



Show and Tell

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Argotist Ebooks

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Maybe Virginia Woolf was right – maybe human character did change on or about December 1910. But human character changed, or changed again, on or about July 1982. Jonas knows – he was there. Maybe you were too.

It was the year *TIME Magazine* named the computer Machine of the Year. The year Disney opened EPCOT, Experimental Community of Tomorrow. The year genetic engineering was first used commercially to produce the recombinant DNA drug product, human insulin. The year Freeware was developed by programmers Andrew Fluegleman and Jim Knopf. The year of the first artificial heart implant. Pneumatic tubes fed the implant, designed by Robert Jarvik, with a control apparatus the size of a shopping cart. That first guy lasted only 112 days. Remember?

1982: Reagan, Thatcher, potassium cyanide-laced Tylenol, Israel invading Lebanon, Argentina invading the Falklands, *USA Today*, the death of Brezhnev, the world's largest oil rig sinking in the Atlantic, 700,000 demonstrators protesting nuclear weapons in Central Park, the Vietnam War Memorial, the US recession, *E.T.* and Smileys and “Ebony and Ivory.” Say hello to Madonna, say so long to Lester Bangs. Gas averaged 91 cents a gallon and the median household income in the US was \$18,642. It's one year before Ameritech launches the first US 1G mobile phone network, and a mere eight years before Belgian computer scientist Robert Cailliau christens the growing global consolidation of network apparatus “WorldWideWeb.” That's right – without the definite article. Two years after the first “classic rock” radio station in Cleveland.

The Mists of Avalon, *The Color Purple*, *The Shansbank Redemption*, *Schindler's List*. Those were novels in 1982. *The Year of Living Dangerously*. “Thriller.” Remember?

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In 1982, Jonas was earning \$32,400 a year as a Senior Project Engineer with Bristol-Myers Co. in Syracuse. This is the same plant that had supplied half of the US demand of penicillin, a massive quantity indeed, during World War II. In truth, the plant had seen better days, its pipe chases now tangled conduits carrying any number of variously innocuous and toxic substances to and from a complex array of processes, an accretion of designs and redesigns that no blueprint could adequately demarcate. There had been decades of leaks and spills, there would be decades more of oozing and dripping. The amount of solvent that had leached into the soil, into the aquifer, and ultimately into the creek nearby, or had evaporated into the atmosphere, had doubtless caused harm to living things in the vicinity, undocumented harm that boosters for this local industrial employer perennially downplayed.

Jonas was aware of all of this. But even in the wake of the FDA's halfhearted attempt the decade prior to ban penicillin and tetracycline from livestock feed on the grounds that this could lead to antibiotic-resistant strains of human pathogens, antibiotics had saved lives – that much was certain. And in the end, one's bread needed buttering. So Jonas strove to do the best he could under the circumstances, his effort consisting of partial modifications that made processes incrementally more efficient, or marginally safer. It would be thirty years before most of the plant would be razed to make way for a park-like industrial campus, eliminating penicillin production and the two thousand plant personnel required to sustain it. The new number would be closer to five hundred. But Jonas, or at least the Jonas of those years, would be long gone.

In September Jonas was granted his Professional Engineer's License to practice in New York State. Around that time he bought a Datsun 310 GX five-door hatchback demo for upwards of nine grand. He still owned his 1978 Yamaha RD400. He lived in a nice apartment in Liverpool with a gas fireplace and

dishwasher, across from the Lakeshore Drive-In and right around the corner from Heid's, famous locally for their hot dogs. He took the New York State Thruway to work every morning, a half-an-hour drive on a snowy winter day. His workday commenced at 7:30 a.m. and ended around 4:30 p.m., with forty-five minutes for lunch. He liked the Denny's down on Erie Boulevard East – there was a waitress there he was sweet on, Kim. She pumped him full of caffeine, free of charge.

Life was good, considering.

