Grim Fascination

Fingers, James Toback, and 1970s American Cinema

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> During Fingers' ninety minutes, [Keitel] rapes two women (one, pointedly, only after insisting she remove her diaphragm), terrorises two others, observes two women's heads being smacked together by another man (and feels humiliated by this performance because he's not man enough to have engaged in such behaviour!), endures further 'humiliation' as his prostate is examined by a doctor, and prematurely ejaculates several times. And he's the film's hero!
>
> Ken Eisen, "The Young Misogynists of American Cinema"[1]

Last Chant for a Slow Dance

A room, a piano, a man. The camera dollies in. Expansive construction of a sonic space: the fugue from J. S. Bach's *E Minor Toccata* flows, performed by Jimmy Angelelli (Harvey Keitel), ostentatiously expressive at the piano in the manner of Glenn Gould. This is a picture of Jimmy's interior world. But there is also an exterior world, which exists only insofar as it is framed by a window and made neatly available to the man's gaze. Hence the second phase of this opening scene: having finished the piece, Jimmy rests, rises, looks out the window; the camera lifts with him. As if willed by his gaze or seduced by his music, a woman – Carol (Tisa Farrow) – stands outside. A shot/reverse-shot volley ensues, with Jimmy's second POV shot slowly zooming in on her as she turns away. A jump cut hurls us headlong into Jimmy's breathless pursuit of the object of his desire. He has been drawn out into the larger world. A moment's confusion shows Jimmy looking this way and that. At last spying Carol, Jimmy's sound output renews itself – he switches on a large portable tape recorder blaring out "Summertime, Summertime" by The Jamies – and expands to fill both the exterior environment and the film's soundtrack. A dolly shot stands in for his forward moving POV, bearing down on Carol.

In its opening moments Fingers (1978), the debut feature written and directed by James Toback, lays its cards on the table in a strange and disquieting

manner. It is a perfectly classical premise, for cinema and cinema theory alike: a steely artist-hero in control of space, action, sound and the look. Yet there's a neurotic quality to the film's exposition: too rushed, abstracted, diagrammatic, non-psychological. None of the usual filling-out is happening; it's as if we are already in the register – unannounced – of fantasy and hallucination. Toback is wise to the abrupt chilliness of the fantasy scenarios he likes to depict: "It's almost as though one gears the enactment of desire, if and when the opportunity comes, to recapitulate as precisely as possible what the fantasy was (...) [to see] it from the outside while in the midst of it."[2] The result is less a passive, complicit reflection of social codes of masculinity than a strained and tense will-to-masculinity. Not a hero, but the difficult, pained effort to conjure one.

What is so far implicit in the inauguration of Fingers soon becomes completely explicit. As the film continues on the street, Carol turns and Jimmy jumps back slightly, already losing face and control. And this is only the beginning of his long, slow fall. If Jimmy incarnates the painful dissolution of the "whole sensory-motor continuity" which forms, for Gilles Deleuze, the "essential nature of the action-image",[3] Toback's film reveals that this break-up relates above all to the wavering tenability of a functional male hero.

In this regard, as Deleuze suggests, Alfred Hitchcock may have sown the seed of destruction in the very cinematic system which he perfected. By insisting on a structure of character vision – a long, lingering series of looks – inside the chain of exterior actions which constitute a plot, Hitchcock introduced an increasingly reflective pause or gap. This vision slows down and absorbs the action, placing it at a contemplative distance, rendering it ghostly and intangible, cutting it to the measure of a frustrated desire. What we arrive at, especially in Vertigo (1958) – to nuance what Laura Mulvey first made of Hitchcock's look in her seminal 1970s essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"[4] – is not the apogee of masculine power, possession, privilege and penetration, but one of the first historic signs of its paralysis.

Hitchcock ushered in a realm of cinematic fiction centred on obsession, rather than action, and the 1970s was the era in which this temptation truly took grip. Recall all those tales of the period about guys relentlessly pursuing some dream-ideal – a woman first conjured through a tantalising photograph, a fleeting glimpse, a tempestuous hallucination, an unrequited memory, even the figure of a mannequin in a shop window – in films including American Graffiti (George Lucas, 1973), 10 (Blake Edwards, 1979), Bad Timing (Nicolas Roeg, 1980) and Obsession (Brian De Palma, 1976). This is a model of obsession with a total and often savage inward turn.[5] Obsession is all-consuming for these troubled heroes, and also all-encompassing in that it tends to shrink the entire world down to the co-ordinates of the obsessive scenario. But, unlike the unfussy apartments shared by mutually obsessed lovers in films of the Last

Harvey Keitel in Fingers

Tango in Paris (1973) ilk, with their creation of a "world apart", the solitary world of an obsessive man is mobile – a pure projection along his lines of sight and movement. It is the world he observes, explores, carves out, brings into being through his Schopenhauerean will.[6]

Such is the *mise-en-scène* of the obsessive pursuit: its pleasures for the protagonist and the audience are in those processes prior to action – the stealthy watching, planning, staging (as in Scorsese's Taxi Driver, 1976) – and sometimes afterwards, in its endless replaying in memory or on some audiovisual screen. The obsessed hero is consumed by the vocation of 'show-making' (to use Dennis Giles's suggestive term from another classic 1970s text),[7] anticipating and preparing the final, delicious outcome of his pursuit. He transforms his life into a kind of theatre.

It is a special legacy of the 1970s that, today, obsession is rarely glorified in movies of any persuasion. Even supposedly pure, sublime, romantic obsession tends to look creepy these days, as in Paul Schrader's Forever Mine (2000). Desire, separate from the action of its fulfillment, often registers as a form of disease. Hitchcock's decisive move, within the matrix of popular genres, was to take the figure of the disabled, reflective, melancholic male hero from the 'women's weepie' (like Portrait of Jennie, 1948) where he had been safely cordoned, and place him at the heart of action plots in the 1950s; the crisis of the action-image reverberates from there. Action becomes less and less possible as obsession moves in. The lost, burnt-out heroes of the 1970s – like James Taylor in Monte Hellman's Two-Lane Blacktop (1971) or Gene Hackman in Arthur Penn's Night Moves (1975) – mutate, in the 1980s and beyond, into various types: the frenzied investigators who lose their way and their self in 'hysterical texts' such as Cruising (William Friedkin, 1980); the tragic, Faulknerian figures twisting in a labyrinth of deceptive memories, like Robert De Niro in Once Upon a Time in America (Sergio Leone, 1984); and the Scorsesean heroes who grab and lose the whole world in an inevitable, crashing arc (Goodfellas [1990], Casino [1996]).

