

HEADING OFF SATISFACTION IN *TOUGH GUYS DON'T DANCE*

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*L'ennui n'est pas loin de la jouissance:
il est la jouissance vue des rives du plaisir.*

Boredom is not far from bliss; it is
bliss seen from the shores of pleasure.
—Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*

IN A MAINSTREAM HOLLYWOOD FILM, much of the appeal is based upon the prohibition of excessive enjoyment—a condition of too much attainment—so that the audience is delivered its pleasure piecemeal, in fits and starts. Within individual scenes and sequences, as well as over the course of whole films, various goals are established and their arrival is carefully managed so that the best is saved for last and we never get too much of what we think we want. As film theorist Todd McGowan explains, in cinema as in everyday life, the object of desire “remains pleasurable only insofar as it remains absent and impossible”:

Films provide a hint of enjoyment through the fantasy scenarios they deploy, but not too much. They remain pleasurable rather than becoming authentically enjoyable and thus threatening. The pleasure depends on an abbreviated deployment of fantasy, one that ends before it reaches its traumatic point. (Lynch 105)

By meting out pleasure in this way, mainstream cinema guarantees the audience's engagement, but at the cost of enforcing a certain regularity and

normalization. Other options do exist, of course—a traumatic excess of on-screen pleasure can be approached and even sustained—but profit-driven Hollywood does not usually consider such tactics viable. Imagine, for instance, a *Die Hard*-style action adventure film that delivers all the spectacular car chases and explosions we expect, but then at some point in the narrative *fails to cease* to deliver them, so that we get a twenty-minute sequence of pyrotechnic mayhem, with orange balls of fire repeatedly filling the screen, rocking the theater's sound system. We got what we wanted, didn't we? Of course not, because, as McGowan suggests, the object of desire in cinema must always remain fantasmatic—partly denied, temporarily suspended, or veiled halfway out-of-frame—in order to continually fuel our attraction. In other words, our (partial) enjoy-ment cannot be permitted to lapse into (permanent) enjoy-ance. Directed by Norman Mailer in 1987, with a screenplay adapted by the author from his 1984 novel, *Tough Guys Don't Dance* flaunts the rules of attraction I have just outlined, and thus constitutes an impossible production,¹ a mainstream Hollywood film that refuses to prohibit enjoyment or modulate satisfaction, and instead delivers a full-on excess of attainment, resulting in a kind of sublime pleasure-in-pain.

From the time of its theatrical release, and in numerous DVD reviews since, the relative merits of *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (hereafter *TGDD*) have been playfully adjudicated in the popular press and on the web, with many critics deriding the film as a pointless vanity project, a self-satisfied exercise in overindulgence. To such critiques, fans of the film respond: *yes, exactly, don't you just love it?!* In an effort to challenge this binarism, and as a means of theorizing a particular mode of cinematic enjoyment, I want to argue that Mailer's predominant tactic in the film, more achievable in temporally-regulated cinema than in literary fiction, is *suffusion*—a rejection of cinema's conventional gaps and deferrals in favor of a relentless delivery of the object of desire. Such excessive, suffocating fulfillment, I argue, transports viewers to the forbidden zone beyond pleasure that Jacques Lacan designates "*jouissance*." Lacanian theorist Bruce Fink glosses this crucial term as follows:

The subject comes into being as a form of attraction toward and defense against a primordial, overwhelming experience of what the French call *jouissance*: a pleasure that is excessive, leading to

a sense of being overwhelmed or disgusted, yet simultaneously providing a sense of fascination. (xii)

Here, *jouissance* figures as a third term in which pleasure and pain coincide; it is simultaneously a transgression of homeostasis and a prolonged orgasmic bliss that cannot be tolerated. *Jouissance* is often translated in English as “enjoyment,” leading to a great deal of unnecessary confusion. Rather, *jouissance* should be understood as the *beyond* of enjoyment, a forbidden attainment of what culture deems unattainable, a problematic realization of the complete and total satisfaction that necessarily remains *over there*, in contrast to the only-ever-partial pleasures humans are relegated to endure *here*, in their daily lives. I want to argue that it is precisely this impossible beyond that Mailer brings uncomfortably close throughout *TGDD*. The effect is either sublime or ridiculous for individual audience members, but in either case the result of Mailer brazenly flaunting the kind of middling pleasures Hollywood typically peddles.

In sharp contrast to Mailer’s novel, in which the first-person narration of protagonist Tim Madden provides the reader some frame of reference, the film adaptation immerses us in Tim’s (Ryan O’Neal) world through a series of flashbacks, initially providing very little context to indicate how we should interpret what we see and hear. Like Tim, we wake up at the beginning of the film only to find ourselves swimming in *jouissance*, up to our neck in a bizarre story world that will become intolerably tasteless for many, outrageously addictive for a few, and in any case a litmus test for one’s propensity towards camp. At the same time, in shadowing Tim while he reprocesses his “hundred hours of lurid unmanageables” (211), the audience is delivered an allegory on the paradoxes of *jouissance* itself. In terms of narrative, the film can be understood as a kind of short-circuited *noir* amnesia narrative, which at the same time suppresses all of the stylistic excesses of *noir*, in effect subverting subversion itself. The result is a two-hour long contradiction, an unholy marriage of delirious content and banal form—a text that, despite its existence on celluloid, can only be described as a real impossibility. In a strong sense, then, the critics are right: if Hollywood is our standard, Mailer’s film *really is* a failure—both on its own terms and in comparison to the novel (which is only ever debatably a failure). However it is precisely in daring to fail so grandly—having refused the even more unbearable contentment of taking the middle-road, pleasure—that

the film succeeds in delivering us to the unspeakable beyond that is *jouissance*.

