

Life As We Show It

WRITING ON FILM



Co-edited by Brian Pera & Masha Tupitsyn
Introduction by Masha Tupitsyn

City Lights • San Francisco



Copyright © 2009 by Brian Pera and Masha Tupitsyn
Introduction copyright © 2009 by Masha Tupitsyn
All rights reserved

First edition 2009

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Cover illustration: frame enlargement, *The Man with a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929)

Reproduced by courtesy of The Austrian Film Museum, Vienna

Cover design: Stefan Gutermuth

Book design and composition: Linda Ronan

Page 293 constitutes an extension of this copyright page.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Life as we show it : writing on film / co-edited by Brian Pera & Masha Tupitsyn.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-87286-525-9

1. Motion pictures. I. Pera, Brian. II. Tupitsyn, Masha.

PN1994.L4828 2009

791.43—dc22

2008035720

Visit our website: www.citylights.com

City Lights Books are published at the City Lights Bookstore,
261 Columbus Avenue, San Francisco CA 94133.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments **iii**

Introduction by Masha Tupitsyn **1**

1 Genre Pictures

Other Movies **13**

Lynne Tillman

Outtakes **23**

Lidia Yuknavitch

In A Jungle **47**

Veronica Gonzalez

Young Goodman Brown Effect **58**

Kevin Killian

From What Ever: A Living Novel **67**

Heather Woodbury

2 Living Images

Phone Home **83**

Dodie Bellamy

Desiree, Daneal, And The Devil **106**

Donal Mosher

From Don't Let Me Be Lonely **110**

Claudia Rankine

My Western **116**

Rebecca Brown

From The Red Parts: A Memoir **134**

Maggie Nelson

The Gospel of Larry **142**

Myriam Gurba

The Wounded Man **154**

Abdellah Taïa

Somewhere, Over 162

Daphne Gottlieb

The Forgotten Movie Screens of Broward County 165

Richard Grayson

3 Viewfinder

The Elizabeth Taylor Puzzle 175

Wayne Koestenbaum

Hysteresis 192

Elizabeth Hatmaker

The Victor Salva School of Film Theory 200

Bard Cole

Multiple Journeys Into Hell 213

Stephen Beachy

The Devil Is a Woman (1935) 224

Robert Glück

From Unexplained Presence 231

Tisa Bryant

Food of the Gods 238

David Trinidad

4 Between Pictures

Behind-The-Scenes (1982) 245

Masha Tupitsyn

Echo 260

Peter Dubé

After Watching Klimov's Agoniya 266

Fanny Howe

Roman à Clef 272

Brian Pera

About the Contributors 285

About the Editors 291

INTRODUCTION

The dismantling of the world's contents is radical. Even if it is undertaken only for the sake of illusion, the illusion is by no means insignificant.

Sigfried Kracauer

In the movie *The Blob*, a crowd of 1950s teenagers sits inside the Colonial Theater watching a midnight “spook-bit” in a small town in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania. On-screen, a sea of purple scrim frames a tiny black-and-white movie image. From it, a menacing, incantatory, voice booms, “Yes, I am here. The demon who possesses your soul. . . . I am coming for you. I have so much to show you.” Since it has no face (sound and image are unsynchronized), it’s as though the voice isn’t tied directly to the horror on-screen, but to something beyond the theater; that the message transcends the frame it’s in and is being communicated to the viewers inside the Colonial, not to the characters on-screen. It isn’t until the very end that the blob targets the actual theater. Inside, rather than feel terror, the young viewers laugh at the on-screen horror. They’re confident that whatever’s on it is confined there and will never spill over into real life. Horror moves into the screen, and the screen moves out into the world.