Already, by the end of the 1970s, there is a spectacle of masculine failure in which both hero and film wallow; the severest and most radical expression of this comes from the experimental sector, Jon Jost's micro-budget feature Last Chants for a Slow Dance (1977) inspired by the Gary Gilmore case and inaugurating a bleak trilogy of movies featuring actor Tom Blair in which atrocious violence is steadily turned away from the Other and in on the family (Sure Fire, 1990) and eventually the self (The Bed You Sleep In, 1993). Those American heroes in this 1970s vein are paranoiacally consumed to the point of losing their career and their family (Scorsese's Raging Bull, 1980); or so dreamily stupid that everyone else takes them for a ride (De Palma's Body Double [1984]). If obsession signifies an immersion in a pleasure or fantasy principle then, at another moment or level of the film, a reality principle comes in hard for the kill (comically so in 10). Obsessive pursuit becomes something dogged, haunted; the inward turn no longer signals a crowning moment of selfhood but a dead end.[8] Fifteen years on from Raging Bull, Todd Haynes (a

keen scholar of 1970s cinema) will, in Safe (1995), at once offer the final laurel on this tomb of the self and democratise its traditional gendering by portraying a cosmically allergic woman (Julianne Moore) whose pursuit of the phantom of her own health and well-being renders her rather less than human.

Crude but Fascinating

James Toback is eerily sensitive to this new mood as it emerges in 1970s American cinema. A Jewish New Yorker and Harvard literary graduate, he began writing in 1966 for publications including *Commentary*, *Dissent*, *Esquire*, *Harper's* and *The Village Voice*; his first piece was titled "Norman Mailer Today". Later, he contributed a chapter to a sociological anthology titled *Violence: Causes and Solutions*, celebrating the controversial emergence of such milestones as Bonnie and Clyde (Penn, 1967) and John Boorman's Point Blank (1967), coining an aesthetical-ethical catchphrase reminiscent of *Cahiers du cinéma* in its auteurist 1950s: "style as morality".[9] His next step was to immerse himself in the participatory New Journalism of the period, moving in with the black sports star Jim Brown (eventually cast prominently in Fingers) in order to write a "self-centred memoir" titled Jim (1971) which records how he and his subject "got to the bottom of all sexual possibilities".[10] Putting all that together, it is easy to see how, still today, Toback is routinely reduced to the stereotype of the libertarian "white Negro".[11]

Toback's first important work in cinema was the script for The Gambler (1974), an unjustly overlooked film that is more notable in retrospect than it seemed to commentators at the time. Its unique collision of topics, drawing from many genres but following the template of no single genre – criminality, sexuality, sport, gambling, family melodrama, high culture – sets the distinctive pattern for all future Toback projects, including the documentary 'happening' The Big Bang (1990). The fledgling auteur, in and around The Gambler, was already talking up his big, existential themes: loss of control, uncertainty of self, reckless risk, erotic ecstasy, magnificent obsession, the continuum of the artist and the gangster ("Acting imitates crime; encourages it, deplores it, glorifies it, rechannels it – is obsessed by it"[12]), and defiance of the mainstream system (in the 1990s, he called studio executives "pathetic, dull, cowardly, hypocritical, vapid presences ... I don't just mean artistically, I mean financially pathetic, too"[13]). Even the briefest glimpse into the Toback mosaic of scripts, films, writings and interviews uncovers patent psycho-autobiographical echoes from one text to another: for instance, a line uttered by Jimmy's father, Ben (Michael V. Gazzo), echoes the words of Chaim Weizmann

which Toback encountered through his grandfather: "If you will it, you will have it."[14]

Karel Reisz's direction of The Gambler makes for an instructive benchmark against which to measure Toback's own subsequent style. Resembling the method of Sidney Lumet at his best and anticipating Paul Thomas Anderson's Hard Eight (1997), Reisz blends neo-classical precision-control with the legacy of the Nouvelle Vague: each scene presents itself as a block of finely observed and performed detail (James Caan at the gambling table, for instance). Only a long way down the chain of scenes are we able to piece together all the pertinent character relations and retroactively see the narrative set-ups so casually planted within the flow of gesture and atmosphere. Toback astutely noted Reisz's "extremely successful creation of tightness, tension, movement, and dramatic force" within a stylistic framework that, at the same time, is characterised by "a kind of leisurely and graceful fluidity".[15]

But Toback himself, as a director, is not 'into' control. There is a phenomenon of semantic contamination in his work – a restless contagion of metaphors and associations that is closer to the irrepressible zaniness of Larry Cohen (The Private Files of J. Edgar Hoover, 1977) than either the opportunistic conceits of Mike Figgis (Liebestraum, 1991) or the baroque edifices of Richard Rush (The Stunt Man, 1980). It begins with the title: Fingers evokes all at once Jimmy's activity and his passivity, the criminal role he plays for his father, music and sex, and an especially memorable medical examination. Toback is eloquent on this manner of working: "I like movies that speed by, that one has to grab at with the eye and the mind, and that are scene-for-scene and shot-for-shot gone as soon as you do grab them (...) there is a point [in the editing process] when you just realise that you're in the rapids, and the most you can do is kind of guide it around rocks."[16] Toback takes as a personal motto the words of Jean Cocteau that François Truffaut cited in praise of Fingers: "Whatever isn't raw is merely decorative."[17] Even those critics temperamentally ill at ease with the cinema of John Cassavetes (or later the Dogme movement) found something gripping in Toback's initial display of rawness: Leonard Maltin, for example, rates Fingers highly as a "crude but fascinating melodrama".[18] And the reference to melodrama is apt: "What I really like to do is stretch things to their limit of credibility, and then really get into those extreme situations which reveal the core."[19]

Toback's films present themselves as messy and impulsive – even more so lately, in Two Girls and a Guy (1998) and Black and White (2000), which place enormous faith in the psychodramatic improvisations of their game casts. His work, taken as a whole, is undoubtedly less skilful, less artful than that of Scorsese, and less dynamic and inventive on a fine-grain level than that of Abel Ferrara – to name his closest, contemporary neighbours in the Ameri-

can chapter of the cinema of obsession and madness. Toback is better at the broad strokes of a scene – concept, casting, location, musical accompaniment – than its shot-to-shot sculpting.

But what makes Toback a figure of central significance is that his work is compelling and confounding in equal measure. It is hard to determine where his films stand on the many, hot issues (of gender, race, power, identity ...) that they so vividly raise and dramatise. Like Ferrara or Larry Clark (who emerges as a major American filmmaker in the mid 1990s), Toback seeks a mode of heightened, tabloid reportage (the Sam Fuller heritage) that is also, without self-censorship, a projection of the artist's murkiest and most disquieting phantasms. Such work – profoundly ambiguous in its meaning and generative of equally profound ambivalence in its spectators – poses a big challenge to any critical tradition which aims to draw a clean line between films that are progressive and those that are reactionary, or between those which explore the contradictions of their content and those which merely reflect such problems symptomatically (an example of such a model is Robin Wood's distinction between coherent and incoherent texts).[20] Merely labelling the outrageous and troublesome elements of Toback's cinema 'problematic' – for the past two decades the favourite word of disapproval in cultural studies – is a sorry cop-out.

Toback belongs to a critically undervalued 'cinema of sensation'. A sometimes queasy sense of amorality is the honour-badge of this cinema: the most extreme situations are to be gazed upon, by filmmaker and spectator alike, not only with curiosity but also active fascination.[21] The only distance from ideological givens is arrived at through excess, through immersion, through a laying bare or overexposure that is at once lucid and savage. To truly enter into the spirit and peculiar complexity of movies like Fingers, Ferrara's The Blackout (1997) or Clark's Bully (2001), one must be prepared to surrender to their sticky embrace.