“WHOEVER WROTE THIS HAS NEVER READ A GOOD BOOK.”²

In a 1987 review of *Tough Guys Don't Dance* in *The Washington Post*, Hal Hinson remarks that he has “rarely found it harder to determine whether [a] film’s effects were the result of the artist’s designs or his ineptitude.” Pauline Kael’s response to the film is similar:

[I]t has an eerie, dated quality, like a copy of Playboy left out in the sun for 15 years. The women are subhuman, and most of the actors look stranded—lost and undirected. Yet the tawdriness of Mailer’s self-exposure and self-glorification has a low-level fascination. [...] You stare at it knowing it’s hopeless yet not really wanting to leave. (784)

One cannot help but identify with these critics’ confused ambivalence. It is difficult to think of a film that produces such a feeling of distantiation and wobbly uncertainty, a kind of seasickness that sticks with the viewer, persisting even after the closing credits roll. To be sure, the film contains a number of technical flaws—the camera’s repeated violation of the axis of action in the early scene at the Widow’s Walk, and the transitional shot in Tim’s Jeep in which his dog pokes its nose into the frame, long after the scene in which the animal was stabbed to death. Such momentary gaffes are not what concern us here, however. Instead, *TGDD* resounds because failure itself has become a kind of *modus operandi*. Not only is defectiveness permissible in Mailer’s production, it is ontologically central—an integral part of the endeavor rather than an isolated accident—and this willingness to take cinema to its point of collapse profoundly impacts both the film’s narrative structure and its style. To borrow a catch phrase from contemporary pop culture, the film is a *hot mess*, a casualty of its own VIP status, and as such can be judged an unmitigated, if decidedly perverse success.

As an example of the film’s overarching conceptual failure, consider the scene near the opening of Tim’s initial flashback, his recollection of what is supposed to be a wild, cocaine-fueled party at the home he shares with Patty Lareine (Debra Sandlund) in Provincetown. In the novel, Tim describes the party as being populated by “drunks, freaks, male and female models, half-

nudes and premature Halloween types in costume.” (32) Yet the scene we see on screen, a metonymy for Tim’s “idiotic, crazy summer,” looks entirely too tame—a ludicrous eighties cliché. Bowls of caviar and cocaine rest on opposite sides of a glass-top coffee table; a woman answers the door wearing only a G-string; everyone dances in lockstep, with a sort of post-*Footloose* finger-snapping sway. Most hackneyed of all is the pop song emanating from the stereo system—“Real Man,” sung by Pam Tillis—which sounds like a corporate knockoff of Jefferson Starship’s already terrible 1985 anthem “We Built This City.” If this were a truly “crazed” eighties party, wouldn’t we be hearing something in the style of the Pixies, Sonic Youth, Metallica, or at the very least Guns N’ Roses (all of which were far from marginal by the time of the film’s production)? What brazen nepotism or contractual favor could have possibly landed this song, of all songs, on the film’s soundtrack? Yet if we cannot partake in its pleasure (as the party guests appear to) and cannot fathom the reason for the song’s inclusion, this audiovisual maladjustment is precisely what launches the scene into the domain of *jouissance*. Suddenly aware of the “other side” of the film’s production—the realm of casting couches and inside deals—a heady whiff of *jouissance* begins to emanate from behind the scenes of the story-world. We sense that someone is being satisfied by all this, and for reasons that are fascinating because they are largely obscure.

Related to this failure of edginess in the film’s not-so-wild party sequence are a number of later scenes in which Tim appears to be taken aback by actions that are not really all that impressive. Police Captain Regency (Wings Hauser) smokes a marijuana cigarette in his office and Tim is stunned by this. Why? Are we to believe that the film’s protagonist, himself a drug user and ex-convict, has never considered the possibility of police corruption? In assessing *TGDD* in these terms, it becomes difficult to think of another film that so systematically undershoots the mark in terms of “inherently shocking events and actions.” A similarly mild burst of violence occurs later in the film when Tim bashes a vintage Rolls Royce with a crowbar, but the damage is clearly nothing so bad that it couldn’t be repaired as new in Boston by next Friday. Likewise, as a rule, when bullets are fired in *TGDD*, characters barely even flinch. When Wardley Meeks III (John Bedford Lloyd), shoots himself in the heart (!) with a pistol, it is like a gunshot in a Hollywood melodrama from 1935: quick, bloodless, and free of concussion. Similar is the scene in which Tim and Madeleine (Isabella Rossellini) return from their

sexual adventure in North Carolina and veer off the road and crash. Filmed from a distance, and with little visible impact, we cannot discern whether this is tragedy or parodic comedy or neither.