Then a fuse is blown and the movie shuts off. The blob, a veiny mishmash of the bodies it’s consumed, oozes out of the Colonial’s projection room, the source of all movie theater images, and spreads itself across

the room like a thick layer of icing. In this moment, the blob is primordial ooze in the shape of celluloid, and with its possession of the movie screen, horror shifts from cinematic to real. Within moments, a surge of movie viewers burst out of the Colonial in panic. The movie theater marquee above the frenzied crowd displays the name of the featured attraction, aptly titled *Daughter of Horror*, also known as *Dementia*. As the film patrons fall over like dominoes, a gooey, sepia-tinted mound known only as the “blob” (practically a palindrome) follows. It’s reminiscent of Roy Neary’s excremental replica of the Devil’s Tower in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. In addition to blood and shit, the blob is also the same consistency as brownie mix, and not only does it literally fill the Colonial—the symbolic shape of celluloid—as it seeps out of the theater, the now enormous globule overtakes our frame and obstructs our screen. Like the double-bill spook-show, the idea of a shapeless life form feeding off the inhabitants of a small town is twofold. As it exits the theater, the blob is revealed as a monster that feeds not only off of flesh, but off the contained screen fantasies of 1950s B horror, or as Michael Wood puts it in his foreword to Peter Biskind’s *Seeing Is Believing: How Hollywood Taught Us to Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties*, “The movies didn’t make this happen, but they helped to make a particular set of values seem universal, and to make a partial account seem like the whole story.”

Shot from outer space in the form of a pink meteor, or according to the two teenage lovebirds who spot it, a shooting star, the blob is a foreign entity that literally opens up the frame (America) and bursts a cultural bubble, so that everything after the 1950s becomes post-America. And, like the colored “special effect” silicone that was used to make it, the blob seals the gap between on- and offscreen. As a genre of possession, the structure of invasion in sci-fi, which typically masquerades sociopolitical anxieties over rivaling ideology, is usually expressed through the insurgent and indeterminate body. In the case of *The Blob*, however, a meta-picture, the dividing line is film itself. As one suspicious policeman puts it in the movie, “The bigger the blob gets, the bigger the story.” And later, when Dave, Phoenixville’s sympathetic cop goes into the Colonial to confront the monster, only to come right back out with the warning, “Don’t go in. It’s the most horrible thing I’ve ever seen in my life,” is he referring to the blob or to *Daughter of Horror*? Finally, the best part: the blob rolls out of the Colonial’s double doors and then, for a couple of seconds, fills our screen, looks right at us, and pulsates, throbs, a cake rising in an oven—as

though breathing, until for a second it's up on the marquee, announcing itself as the true source of horror.

Released in 1958, *The Blob* marks the end of the official story of the fifties and its narratives of incursion. Signifying a break from centrist ideology, and a hairsbreadth away from the rebellions of the 1960s, the film ends, not coincidentally, with a question mark etched into the sky as the frozen blob is dropped like a bomb into the Arctic Ocean for safekeeping (that is, "If the Arctic stays cold," warns Steve McQueen's teenage Steve in a nod to global warming and atomic warfare). The form-defying blob thus becomes a strangely fitting analogy for the genre-defying approach *Life As We Show It* takes to writing about film. For, in the fifty-year interim since *The Blob* came out, the world has in many ways become what happens on-screen, and the screen has become the space where we wait for things to happen and plot the things we want to see.

When the great comedian Gene Wilder got his first big movie break, he ran around Lincoln Center ecstatically proclaiming, "I want everything I've ever seen in the movies!" With Reality TV currently reigning supreme, the symbiotic bonds that we have with screen fantasies and screen idols—that is, the way we contain, portray, and pursue images, rather than the way images portray us—have largely gone on to erode any kind of real civic alliance, making images the ties that bind. More than anything else, as a reflexive subcategory, Reality TV allows us to monitor and showcase the indelible impressions movies have made, in particular, our desire to be screened in the first place, making it a kind of twenty-first-century survey of 100+ years of cinematic mythmaking. As a recuperative ploy, Reality TV hijacks "reality" in an attempt to present it purely as a screen phenomenon even when the screen being used claims to democratize and elucidate ("expose") the star process, "underlin[ing] what be might be called the collusion or conspiracy that exists between Hollywood and American reality."¹

If diegesis refers to the story world, or the world of the fiction, and the things that occur within it, then non-diegetic refers to that which happens outside a film's given parameters. Wikipedia defines a non-diegetic insert as "a scene that is outside the story world which is 'inserted' into the story world." Thus, the genre of assemblage and insertion, fictions about fictions, fiction from fictions, or more specifically, fictions affixed and inserted into already existing fictions—in the case of this anthology, the fictions of movies—might be an interesting and useful way to

describe what the writers in this collection are doing. By emphasizing a movie's extra-cinematic narratives, that is, what one hears, says, reads, and believes about a visual medium, rather than what one simply sees, it becomes clear that images are not just shaped by the screens that transmit them, but by the viewers who inhabit and alter those screens, enabled by new digital technologies, which continually redefine and stretch the parameters of screen and viewer.