And on a pleasant Saturday in mid-July he found himself in the dark. Or rather, seated in the dark with a bunch of strangers. That's when it happened. That's when people became, in 'The Doors's sense of the word, *strange*.

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The Cinema North was one of those boxy, single-screen theaters with few embellishments aside from the glittery sign above the rounded, raised, glass-enclosed entrance, and a comedy and tragedy mask flanking the proscenium. It sat around to the side of the Kmart Plaza on Northern Lights Circle, a shopping area at the intersection of Interstate 81 and Route 11 situated in a couple of unremarkable square miles at the northern edge of Syracuse that residents knew as Mattydale. Like its sister theaters the Cinema East and the Westhill, it served its purpose well enough while reminding its more seasoned patrons that the old dream palaces really were history, and that moviemaking henceforth would be less and less about art and more and more about commerce. In 1982, law-abiding citizens still watched the tube intent on finding out who they were, and still clutched that ticket stub hoping to learn who they might be. But it wouldn't be long before a public responsive to such distinctions would go the way of Blue Light Specials.

That's entertainment. And in 1982, at three bucks a head. Jonas, his sister Shelley, and his buddies Cut and Harper – they can swing three bucks each every Saturday or Sunday night, plus another couple of bucks for popcorn and soda and a box of nonpareils.

That's right – it's *soda* in these parts.

Tonight, with an R-rated feature showing, the nine-hundred-seat theater will fill to approximately two-thirds. That's a lot of popcorn and soda, especially with dozens of two-hundred-pounders like Harper in attendance.

Showtime is at 7 p.m. EDT.

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In the theater on this particular evening is a veritable cross-section of the area's population. You have a relatively small number of doctors, and lawyers, and engineers. You have a relatively large number of assembly-line workers, and retail workers, and construction workers. You have a goodly number of the gainfully employed, a fair number of what we call now the under-employed, and a handful of small business owners. You have about the same number of people over twenty-five as you do under twenty-five, but many more people under forty than over forty. A majority would, push come to shove, attest to their belief in god, but many are at best casual churchgoers.

Only a handful of African Americans are present, as is typically the case in this theater. There are no Latinos, and the primary ethnicity is Italian-American. The ratio of couples on a date to married couples is three to one, and, though few in the audience would give evidence of it in this crowd, eleven couples are gay, and thirty-five people have begun to explore their sexual orientation. For the men, it's mustaches, for the women, tight jeans are back in. You have former jocks, and former cheerleaders, and former honors students. You have a few dozen college students and eighty-odd high schoolers, including three overdressed teenyboppers wearing gobs of makeup who use fake IDs to beat the MPAA-sanctioned and management-enforced rating system. A group of fifteen-year-old boys with razor burn and rock band tees also make it past the ticket booth.

And on this particular evening, the Cinema North is host to The Film Critic and his graduate-student date, both of whom enter gratis thanks to the former's pass. With his student gazing at him in rapt attention, The Film Critic treats his companion to some tidy dissertating on film theorist Laura Mulvey's influential writings, in the process managing to put theory in the service of sexual innuendo.

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Had anyone in the theater had access to a television, they would have been greeted by one of the three network-affiliate weathermen interrupting regularly scheduled programming to explain that a line of severe thunderstorms had unexpectedly developed and was moving into the area from the northwest. Or in the more colorful words of the forecaster on the newly-launched Weather Channel, which relatively few in Mattydale would have had access to in 1982, a storm system was approaching that had quite literally "come out of nowhere." Accompanying the ominous clouds are abundant cloud-to-ground lightning strikes, and an eerily unfluctuating basso profundo.

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At 7 p.m. the lights dim. The two ushers, both young men, make their customary march up and down the aisles. There's the obligatory projection flicker and alignment, the screen lights up, and everyone – every single person in the audience – is paying attention for an instant to the image reflected back at them from the screen, and to the auditory *blip* of a soundtrack engaging. As collective attention settles in and out, all seems well in the Cinema North universe.

