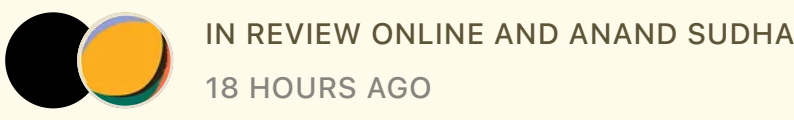




Trafficking Amidst the Disreputable in MoMA’s “Cinemas of Transgression”

Continuing our series of essays on MoMA’s Long Live the Underground! program.



IN REVIEW ONLINE AND ANAND SUDHA
18 HOURS AGO



Share



Nymphomania (Tessa Hughes Freeland, 1994). Credit: Millenium Film Workshop

The thematic programs in MoMA’s retrospective commemorating the Film-Makers’ Cooperative and Millennium Film Workshop are generally grouped around certain political (“Make Love Not War”), poetic (“Quotidian Pleasures”, “Diaries, Notes, and Sketches”, etc.) and critical (“Seventies Structures” from P. Adams Sitney’s definitions of structural films) resonances, but the “Cinemas of Transgression” (CoT) program is curated in response to an actual movement. Coined by the filmmaker Nick Zedd in “[The Cinema of Transgression Manifesto](#)”, it aimed to “openly renounce and reject the entrenched academic snobbery which erected a monument to laziness known as structuralism”, and to disregard film schools by foregrounding humour to question existing standards and taste. But the curators of this, and series’ other programs, are less bound by strict definitions, seeking instead to emphasize the plurality, in this case, literally through the “Cinemas” in the title, of the films and filmmakers supported by the workshop even within distinct themes.

Strangely, among the filmmakers who willingly adopted this label, only one, Tessa-Hughes Freeland, is a part of this program. Scored to Debussy’s “Afternoon of the Faun”, Freeland’s film, *Nymphomania*, involves the rape of the titular nymph after the “horny” faun (a deliberate visual pun) sees her dance. The prestigious, highly-regarded art of Debussy is subjected to a wilfully crude treatment featuring an elongated rubber penis. While the film’s shockingly “bad-taste” depiction does critique the sexism of the so-called “high” arts, it soon devolves into a spectacle of stalking and rape, one that even adopts the gaze of the oppressor to make a (*shocking*) point.

Dana Dawud’s *Palcorecore* (2023) also uses disreputable filmmaking methods to question the “dominant politick” and institutionalized film forms, but they emerge from our present-day social-media bubbles. Riffing on a social media fad (Corecore) that jumbles seemingly unrelated clips to underscore a particular theme, Dawud duly plunges us into a welter of dissonant sights and sounds, where scraps of archival interviews in Arabic, shots of old Palestine, and philosophical narration infiltrate the world of TikTok reels shot in bombed-out Palestine. Information overload is apparently a common theme in Corecore videos, and instead of merely transposing its aesthetic to Palestine, Dawud critiques our understanding and delineation of Palestine itself. Palestinian cultures, histories and ways of life are scattered bits of information floating amidst the spectacle of bombs, to the extent that an entire country and its peoples are solely described through the lens of the horrors happening to them.

Trafficking amidst the disreputable, as these films attest, pushes directors toward a multiplicity of forms and modes. These filmmakers train their eyes not only on the avant-garde, but also, as Adrian Martin describes Abigail Child’s *Mayhem* (1987), on “the detritus of noir”. *Mayhem* is as evocative as its title suggests, aggressively blending Child’s shots of her actors on New York’s East Side with samples from older films to create an assaultive montage of operations (smearing, scratching, negative images, fragmented audio samplings, hanging gestures, etc.) that overwhelms as much as it excites. *Mayhem* is not a film that can be made sense of through its individual components, but through its stitching and assembly. Incompletion forms Child’s editing ethos, such that a finished artwork is sculpted paradoxically from hanging gestures and unresolved moments.

The In Review Online Substack is powered by your subscriptions. Support our work by upgrading your free subscription and sharing our Substack with friends.

Type your email...

Subscribe

The British starlet Peg Entwistle’s infamous suicide in the 1930s serves as fodder for Joe Wakeman’s interrogation of the Hollywood dream factory in *Hollywood Landing: The Peg Entwistle Story* (2025). He acknowledges the allures of Hollywood through a glorious animated sequence that depicts Peg Entwistle jumping from a trapeze into a pool of light when, in fact, she’s merely an offering at that altar of kitsch, the Hollywood sign. In *Chop-Off* (2008), on the other hand, M M Serra anticipates Cronenberg’s *Crimes of the Future* when she turns her attention to what’s perceived as ugly in the form of a self-described “amputation artist”. By alternating the performer’s words with footage from Tod Browning’s *Freaks* (1933), Serra assimilates her subject’s form into similarly “chopped” audio and images – though she is severely hampered by the use of prescriptive intertitles (“Pleasure from Disgust”).