Given that movie theaters are no longer the primary viewing grounds for movies, movies are not confined to their "original" screen sources. They can be moved around, taken apart, and put into new frames; decontextualized and recontextualized at home in a variety of ways thanks to the internet and its user-friendly modes of revision. In *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*, film scholar Laura Mulvey distinguishes the meditative, pensive spectator, who extracts and studies the film fragment in order to place it back into its original context with "extra understanding," from the more fetishistic and possessive spectator, who, with the availability of new technology, isolates the film fragment from continuity and context in order to gratuitously fetishize it à la YouTube. Through repetition and return, the critic's disruption of narrative flow allows them to find the "film behind the film"; to unearth hidden meaning.

But what exactly are the dimensions of the "story world" in today's new audiovisual culture, and what are the spaces and genres for its articulation? As much as readers and publishers alike would prefer that writers stick to a single mode of "extraction," to use Mulvey's term, in order to express a full range of responses and speak to the complexity of the current system of images—the role they play in our lives—is it really useful to limit ourselves to a singular genre or trajectory of writing? Moreover, what is being inserted into what, and can concrete—"1950s"—distinctions between reality and representation even be made in this hyper-age of media?

When Derek Malcolm, a former film critic for the *Guardian*, accused filmmaker Peter Bogdanovich of being "permanently hooked on making movies about movies"—for which Woody Allen, who did the same thing early on in his career was celebrated—he suggested that "the way back" for Bogdanovich would be to "make a film about real people instead." Malcolm's advice begs the question, what is a movie about real people? What does verisimilitude mean in the context of a fiction, in particular, an oversaturated twenty-first-century fiction? And what is

reality and its representation in a world where “realism” and identity have proven to be nothing more than constructs? In his privileging of the real, is Malcolm referring to real people in movies or real people in real life—as in documentaries (if one can call documentary—of which the now rampant and psychoscopic Reality TV is a direct descendant—a mode of factuality)? This call for realness touches upon the futility and insincerity of categories in a market-driven society—as Eileen Myles puts it in *Chelsea Girls*, “You can’t get money without a category”—which, in the case of Reality TV, merely unveils yet another layer of fiction. Reality TV is compelling precisely because it offers a template of reality that can be effected as strategy.

While categories have never been more enforced by the marketplace when it comes to what sells, the real incentives are brands, which rouse interest by establishing an audience correlatively, thus becoming the terms of consumption (audience before product). With the recent publication of her memoir, *Undiscovered*, leading actress of the 1980s—or “the indispensable 80s woman, a major focus for the return to the good old values of patriarchal capitalism and the restoration of women to their rightful place”²—Debra Winger becomes writer, sage, and self-help guru overnight. Simon & Schuster, the book’s publisher, describes Winger’s memoir as an “intriguing mix of reminiscence, poetry, storytelling, and insightful observation, a portrait of a life well-lived . . . strikingly rendered.” As a star, not only is Winger permitted to don different labels in a way that results in lucrative film and publishing deals, but her writing and meditations on life take their inspiration from the genre of Hollywood fiction, so that the discourse of behind-the-scenes is appropriated as individual autobiography. Winger disobeys the “rules of art” by moving freely between genres and even non-forms in her writing. “Genres are necessities of the industry,” writes film scholar Stephen Heath, “the optimal exploitation of the production apparatus requiring the containment of creative work within established frameworks.” Winger’s writing bypasses these necessities by fulfilling them in other ways.

