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Fighting Obsolescence with Film: Michael McGriff and J.M. Tyree's *Our Secret Life in the Movies*

Our Secret Life in the Movies, by Michael McGriff and J.M. Tyree.
Austin, Texas: A Strange Object, 2014.

Almost 60 years ago, Alain Robbe-Grillet declared "Several Obsolete Notions" regarding the novel. "Some seek with all their might," he writes, "to keep the novel fettered" to the "memory" of a "dead system":

All the technical elements of the narrative— . . . unconditional adoption of chronological development, linear plots, regular trajectory of the passions, impulse of each episode to a conclusion, etc.—everything tend[s] to impose the image of a stable, coherent, continuous, unequivocal, entirely decipherable universe. (32–33)

Seeing that our own universe has zero correlation with that "image," why does this type of false coherence continue to dominate our fiction? Robbe-Grillet's attempt to usher in a *Nouveau Roman* did not meet with widespread adoption, despite a brief moment of prominence. This is clearly indicated by the fact that two of the author's primary candidates for obsolescence, "character" (27) and "story" (29), remain the dominant forces dictating the construction of fiction.

In a time in which the literary establishment still pulses with excitement over the prospect of a new Jonathan Franzen or Marilynne Robinson novel, casual observers might suspect that the novel has remained formally frozen in time while parallel forms (i.e., visual arts and, less dramatically, poetry) have continually mutated and transformed. While that observation would certainly have merit—writing being the most conservative of the arts and prose writing the most conservative branch of it—it would ignore much of the work currently occurring in the margins of the literary world. Recent years

have seen an increasing crop of formally adventurous fiction emerge from American small presses, such as Michael McGriff and J.M. Tyree's *Our Secret Life in the Movies*, published by the young Texas press A Strange Object.

In place of Robbe-Grillet's "Obsolete Notions," McGriff and Tyree construct their book around a particularly effective conceit, as they explain in the introduction:

We'd hatched a plan to watch every film in the Criterion Collection's sweeping catalogue of world cinema classics over the course of a single year . . . We watched film after film—as many as two or three a day—and wrote stories inspired by them. For each film, two stories, a double take. (xi)

The book, then is a product of multiple forces: two separate authors producing ostensibly separate (and unattributed) works that are themselves responses to works produced in a far different artistic discipline, film. Unmentioned in the introduction is that the authors also clearly respond to each other's work, so that the overall text can be characterized as a conversation between a host of voices, encompassing numerous sets of narratives, verbal and visual images, etc.

Little of the sense of stability that Robbe-Grillet laments appears in evidence in McGriff and Tyree's text. The front cover labels the book as "stories," but this designation doesn't do justice to how the text's fragmented sections function as a singular unit. While the individual "stories" may have merit, their power lies in how they bind together, a fundamental characteristic of the novel form: often disparate parts (think, on the most basic level, chapters) pressed together into an organic whole. *Our Secret Life in the Movies* joins a long line of fragmented works, perhaps most famously Jean Toomer's *Cane*, which draw their primary tension from this action. The highlighting of the separateness of a work's individual parts can lend a new power to the form.

McGriff and Tyree do offer connective tissue between the various pieces, but this tissue is less governed by a sense of narrative than by a building catalogue of details tied to historical era. In the first nine pages alone, the reader encounters Guess jeans, the Rubik's Cube, Carl Sagan, Capri Sun juice boxes, *Red Dawn*, Pat Benatar, and Ronald Reagan. These details, which continue to proliferate, offer a unified snapshot of an American working class white childhood during the waning years of the cold war. In particular, the specter of the USSR and the fear of nuclear annihilation are presented as wholly em-

bedded in the process of growing up during the eighties: "The leader of the free world wanted x-ray-laser-armed satellites in space to blast the Soviet's missiles" (6); "Everyone was frothing at the mouth for Reagan, and I slept comfortably in the arm of his speeches, beating my tin drum and hoping the communists would stick their toes over the line" (7); "An ex-marine visiting our school said that when Russian missiles hit, papers would burn in wastebaskets thirty miles in every direction, so there was little point in cowering underneath our desks" (30). When these satellites, Reagan's "Star Wars," reappear, McGriff and Tyree pointedly label them an "extraterrestrial weapon system named after children's movies" (38).