At play in such sequences are the psychodynamics of the underwhelming, a trend that is perhaps best represented in the script's repeated use of the phrase "made love" where we expect to hear "fucked." This is of course not to suggest that there are not moments where *TGDD* aims to surprise the viewer and succeeds; how could anyone fail to be shocked at the sight of the rubbery, lime-covered, headless body of Jessica, hooked and pulled out of a fifty-gallon oil drum? Such scenes, however, only underscore the remarkable tameness of the other supposedly sexy and violent scenes that appear around them. Failed edginess, when it appears with such regularity, does not merely disappoint, but has the effect of making the film seem aloof and presumptuous. In its lassitude, the film betrays a secret extravagance, affronting our viewerly good faith, tacitly assuming that we will accede to Mailer's terms of engagement because he is Mailer: a figure so well established and so potent that we will automatically forgive, or "write off" as an anomaly, anything and everything in the film that comes up limp. The smugness of such an approach is off-putting, to be sure, but in a manner that produces the impression of a *jouissance* at once within and beyond the film's diegesis. Not only the film's various characters, but indeed the production itself appears to be enjoying at our expense, and our only options are to consent to being abused, or to walk out.

Another way in which the film takes liberties with its audience, resulting in a kind of perverse fascination, is Mailer's much-celebrated scripted dialogue. In many cases taken verbatim from the novel, Mailer's words prove troublesome when spoken aloud by flesh-and-blood actors. Although literary adaptations always run this risk, when such dialogue fails it is usually either because an actor's delivery falls flat, or because the words they have been supplied come across as too literary, not punchy enough to satisfy the exigencies of cinema. In the adaptation of *TGDD*, however, the situation is precisely the opposite. Already pulp-cinematic in the novel, when Mailer's words are brought to life on a movie-made timeline they repeatedly overshoot the mark. Outrageously lurid to begin with, when the actors' rich inflections are added to Mailer's words, the lines lapse into pure impossible excess. "Too much" for the printed page, the flamboyant, at times eschatological content of the novel's best exclamations become "*much* too much"

when enunciated. The irony of such an arrangement is that Mailer's hyperbolic script can only ever match itself; it cannot top itself, although it appears to be straining to do so at every turn. Every line is as good as the last, but none is better, and this leveling effect is an indicator that we have crossed over into the domain of *jouissance*.

Excessive and highly memorable dialogue emerges throughout the film, as if smuggling these lines into a major motion picture were precisely the point. Around the one-hour mark, Tim's yellow Labrador retriever appears in the passenger seat of his Jeep. Up to this point the audience is unaware that Tim even has a dog, and the beast is around just long enough to be stabbed to death by Spider (John Snyder) during a brawl on an isolated road. Realizing what has happened, a winded Tim intones: "Your knife ... is in ... my dog." The cadence of the phrase is ludicrous, the scene unnecessarily bloody and violent. Is this Mailer engaging in wry self-parody? How are we to respond later in the film when, in his deep Southern drawl, Wardley Meeks III says to Patty Lareine, "I may be a physical coward but I will assert that I have *death guts*." Or when acting chief of police Regency declares to Tim: "I'm a law enforcement officer and it *turns me on*." No less impressive is the film's ostensible climax, in which Regency bashes his head against a door, resulting in a speech-impairing stroke. Slurring, Regency spitefully mocks his wife Madeleine for her inability to enjoy sex: "That's because ... you got ... no *woooooommb!!!!*" In the middle of the line, the camera cuts to the hallway, where Tim is listening in. On the word "womb," actor O'Neal buries his face in his hands, as if he cannot believe how badly actor Hauser is hamming it up.

Functioning as a coat-rack on which to hang these crazed pronouncements (and others too numerous to mention) is the film's famously over-complicated plot, a flashback-driven narrative that subordinates causality—for instance the possibility that Mailer's story could have produced real mystery, or real suspense—to the outlandishness and vulgarity of the film's various characters. Roger Ebert has commented that the film's main storyline "is as confusing as *The Big Sleep*," and it would be difficult for any viewer to avoid confronting the multiple, convoluted, and perhaps too obviously vaginal folds of the plot as Tim works to reconstruct his missing hours. At one point late in the film, we find ourselves on a desolate beach listening to Wardley Meeks III, whose voice-over introduces a flashback that takes place *within* Tim Madden's own flashback, which itself is occasionally interrupted

by Tim's voice-over. One cannot help but think "Where are we again?" yet this question dissipates in light of Wardley's effete mannerisms and lugubrious elocution. The scene is all Wardley, and a campy *tour de force* for actor Lloyd; it ultimately does not matter where his flashback fits into the plot or how it affects Tim.