Perhaps Bogdanovich’s response to a similar critique of simulacrum in his 1975 movie *At Long Last Love*, a commercial and critical disaster, can offer some insight into this old-fashioned and ultimately unreliable distinction: “The New York of the thirties doesn’t exist anyway. You know what [Ernst] Lubitsch said: ‘I’ve been to Paris, France, and Paris, Paramount, and I prefer Paris, Paramount.’ Most good movies are made

on the backlot. I want to create an illusion of New York, an artificial New York.” Similarly, much to the dismay of viewers and critics alike, in Stanley Kubrick’s *Eyes Wide Shut*, the fantasy of place is linked with the “backlot” of desire by filming New York City as a blurry and generic artifice; a stage set hallucinated by Tom Cruise’s character Bill. As New York becomes the specific scenery for Bill’s libidinal fairy tale, the city sheds its identifiable morphology. But also, with New York in a constant state of flux due to gentrification, which makes the city more provisional theater than actual place, do any of us know what New York City really looks like anymore? In a similar vein, David Lynch’s *Inland Empire* presents life as an unending movie role: the screen (the new ontological space) and, as a result, identity, is elliptical—an act with no beginning or end.

With the DVD special feature, the idea of a final cut is a thing of the movies’ past. Now, when thinking and writing about a film, one must take into account a much larger cinematic space that includes deleted scenes, outtakes, production photos, storyboards, interviews, and commentaries. In other words, what’s “in” and “not in” the film, what is or could have been the story. The phenomenon of the movie commentary presents yet another break with diegetic reality, or a broadening of it, by having participants comment, as director and/or actor, on the experience of being inside a given story. DVD bonus features reveal that a movie, like any story, is also made up of cuts—the unused—demonstrating, yet again, that the story of a story is always part of the story.

With the home-centric devices of the new audiovisual age enabling new modes of address, viewers can reclusively reframe images and cinematic narratives in ways previously only available to industry insiders. DVD bonus features present narrative as not only wide-open, but variable. “Inevitably, today’s stories are but prologues or sequels to other stories,” writes social critic Todd Gitlin. “True and less true stories; stories that are themselves intermissions, stories without end.”

The market of the addendum has led to an expansion of promotional discourse. Unfixed by institutional borders, the dispersal of information via the Internet has created non-structures, non-places, and non-genres of seeing and meaning. Gossip and offscreen discourse—or in the case of Heath Ledger, death—often generates more curiosity about an on-screen performance or performer, even going so far as to determine or rewrite its quality. In an appearance on *The View*, actor Aaron Eckhart, Ledger’s

costar in *The Dark Knight*, described Ledger's work in the film as a "performance of a lifetime," which, ironically, is exactly what it is. Ledger, along with the narrative of his death—an annotation—in relation to his last film, is an example of the auxiliary film text. Now, what was once left out of a film is put back in, thus dangling narrative, and its complex construction, in front of the viewer like a carrot.

When it comes to tabloid culture, fantasy and reality are one and the same. The last few years, especially (see James Frey's contested "memoir" *A Million Little Pieces*), have proven over and over that it rarely matters whether a narrative is actually "true"—a defunct distinction that stars today insist upon when it comes to the reported details of their lives off-screen. Stories of stories lead to more stories, regardless of the form they take, and in the case of James Frey, the plot of his "fake" memoir has become intertwined with the plot of his "real" life, which was falsified, or falsely classified, in order to land a publishing deal. A star's "good" reputation is no longer the sole ingredient of on-screen success, for the consumption of narratives isn't based upon rigid distinctions like true or false, real or fake, good or bad, but on consumption itself, in the same way that supermarket tabloids are stacked at checkout counters not only to be purchased monetarily, but to precipitate a social mode of consumption that has far greater currency. In their book *Channels of Desire: Mass Images and the Shaping of American Consciousness*, Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen write, "The politics of consumption must be understood as something more than what to buy, or even what to boycott. Consumption is a social relationship, the dominant social relationship in our society."