An overwhelming negative portrayal of childhood emerges from direct interaction with the films being responded to in the opening sections of *Our Secret Life in the Movies*, dominated by works that feature a child's point of view: Carlos Saura's *Cría Cuervos*, Claude Jutra's *Mon Oncle Antoine*, Lynne Ramsay's *Ratcatcher*, and David Gordon Green's *George Washington*. The narrator of Saura's film is an adult looking back on her childhood, and her words spoken in the film (and not included in *Our Secret Life in the Movies*) aptly capture McGriff and Tyree's perspective:

I can't understand people that say childhood is the happiest time of one's life. It certainly wasn't for me. Maybe that's why I don't believe in a childlike paradise or that children are innocent or good by nature. I remember my childhood as an interminably long and sad time filled with fear. Fear of the unknown.

Saura's film takes place during the Franco rather than Reagan regime, but his narrator's speech could come out of the mouths of any of McGriff and Tyree's first-person narrators. In a late section responding to Andrei Tarkovsky's *Mirror*, one of these narrators describes childhood as a lingering, palpable presence in his adult life:

[I]n every school-bus window, in every black cup of coffee, I could see the God of Childhood, which from the moment it landed on my head with its light hollow bones, to that stretch of years where it rode in my shirt pocket each day, its animal heart beating wildly against my chest, to the moment I released it when I turned forty, it pulled me through everything by its rein of starlight. Even with all that passed now, I still carry one of its feathers pressed between the pages of this book. (142)

Perhaps the book's most intriguing suggestion is that the condition of being a child has uneasy parallels with the experience of watching films. This is a text, after all, not only created in response to films but also in which the characters themselves watch films. In the early sections, era-specific films play a key role in the invocation of childhood. Along with the already-mentioned *Red Dawn* and *Star Wars*, "Dolph Lundgren in *Red Scorpion*" appears as the reward for an invasive questionnaire given at a local mall (41). Once adolescents, the narrators watch "*Return of the Living Dead . . . or Martin*, a movie about a deranged kid who mistakenly believes he's a vampire" (54).

George A. Romero's *Martin*, in fact, features distinct parallels with *Cría Cuervos*, with both films forcing the viewer to experience them from the perspective of child-like uncertainty. While McGriff and Tyree's narrator asserts that the protagonist of *Martin* is mistaken in his belief that he's a vampire, the viewer of that film remains much less sure for most, if not all, of its running time. Similarly, in *Cría Cuervos*, the viewer is forced to accept its young protagonist's belief that she has murdered her father by poisoning—at least until much later, when the camera finally offers a glimpse of her "poison," a can of baking soda. When the girl attempts to murder again, this time her aunt, there is little comfort in the fact that she'll inevitably fail. Her *belief* has become what truly matters: in her mind she's already a murderer and will remain one all her life. So why not attempt it again and again? Fantasy can, in this fashion, bleed into or even override actual experienced events.

Compare this with McGriff and Tyree's only slightly less chilling depiction of the questionnaire that results in *Red Scorpion* tickets:

The hundred answers were allotted a numerical value, and the total score revealed things, within a five percent margin of error, like who would become a sex offender, who would die of self-asphyxiation, and who among us would float back to our cars and have little effect on anything. The scores, corresponding outcomes, and social security numbers were sent to federal law enforcement databases, university researchers, and ad agencies. (42)

Appearing in the early sections of the book dominated by generally realistic, even memoirish, detail, this statement confronts the reader with the odd dilemma of determining the factual content of a fictional work. As with the viewer of *Martin* or *Cría Cuervos*, the reader is asked whether she believes this fantastical situation actually occurs

within the text or if this is simply the product of the child-narrator's imagination. McGriff and Tyree, as with Romero and Saura, decline a definitive, comforting answer, because that answer wouldn't matter. What the child believes during childhood automatically becomes real for him, and this fluid relationship between fact and fantasy—a crucial characteristic of the "God of Childhood" (142)—doesn't disappear simply because he grows up.