In her much-cited 1964 essay "Notes on Camp," Susan Sontag explains that, for those who partake of the camp sensibility, pleasure derives not from witnessing complex, nuanced character development, but from the distillation of character to a high potency:

What Camp taste responds to is "instant character" [...] and, conversely, what it is not stirred by is the sense of the development of character. Character is understood as a state of continual incandescence—a person being one, very intense thing. This attitude toward character is a key element of the theatricalization of experience embodied in the Camp sensibility. And it helps account for the fact that opera and ballet are experienced as such rich treasures of Camp, for neither of these forms can easily do justice to the complexity of human nature. Wherever there is development of character, Camp is reduced. (286)

Character in *TGDD* is campy not only because Mailer's actors take it over-the-top, but also because the various primary characters are relatively uncomplex stereotypes (and hybrids of stereotypes), and thus exceedingly well-defined. As a rule, they do not develop as the film proceeds. Regardless of her newly elevated financial means, Patty Lareine will always be a redneck—Wardley calls her "a study in low greed"—and Debra Sandlund's caricature-like performance follows suit, epitomizing the "continual incandescence" Sontag identifies as camp. Whole novelizations could be written on the exploits of Wardley, Patty Lareine, Regency, or Tim. Indeed, the film could easily support a screen-to-stage musical adaptation in the spirit of *A Fish Called Wanda*, *Legally Blonde*, or John Waters' *Cry-Baby*, building lyrics and dance numbers around the actors' various lines and deliveries, as well as their trademark facial expressions and movements.

Yet of all the ready-made characters Mailer deploys, perhaps the most significant is Tim's father Dougy, who appears on screen in the form of *film noir* icon and legendary real-life tough guy Lawrence Tierney. In one of

modern cinema's most effective appropriations of "instant character," we expect an aging John Dillinger and we get him. Early in the film, Dougy says to Tim: "Certain dames oughtta wear a t-shirt that says: hang around, I'll make a cocksucker outta ya." Later he gruffly blurts out, "I say we deep six the heads. You got an anchor?" It is difficult to explain the effect of hearing these lines; to say they are pastiche is beside the point. They are, to be as precise as possible, exactly the kind of lines one would desire to hear Lawrence Tierney deliver—the ultimate Tierneyisms!—and his character is never any more or less intense, or indeed any different, than he is in these scenes. Indeed, it is tempting to speculate that Mailer had Tierney in mind when he wrote the character of Dougy in the first place, for the novel. To be clear, what it is issue in both works is an attempt to condense into words—into individual lines of dialogue—the ineffable *jouissance* of cinema itself, which is to say an effort that can only fail. In adapting his own already cinematic novel for the screen, it is the gap between the novelistic and the cinematic, and not their ostensible connection, which Mailer wants us to suffer, and to enjoy.

THE RISK(S) OF STATING THE OBVIOUS

Up to this point, I have largely addressed the scripted content of *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, which of course is only half the picture. In this section, I theorize the film's halting and oddly nondescript approach to form. In doing so, it will be crucial to reemphasize that the extreme, potentially painful suffusion that psychoanalysis terms *jouissance* exists in an oppositional relation to the low-level comforts of pleasure. One may move past pleasure toward *jouissance*; they are on the same continuum, but they are not the same thing. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes makes this distinction explicit:

Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading. Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language.

Three points in this passage require further explication. First, the term translated above as “bliss” is “jouissance” in Barthes’ French original, and indeed much of Barthes’ theory of textual *jouissance* is bound up in Lacan’s formulation of the concept. Second, the fact that a *jouissance*-text “brings to a crisis [a reader’s] relation with language” can be understood in filmic terms as a crisis of form. What brings us to a point of pleasure/pain in *TGDD*, more than anything, is the droning repetition of formal sameness.

My third point of explication will require a bit lengthier discussion. What exactly does Barthes mean when he associates the *jouissance*-text with *ennui*, boredom? Encountered in actual films, boredom can be understood not as a lack of desirability, but as a kind of *distension* of desire—an encounter with lack as it emerges on a very slow track. Were we to fast-forward the action to double-speed, it would still seem interminable. Indeed, this sense of interminability in the here-and-now could serve as an all-purpose definition of boredom, cinematic or otherwise. Clocking in at seventeen and a half minutes, the 1967 recording of “Sister Ray” by the Velvet Underground may be experienced as boring by some listeners and exhilarating by others, yet in both cases its effect derives from a repetition in which variation is relatively minor. Most popular films and television shows, which are by definition pleasure-texts, consist of a repetition in which variation is relatively major.³ On this count, “Sister Ray” is a text of boredom and so is the film version of *Tough Guys Don’t Dance*, where Mailer’s cinematic style thumps along simplistically, virtually without variation. Such unwavering formalist repetition tends not so much to induce sleep as to bludgeon its audience with a suffusion of presence—each past and future moment exists right here, right now. In boredom, mainstream audiences encounter a suffusion of present-ness, a sense of time having gotten stuck at what should have been a fleeting moment, and consequently overflowing its container. Beyond receiving a consistent, partially satisfying supply (of back-story, characterization, sound design, or *mise-en-scène*), in boredom, our desire runs up against a surplus—what Patrice Petro calls an “anxiety of abundance” (62). To reverse the Gertrude Stein quotation about 1930s Oakland, when a mainstream audience experiences boredom, it is because there is *too much* there there.