Is the ultimate fault-line in the discussion of these films the value we place on *despair*? Since the dawn of the 1970s, much independently minded American cinema, from Hellman to Haynes and David Lynch via Last Exit to Brooklyn (Uli Edel, 1989) and most of Altman's oeuvre, has generated its most intense powers from nihilism and fatalism, the overwhelming sense that everything is doomed to end badly or tragically. Some critical schools judge this tendency harshly as defeatism or, worse, quiescence to the status quo. Of course, American breast-beating over a vague, amorphous malaise is too often merely facile (as in P. T. Anderson, or Sam Mendes' American Beauty [1999]). But there is, paradoxically, something bracing and vital about works in which, as Ross Gibson said of Lynch's Blue Velvet (1986) and Paul Morrissey's Mixed Blood (1984), "[v]alues exist as sentimental residues, as vestiges of a society in moral twilight, or as clay pigeons to be blasted by the films' cynical

armouries".[22] It is precisely the "provocative absence of virtue" which gives these films their power as social critique, even if the exact terms of that critique are not spelt out or embodied within the fiction itself (as a classically inclined commentator would demand). The amoral cinema of sensation shifts the burden of interpretation, and of moral judgement, back onto the viewer.

Like his characters, Toback has relentlessly pursued, across two and a half decades, the realisation of deeply personal projects dreamt up near the beginning of his film career: especially The Pick-up Artist (1987), eventually watered down from its original incest-fantasy scenario, and Harvard Man (2002), which recreates a momentous LSD trip from his 1960s youth (and which, throughout the 1990s, was to have starred Leonardo DiCaprio). Like his characters, Toback has regularly been accompanied – and sometimes usurped – by more powerful players in the industry, ego ideals who are masters of aesthetic control and/or Hollywood spin: Reisz, Warren Beatty, Barry Levinson, big men who either get to direct Toback's scripts (as in the case of Levinson's fine film of Bugsy [1991]) or rework his early contributions to their own projects (as with Levinson's Jimmy Hollywood [1994] and Beatty's Bulworth [1998]).

And, once more like his characters, Toback is not only driven but haunted – spooked by the artistic and critical (if not commercial) success of Fingers, which Dusan Makavajev warned him he would probably never again equal. That prophecy has, so far, proved substantially correct, with even such faithful champions as David Thomson driven to point out the fact: every Toback film is intriguing on one plane or another, but Fingers remains his only masterpiece to date. That is partly a happy accident arising from a volatile combination of elements – including Keitel at his most comprehensively inventive as an actor, Matthew Chapman's hard-edge cinematography and a certain, bracing minimalism in Robert Lawrence's editing that may well have come from Toback's first-timer unfamiliarity with extensive scene coverage coupled with budget restrictions and a tight shoot – but it is also surely a matter of historic context.

Toback finds himself today hailed by the likes of the popular *Movieline* magazine as someone "whose roots go back to the most extraordinary stint of originality-tolerance that modern Hollywood's seen", making films that prove that "the 1970s weren't for nothing"[23] – partly because of his ongoing association with Robert Downey Jr., who has his own family tie to those glory days via his father, Robert Downey (director of Putney Swope, 1969). But this is a relatively recent accolade, a veritable re-invention of the public persona. During the 1980s Toback slipped into semi-obscurity as he tried uneasily to negotiate trends like the teen movie (in The Pick-up Artist) and international co-production (Exposed, 1983). In the 1990s he scratched out a sideline between

script commissions as an acerbic, roving commentator, becoming better known (and sometimes derided) for his appearances in the pages of *Interview* or on the TV series *E! Hollywood True Stories* – not to mention the infamous exposé performed on his private life in *Spy* – than for his film work. But, simultaneously, the booming script-advice industry, with its how-to manuals, professional journals and world-wide events of the 1990s, has helped reboot Toback's serious reputation – as has happened for many longstanding writer-directors who began their careers in the 1960s and 1970s, like Robert Towne of Chinatown (1974) fame. These days, Toback is as likely to be called upon for battle stories from an 'indie' prehistory or hip wisdom into present trends by *Scenario* magazine as by UK's *Projections* annual or *Positif*.[24]

Fingers, of course, arrived almost too late to ride on the coat-tails of the now rather mythic and overly romanticised Altman-Coppola-Bodganovich 1970s parade of free cinema. Jaws (1975) and Star Wars (1977) had already reoriented the production landscape decisively and irrevocably towards the blockbuster era that has dominated the market ever since. It was no longer possible, in 1978, for Toback's maverick vision to be the beneficiary of any off-studio privileges; his film was eccentrically financed (via Fabergé impresario George Barrie), poorly distributed, and subject to slight censorship problems in many countries to which it travelled (for its spectacular castration and revenge-murder scene). In the press, its initial reception was mixed. Thomson followed Pauline Kael in giving it high-profile critical support – although the latter's enthusiasm for Toback's "true moviemaking fever" was balanced against her sense that "because he doesn't censor his masculine racial fantasies, his foolishness and his terrible ideas pour out freely";[25] and *Film Comment* gave it decent space – tellingly, not as a stand-alone event, but within a dossier on screen acting.[26]

However, a wave of commentators with different ideological priorities and new theoretical agendas, in *Cineaste*, *Jump Cut* and elsewhere, were all set to denounce what they (rather too hastily, in my view) judged as the passé, macho-countercultural posturings of Toback and several of his contemporaries, including Schrader and De Palma, pegged as relics of the dead, deluded 1960s. Ken Eisen, for example, waxed polemical: "With Toback, as with his fellow misogynists, there's never any question of ambiguity or possibility of criticism entailed in their narratives."[27] Love and Money (1980, released 1982), Toback's subsequent and weakest film, did nothing to maintain any career momentum. It is not exactly surprising that when, in the mid 1980s, we reach the sophisticated political and aesthetic critiques of Wood in *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* and his colleagues at *Cineaction* and *Movie*, Toback is entirely overlooked as a figure bearing any radical or populist-progressive potential.[28]

If Fingers can strike us today as a final, defiant gasp of the 'grand exception' of American cinema in the 1970s, that is doubtless because it gathers so many elements, themes and tropes from the better-respected classics of the decade: Coppola's interpenetration of gangsterism and family life; the Pyrrhic victories in Schrader's revenge-quest tales; Penn's sense of a modern hero lost in a labyrinth; Bob Rafelson's men split between high culture and nomadism. Scorsese's Mean Streets (1973) must have been a particularly significant event for Toback, since he borrows from it Keitel as the iconic, divided Italo-American, the grinding clash of social cultivation and streetwise experience, and the insistently ironic use of popular music in stark contradiction to the actions it accompanies. But, at the same time, Fingers separates itself from this illustrious company and announces a new tone for a different, coming era.

