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Recycled Culture in Contemporary Art and Film : The Uses of Nostalgia by Vera Dika

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evangelist who used her own all but lost films to limn a wicked world through which African Americans traveled on a *Hell Bound Train*, ever in struggle between free will and a bad end. And Gibson's Zora Neale Hurston was immersed in her own personal films of black Floridians as a pioneering ethnography grounded in her study of Franz Boas's "cultural relativism" which he and *his* circle at Columbia University (whose ranks also included Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict) used to undermine "scientific" racism. While linked to Micheaux through their common medium of *black* cinematography, the two women worked at their distinctive trades far from his scrabbling world of cinema and commerce. So we might say they shared a common sphere, if not his actual "circle." Indeed, we might say this of the subjects of each of the essays purporting to reveal a substantive Micheaux circle. But the point remains a minor one in this major work.

How might we heft the weight of this big, richly caparisoned book and somehow reckon its place in the canon of African-American historiography? Sadly, all historians share a common fate: as the late scholar and colleague, August Meier, once told me, if one's work stays in print for 25 years that is a fair measure of its impact on one's field (and its place in the cultural canon). If *Oscar Micheaux & His Circle* were a racehorse, I would bet that it should easily go this distance and take its place in the canon both as a compendium that marks the scholarly achievement of its age and as indicator of work still to be taken up, yet also as a readable and accessible book in the current literature.

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Recycled Culture in Contemporary Art and Film

The Uses of Nostalgia

By Vera Dika. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2003. \$70.00 cloth; \$24.99 paper.

Modernism's revision of canonical images and texts has prompted many to ask whether postmodern practices are capable of staging their own coherent critique. These debates have localized around questions of history. After all, pastiche, the trademark of postmodern art practice, involves imitation and a saturation of images divested of their narrative identities. For Fredric Jameson, the nostalgia film is the epitome of this cultural practice, presenting past images with defaced contexts that create a nonnegotiable barrier between history and contemporary viewers. In a persuasive new study, Vera Dika confronts Jameson's formulation of the nostalgia film, and argues that many con-

temporary films have staged "sites of resistance" which rupture the "ahistorical surfaces" of pastiche (2).

Several film historians have explored post-classical Hollywood cinema's capacity for deliberately critical historical perspectives (whether modern or postmodern), but they have lacked Dika's unique concentration on the recycled film image as an embodiment of resistance. Rather than looking for the subversion of historical "evidence," multiple points of view, and conflicts between text and image, Dika relies on cinema's own innate historical parameters: the visual traces of Hollywood genres and stars that have recurred in films since the 1970s. Dika's decision to contain the historical referents within cinema's own fragmented past images is a brilliant way of grasping the essence of postmodern historical practice. As she writes, "The image returns not as a representation of the natural real, but as simulacral, as a copy of copies whose original has been lost" (3). Her methodology balances postmodernism's nostalgia for remote, classic images and its disjunctive relationship to history with the photographic/film images' own meditations on "temporality and textuality." As Dika notes, the contemporaneous avant-garde also appropriated and transformed classic film images (the film stills of Cindy Sherman), but mainstream cinema's participation in this practice—an intersection between "high art" and popular culture—reveals a new way of locating film's potential for subversion and critique.

Dika's sampling of nostalgia films is eclectic, startling, and even abrasive. *Badlands* (1973), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), *The Shootist* (1976), *American Graffiti* (1973), *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (1988), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), and *One From the Heart* (1982) are among the more prominent. Some of her selections from the 1970s were also included in Noël Carroll's 1982 survey of non-critical "allusionist" films and Robert Kolker's demythifying "cinema of loneliness" (1980, 1988). Both studies analyzed the genre reworking of post-classical Hollywood cinema, but Dika takes them to task for eliding the work of more modernist genre filmmakers like Sam Peckinpah and Robert Altman with the post-modern reuse of old genres by Terrence Malick (*Badlands*) and Francis Ford Coppola (*Apocalypse Now*, *One From the Heart*). According to Dika, while the former were bent on working against the persistent tradition of classical Hollywood with stark revisions of the Western (*The Wild Bunch*, 1969) and the musical (*Nashville*, 1975), Malick and Coppola returned to an already dead and dismantled classical cinema system.

Yet, in spite of Dika's finely wrought argument, the distinction between modern and postmodern practice is slim, and brings to mind Philip Rosen's question of whether postmodernism ever constituted a decisive break with modernist film narratives. For Dika, the Western, the musical, the iconic rebels (James Dean) and goddesses (Marilyn Monroe), all have to be dead for postmodern nostalgia to be possible.