On a recent episode of *The Rachel Ray Show*, two female guests describe their experience with the company Celeb 4 A Day, a fake paparazzi service enabling people who are not famous to pretend to be by hiring fake paparazzi (up to six) to follow them around for two hours. The service also comes with a bodyguard and publicist as well as incriminating "evidence." One woman said she hired Celeb 4 A Day because she'd "always wanted to be an actress." Her confession is revealing. It records a major shift in the public's perception of acting as a vocation that transpires primarily outside the parameters of a film text (as something extra) and further, implies that the aspect of fame that is most dreaded by celebrities is the one nonfamous people want to experience the most. In the September 14, 2008, issue of *New York Magazine*, Emily Nussbaum's cover feature, "Man in the Bushes," looks at the rise of modern American

celebrity through infamous paparazzo Ron Galella, without whom “there’d be no TMZ” and who “took acting classes at the Pasadena Playhouse, not to become a star himself,” she writes, “but to learn to act like one.” Fame, as Galella proves, is no longer a by-product or an extension of acting; acting is now a side effect of fame. A declared—or in the case of Reality TV *auditioned*—“talent” in one field can lead to success in an entirely different field, and an appearance on Donald Trump’s *The Apprentice* as a wannabe business mogul, can lead to cohosting *The Tony Danza Show*, being on the cover of *Playboy*, or recording a hip-hop album. Celebrity stylist Rachel Zoe, who has changed the parameters of offscreen style by dressing stars for “every” occasion, claiming that “life should be a red-carpet moment,” has also stated, “The nature of what, or who, is a celebrity has expanded. We aren’t saving lives here, but we are creating images, and images create opportunities in a lot of areas.”

When I met Brian Pera, my co-editor, in December of 2005, it was through email, the equivalent of coffee or drinks in the cyber world. Brian wrote me a missive in response to a formal inquiry I’d made about submitting to his online journal, Lowblueflame. The last issue he edited, which was still up on his Web site at the time, featured some of the writers in *Life As We Show It* and was dedicated to the movies. The untitled issue of Lowblueflame, which I refer to as the “d \acute{e} jà vu issue,” was an exercise in cinematic hearsay. Tracing his own celluloid obsession, a curiosity informed in equal measure by movies seen and unseen, Brian asked each writer to describe a film based on what they’d read and heard about it. If I’d been able to participate, I would have recounted my own movie d \acute{e} jà vu (a word that literally means “already seen”) of *Don’t Look Now*, which I’d seen on TV but didn’t remember seeing until years later, when I overheard someone describing what I thought was a private terror: a red-cloaked monster-dwarf haunting Donald Sutherland in the catacombs of Venice. At the time, my cinematic references were much more limited: I knew who Donald Sutherland was, but not Julie Christie. (I had not yet moved to London or discovered the British New Wave.) The name Nicolas Roeg didn’t ring a bell. But based on the villain sketch, and the red hood on the little girl next to me, I immediately recalled the iconic movie I’d seen a clip of as a six-year-old, rather than the private “memory” fragment I had catalogued it as all those years.

By confabulating movies they hadn’t actually viewed, the writers in Lowblueflame concocted parallel pictures, plots, and narratives. In many

of the stories, subtext is teased and stretched until it possesses the official narrative, filling and swallowing it like the amorphous blob. Lifelong *Jaws* fanatic and one of the makers of the yet-to-be released 2006 documentary *The Shark Is Still Working: The Impact and Legacy of Jaws*, narrated by Roy Scheider, Erik Hollander writes about the many different ways movies can be viewed:

It was a full three years later when I finally got to see *Jaws* on the big screen during its rerelease in 1978. In the years between, I had obsessed about what I had come to imagine the film to be like. I based my “vision” of the scenes on three years of playground chatter from those lucky classmates that were allowed to see it—which was everyone else! Despite having conjured up a pretty impressive picture in my mind about the movie, finally watching the real deal with my dad on that fateful afternoon in July replaced my misinterpretations with imagery that exceeded my wildest expectations. That day has never left me. When *Jaws* finally aired for the first time on network television, my dad set up a cassette recorder and taped the audio for me, and for the next Lord knows how many years, I listened to that cassette every single day until the magnetic signal wore away. Every line, every sound effect, every music cue has been seared into my memory ever since. So, for me, *Jaws* has always been more of a personal life experience than merely a favorite film.