Like Two-Lane Blacktop at the beginning of the decade, Fingers at its end is a severe film which does not trade in the slightest vestige of sentimental rhetoric, in the way that the works of Coppola, John Milius, Clint Eastwood, Michael Cimino, Oliver Stone, Scorsese or even the militantly radical Robert Kramer invariably do. It is not surprising that certain French critics of the time (notably Pascal Bonitzer in *Cahiers*) hailed Hellman's landmark film for offering a terse, astringent, almost Lacanian kind of post-humanism, untainted by romantic illusions.[29] Likewise Toback's film, by pushing so much of the 1970s cinema ethos of spontaneous transgression (ultra-violence, verbal obscenity, sexuality revealed at the heart of every character neurosis) into brutal hyperdrive, opens a door to the dizzy, analytic logics of postmodernism that would emerge in the 1980s. The modern individual as portrayed by Toback doesn't "break on through to the other side" (as The Doors sang), but beats his or her way into a hellish, asphyxiating hall of mirrors where self and other enter a fatal feedback loop – allowing, as this auteur described his formative drug experience, "the knowledge that my entire repertoire of communication – words, movements, gestures – belonged to someone else; that I didn't exist. That 'he' was playing 'me'."[30]

Now Is Forever

After its introductory sequence, Fingers moves on to Carol and Jimmy in his car. It quickly becomes clear that Jimmy's initial performance at the piano is his only 'act' that will ever go smoothly or well. As the film extends the performance motif – into driving, sexual prowess, verbal skill, clothing, gangster stand-over tactics, and the "presentation of self in everyday life" (as sociologist Erving Goffman termed it[31]) – Jimmy's act increasingly erodes, blocks,

fails. His first major moment of physical failure already compounds several performance problems. "I'm a terrific driver, this car's part of my body, it's an extension of my d ..." – and then he crashes into the back of another car.

"A whole upsurge of sensory-motor disturbances", indeed.[32] The message from the head to the body and then to its tools (a car, a gun, a piano) gets lost every time ("My hands don't work right and my mind starts interfering"). Jimmy's body-ego draws itself inward and then puffs itself up. It maintains itself through tension, nerves – reminding any 1970s buff of James Taylor's brusque rejection of a neck massage in Two-Lane Blacktop, because he prefers to have a muscle "jumping around" back there. In Fingers the male body-ego dreams it is still young and perfect, and projects this dream onto others – Ben says of his fiancée Anita (Georgette Muir) that "she's got a body that won't stop". There is a similar aura of invincibility encasing Jimmy's extended, sensory 'personal space' – which is allowed, through criminal privilege, to function oblivious to its surrounding reality, as in the restaurant scene. But such equilibrium is a delusion; meanwhile, the actual, mortal body is breaking down. This is particularly evident in Ben. He is a spectacle of pathetic masculine decay – fat, coughing, wheezing, collapsing in the street. The emission from his vocal chords – always harsh and constricted – is a true sound for the stressed-out 1970s, poised between the drone of Alpha 60 in Godard's Alphaville (1965) and the microphone-assisted emanation from the damaged throat of an old gangster in Cimino's Year of the Dragon (1985). Ben tries his best to pass off a lifetime of dissipation and excess as virile vitality; in Toback's galaxy of character types, he is the grotesque flip side of Bugsy Siegel, the archetypal gangster-star for whom glamour is a mask to be fastidiously applied and maintained, even in the midst of the most violent acts.

By contrast, simply to look at Jimmy in repose or dressed to kill or lost in the rapture of music, one would conclude that he is naturally much closer to the ideal of youthful glamour to which Bugsy aspired. But the genius of Keitel's performance lies in its embodiment of a neurotic condition of twitching extremities. Nervous energy doesn't come near describing it: the fingers which always drill rhythms; a posture which is so easily thrown off-balance by any external element, from the very first moment that Carol turns to face him; the painfully awkward sexual positions; the fragile bodily parts – especially those extremities – susceptible to sudden injury at every turn (as in the truly frightening incident in the stuck elevator when Jimmy hurts his finger on the buttons); the outbursts of violence that lurch excessively out of control (his debt collection performance; the restaurant blow-up; the final revenge against Riccamonza [Anthony Sirico]). The opening shot of an early scene is classic: Jimmy singing distractedly off-key and out of sync to The Chiffons' "One Fine

Day", while his hands mime extravagant piano arpeggios that bear no relation to the music.

Fingers portrays a man in desperate search of his identity via the "motivating" links of cause and effect – a classical narrative identity. Jimmy is endlessly trying to force connections, to add up a trajectory which could make him a hero in control of his own story. But his life keeps falling apart – either into disconnected scenes in which he spasmodically and inconsequentially exercises his will upon the world (such as when he raves to Esther [Jane Elder] on the street); or into separate threads (his musical career, his affair with Carol, the relationships with his split parents), each of which reach a brutal impasse. A crisis in any one of these areas leads to the effort to force a compensatory link in some other area. So, his desire for Carol only seems to come in a rush in moments of desperation that originate elsewhere, such as the failed audition, rejection from his mother, Ruth (Marian Seldes), or Ben's homosexual taunts.

In Fingers, Jimmy's interior identity is a mad makeshift comprised, in no discernible hierarchy or sequence, from bits of his familial and cultural environment. This goes beyond an Oedipal split between (as Richard Combs put it) fatherly money, aggression and violence versus motherly culture, sensitivity and virtuosity.[33] If the chief index of that split is the two associated types of music (the mother's past classical music career, Ben's Jerry Vale tape), then what complicates the binary arrangement is a cultural sign more obviously contemporary with Jimmy's formative years – the 1950s and 1960s pop music that accompanies him at all times.

The primary function of the music (which appears in ten out of the film's twenty-five sequences) is to foreground a dynamic of the moment, an eternal present, displacing any deeply rooted pathology stemming from childhood trauma. Toback's collage of found music stresses a certain, sticky sensuousness: the songs are highly affective, syrupy kitsch, pulling the situations they accompany in often incongruous directions. This might seem a standard device of narrational irony (and a rather heavy handed one at that, as when Merrilee Rush and The Turnabouts' "Angel of the Morning" accompanies Jimmy's strong-arming of Luchino [Lenny Montana], or when Vale's "Now is Forever" plays over the spectacle of Ben's corpse), but its effect is more visceral, testifying essentially to the notion that events are always flying apart (Toback: "I like, at least in one other way, pulling a scene in its opposite direction"[34]) and that the individual lives within these competing, tearingly incommensurate frames of reference. But Toback understands well that while pop music can mark a strategy of insistent disjunction for the alert spectator, it also acts as a social and ideological clue in the world of these characters (and by extrapolation, in the real world beyond it): it transforms violence into fun spectacle (as Stanley Kubrick first intuited in A Clockwork Orange [1971]) and en-

hances the imaginary adoption of a "white negro" hipsterism, a fantasy in which even the most painful discombobulations can register (Mick Jagger style) as a macho funkiness.