The coming attractions are served up, generously this evening, in this order:

Fast Times at Ridgemont High
Tron
Poltergeist
Firefox
An Officer and a Gentleman
Blade Runner

And finally

E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial

In a few months, as summer fare subsides, audiences will be teased with *Tootsie*, *Sophie's Choice*, *The Verdict*, and *Gandhi*. You can gauge for yourselves, you film buffs of latter-day TCM ilk, how various sectors of this audience might respond, in oohs and ahhs, in laughter and awe, to the trailer for any one of these offerings.

But then, you're now, all of you, post-1982ers.

The important thing to note here is that, during the *Poltergeist* trailer and again during *E.T.*, as the approaching storm system is starting to make its rumbling presence felt and a half-hour before the power goes out during the second helicopter scene and everyone in the theater is shrouded in darkness together, several patrons will glimpse the stocky young man seated two seats to the right of Shelley employing a rubber band as a slingshot to propel a shiny slip of foil gum wrapper toward the ceiling in front of the screen. And as the foil twinkles down through the projection light, the effect, as some would later recall, will be rather like a star dropping from the heavens to terra firma. Even *The Film Critic* will be amused.

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Here's what you need to know about our little band of four:

Jonas is comfortable in his own skin, a happy combination of Action Man and Thinking Man whose chief weakness, at this point in his life, stems from his thinking that he's more Action Man than Thinking Man. He's wearing a brand new pair of lime green Nike track shoes and a new pair of jeans.

Shelley is an attractive, if not beautiful, smartass who, as a young girl, wanted to play shortstop for the Yankees but, upon realizing the limits both of her fielding talents and of her beloved franchise's exclusively male roster, has turned to physical therapy to derive eight-to-five meaning from her life. Everyone says she's got the touch. She's wearing sandals and a knee-length skirt.

Cut is a car mechanic and an accomplished philatelist. He has a thing for Shelley but can't seem to find it within himself to make a move. Shelley is waiting, patiently, for him to do so, while Jonas is wise enough to keep out of it. He's wearing a pair of black & white canvas Keds and worn flare jeans.

Harper is a holy fool. He's wearing a scuffed-up pair of beige Hush Puppies – no socks – and ragged jean shorts.

Their average age is twenty-seven. Jonas and Shelley are half Jewish (on their father's side) and half Italian-American, Cut is Scots-Irish, and Harper is part Polish, part Russian, and part Cherokee.

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House lights fade completely for tonight's feature presentation.

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“There's always been something about Kurt Russell, a subliminal wink in his performances that, especially when viewed in retrospect, threaten to undercut the overweening sincerity of his Disney years. The first director to pick up on this was Robert Zemeckis, and Russell gives Rudy Russo precisely the right-of-way he needs to make you believe that this used-car salesman is genetically predisposed to the con. A year later John Carpenter took Russell in another direction entirely, and between his eye-patch and his unshaven

mug, Snake Plissken has both the true grit and the kind of doesn't-give-a-shit brio we've come to expect from our antiheroes, our bad good guys, or good bad buys. It would take Quentin Tarantino at the helm,, more than three decades later, to finally pull out of an intertextually stubbled, scarred, but fully sighted Russell his consummate dark side.

“When Carpenter and Russell reunited a year after their first effort together, the beard was fuller but the eye patch had been replaced by a sombrero – just the right touch of cross-cultural insouciance to convey the rough & (Mac)ready protagonist to which most young men weaned on Frank Bullitt and Harry Callahan might relate. White masculinity in the US has always thrived, in certain class quarters, on undercutting the WASP-ish contours of whiteness itself. Toss in an African-American antagonist (Keith David) with his own heroic leanings – the closest white guys will ever come to black cool is a black buddy, or anti-buddy (even while assuaging their own racial anxieties) – and a director who holds the first movie version in high esteem, and what you've got is at once a box-office hit and an item to which film critics were bound to condescend both because of its pop appeal and because each new wave of special effects, including the rather gory one at work here, tends initially to overdetermine viewer response.