McGriff and Tyree's indictment of childhood as a debilitating force and the related image of the meandering, often drug- or alcohol-addled man-child is a familiar one, and the authors succumb to it on a few too many occasions. A teenager quitting the high school sports team to "smoke a lot of weed in [his] friend's mom's trailer down the block" (53) appears disconcertingly generic in a text that otherwise offers so much strangeness. Similarly, the repeated presence of semi-crazy, unconventional young women "screwing the hell" (54) out of the narrators represents an uncomfortable and dated trope, particularly in a work where women otherwise get so little play.

If these moments in the text can read *late twentieth century short story* a bit too loudly (the authors appear to wink at this characteristic by choosing the film adaptation of Denis Johnson's oft imitated *Jesus' Son* as one of their inspirations), the conceit of the book thankfully works to undermine this. At the moment when *Our Secret Life in the Movies* most threatens to move into the realm of Johnson or Hubert Selby, Jr.—two teens squat in abandoned building, taking morphine and describing falling snow to one another (88)—paired pieces responding to Lars von Trier's *The Element of Crime* lurch the text in an entirely different direction. The ultra-stylized, grotesque fantasy of von Trier's film pushes McGriff and Tyree toward dystopian satire:

The rich pass overhead in space cars, hovercraft, floating rooms complete with carpets, cats, pastel flowers in vases, wireless stock-trading platforms and transparent retractable domes. ... I see that gang rule has been restored and that the community college has completed its transformation into a "sex positive" entrepreneurial entertainment zone. (90)

This section disrupts the chronologically coherent coming-of-age tale flitting around the edges of the work up until this point, and the final third of the book veers into unexpected territory, such as a "The Man Who Married an Egg," a short Lydia Davis-y two paragraphs responding to Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, in which the narrator's father exchanges his family for a carton of eggs (111), or "For Us," after von

Trier's *Antichrist*, in which a door-to-door salesman sells from a "case of human ears" (115-16).

It might be useful to consider *Our Secret Life in the Movies* not only as product of its conceit but also as a product of constraint. After all, the writing's tri-part authorial voice (two authors plus one filmmaker for each paired section) showcases a book ruled rigorously by a predetermined design, and as suggested above, it is this design that again and again moves the book away from conventional arcs and an "entirely decipherable universe" (Robbe-Grillet 32). While elements of a character or characters' journey—the hegemonic force that has ruled the construction of the novel for centuries—remains present in the text, McGriff and Tyree correctly realize that these elements are the book's least interesting components. While the authors' aimless young men provide a degree of emotional heft, the project of the book itself drives the reader forward, building a sense of wonder at a collaborative performance that works between forms, between disciplines, to fuse an unwieldy mess of parts into a digestible whole.

McGriff and Tyree's commitment to a constraint that encompasses disruption into its very form, continuously thwarting the authors' own stabilizing inclinations, suggests one alternate model for the construction of fiction that belatedly addresses Robbe-Grillet's call for a new novel. It is a truism to say that the core of any fictional work is conflict, a notion we tend to associate exclusively with character, but this book demonstrates the potential in centering a novel's conflict around form itself. Ample precedence, of course, can be found in the Oulipians, the *Nouveau Roman*, and modernists like Virginia Woolf, but there's something particularly heartening about the normalness of *Our Secret Life in the Movies*, its lack of a pretense of innovation or radicalness—the suggestion that the book might offer less a *challenge* to mainstream literary fiction than that it might actually *be* mainstream literary fiction. *Our Secret Life in the Movies* gives its readers a glimpse of the energy coming from our best small presses, their growing willingness to attack the center of the literary world from the edges, to shift the novel away from a "dead system" (Robbe-Grillet 33) and back toward relevance.