The formal construction of the film reflects on every level this conception of forces that are out of sync and phasing strangely. Jimmy's pop music tape obeys few diegetic rules, playing continuously over ellipses and rarely altering its volume according to the norms of sound perspective ruling shot changes. Jimmy's question in one scene ("what's your name?") is answered weirdly at the end of the next scene ("Carol"). The *découpage* insistently disarticulates the diversely framed spaces in a scene, rarely allowed to 'add up' in a clear or conventional manner. The first restaurant scene is exemplary. Without an establishing shot, we first see Jimmy in a collapsed telephoto frame, entirely self-absorbed. Then, having shifted 180 degrees to film the facing spatial plane, the camera reveals at last the presence of Ben (only the edge of the tape recorder overlaps these two frames). With the next shot on Jimmy, Ben is given an off-screen line of dialogue which is an incomprehensible explosion of rasping, guttural noise. Once a clear dramaturgical line of force has been laid for a conventional shot-reverse shot dialogue exchange – with, eventually, a traditional establishing shot – this eye-line is broken up by off-frame distractions (the gay men here functioning formally like the little girl in a later park scene).

The sense of an eternal present is secured by the peculiar quality of scene transitions and their non-cumulative value. The film's hallucinatory, even nightmarish quality derives from the way in which its narrative organisation sticks close to Jimmy's apprehension of events – even as he loses grip of them. This headlong trajectory introduces key expository elements abruptly and often quite late (such as Dr Fry [Murray Moston], and Ruth), and just as disconcertingly leaves them immediately behind (Anita is never mentioned beyond the restaurant scene, and Jimmy's musicianship is abruptly dropped from proceedings once he has failed his audition). The plot also veers wildly off into pure, unstitched digressions (such as the appearance of Esther) and plants clear narrative set-ups which don't appear to pay off (does Julie [Tanya Roberts] tell Riccamonza that Jimmy had sex with her?). Jimmy's pathetic attempt to superimpose an intelligible and morally freighted time-frame on these cascading events, "What do you want to do with the baby we made last night?", is met by an indifferent "What do *you* wanna do with it?" from Carol.

The classical narrative system which (as Raymond Bellour has demonstrated)[35] builds its sense of volume through the careful repetition and development of motifs gets well and truly amputated here. There is a deliberately attenuated mimicry of this system in the cyclical return of certain situations and places, such as Jimmy at his piano (four times in all). This thread is emblematic of the gradual dissociation and emptying-out which is at the heart of

the film: it moves from the initial scene of fullness and presence, to an image-and-sound trick whereby Jimmy seems to be playing but is in fact miming to a tape, to the final dissociation of elements wherein the piano music exists only on the soundtrack while Jimmy appears beyond consciousness.

A Dumb Fuck

FINGERS investigates subjective and intersubjective levels of experience. Intersubjective relations carry the weight of a reality principle in this tale; it is effectively only Jimmy who believes in, and attempts to live, a pristine ego-subjectivity – which he suffers for, and eventually loses (this is also the path for Scorsese's and Ferrara's heroes). It is in the intersubjective field that the workings of power, the dynamics of conflict and control, occur. Toback establishes an elaborate, highly systematic logic for intersubjective exchange.

Exchange implies a contract, an agreement of wills. Taking up ideas offered by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and Thomas Elsaesser in their respective discussions of 1970s European cinema,[36] exchange can be conceptualised in two distinct forms. There is an exchange of like-for-like (as in a friendship struck up on a mirroring basis) or an exchange of two commodities that are different in kind (e.g. money for sexual favour). A third form of exchange can also be posited: a reciprocal form of personal relation beyond strict codes of barter, a give-and-take without accounting. This relation might be empathy, affection, or love. FINGERS forecloses, through its jet-black humour, even the possibility of such reciprocity. Jimmy is always conjuring moments of reciprocity (to Carol: "Don't you understand what's here, what's there between us?") and empathy ("I'm going to bring you into your dreams of yourself"). His biggest (and maddest) *faux pas* is to blurt that Carol "loves" Dreems. And the film's bitterest irony is contained in the empathetic words of musical maestro Arthur Fox (Dominic Chianese) preceding Jimmy's catastrophic audition: "I have a good feeling about today."

The simplest kind of exchange in FINGERS is brutally physical coercion, of the kind Jimmy carries out on behalf of Ben: if the client doesn't cough up money, he gets bashed, as in the pizzeria stand-over. But such coercion is the least effective and the most easily undermined form of exchange, for it inevitably invites and meets resistance. Truly binding exchange happens at an emotional-psychological level.

Jimmy falls foul of repeatedly attempted like-for-like exchanges, which are badly judged or blankly refused. He desperately seeks mirror-figures to shore up his failing self-image, and never finds one. This becomes the index of his

foolishness, his desperation and his crisis. With Carol, from the word go, he keeps throwing mirror-cues (questions such as "you like all kinds of music, huh?") which he then has to pick up himself and confirm, after the pause in which she remains stonily silent ("So do I"). When Carol does speak, she flatly contradicts him (He: "You're as crazy as I am"; She: "You're not crazy, you're just scared"). A key part of the film's micro-texture is an almost screwball series of flat refusals, like after Jimmy gets out of jail: "Can I use your phone?" – "No". Jimmy's most extravagant attempt to secure a mirror identification, with a cop (Zack Norman), on the bases of race, lifestyle and culture – "We're brothers, we're twins ... you're a sensitive guy, you should be out on the street listening to Shostakovich, Gesualdo and The Drifters ... the fucking Arabs are looking to bury us, the French are looking to bury us ... we gotta take care of each other!" – lands him instantly in jail.

The dominant and most successful form of intersubjective exchange in Fingers involves the submission of one will to another, of a Self to its Other. The basic survival law of this jungle is: dominate or let yourself be dominated. This is once again a pragmatic matter; there is no option outside the rules of this exchange-game. There are those who know their place in the game (Carol "wanted to" have sex with Jimmy, but forbids herself) or are explicitly reminded of it (Dreems to Carol: "Don't ever cross me"; Riccamonza to Julie: "I'll break your face"). And then there are suckers like Jimmy who are easily tricked, bound into an unspoken intersubjective domination.

Jimmy's parents are dominators, masters of the deadly psychological ploy of the double bind.[37] They hold out to their son the promise of a selfhood, while all the time obligating him into submission. Thus the irony of Ben's platitude to Jimmy – "If you know you can do it, you'll do it" – which encourages a Self but issues a command from an Other. (Ben offers a complicit smile and immediately adds: "It's just like collecting.") Ben consistently exploits Jimmy's need to please his Big Daddy Other in order to receive self-confirmation. He obligates his son through phrases like "I got nobody, I got you", "Ever since you were a kid, did I break my word to you? ... So you can't blame me if I expect the same from you, can you?" When Jimmy tries to halt this obligation, or fails to live up to it, Ben savagely erases his identity: "I should have strangled you in your crib." This is topped only by Ruth who doesn't even wait for a report before she rejects Jimmy – "I don't want to hear it ... Whatever it is you plan to hurt me with" – and who, in an unforgettable gesture, blots out her son's face with her hands. Like Ben, she psychologically (and literally) pulls Jimmy close and pushes him away in consecutive split seconds; her opening line is immediately followed an exhortation ("Don't I get a kiss?") and then an admonition ("You call *that* a kiss?").