“This is a far cry, at any rate, from a chick flick – it lacks even the single Hawksian female of the fifties version -- though most female viewers will probably find themselves drawn at least somewhat to Russell's on-screen persona, and young heterosexual couples can, as with most horror films, cuddle together through the scares.

“But older viewers might not be prepared for this remake, or adaptation. For one, in the three decades between *The Thing from Another World* and *The Thing*, the Cold War had cooled down considerably. Race relations in the US had gone from a perceived social problem to a perceived cultural problem, while remaining more stubbornly social than some cultural commentators would concede. Absent the Communist datum, in any case, extraterrestrials could be alternately more friendly – even musical, like us – and less, or other than, human. Not an Arness-sized monster, but a cellular organism capable of infinite transmutation of the abject, a conceit that would also allow for a foray into the wilds of neoliberal *Body Snatcher* paranoia, the hyperreal simulations (modeled on “the genetic code”) of Baudrillard's seminal text coming only a year later. As ticket prices had increased and TV had wooed couch potatoes with condensed storylines, Hollywood films by and large, especially horror and sci-fi, had added to their running times, Carpenters's version tacking twenty-two minutes to the narrative arc to remain more faithful to Don A. Stuart's (John W. Campbell, Jr.'s) 1938 novella than the faster-paced Kenneth Tobey vehicle while giving audiences their perceived money's worth.

“Whatever the case, *The Thing* restores to the story its Antarctic setting, as in the novella, which the Hawks version had, evidently due to its strategic military value, relocated to the Arctic. The rationale for both Antarctic and Arctic settings is as in the novella:: a scientific research station with military support. But in the fifties version, we watch as the USAF is dispatched to the outpost, whereas in Carpenter's version, the military personnel are already present and are called into duty in the opening scenes, which scenes are an inventive twist on the novella added by screenwriter Bill Lancaster.”

Such was the 2002 reappraisal penned by film critic Leo Altman for *Variety*. Many of us felt that old Leo had nailed it.

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In 1982, core drillings in Greenland by Will Dansgaard, Han Oeschger, and others will reveal that significant temperature variations, whether caused by humans or by other factors, are possible within a human lifespan. Some are beginning to revisit, from a newly informed vantage point, the age-old question that Frost had so cogently posed: whether desire would stoke an apocalypse of fire, or whether hate portended an end in ice. Ultimately, Frost's narrator can see things either way. Of course Dante had famously imagined, at hell's absolute bottom, a frozen lake, and Milton had imagined the damned brought "From beds of raging fire to starve in ice." At the end of *The Thing*, however, as the flames die down and survivors Mac and Childs sit waiting to "see what happens," it would appear that fire and ice alike are both potentially deadly and redemptive, yet another binary – like black and white, or body and antibody, or human and nonhuman, or truth and falsehood, or acting and non-acting – that the film so astutely offers as a parallel touchstone.

But in July of 1982, our band of four will never get that far – will never see the ending. Nor will they get as far as the comic book series, or the video game sequel, or the 2011 prequel.

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It's after that provocative opening sequence – after the Norwegians are obliterated in their helicopter in a failed attempt to shoot the sled dog, just as MacReady dons his sombrero and begins to pilot his chopper to the Norwegian camp, and just as theatergoers are drawn into the thick of things – that the screen goes black, and every shred of light that might sneak in from the concession stand is blotted out. All that remains illuminated are the exit lights. The power has failed, and it takes no more than two seconds of uncertain silence for most in the theater to share a nervous chuckle.