As a means of underscoring the perversely boring anti-style of *TGDD*, I want to take seriously the inevitable (and for some, heretical) comparison between Mailer’s film and David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet*. A film that received tremendous attention from popular critics and scholars alike, *Blue Velvet* was

released in September 1986, just prior to the start of production on *TGDD*—in other words, just in time to influence it. The most obvious connection between the two films is the appearance in each of Isabella Rossellini, to whom Lynch was engaged at the time. To anyone familiar with *Blue Velvet*, the surprise arrival of Madeleine at Tim's door near the end of *TGDD* cannot but appear like a weakened, inferior version of the traumatic emergence out of the hedges (also from screen left, also near the end of the film) of the bruised, naked Dorothy Vallens (Rossellini). But the similarities to *Blue Velvet* do not end there. In Lynch's film, a man having a stroke initiates the narrative, whereas in *TGDD*, a man having a stroke ends it. In *Blue Velvet*, the mystery begins when Jeffrey Beaumont (Kyle MacLachlan) discovers a moldering, ant-infested ear in a vacant lot. In *TGDD*, the mystery begins when Tim discovers a severed head in a similarly depopulated liminal area. Also, just as both films may clearly be understood as revisionist *films noirs*, both begin with idyllic local vistas which, in retrospect, betray the seamy underworld that their narratives slowly reveal (for Lynch, the intertext for these shots is Norman Rockwell's *oeuvre*, whereas for Mailer it is Edward Hopper's). Finally, and perhaps most strikingly, the musical scores of both films were written by the same composer: Angelo Badalamenti.⁴ However, when we begin to consider the directors' two respective styles, all comparisons must cease.

In sharp contrast to the well-known formalist triumphs of *Blue Velvet*—Lynch's use of highly saturated color, low-key lighting, ominous ambient noise, disconcerting extreme close-ups, and so on—Mailer delivers an unwavering, seemingly deliberate lack of formalist imagination in translating his story into motion pictures. If we set aside for the moment the script's campy excesses, and focus solely on the elements of film form—camera, lighting, *mise-en-scène*, sound, editing, costuming, etc.—*TGDD* suddenly appears uncharacteristically prosaic, as if Mailer were challenging himself to scream normativity at the top of his lungs.

In terms of cinematography, when the camera in *TGDD* tracks or pans, it is rarely for any particular aesthetic effect, but only to keep a character in frame (for instance, Tim's movement throughout the house in the opening shots). Virtually every shot in the film is eye-level, eschewing any high or low angles, and the camera seems disinclined to dolly in or out. Establishing shots are delivered in precise accordance with classical Hollywood style, and the lighting in the film might best be described as "simple realism," making

available the images, but not coloring them in any striking way and never pushing things so far as to reveal its own artifice. Similarly, in terms of soundtrack, Badalamenti's opening theme—what might be called the “Pool of Memory” theme—is in a strong sense too tame for the film's lurid content. It is as if the film were captioned by someone who did not speak its language—who failed to take into account, à la *Blue Velvet*, the vile infection seething beneath the surface of everyday appearances. Moreover, the score includes an unfortunate series of orchestral blasts that verge on mickey-mousing. When Tim discovers his blood-soaked jean jacket on the seat of his Jeep, Badalamenti's soundtrack marks it as important: deeeeeee-DAAAAH! When in various scenes we hear the echoing voices of the ghosts of Hell-town whisper “Whose head is it?,” this aural cue seems excessively obvious (in Hollywood parlance, too “on the nose”) in its effort to signify an elusive *jouissance* that Tim once experienced, but now cannot locate.

The film's *mise-en-scène* is likewise mired in cliché: Patty Lareine's brass-and-glass décor, her white lacquered dining room suite, and her puffy, floral motif comforter in shades of rose and teal—all these enjoyable commodities unite to form a veritable case study in what it means to be 1980s *nouveau riche*. The house decor is full of Art Nouveau objects, a style that Susan Sontag identifies as the epitome of camp, yet it is clear that Patty Lareine chose these objects without irony. At the same time, it is these objects' banality—their “vanilla” quality—that makes them work *for* the film as a subversive text. Wardley Meeks' gleaming white Rolls Royce, the cheese-cake quality of Tim's supposedly pornographic Polaroids, the excessive number of file cabinets lining the walls in Regency's office—the film is chock full of such middling, conservative artifacts of production design. Costuming and makeup are never extreme—neither naturalistic nor exaggerated, neither inappropriate nor inventive. Tim, made up to “look like shit” at the beginning of the film, unsurprisingly wears an unzipped grey hooded sweatshirt and has dark rings under his eyes. Later, as if to encapsulate Cape Cod fashion during the off-season, he dons a red and black checkered hunting coat for his mission to Truro Woods. Dougy, a macho retiree, sports a cashmere v-neck over a blue dress shirt with green corduroys. Patty Lareine, the film's unhinged southern belle, wears various stereotypical dresses and picture hats. Local druggie Spider is seen in a black tank top or a leather jacket, with cheap silver rings on all his fingers, while his would-be accomplice Wardley Meeks III looks like something out of a mid-1980s Ralph Lauren

advertisement; his longish auburn hair and linen suit are a perfect fit for his character. Yet while the characters themselves are diverse and frequently maniacal, there is nothing odd or unanticipated about their attire. In a word, the film's production design is *expectable*.