Two films from this lineup shift their canvas from Hollywood to more fluid categories: Bradley Eros and Jeanne Liotta’s felicitously titled *Dervish Machine* (1992), and Peggy Ahwesh’s *The Scary Movie* (1993). Eros and Liotta’s film is an odd fit in a program devoted to transgression, for their transposition of the luminous, soft-focus poetics of silent film isn’t one of rebellion, but of devotion. The dervishes’ whirling dances find echoes in a montage of rotating wheels and gears (including the spool of film projectors) – an apt prelude to an ecstatic interplay of overposed lights and darkened shadows set to the alluring strains of Rimsky-Korsakov’s “Scheherazade”. Ahwesh’s *The Scary Movie*, on the other hand, repurposes the narrative and formal gambits of the horror genre into sites of play. Sampled soundtracks and screams freely mix with children’s riotous reenactments of horror scenes. Their infectious energy, which you can see in the children’s screaming smiles, compels Ahwesh to electrify stock horror camera shots with whirlwind movements and shifting shadows.

While Ahwesh’s film plays with the idea of horror films, two others, in the vein of several avant-garde horror touchstones like Takashi Ito’s *Spacy* (1981) and John Smith’s *The Black Tower* (1987), expand the genre’s boundaries by working with techniques and materials that are seemingly outside its purview. Kalil Haddad’s *The Taking of Jordan (All American Boy)* (2022) employs innocuous home videos, largely pornographic photos, and archival footage in a terrifying meditation on (homosexual) sex and death. The spectre of homophobia and AIDS continually haunt the film and its subject(s), to the extent that Haddad’s shifting techniques of flickers, violent cut-ups and zooms, and the rotating roster of gay young men offer only stark reminders of the lives and sexualities that have been lost. Joey Huertas’ *Episode* (1996) also focuses on lives lost, but as a result of shocking neglect and rampant misunderstandings about bipolar disorder. Huertas rapidly cuts between shots of an adult woman displaying a range of emotions, photos of a child (presumably her?), broken windows, and dilapidated buildings, and overlays them with eerily garbled sounds that both belong to the image and don’t. For instance, we see a woman screaming, but the sound that emanates is closer to a string instrument’s terrifying wail. As a means to shock the establishment into taking Bipolar Disorder seriously (scraps of bipolar patients’ medical files are superimposed on the images), *Episode* is a relentless, throbbing evocation of conflicting states of being, where space, time, reality, imagination, anxiety, and trauma all concentrate at a single point that threatens to rupture both the victim and the film itself. Few films have left me this staggered after a viewing; its wallop so profoundly affecting that I needed a few minutes to dispel the daze.

The diversity of this program’s content is, like the films themselves, a testament to how broadly one can interpret ideas and meanings associated with transgressive cinema. And if some films do appear to stretch the meaning of the term a bit too liberally – like Tempest Creation’s *ZeroZeroZero* (2022), which blends a low-res, 2000s gamescape diorama and creepy, chimeric forms with Wittgenstein’s philosophy; Gloria Chung’s *Time is a Bird* (2026), a collage of light in all its forms (particles, streaks, beams), manifestations and motions (flickering, concentrating, flashing); or Lili White’s puzzling *The House of Water #29: The Abyss* (2019), which contrasts flowing water with black and white splotches that vaguely resemble human figures – their proximity allows their seemingly disparate ideas to converse, tracing a lineage from the disfigurement, obfuscation, and play with filmic images and material in the avant-garde of the 70s and 80s to today’s highly digitalized worlds. If there’s anything that avant-garde cinema has taught us, it’s that ideas and labels are fluid and can take on new meanings and aesthetic possibilities when repurposed for different contexts. It is refreshing to see programmers imbibe its spirit in their curation.

Subscribe to In Review Online

Launched 5 months ago

Film and Music criticism since 2007

Type your email...

Subscribe

By subscribing, you agree to Substack’s [Terms of Use](#), and acknowledge its [Information Collection Notice](#) and [Privacy Policy](#).

2 Likes · 1 Restack



Share

Discussion about this post

Comments Restacks



Write a comment...

Top Latest Discussions



The Image Left Behind: The Films of Kalil Haddad

As it continues to tour across North America, Sarah Fensom examines Kalil Haddad’s provocative, self-curated program of short films, titled “He Never...

JUN 12 · IN REVIEW ONLINE

There Is No Ordinary Person: An Interview with Jacqueline Lentzou on “A Day in the Life of Jo: Chapter Phaedra”

We’re bringing you a series of interviews with filmmakers from this year’s New York Film Festival, starting with Greek director Jacqueline Lentzou.

SEP 30 · IN REVIEW ONLINE AND BRANDON STREUSSNIG

Beyond the Veil: Teo Hernández Uncovered

On the occasion of the great experimental filmmaker’s first U.S. retrospective, Chris Cassingham explores Teo Hernández’s prolific, ecstatic body of...

JUN 17 · IN REVIEW ONLINE AND CHRIS CASSINGHAM

See all >

Ready for more?

Type your email...

Subscribe