This revival negotiates the heart of Dika's critical resistance: the way past images collide with contemporary

culture. *Recycled Culture* recovers these sites of displacement and critical opposition in a series of lucid and imaginative readings, from *Badlands* to Gus Van Sant's return to *Psycho* (2000). Many of these postmodern moments occur when the grown-up 1970s generation looks back on the 1950s and the historical rupture of President Kennedy's assassination in 1963. As Dika points out, Malick's nostalgia for the 1960s is consistently corrupted by the narration in *Badlands*. She cleverly returns to the Dean image (Kit/Martin Sheen) and his transformation from rebel to sociopath. Yet *Giant*, the classic George Stevens film *Badlands* invokes, also possesses elements of historical dislocation. It too represents looking back, this time of the 1950s on the Depression era in Texas, but its bleak Hopperesque landscapes confound any uncomplicated (read "classical") revisitation of a past era. *The Shootist* may show clips of old John Wayne films to illustrate the death of Western film history, but what would Dika make of Darryl Zanuck's reuse of old footage in *The Return of Frank James* (1940), or other classic filmmakers' frequent reuse of *Jazz Singer* (1927) footage? Dika carefully avoids these potential ruptures in her exclusive postmodern formulation, and instead concentrates on an astonishing variety of genre displacements: *Psycho* (1960) and its cannibalistic offspring, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*; *The Shootist's* embalming of John Wayne and the Western; the sexual purification of *Grease's* 1950s; and the destabilization of the ontology of the photographic image and historical narrative in *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988).

Dika's *Recycled Culture in Contemporary Art and Film* is challenging, original, and articulate, but like most impressive theories of film, raises as many questions as it answers. One of her major claims for a photographic image-based analysis is the connection between the modernist, high art practice of foregrounding the apparatus (*Man with a Movie Camera*, [1929]) and its disturbing historical transformations in postmodernism. Although she acknowledges that mainstream Hollywood cinema has participated in these practices (*Sherlock Jr.* [1924] and *Citizen Kane* [1941]), Dika is unwilling to see classical cinema's potential for critique and its disjunctive relationship with the past. But don't *Citizen Kane* and *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) embody a self-reflexivity that is also deeply tied to the impossible recovery of a lost past, whether it's a heroic Lincoln Republic or a silent Golden Age? Is it possible that Hollywood genre films contain traces of modernist revisionism and postmodern dislocation and recovery? After all, while Dika's final chapter surveys Hollywood's recent acceleration of remakes, Hollywood has always been self-consciously dependent on re-visioning old images. Postmodernism and the nostalgia film have certainly redefined the baby-boom generation's relationship with the fissure dividing the innocent, pre-November 1963 America and a nation torn by war and political disillusionment, but doesn't every film redefine its past in relation to a disjunctive and unstable present? This was originally a modern historian's idea (Frederick Jackson Turner).

Recycled Culture is incisive, theoretically challenging, and ambitious. Dika's close analysis of a variety of post-1970 films is astonishing in its range of photographic and historical depths. While her periodization and containment of classic genres may raise some eyebrows, in *Recycled Culture* she has redefined the standard of scholarship in the theories of film and history.

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Book Notes

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Herzog, Werner. *Eroberung des Nutzlosen*. Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2004. EUR 21,50. Director Werner Herzog, best known for the New German Cinema masterpieces *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972) and *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), has said that his written works will outlive his films. *Eroberung des Nutzlosen (Conquest of the Useless)*, a record the director kept while filming *Fitzcarraldo*, lends credibility to the claim. Penned over two decades ago in a miniscule, nearly indecipherable hand, some pages smeared and fixed together by tropical heat and damp, the volume is neither diary nor working journal but a "landscape born of the delirium of the jungle" (6). Herzog aficionados will find here little technical information and few behind-the-camera anecdotes the director has not made available before in numerous interviews (the most comprehensive collection of which remains Paul Cronin's *Herzog on Herzog* [2003]). But Herzog's often surreal observations, impressions, and musings both before and during filming in Peru make the account unique. Whether in Francis Ford Coppola's San Francisco home or in a Peruvian cantina, the director exhibits a keen eye and marvelous detachment. His lyrical irony suggests a felicitous blending of Rainer Maria Rilke and Charles Bukowski, while the images his prose conjures attain cinematic clarity. The reader quickly understands how Herzog can create films with only a tentative script and no storyboards. He describes, for example, native butchers ineptly slaughtering a pig, the beast's screams driving a pink lung from its pierced side. A kitten slowly expires in muck, hind legs outstretched and spittle bubbling from the muzzle, while chickens pluck at the warm flesh. A young boy is presented to Herzog for adoption; five years old, naked, and named Wagner, the child has neither father nor mother, the author is told, only his shadow.

One day toward the end of shooting, an exhausted Herzog writes that he can express himself only in strained