Looking at movies as representations of events and practices in his book *What Do Pictures Want?* W.J.T. Mitchell treats images as living things with personalities, demands, and desires of their own, stating, “To get the whole picture of pictures, we cannot remain content with the narrow conception of them.” Whether or not the contributors to this collection are distinctly aware of their focus on the subject of cinema and media as a new genre or form of writing, I cannot explicitly say. But part of the incentive for *Life As We Show It* was to use film, and the culture that comes with it, as an ingredient for narrative impetus—for writing, for imagining, and for thinking. Movies are starting points, like any subject or theme, to enter into the culture that’s inside of them. For me, film writing, as opposed to straight film criticism, is a way for an author to merge with not

just the thing they write, but the film they're looking at, so that writing becomes both cultural analysis and personal revelation. Since on-screen and offscreen constantly overlap and get mixed up, writing about images becomes more interesting when it attempts to reflect this blurring through form and content. When writing is allowed to be transformed and shaped by what it writes about.

Masha Tupitsyn
New York City, 2008

NOTES

1. Thomas Elsaesser, Noel King, and Alexander Horwath. *The Last Great American Picture Show: New Hollywood Cinema in The 1970s*. Amsterdam Press, 2005.
2. Robin Wood. *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, Columbia Univ. Press, 1986.

1

Genre Pictures



OTHER MOVIES

Lynne Tillman

Along Tenth Street, it's pretty quiet. The beginning of the night and the taxi people opposite my building have four limos out front waiting, probably, to drive to the airport, but no one's gunning his engine. The motorcycle club is out of town, the ten bikes that are usually parked next to each other and which take up one and a half car lengths, they're probably rolling along a highway somewhere, or they've pulled over to the side of the road and the bikers are drinking beer and listening to the radio, something I know about from road movies like *Two-Lane Blacktop* or *Easy Rider*.

Roberta's walking her dogs. She's got three of them, two very small poodles and one big mutt. At first, I couldn't stand Roberta. Along with her dogs, she owns three cars, all of them in bad shape, and she moves them daily. In this way she participates in a major block activity, car parking. There are people who sit in each other's cars, or move them, or just look after them. Roberta spends about three hours every single day waiting for the time one of her cars will be legal in the spot it's in. Alternate side of the street parking means nothing to you unless you have a car in the city. Then, if you don't have the money to park your car in a garage, it controls part of your day.

As I say, I took an instant dislike to Roberta, because she raced her engine, turning it over and over late at night under my window, and because of the way she looked. She has a huge mass of dyed black hair, eyebrows tweezed into startled half moons, and she wears sausage-tight pants

stretched over a big stomach and ass. But by now we've taken to saying good morning to each other and she doesn't look so bad to me anymore and I guess she's all right. She probably never suspected that I had put a desperate and angry typed note on her car window saying I'd report her for noise pollution if she continued racing her engine at two a.m.

That was a while ago, around the time Richie got put away. Now he's down the block, drinking coffee from a styrofoam container, not worried that those containers cause cancer, just calmly looking at the setting sun. Richie's out of the hospital again and on lithium. The new people on the block didn't know about him then, didn't know that his screams weren't serious, and he probably woke them the way he wakes everybody at first. You learn not to pay attention. You learn to distinguish his shouting from anonymous and dangerous screams or from calls for help and you fall back to sleep. But these new tenants called emergency and Richie disappeared again. It took weeks to find out where he'd gone. Jeff, who's been on the block longer than almost anyone, hung a sign in his storefront window and many along the street, on telephone poles. WHERE'S RICHIE? The signs lined the block. We all missed him. Maybe Jeff's lover Juan didn't, but I never talk to him, he's very unfriendly.

Richie usually stands in front of the door where he sleeps. The rock group gives him a bed and food. He stays outside during the day, rain or shine. When Richie's in one of his moods, having a psychotic episode, he walks back and forth and shouts: "Where's the sixties?" "Where's Central Park?" "Who killed Kennedy?" Sometimes he just howls like a wolf. When he comes out of it, he washes and combs his hair, cleans himself up, smiles at you and says, "Hi, how are you?" Makes small talk. If you can make small talk, that means you're well. One time I dreamt he was my boyfriend. Maybe because he's so steady in his own particular way.