Then the exit door stage left blows open, banging up against the side of the theater, rain and wind howling with a ferocity that few have witnessed. Lightning flashes shudder in through the opening, and between the downpour and the steady roar of thunder, it's difficult to talk with the person seated next to you. This time the scattered laughter that erupts is accompanied by a hushed sense of anxiety.

Jonas stands, walks to the door, leans out into the rain and wind, grabs the door as firmly as he can, and with no small amount of effort, manages to shut it tight. As a result of this simple action, he's drenched from the waist up. He smiles as he walks back to his seat.

*

Gradually the audience acclimates to the darkness, resuming chitchat while waiting for the power to be restored.

"So now what? What the fuck are we gonna do now?" Cut is always the first to complain.

"We're going to get to know each other better," Shelley teases. Cut appears stymied, doesn't know how to respond. Shelley sighs, audibly.

"I think we should start a bonfire and roast marshmallows!" Harper blurts out as he empties the box of nonpareils into his mouth. He's only half-joking.

"Shit, I'm freezing my ass off," Jonas murmurs, ignoring Harper's outburst. He leans over to address his three companions in a low voice. "Let's go up front and see what it looks like out there."

The four stand and make their way up the aisle together. They push open the theater doors and walk into the concession area. That's when they see it.

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There's something I've left out – something important that you need to know:

I was there.

Or rather, I was there the instant after the lights went out. And then it was as if I'd been around *forever*.

*

That's when they see it, but it's already too late for them. They don't know it, but it's already too late.

As they and the Cinema North staff stand gazing out through the glass-enclosed entrance and across the Kmart parking lot, they see that the unabating deluge, having flooded the lot, has already risen above the first concrete step leading up to the theater. And looking north up Route 11, they see the horizon line punctuated by an unrelenting series of lightning bolts of unprecedented intensity. At one point a particularly intense bolt lights up the panorama, landing out of sight of our band of four and in what they reckon to be in the neighborhood of TJ's Big Boy and Sweetheart Market. Later they'll discover that the restaurant itself has been hit and that a fire has ensued. But later too will be too late.

It's not that they won't eventually escape the premises, you understand. There will be a future for each and all. But that future will be a different one than the future they brought with them this evening.

*

The first signs of the change will go unnoticed by friends and acquaintances, who themselves will change in due course.

The magnetic bottle opener that has followed Jonas since his college days will no longer be stuck ostentatiously to his fridge.

Shelley will stop fussing over her outfits.

Cut will lose interest in his stamp collection. (Later, Cut will become a vegetarian, the first of our four to give obvious evidence that he'd changed.)

Only Harper will appear to remain the same behaviorally. But deep inside will roil the same elemental disturbances.

*

There's something of an explanation for what's happened.

“It’s a recombinant archive, both genetic and experiential, to which I’ve been granted unrestricted access. For every data point, a particle, for every particle, a data point. And all particles, and with them all data points, comprise a transgenic sensorium activated by each aggregate organism. Sentience becomes a matter of relation, a subatomic order through which passes the fluctuating spectral energy that itself passes for time, for duration, for change, what some enlightened bipeds have intuited as *duende*. Hierarchy obtains as a matter of accretion, overlap, redundancy and complexity of corpuscular signal. Most intriguingly, each quantum of intelligence becomes for me, for us, a narrational agency of varying potentiality. Taken altogether, a living network. The cosmic. Taken singly, an access point. A man, a woman, an alien, his and her stories, which are his and her stories, and our stories.”

Jonas could be telling *this* story. Let’s say Jonas is the teller of our tale, as he sits in a small diner in Cheyenne, Wyoming, not far from the Air Force base. He’s trying to find the words for what he experienced on that fateful July day decades prior. The words are what you see in quotes, above. He’s talking with a guy a generation older, a guy who walks with a limp, over a breakfast of coffee and pancakes and bacon. This guy, Slim, an African-American rodeo devotee, experienced much the same transformation several days later, but some two thousand miles away, while working in a rail yard. The skies were blue in Cheyenne that day – no storm, no power outage.