In his contemporary review of the film, David Denby describes Mailer's characters as "almost gross and sometimes ludicrous, like dirty-talking refugees from *Dynasty*. Their words pop out too emphatically, with an air of shocking us that becomes laughable" (140). In his *Washington Post* review, Hal Hinson also compares the film to *Dynasty*: "If a gang of inmates from an insane asylum were to stage a low-rent episode of *Dynasty*, it might look something like *Tough Guys Don't Dance*." The key is to recognize that nowhere is this film more like ABC's long-running night-time soap opera than in its form, which is strictly TV-style—a kind of invisible non-aesthetic, bereft of much of what makes cinema cinema. Considering Mailer's where-withal and reputation as a maverick, any viewer would have gone into his film expecting exceptional (or at least exceptionally weird) direction. Instead, the film delivers the same old drill—Hollywood style at its most conventional.⁵ What should we make of Mailer's bromidic style, especially in light of his hyperbolic dialogue and the implausibility of the overall narrative? Is this simply unsophisticated filmmaking, or is it something more: a sophisticated deployment of unsophistication, the best guarantee of which is its sheer duration, its repetition without variation.

It would be one thing if we got the sense that the film's flat style was the result of its relatively inexperienced director not knowing any better. Yet the film scrupulously disallows such a conclusion by engaging in what might be described as a tokenistic approach to stylization. When style flares up in *TGDD* is always as a *hapax*—an isolated, one-off occurrence demonstrating that a more aggressive formalism was indeed possible, but was just not a direction the filmmakers opted to pursue. In effect, such moments say to the audience: *here, take a look at what this film is failing to give you*, and this comparison sets in high relief what we actually get: the film's markedly less exciting, banausic approach to style. Examples of such dabbling formalism include the 360-degree swirling camera as Tim learns of his wife's affair with Regency ("Oh Man! Oh God! Oh Man! Oh God!"); the film's solitary low angle shot, looking up at Madeleine before she shoots and kills Regency; the dolly away from a down-lit Regency looking particularly sinister as Tim leaves his office; the nearly vertical, high angle shot out of Tim's bedroom

window at the crashing surf; the oblique point-of-view shot through the window of Tim's Jeep, revealing the underside of tree branches as he speeds toward his marijuana stash; the strangely-positioned tracking crane shot that trails Tim and Wardley as they travel down Main Street in Tim's Jeep; the loopy *giallo*-esque harpsichord music we hear when Wardley gets into the Rolls and sets off for Race Point; the series of jump-cuts as Tim smashes Wardley's Rolls Royce with a crowbar; and the highly expressionistic extreme long shot of Wardley, pistol in hand, following Tim as he limps up a sand dune toward the burial site at Hell-town. These anomalies are truly exceptional, however, blips on the screen—a handful of shots in a nearly two-hour film. Yet despite their limited number, they are systematic deployed. To state the problem differently, although he might at first glance appear guilty of a simple inconsistency, a closer analysis reveals that Mailer's apparently inconsistent stylization is handled in an utterly consistent manner.

Most would agree that to reduce Mailer's novel to its content, dismissing it as just another tale of drunken, drug-addled excess, would be to miss the point entirely. The book is, among other things, a work that invites us to compare such lunatic excesses with the relative lucidity of language with which the tale is told. In other words, the seductiveness of the novel involves subtracting literary form from content, and vice versa. The film version of *TGDD* is no different, but in place of Tim's colorful first-person narration we get the utter transparency of Mailer's cinematic style. We expect David Lynch and instead we get *Dynasty*. Yet—and here is where the film's viewership splits in two—the dearth of stylistic originality is numbing to the point of discomfort, like listening to a dial tone for an hour fifty. After a while, one cannot help but sense that every scene, event, and character in this film is “under the influence” of *jouissance*. If the overall look of the film is vaguely soft-focus—indiscriminately filtered so that the image neither looks quite real nor pointedly nostalgic—it is because gooeey, substance-less *jouissance* is stuck all over everything.

To the extent that Mailer seems consciously to invite viewers to compare his film with *Blue Velvet*, it is oddly enough not Lynch's film, but Mailer's, that appears the more unconventional of the two. In effect, Mailer trumps Lynch's notorious masterwork with an inertness of style no film school graduate could possibly dream up. In Lynch, *jouissance* appears at the margins, “in dreams,” while on occasion invading our symbolic reality, leaving its traces in waking life. Correspondingly, in *Blue Velvet*, stylization tends to

function expressionistically, flaring up at moments of intense drama and psychological distress. In *TGDD*, on the other hand, *jouissance* is stage center, a place Mailer's characters fully inhabit—"the norm" so to speak. Appropriately, the film's style is boring, as if to stress the *de rigueur* quality of the wild eccentricity we see. In the novel, when Tim describes the séance, he notes that "It did not seem spooky. Rather, it was tedious" (80). Nothing could better express the experience of watching Mailer's film. Even given its occasional stylistic flare-ups, it manages to fail with such consistent flatness that it seems impossible (to me at least) to argue that the film's pointlessness is ultimately pointless. The film is conservative, even reactionary at the level of form, yet for all this, is no less obscene. The result is a camp text for the ages, worthy of being shelved somewhere between Sam Fuller and *Show-girls*, and this is no mean feat.