It takes time to discern behavior different from your own. When I first moved in, I called the police because there were strange and loud noises on the street. I thought someone needed help. A cop said: "You'll learn to tell when they're funnin' and when they're serious." I think the neighbors below me used to beat each other up. A tall, thin, black woman, a tough blonde white woman, and the black woman's adolescent daughter. Sometimes I'd run out my door and stand in front of theirs, ready to knock loud. But I never did. Two years later I saw the blonde go into an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting on Saint Mark's Place. There's always a big mob of people outside just before and after

meetings. “A good place to meet men,” I heard one woman say to another as I strolled past. The fights downstairs have stopped. We’ve exchanged names—Mary, Jan, and Aisha—and now we complain together about the landlord and the super. I like the women, there are always wonderful cooking smells coming from their apartment. Their daughter seems OK, but it’s hard to tell how kids will turn out. Maybe in the midst of those fights, the little girl cowered in her room, on her bed, or was protected by an imaginary friend. Rescued by someone like Sigourney Weaver in *Aliens*, who kind of looks like her mother.

Not so long ago, Telly Savalas was filming here. The dealers down the end of the street yelled to him, “Hey, Kojak, how’s it going, man?” Savalas gives the high five sign, and the guys are content, even proud to be, if only for a second, part of the big picture. We’re accustomed to our block being used as background, local color, for TV movies or features, even commercials. Cops and robbers. Drug busts. Hip and trendy scenes, the location for galleries, weird boutiques, that kind of thing.

If I were to make a movie of the block, one version could be based on *Blue Velvet*, titled something like *Under Tenth Street* and starring Roberta as the Isabella Rossellini character, one of the rock and roll guys as the boyish voyeur, and Richie as Dennis Hopper. It might open with a shot of a large rat on a roof blinking its eyes at the camera and some country and western music playing on the soundtrack. The big city romance of the small town set in a big city.

Sandra might be from a small town in Utah. I see her about once a week. She could be the daughter of a farmer and his hardworking wife, long dead, Gothic American types carrying pitchforks. I figure Sandra escaped to the big city years and years ago. She’s down on her luck, without a home and with a drinking problem.

Sandra’s emaciated. Walking along the block, she’s carrying two tote bags and clutching a cardboard box to her thin chest. She heads for Susy, a punked-out seventeen-year-old, and says, “I’m sixty-seven, can you give me a dollar?” Susy gives her a dollar, then counts her money to make sure she’s got enough. As she counts her money, someone moves up on her. Susy shoves the money in her pocket and jumps in the other direction. The guy behind her, one of the rock and roll guys, is rushing and he shakes his head but doesn’t look at Susy. He looks at Sandra. When Sandra notices him, she asks for another dollar.

What I think happens to Sandra as she walks off the block, or set,

is that she goes to the B&H for a bowl of soup. It costs \$1.35 and comes with two slices of bread. Afterwards she'll reluctantly spend the night in a shelter where she'll have to hide her money because somebody might steal it. It's safer on the streets than in a shelter, but at her age it's too cold and she might freeze to death in her sleep. I don't know why, but Sandra has an inordinate fear of being buried alive. She keeps a notebook—she used to be an editor for a Condé Nast publication before she started hitting the bottle—which details her life on the street and her fears. After she dies of hypothermia or malnutrition, the notebook might be found and published in the Sunday *New York Times Magazine*.

Susy's about fifty years younger than Sandra. To me she looks a little like Rosanna Arquette in *Desperately Seeking Susan*, when the Arquette character dressed up to look like Madonna. After Susy pushes the wallet into her pocket, she looks again in the rock and roll guy's direction, needing a bed, or a fuck, a little love. Maybe she's a teenage runaway.

Susy enters a door near where the dealers hang out and where they, in gestures and movements as choreographed as any ballet, walk past each other or a client and exchange small plastic envelopes for money. Susy disappears behind a dark grey steel door. Behind this grey door the girl might be shooting up, doing her nails, abusing her child, or talking to her mother on the phone. On the other hand she could be a lab technician. From across the street I follow her disappearance, the door an obstacle to my camera, not, of course, to my fantasy.

