someday, probably when Spielberg is old or dead, critics of another generation will re-evaluate his films and place *A.I.* at or near the peak of his work. The Spielberg who made *Schindler's List* and who's financed the Shoah Project has combined his innate whimsy with what he's learned in those endeavors, focused that combination on the relation between technology and the soul, and come up with *A.I.* It is not a perfect movie by any means, but its inspiration and force transcend its rough (or sometimes too smooth) edges. The central idea: that humanity will be valued by the other-than-human not for its achievements but for the paradox of its ineradicable innocence, an innocence so hard-wired into the structure of human consciousness that it cannot be erased or even influenced by experience. That is a *large* theme, a theme that puts Spielberg in the company of the greatest artists.

There were other films that came out of nowhere and tried something worth attention, films that will have a life in the undercurrents of the culture: *The Circle*, *Vanilla Sky*, *The Anniversary Party*, *The Deep End*, *Hearts in Atlantis*; while *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings* will justly be considered seminal for the first generation to whom the 21st century truly belongs.

I suggest an exercise: Imagine all this, and all else that we hold dear, utterly swept away and forgotten. What will then be left? The impulse to make images -- and those images will relate to these in ways we and our inheritors can't and won't suspect. All culture occurs, at its core, in a secret place. And, yes, something else will be left: the impulse to make lists.

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