Such familial double binds construct a fraught subject position for Jimmy. When he goes into a compensatory act in a sphere not overshadowed by the edict of his parents – all that's really left is the sphere of sexuality – he miscomprehends and confuses all the rules of exchange. In the toilet scene, Jimmy chats up Julie (a way to transgress Riccamonza) with a sexual come-on – "I love your ... pussy. Your silk pussy". After one of the quickest and most uncomfortable-looking sex acts in movie history, he informs her of his motivation ("Tell him I did this"). But then, in an effort to affirm *both* the indifferent exploitation *and* the sexual intimacy attached to his action, he adds: "It's nothing against you, you *are* silk" – which leaves her just hurt, exasperated and confused, because she has been made an object of exchange in two ways at once, both as a means and as an end.

There is a similarly confused psychological dynamic in the scene where Jimmy confronts Carol in her apartment. He is out of his mind at this point with frustrated desire, mixed with an increasing dread of impotence in other spheres of his life. But he doesn't force himself on her. He wins a voluntary gesture of reciprocity – "I need you to want me. If you don't want me, I just can't do anything" – which he can also take as an admission of her desire (as distinct from a simple submission to his will). But having been granted this much, he then plays macho master by ordering her to take out her diaphragm – as if to stipulate that *she* can only have sex with *him* if reproduction is a possibility.

Given Jimmy's hyper-nervous way of inhabiting his body – his trigger-edge tension, his inability to manage its bloated or damaged extremities – having sex is inevitably a nightmare. He suffers from premature ejaculation and prostate pain. But, even more crucially, the film shows sex to be a matter of exchange – and a problem for Jimmy because he doesn't ever understand this. The urological examination scene (a one-take wonder unique in the annals of American cinema) establishes this theme with characteristically risible directness. Jimmy grimly endures Dr Fry's rectal examination but obviously regards it as an aberrant homosexual violation of his manhood – he enquires in a panic as to why Fry's surgical glove extends to the elbow. This priceless dialogue follows:

Doctor:	The golden rule of urology: if you get an erection, you come; and if you don't get an erection, you walk.
Jimmy:	Yeah ... What about heroic fucks?
Doctor:	What's that?
Jimmy:	You're ready to come and you're in love and the girl needs more. She's gonna cry inside if you shoot it all out, so you do your razor blade fantasies and you hold back.

Doctor: That's not a heroic fuck, that's a dumb fuck – You're straining your prostate gland, you're congesting it. Jimmy, you gotta make up your mind. Whose penis are we talking about here, yours or hers?

The scene drolly evokes, in its own terms, Lacan's famous dictum that there is no sexual relation possible between men and women, providing a succinct statement of the story's intersubjective dilemmas. Beyond being unable to conceptualise sex only, or primarily, as a matter of penis power, Jimmy double-binds himself twice over. Firstly, in trying to please the other in the only way he can imagine, he has to breach the limit of his own capacity, thus hurting himself. Secondly, in attempting to give his all physically, he assumes that he gets the same back emotionally; he is certain, in his own inimitably confused way, that love is at stake in all this. He has no access to the idea of a contract or a negotiation based solely in the realm of the physical. Fry, for his part, certainly has no interest in fathoming the sexual relation: he reduces both genders to the same physical model ("whose penis – yours or hers?") as a way of counselling Jimmy to simply concentrate on the bodily mechanism of his own pleasure. But Jimmy – like the central characters in Barbara Turner's remarkable scripts for Georgia (Ulu Grosbard, 1995) and Pollock (Ed Harris, 2000) – does not have a sure enough sense of Self to do anything so uncomplicated. Heroism is also at stake in this urology scene. To be a hero is – in Jimmy's terms – to possess extraordinary powers of empathy and understanding in relation to all others, and to be able to translate those mental powers into actions like the "heroic fuck". But that kind of heroism is – as the doctor says – just dumb.

There is a ghostly shimmer of like-for-like exchange in Fingers. Logically, it can never actually take place – and never does – since proliferating difference is the principal characteristic of its postmodern world. But those who dominate can *assert* that it is taking place, and bask in the ensuing illusion of camaraderie without fear of being contradicted. This is true of Ben who, rather ludicrously, likes to see Jimmy as his mirror, and offers him the services of his tailor; it is particularly true of Dreems who, in classic jive talk, introduces Jimmy to others as his "main man". Jimmy, of course, is unable to disagree with either of these principal ego-ideals.

However, exchange can also break down. This occurs either when its terms are defied (as by Luchino), or when the difference of the Other suddenly becomes nonnegotiable. The anticipation of the Other's violence within the nervous Self results in a 'first strike' violent act which then precipitates escalating warfare. Between men, the act of marking and declaring a non-negotiable difference means casting it in an aberrant sexual form, wholly and sickeningly Other. Thus, anyone with whom an exchange cannot or will not be negotiated

is immediately a "cocksucker" (Luchino's defiance: "Suck my cock ... double suck"), a "motherfucker", or a "cunt" (which is Jimmy's most extreme epithet): in other words, a faggot, a pervert, or a woman. Actual women are a different matter and pose a separate problem for these men: although they are eminently buyable, they nonetheless carry the inextinguishable aura of castrating threat, as is clear from Ben's speech (coming, significantly, just before the introduction of his fiancée Anita): "Of course your dick keeps hurting you, it's a conspiracy ... women bust your balls ... the moment they lose their virginity, they're all whores."

An expanded model of such fraught and violent exchange – covering attributions of race, status and even hygiene as well as sexuality – is hilariously sketched in the prison scene. Formally, this scene resumes most of the film's parameters and strategies: incommensurate segments of space which are not immediately established in the *découpage* (one side of the jail with Jimmy and an Italian prisoner [Tom Signorelli], the other with black prisoners [Pembrose Dean and Arthur French]); a verbal monologue (the joke) which never reaches its end-point; Jimmy's complete obliviousness to events and his nervy introversion, mentally practising his musical piece while others try to speak to him; a gaggle of people in the same, enclosed, aquarium-like space, all at cross purposes, scarcely seeing or hearing each other; and the hero's totally misjudged attempt at show-making, trying to peacefully unify the situation by going into his act, but only atomising it further (the scene ends abruptly with Jimmy's weird gesture of centring himself). But it is in the dialogue that the micro-action of the scene, with its second-by-second twists and turns, really happens:

Italian Prisoner:	There's three guys in the desert, you see. An Italian, an Irishman and a Polak. The Italian's got a hunk of gorgonzola cheese, the Mick's got a can of beer, and the Polak's carrying a ... a car door under his arm. So they run into this Arab in the middle of the desert ...
Black Prisoner 1:	Hey man, why don't you shut your ass and go to sleep?
Italian Prisoner:	Who's talking to you, asshole?
Black Prisoner 1:	I'm talkin' to you, sucker.
Italian Prisoner:	Bullshit, all you're doin' is sittin' around in your dry piss.
Black Prisoner 1:	Whose dry piss?
Italian Prisoner:	I don't see anybody else sittin' here.
Black Prisoner 2:	And what about me? You don't see me?
Italian Prisoner:	You a human being? You're a fuckin' animal!