CONCLUSION: THAT'S HAPPINESS

That is clearly the essence of law—to divide up, distribute, or reattribute everything that counts as *jouissance*.

—Jacques Lacan, Seminar XX

Early on in *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, a joke about *jouissance* sets the tone for the film. At the Widow's Walk, a bemused and tipsy Jessica Pond (Frances Fisher) invites Tim to tell her a joke. "What makes surgeons happy?" Tim asks. "What?" Jessica responds. Tim returns the punch line: "To cut people up and get paid for it—*that's happiness!*" Jessica erupts in a peal of laughter while her companion Lonnie Pangborn (R. Patrick Sullivan) sits stone-faced, knowing full well where all this is going. The joke is remarkably unfunny, as if straining to make a point. Yet the question of whether Tim "cut people up" during a night of extreme enjoyment forms the very backbone of the film's narrative. In the final analysis, the droning, campy *jouissance* of *Tough Guys Don't Dance* would be less interesting if not for the fact that the film's protagonist, Tim Madden, is throughout the film embroiled in a crisis of *jouissance*. Last week two people were murdered. A severed head or two are in the cellar. Upon discovering his father Dougy's arrival, Tim says flatly: "I didn't

do it. [pause] I don't think I did. But my head's been peculiar lately. I have blackouts. I hallucinate." Symbolized by the blasting ocean waves that awaken Tim at dawn, and which have entirely receded by the time he has slept off his hangover, Tim's drink- and drug-fueled blackouts are surrounded by hard evidence, tangible indicators of both his sexual excesses and a murder spree he may have authored, but cannot recall. In this way, amnesia becomes a fictive stand in for "the irreducible kernel of *jouissance* that resists all symbolization" (Žižek 14). It is evident that an excessive, obscene enjoyment has happened, and the question is: was it Tim's *jouissance*, or someone else's.

Not coincidentally, this is the question pondered by all of the classic *film noir* amnesiacs. As with the protagonists of such classic *films noirs* such as *Beware, My Lovely* (Harry Horner, 1952), *Crack Up* (Irving Reis, 1946), *The Crooked Way* (Robert Florey, 1949), *Deadline at Dawn* (Harold Clurman, 1946), *Impact* (Arthur Lubin, 1949), *The Long Wait* (Victor Saville, 1954), *Street of Chance* (Jack Hively, 1942), and *Somewhere in the Night* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1946), it is only by peering into the "unaccountable spaces" of his blackouts (Mailer 42), asking a lot of questions, and finally determining his innocence, that the amnesiac reconciles his *jouissance*. The same can be said for the viewer of *TGDD*: it turns out that the film cannot deliver the excess enjoyment we anticipate, but in the process of discovering this impasse, *jouissance* nonetheless overtakes us, albeit in a different form, as camp.

Perhaps the most perversely compelling, campy dialogue in the film—an exchange not directly adapted from the novel—occurs in Tim's attic studio after Dougy has examined the decapitated head in the basement:

DOUGY. Somebody used a knife to sever the head, but there were no other marks on the head.

TIM. Would you stop repeating that word?

DOUGY. What, "head?"

TIM. Yeah, it gets to me.

DOUGY: Well, there's no substitute.

Apart from demonstrating that Tim is a sensitive soul, and that he still feels some affection for his deceased spouse Patty Lareine, we are left with two realizations: first, that saying the word “head” repeatedly in such circumstances could make a man queasy, and second, just as Dougy indicates, that there is no way around this problem—no substitute for the word “head.” The naturalism of the dialogue is extremely off-putting, yet regardless of one’s reaction to the conversation, there is surely nothing else like it in all of popular cinema.

The semantic discord between the two men speaks precisely to the paradoxes of *jouissance*. If one’s spouse or partner is alive, he or she has a face, lips, eyes, a nose, etc., and of course a body, which can likewise be understood in terms of its various parts. In the highly symbolic realm of affection, though, one’s lover’s “head” does not register in such terms. It would be highly unconventional—for many, effectively impossible—to say: “My darling, you have such a lovely *head*.” One may speak of a stranger’s head, and one may bang one’s own head on an unexpectedly open cabinet door, but otherwise the term is too blunt and anatomical to apply to one’s object of affection—a coroner’s terminology, or a football coach’s, but not a lover’s. For Tim, the word head is unspeakable in this context, and not just because of the one he found in a garbage bag in Truro Woods. Rather, “head” is a signifier of Tim’s excessive *jouissance*—a blunt, idiotic word which, when spoken repeatedly by his father, and in such blasé terms, brings the nauseating pleasure/pain of *jouissance* much too close. As a normal desiring subject, a subject of the social order and of language, one cannot conceive of someone one cares about as being divisible in this way.