But it could just as well be Shelley speaking, or Shelley and Cut’s daughter, Sylvia, now in college, the disaffected product of a strangely happy couple whose mutual sustenance together seemed to derive from the mere habits of their shared human history. Or even Harper – Harper’s physical manifestation having long since passed away, as they say, his information safe with the rest of us -- or any one of us, which is all of us. Each of us is all-knowing, within our newfound, ever-expanding biological universe, because we each have access to one another’s information. All of it.

But if it wasn’t the storm that precipitated this global transaction, then what was it? Because neither Jonas nor his railroad friend Slim, neither Shelley nor Shelley’s ostensibly human daughter Sylvia, seems to know. Neither I nor we. There’s a mysterious gap in the archive. Granted, many of us carry on these days without troubling ourselves about such matters.

But I’m not one of those, modestly differential being that I am. I want to know why the information is incomplete. I want to know if I’ve – we’ve – missed some clue, some gap in the mapping from one life form to another that might help to explain how what transpired, transpired.

We arrived, we took over irreversibly, but how? What kind of evolutionary process allows one life form to take dominion over all others? Or was this the result of sheer stochastic process, a possibility that had been there right along, inherent at the birth of the world? Maybe humans – human artists – had intuited this.

*

Was there love. Was there ever love?

In his final days, Harper wept often.

Maybe it had something to do with the projection.

Harper blurted it out, as was his wont. Jonas didn’t know what to say. He chalked it up to the cancer, which even our kind could not always survive.

Was there love?

Was there ever?

*

Jonas had started writing poetry, first at his desk at work, then in his study at home. His initial efforts were crude, little lyrical bursts of angst of the sort so many of his human precursors had attempted. Maudlin at best. But over time he began to develop a keen eye for the paradoxes of the social and cultural sphere.

Jonas recognized that we were aliens in our own bodies, refugees in our own countries. As the years passed we grew comfortable with our discomfort, we began to develop finite selves of a sort, semblances of self-consciousness that operated at once discretely and collectively under what had come to be known, in the vernacular of the day, simply as Surveillance. We carried on as if nothing was amiss.

But Jonas suspected that time would not leave well enough alone, that after a while, our human trappings would reassert themselves. And indeed, gradually we started to feel acutely our own absence, we started detect a certain alienation from our alien identities. We were becoming human, but human absent humanity's original code. A kind of phantom pain set in, a longing for the warm-blooded beings that we – or they – once were. That each of us once was. More and more of the females longed, like Shelley, to experience human childbirth again. More and more of the males began to fancy themselves men. The old femininities and masculinities reemerged alongside ancient animal natures and corresponding eroticisms.

It might have been that a distinctively human trait had survived the transformation. But perhaps the old social and symbolic orders were more formidable than many of our human predecessors had grasped. Perhaps a belief in magic and superstition or even faith itself was inseparable from all configurations of sentient beings, and Surveillance would be no exception. And perhaps the past was indeed prologue. A Cocteau, a Pasolini, an Arthur, an Anger, a Kael, a Brakhage, a Rorem, an Eisenstein, a Shklovsky, a Huston, a Reed, a Lupino, a Kern: as Woolf had written, *Surely it was time someone invented a new plot, or that the author came out from the bushes.*

It was in the gap between what we knew ourselves to be and what we could only imagine we'd once been, that Jonas applied his poetic license. It was here that he was most attentive. It was here that he became a true artist, and that he came to embody a radical departure from the strictures of Surveillance.

*

the registration of Death at work

the belching stomach of Italy

the animating skeleton in the avant-garde film closet

I've always considered movies evil; the day that cinema was invented was a black day for mankind.

Our emotions rise to meet the force coming from the screen, and they go on rising throughout our movie-going lives.