Black Prisoner 2:	Maybe I kick your little white wop ass you see me, huh?
Italian Prisoner:	You couldn't kick my sister's ass. And she's in a fuckin' wheelchair in Daytona.
Black Prisoner 2:	You got a sister in Daytona?
Italian Prisoner:	Yeah. What about it? You wanna make something of it?
Black Prisoner 2:	No. I got a sister in Daytona too.
Italian Prisoner:	Yeah. No shit.
Black Prisoner 2:	You bet your Jew ass I do.
Italian Prisoner:	I ain't a Jew, what do you keep calling me a Jew, you cross-eyed motherfucker ...
Jimmy:	Hey listen, listen ... Instead of you guys talking all this philosophy, why don't you, er, let me sing, ah, the Bach, the Fugue from the *E Minor Toccata* for you, alright?

Problematic Men

Fingers shows masculinity as a shared, internalised, lived social code performed, deformed and reformed in the rituals of intersubjective exchange. Consider again the dynamic of the father-son relation – a particularly vicious and closed masculine circuit. Any problem internal to either man, or endemic to their relationship, is denied: projected onto others (Jimmy's prostate problem is due to castrating women), or reciprocally cancelled. In the restaurant, Jimmy suggests to his father that he give up smoking. Ben's answer affirms male stereotypes with chilling force, in the same moment as it evades the problem which is killing him: "I'll stop smoking when you stop fucking." Not only is this an injunction from father to son to *keep* fucking; it also rests on the assumption that his son cannot possibly have any problems in that department.

Masculinity in Fingers is indeed a fragile ensemble, haunted by that which it attempts to repress – most spectacularly, other sexual options. One thread in the film keeps confronting Jimmy with the ambivalently fascinating and horrifying spectre of his own potential gayness (the guys who distract his gaze in the restaurant; the rectal examination; the "cocksucker" obscenities which cast him in a gay position, particularly Ben's violent "stick your prick up my ass!"). Thomson mentions intriguingly that, due to Barrie's budget cuts, "Toback had to drop a handful of scenes, including a homosexual encounter."[38]

Doubtless the most fiercely problematic of Toback's men – and the aspect of Fingers which stirred the greatest liberal anger at the time of its release – is the character of Dreems played by Jim Brown. His appearance instantly hikes the quasi-hallucinatory feel of the film up a few notches. Is he a figment of Jimmy's flipped-out imagination? The symbolic significance of his name is crushingly direct: Dreems is Jimmy's ideal guy, black, virile, powerful, in control, a man of few words. He is also emotionally coercive and physically violent. The film's freakiest moment, when Dreems bangs the heads of Carol and Christa (Carol Francis) together, was appropriated by Toback from a real-life incident that shortly followed the participatory research for Jim. In life, Brown was arrested for this, and the charges were later dropped; in the film, the recreation of that traumatic moment was performed for real, a "secret three-way actors' complicity", as Toback proudly described it.[39] A similar flare-up occurs between another black sports legend, Mike Tyson, and a fictional character played by Robert Downey Jr. in Black and White (1999). This was a fistful of psychodrama – a conflation or confusion of reportage with fantasy projection – for which few journalists could forgive the filmmaker at the time.

Dreems is also a figure of great humour – a subterranean aspect of Fingers that is often misrecognised. In a few key respects he is as "full of shit" as Jimmy – the sole difference being that no one is about to point that out to Dreems. He provides a point of exaggeration, a far-out parody, of Jimmy's conspicuously self-deluding heroism. For instance, Dreems's declarations of empathy with others easily outstrip Jimmy's in absurd grandiloquence. Concerning Carol, he advises Jimmy, "you don't understand her ass," immediately before once again abusing her. In a central scene of would-be, four-way, kinky sex, where Dreems eventually resorts to violence when the free-love tableau doesn't happen exactly as he wishes, he utters these immortal words (worthy of a Barry White song) to Christa: "Ain't gonna do nuthin' with you, or to you, that's not for you, baby."

This scene trains a cruel irony upon Jimmy's obsessive pursuit. Faced with the materialisation of his ultimate sexual fantasy, he becomes completely blocked. As Dreems half-heartedly exhorts Jimmy to "get his thing together", he tells the little story of a guy who can never get it up when the heat is on – "his dick ain't worth a shit". Jimmy, for his part, responds with a familiar repertoire of alienated gestures – from escape into taped music to frazzled implosion. The scene is another homage to catatonia and irresolution: Toback again snatches the scene away so abruptly that it's impossible to determine who exits with whom and when from this catastrophe.

Jimmy does get one other shot at a love scene. With Carol's loud encouragement, he finally manages to forego his arduous practice of the heroic fuck and ejaculates (it takes all of twenty-eight seconds). Then a fade to black – the only

such moment of calm in the entire film. But the afterglow effect is deceptive. Suddenly there is a cut to Jimmy, alone on the bed the next morning, still half dressed and twitching like crazy at all his extremities. Carol enters the frame abruptly, already dressed and prepared for the day ahead. She asks Jimmy with complete indifference: "Bad dream?"[40]

What happens when Jimmy's everyday shoring up is no longer possible, when all escape routes either inward or outward are closed off definitively? The final, pitiless movement of Fingers records Jimmy's brutal attempt to constitute himself as hero. This occurs, as for so many before him (Jimmy Stewart forcing Kim Novak up the door in Vertigo) and after him (Willem Dafoe moving like a zombie in Schrader's Light Sleeper [1992]), through an act of revenge. Suddenly, and for the first time, Jimmy is one step ahead of what we know about him; he strides with purpose, crossing spaces and places with a mysterious but fixed destiny before him. It's as if, in tracking and annihilating Riccamonza, the one who first derailed his father's little empire, Jimmy can restore the chain of cause-and-effect to its pre-catastrophic starting point, and wipe out the nightmare of fraught intersubjectivity. And more: in castrating Riccamonza, he can take back into himself the lost power of masculinity.

Fingers is a movie which is over before it starts; one of the first things we hear about Jimmy is that he "used to be" a great collector. He may go through the motions, but the *élan vital* of a once glorious man – and a once glorious gangster genre – is missing, played out. Jimmy's ultimate victory feels like no victory at all – it's too desperate, too excessive, it doesn't deliver a high to either the doer or its spectator. The action is emptied out, exhausted. At the end of his "last run" (a common figure in many melancholic male stories) the hero is not even delivered to death's door. Like Edward G. Robinson at the end of Fritz Lang's prophetic Scarlet Street (1944), Jimmy becomes one of the living dead, paving the way for a veritable carnival of ghostly souls in action films of the 1980s and 1990s: De Niro in Once Upon a Time in America, Eastwood in Pale Rider (1985), Christopher Walken in Ferrara's King of New York (1990), Johnny Depp in Jim Jarmusch's Dead Man (1995), Al Pacino in De Palma's Carlito's Way (1993) ...