Yet—and this too is a major point of the exchange—Dougy has no problem at all saying “head,” nor does he hesitate to dig a bullet out of one. Who is this figure, who shows up at his son’s house intuiting that there has been trouble, calmly assessing the problem, and masterfully proceeding to set everything aright? In the parlance of psychoanalysis, Dougy is a perfect fictional stand-in for the father-of-enjoyment, “[a] figure about whom one can say nothing, a fearful and feared as well as dubious figure, an all-powerful, half-animal creature of the primal horde, who was killed by his sons” (Lacan, *Ethics* 176). The catch, of course, is that unlike the murdered primal father, Dougy is not dead, or not quite. His terminal cancer hangs like a pall over all his interactions with Tim, as does his reputation as a man who has suffered in equal measure with his enjoyment. Dougy has enjoyed

in ways that Tim never will; his physical presence, both on screen and in Tim's psyche, certifies this absolutely. Yet Dougy's cancer forecasts a scenario in which the father's shadow will loom over the son even more potently after he dies.

If *TGDD* is a universe of *jouissance*, where the superego has stepped aside and enjoyment has free reign, Dougy returns to his son at the beginning of the film (which is really the end) to rein it all in. The paradox, however, lies in the way he lays down the law. The key is to recognize Dougy not as a model for Tim's *jouissance*, but as a blockage to it in the form of a command to enjoy fully and completely, like the father. In Lacan's words, "Nothing forces anyone to enjoy (*jouir*) except the superego. The superego is the imperative of *jouissance*—Enjoy!" (*Sexuality* 3) By showing Tim how to "deep six" his *jouissance*, along with the bodies that have piled up around it, Dougy leads by example, and in the end Tim appears to have renounced his bliss and found his pleasure.⁶ Although Dougy's cancer implies that Tim will soon have to face his father's death—symbolizing a breakdown of paternal authority—one might just as well question whether Dougy hasn't been dead all along, his reappearance merely one of Tim's self-diagnosed hallucinations. Yet, strangely, all of this is embodied in Dougy's droning incantation of the unspeakable word "head," which everyone in the films seems to have lost in one way or another. In the end, it all becomes parody, with "Pomp and Circumstance" playing as Tim and Dougy dump six corpses from a small boat into the ocean. As the mind races, trying to figure out who they all are, we realize that Tim has finally graduated into his desire, fully assumed it as a project driven by failure, fueled by dissatisfaction. And if we are tempted to watch *Tough Guys Don't Dance* again, once or twice or many times over, so have we.

NOTES

1. It bears mentioning here that in psychoanalytic terms the impossible is in fact possible. In the words of Todd McGowan, "Lacan [...] insists that the impossible can happen, that it only seems impossible from the standpoint of the symbolic order and its constraints on our thought" (81). In other words, for any individual subject there exists a whole laundry list of events and objects that would fall under the heading "impossibilities," yet this rubric in no way prevents them from occurring in the Real. No one, for instance, could get behind the wheel of a car if they thought that crashing violently on the way to work were a real possibility. Yet it is a real possibility; it happens to people every day.

2. The quotation is from a famously tongue-in-cheek preview trailer for the film, in which Mailer himself stands before the camera and reads from a series of comment cards, allegedly filled out at the film's first screening. The comments alternate between high praise and outright disdain. Card #1: "Bold, innovative, wonderful!" Card #2: "Stinks!" Card #3: "A movie not to miss." Card #4: "A giant death-orgy with lots of maniacs." After several more comments, a series of clips from the film rounds out the trailer, and finally Mailer returns for one last comment: "The devil made this picture." He then winks at the camera.
3. In musicological terms, the ultimate in repetition doesn't appear to be repetition at all—it is a drone, a fixed-pitch sine wave that is free of harmonics and sounded at great length.
4. However anachronistic, it is worth noting the exchange between Jessica Pond and Lonnie Pangborn at the Widow's Walk in *TGDD* seems to be very much in the mode of David Lynch; it could appear without any inconsistency in a scene at the Great Northern Hotel in Lynch's television series *Twin Peaks* three years later.
5. Reviews from the period that applaud *TGDD* for its camera work—and there are a few—can only be a product of wishful thinking.
6. In an ending that seems to directly inspire the exculpatory, but deeply contradictory denouement of *The Player* (Robert Altman, 1992)—in which studio head Griffin Mill gets away with murder, keeps his job, scores a box office hit *and* gets the girl—the final shot of Tim Madden suggest a happiness tinged with fear that he will in the end be discovered, and presumably return to jail. The disembodied laugh of Patty Lareine destroys any sense of satisfaction the viewer may have attained in this happy ending, just as the voice of Griffin Mill's unborn child mocks the constructedness of the audience's sympathies in *The Player*: *nyah-nyah-nyah-nyah-nyah-nyah*.

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