I have to teach Hollywood films, and I never in the world saw a Hollywood film that needed more than coffee-table exposition, after-the-movie chitchat, never saw one that needed furtherance of thought. And in fact isn't that the point? It's at least one of the reasons that I go, that is, that it suspends the burnt-out brain for a couple of hours.

Great art works, being unique, are final: they do not open doors, they close them.

Language is much closer to film than painting is.

Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object itself is not important.

It's when a writer, through the use of their talent, connects to readers who might not share that writer's background, that the writer's work becomes universal.

For I love talent. Love to watch it. Love to help it. Am more genuinely interested in the talent of others than I am in my own.

We have no reason to feel any sorrow for him – only for ourselves for having lost him. He is quite irreplaceable. There will never be another like him.

Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto.

In this new world, the question of attribution will have become particularly poignant. And so the preceding snippets would henceforth have been authored by us all. Or as some of us like to say:

Stay uncommercial. There's a lot of money in it.

*

Maybe it had something to do with the projection.

Jonas turned Harper's speculative outburst over and over in his mind. The projection, or the disruption of the projection. Could that be it? Could the screen have somehow transmitted its agencies onto us, or more precisely, onto what we once were and were in the process of again becoming, albeit with that deviation at our cores? Could this be the evolutionary leap that explained the evolutionary gap? Human thinkers and artists had long since imagined such possibilities, of course, this merging of art and life. But how to explain Slim's conversion, along with every other living thing on the planet? Or were all living things more connected than any human had imagined? Was there some ethereal substrate bonding all animate, and perhaps inanimate, things? Was it possible that the shimmering photons reflecting off the screen had effected a power over the organic – over us? Was it possible, as Jonas had surmised, that viewers were not merely adapting to or mutating in response to the images and sounds, but absorbing some spectral energy? Was there a cosmic order beyond this order?

*

Jonas wrote his poems, our poems, in a parlous age. All that remains of his work today is a single poem, attentive to another change in the built environment and dedicated to his close friend and sometime mentor, the author of the first "hyperfiction," as it was known at the time. Most of us regard the poem a work of uncanny nostalgia.

The world continues to change, and we along with it. A small contingent has begun, inexplicably, to feel responsible for potentially catastrophic changes in the biosphere, wrought by our predecessors and to which Surveillance has paid scant heed, that threaten all living things. At the time of this writing it's unclear whether even we will endure, whether, in the end, we too will become mendicants.

*

Shock of the old

for Michael Joyce

He didn't have all the answers
we're talking about Spencer Tracy now
but the world we were told
would be ours
was a world with Spencer Tracy

spent the other day recalibrating
my youth, properly speaking, post-Black Rock pre-
Oregon Boosenberry ice cream, and so it is
the endless succession
of appropriations once again upon us

launching up into the air
a giant balloon
filled with laughing gas, call it the Andrei
Rublev, awaiting some popular young woman with a quiver
or a lyre to—no, I mean

not a still point, but a steady
flow when he wasn't hitting
the bottle or fucking
Kate or whomever
long before he turned sixty

he was an Old Catholic Man, but if you look at him
as Hyde, full of fury, offing
Bergman, or that slave-driving Rogers, the film where
Donald MacBride secrets away, to nibble on
an Abenaki's head

if you see him not as some befuddled Father
figure or patriarchal race mediator, not
Robert Wagner's humble sibling
mountaineer or triumphalist voiceover, his
and a nation's Manifest Destiny

in the final analysis, not as crypto-Darrow
counselor or steely-eyed fisherman, quite, but as judge
Herr Janning, if in each role you
look at him, you look at him judging
how long is long enough—

Did I really say that?
Spence asks, ogling Google, *Show up
on time, know your lines
and don't bump into the furniture?*—for a pure
product it's a pure leap of faith

into hearsay, if not fact—well, he says
this is the world
and you have to start where you are
and you can't do
the job, kid, he insists

without an awareness of your limits
and not the ones you arbitrarily impose
upon yourself either, he continues
munching on a Clark Bar
Look, he says

they offered me the part of
Don Fabrizio Corbera
and James Tyrone, Sr.
and another dad
in *The Desperate Hours* and