Fingers ends, as do The Conformist (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1971), The Conversation (Coppola, 1974), Blow Out (De Palma, 1981) and Cruising, with a blank, static, solitary hero – and like several of his fallen brothers, he stares with enigmatic finality into the camera. In a savage reversal of the opening image, Jimmy now sits at his piano – naked, reduced to animal status, as Keitel would again be fourteen years later in Ferrara's Bad Lieutenant (1992). His hand on the window expresses not yearning but withdrawal, an erasure of alterity, like the freeze-frame of a crazed fan's hand on a car window at the start of Scorsese's The King of Comedy (1983). Jimmy looks out for a moment

before turning to us, but all the lines – sight lines, action trajectories, connections to other people – are blocked.

Thomson cryptically notes Toback's Big Question, the one that motivates his work: "Are you completely out yet?"[41] FINGERS presents the grim but fascinating spectacle of an expulsion from all orifices and by every means: shitting, fucking, spending, beating, shooting, going mad. The hero keeps nothing, wins nothing. His only real drive is to empty himself totally. When the hero is completely out, will he have the consciousness to even know it?

This chapter is an extensively revised and updated version of an essay which appeared in *Intervention* nos. 21-22, 1988.

Notes

1. Ken Eisen, "The Young Misogynists of American Cinema", *Cineaste* September 1983, 32.
2. Michael Dempsey, "Love and Money, Ecstasy and Death: A Conversation With James Toback", *Film Quarterly*, Winter 1980-81, 34.
3. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 1986), 213.
4. Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 14-26.
5. Schematically, obsession can be considered to take two broad, essential forms, inward and outward turning. (I owe this distinction to Ross Harley.) An outward turning obsession is fixed on something outside oneself – some specific object of interest in the world. It is a little too easy to turn this into a moral distinction – narcissistic obsession is bad and sick, 'outgoing' obsessions are good and healthy. In reality the distinction between these modes of obsession often proves difficult to draw. David Cronenberg's CRASH (1996), for instance, presents a richly ambiguous case study in obsession – as does the phenomenon of cinephilia itself, or indeed any "collecting" mania.
6. Adrian Martin, "Will and Representation in Martin Scorsese", *Scripsi* vol. 8 no. 1, 1992, 146-159.
7. Dennis Giles, "Show-making", in Rick Altman (ed.), *Genre: The Musical* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 85-101.
8. Adrian Martin, ONCE UPON A TIME IN AMERICA (London: British Film Institute, 1998); and "Mr Big", *Stuffing: Film: Genre* June 1987, 50-77.
9. James Toback, "BONNIE AND CLYDE, POINT BLANK: Style as Morality", in Renatus Hartogs and Eriz Artzt (eds.), *Violence: Causes and Solutions* (New York: Dell, 1970); cf. also Adrian Martin, "Pulp Affliction", *World Art* November 1994, 84-88.

10. David Thomson, *Overexposures: The Crisis in American Filmmaking* (New York: Quill, 1981), 262.
11. For recent critiques along this line, cf. Josh Kun, "The White Stuff", *Weekly Wire*, 24 April 2000, http://weeklywire.com/ww/04-24-00/boston_music_2.html; Dennis Harvey, "J.T. the Bigga Figga?", *sfbg.com*, 5 April 2000, http://www.sfbg.com/AandE/34/27/biggafigga.html; and Manohla Dargis, "Being James Toback", *LA Weekly*, 7-13 April 2000, http://www.laweekly.com/ink/00/20/film-dargis.php
12. James Toback, "Notes on Acting", *Film Comment* January-February 1978, 35.
13. Tod Lippy, "Writing *Vicky*: A Talk with James Toback", *Scenario* vol. 2 no. 2, Summer 1996, 200.
14. Thomson, *Overexposures*, 257.
15. Dempsey, "Love and Money, Ecstasy and Death", 27.
16. Ibid, 31.
17. Ibid, 35. But note Truffaut's rage as expressed in his *Correspondence 1945-1984* (New York: Noonday, 1990): "I obviously never said, or wrote, that Fingers was one of the greatest American films of the sound period" (529).
18. Leonard Maltin, *Movie & Video Guide* (New York: Signet, 2001), 452-3.
19. Dempsey, "Love and Money, Ecstasy and Death", 30.
20. Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 46-69; cf. also Adrian Martin, "The Wood and the Trees", *Filmnews*, September 1988, 16.
21. Adrian Martin, "A Larry Clark Portrait", in Peter Craven (ed.), *Best Australian Essays 2002* (Melbourne: Black Inc, 2002).
22. Ross Gibson, "Blue Velvet", *Filmnews* February 1987, 12.
23. Editorial introduction to James Toback, "The Father of the Man", *Movieline* June 1997, 47.
24. Tod Lippy, "Writing *Vicky*"; James Toback, "Divisions and Dislocations: A Journal for 1994", in John Boorman and Walter Donohue (eds.), *Projections 4* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995); Laurent Vachaud, "De l'érection à la résurrection: entretien avec James Toback", *Positif* no. 397, March 1994, 29-36.
25. Pauline Kael, *5001 Nights at the Movies* (London: Zenith, 1984), 185-6.
26. "Midsection: Acting", *Film Comment* January-February 1978, includes Toback's "Notes on Acting" plus Stuart Byron, "The Keitel Method", 36-41, which contains an invaluable discussion with the actor about his role in Fingers.
27. Eisen, "The Young Misogynists of American Cinema", 32.
28. An exception within this 'school' is Brad Stevens, "James Toback and *The Pick-up Artist*", *Screening the Past* no. 12, March 2001, http://www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast/firstrelease/fro301/bsfr12a.htm
29. Pascal Bonitzer, "Lignes et voies", *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 266-7, May 1976, 68-70. He suggests that, in comparison with Kramer's Milestones (1975), Hellman is "less duped by truth, intersubjective communication, tribal speech, and revolutionary messianism" (68).
30. Toback, "Notes on Acting", 35.
31. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959).
32. Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 213.

33. Richard Combs, "Alice in the City", *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1980, 265.
34. Dempsey, "Love and Money, Ecstasy and Death", 32.
35. Raymond Bellour, *The Analysis of Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).
36. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, "*Radio On*", *Screen* vol. 20, no. 3/4, Winter 1979-1980, 29-39; Thomas Elsaesser, *Fassbinder's Germany: History Identity Subject* (Amsterdam University Press, 1996).
37. Gregory Bateson, *Steps To An Ecology of Mind* (Frogmore: Paladin, 1973).
38. Thomson, *Overexposures*, 264.
39. Toback, "Notes on Acting", 35.
40. Larry Pryce's mind-boggling novelisation of *Fingers* (Los Angeles: Universal, 1978), while following the film virtually scene by scene, manages to completely re-heroise Jimmy; all signs of disturbance are missing. Pryce's version of the opening pursuit: "The song and the man appeared to be in complete harmony with each other as he approached her with a soft, almost cat-like walk" (7). Sex with Carol: "Slowly at first, and then with a growing urgency their bodies became one, as a wild heat overtook both of them and their rhythm of loving moved on into the long night" (96). Pryce is moved to add the ending of a bizarre and spectacular suicide gesture, doubtless in a desperate attempt to square plot and character: Jimmy jams razor blades under his fingernails and jumps out his window!
41. Thomson, *Overexposures*, 263.