Bogie and I tussled over top billing? I was
by his side every day with Betty when he was dying and
I guess I wasn't *that* desperate but maybe Freddie was
beats me why, what a talent
and a good friend of the Stooges

bet you didn't know that
he used to sneak off
to watch them while doing *Salesman*
which Stanley tapped him for
instead of Lee, god knows

if it had to do with HUAC
but never mind all that, Spence
catches himself, the point is
that for all this naturalism or
minimalism of mine, my shtick

was all about practice, the artifice
of never letting ‘em see you
sweat, including that little shit Mickey
Rooney, but maybe I was just being me, you see
and that was one hell

of a limitation, much as
you go about assembling
with tidbits from here and there, life
some call it, searched and
sure, researched, the exchange

imagined, a technique, yeah
and then some, maybe it’s
the gift of gab, out there in the blue—
no, there I go, not me again
but that *was* me with Sinatra

one of the funniest lines I ever heard read
back to *me*, a *Holy Joe*, when I tell him
something like, *We used to eat*
punks like you, and Sinatra, he
smart-alecks back—well, you could look it up¹

our Hawaii adventure together not
my finest hour, no, then of course Louise—
“Weeze” her family called her—the years apart, years
together, our kids, Johnny, Susie, Johnny—you’ve read
all about it, I assume, on your Wiki or whatever, it’s all

there someplace, except for the source
of the shame I felt or so the evidence
would suggest what not even Kate knew, I
came up in a beer town, you know
it’s a wonder I could get over

all that to befriend a guy like George
Cukor, an actor’s director and
I don’t care if he was what you call
gay, Kate and I loved working with that
guy, and he did wonders with me, us...

Spence would go on, but eventually
it got late, and the later it got
the more ornery he became like
a lot of old men

¹ Sinatra: “Maybe. [pause] That’s when you had your *teeth*.”

and women who never wanted

to be explorers yet found themselves
cast as the reluctant seekers
of their own indiscretions, and it just might give
some of us pause, you know, those crafty stories
we tell about our variously alienated selves

our dream factories today—
But this isn't Boosenberry ice cream
Spence interrupts, impatient
as he is not with digression
but with failing to do the job

and suddenly he's the judge again, ever
directing that unflappable gaze at us and
how far a *cri* from *la politique*
des auteurs do you figure it is to do only what art does
best, by turns, to surprise? to continue

our dream factories today
participating in the inscrutable
blackboxing that underwrites
the digital surge, waves-particles of
cultural form emanating as if

from some invisibly orchestrated
spectrum of affect, all of it streaming
across our brows, and when we subject ourselves
to these alternately tender and violent
mercies, we are acquiescing ultimately

not to the images or sounds thereby
apprehended, no longer are we obliged
to fret over our capacity to be moved
beyond our sundry appetites
due to the collective effort of living beings

but are harnessed instead to the cosmic
app, however ennobling or gothic
that serves, mysteriously, to stimulate said
anthropic hunger, an entirely scripted situation
in which we're likely to find ourselves

as Spence might too, with his bad dreams and all
entertaining the suspicion that
having projected our desires
onto the projector and beyond

having exited one screen

only to find another
sentiment indistinguishable from its
augmented absence, every effect so very
very special, we've lost our taste
for Boosenberry ice cream.

*



About the Author

Joe Amato's recent books include *Big Man with a Shovel* (Steerage Press, 2011) and *Once an Engineer: A Song of the Salt City* (SUNY Press, 2009). His novel *Samuel Taylor's Last Night* is forthcoming from Dalkey Archive Press. With Kass Fleisher, he's completed several award-winning screenplays, including a new screenplay, *The Adjunct*. He can be reached online at <http://joeamato.net>.