I think: Susy's in her room, or someone else's room, or in a hallway on the third floor. I try to picture her. I ask myself, what's she doing? If I could I'd follow Susy inside, and stand invisibly next to her, then maybe I'd rob her story, steal it away to look at and consider.

Recently I watched a TV program about a woman robber who did her breaking and entering in Hollywood in broad daylight. She said steel doors were practically impossible to get past but she could open anything else. She still loved the thrill of being inside somebody else's house, knowing that at any moment the owner might walk in and that she might get caught. A variation on the primal scene, I suppose. Part of her punishment, in addition to going to jail, was to be videotaped teaching cops how to catch a smart thief like herself. She enjoyed telling what she knew to people she outsmarted more than four hundred times. She enjoyed being on camera, caught by it, performing for the cops, her captors. But like Susy's story the robber's story, even though documented,

is hidden from view, blighted by incoherence and the impoverishment of explanation. Still, I can see her on the job. Maybe I'm another kind of thief with desires just as strong as those that compelled the Hollywood woman to break and enter in broad daylight and to want to get caught. I don't want to get caught.

Suppose Susy's caught up with a crowd, as in *River's Edge*, a crowd so alienated and detached they don't report the murder of a friend by a friend. Every day they go and look at her body decaying. They watch her skin turn yellow and green, her lips dark purplish black. Perhaps Susy's the one who wants the movie's good guy to tell the police. Perhaps she's as fascinated with the rotting body as I am with her story. Or maybe she's more like the dance instructor in *Dirty Dancing* who needs to get an abortion because one of the young, rich patrons at the hotel where she works got her pregnant but he won't help her out. Now Susy's on Tenth Street, a runaway, carrying a baby she doesn't want.

Watching her with me, I'm sure of this, is a man in a wheelchair who lives on the ground floor behind a plateglass window. He has as unrestricted a view of the street as you can get. We never speak, nor do we say hello. I don't know his name, but I think of him as Jimmy Stewart in *Rear Window*. Except for some reason he's the predator, not the victim. It may be that he's collecting their stories too and we're natural competitors. He lives next door to the man with seven dogs and ten cats. I know Jimmy Stewart watches Susy because his wheelchair moves ever so slightly when she walks down the block and he bends from the waist to see her better. He seems sinister to me, his fascination a little like mine. When I look in his plateglass window I see him and a reflection of myself, in fact I'm just to the left of myself.

Suppose Jimmy Stewart leads a secret life, is not actually handicapped, is in fact a murderer, and has his eye on Susy. Or on one of the rock and roll guys, or on Roberta. Funny Roberta. She passes a lot of time in front of Jimmy's window. Many of her parking spots land up right in front of it. Or maybe Jimmy's a Vietnam veteran who got shot in the legs. Most likely he was at My Lai, that's where I see him. His actions during that massacre live with him daily, and he will never, never forget or get over them. Like the machine he was supposed to become in training, like the boys who become men in *Full Metal Jacket* by learning to kill and then doing it to rock and roll songs on the soundtrack of the movie, Jimmy Stewart was transformed at My Lai into a human monster more

terrible than he could ever have dreamed or than could ever be shown in horror movies. What was inside him was as destructive and grotesque as what was around him. His thoughts then. His thoughts now. Maybe he sees nothing when he looks out his window. Maybe it's all just a big blank. On the other hand, he reads the *New York Times* every day.

I pass by his window. He's gripping his head in his hands. Roberta's on the sidewalk struggling with her mutt and trying to clean up the shit from her two poodles. Richie's in a doorway three buildings from this scene, and he's humming a tune, which sounds like Sinatra's version of "My Way." Usually he sings Motown classics. This could turn into a musical comedy, with Richie, all cleaned up, a Marlon Brando-type hood in *Guys and Dolls*, or maybe Richie'd get the Sinatra role, Nathan Detroit, since he's singing one of his songs already. Roberta could be the heroine and work for the Salvation Army. Jimmy Stewart could be one of the guys, a third-rate mobster looking for a crap game. Better yet, it's *The Buddy Holly Story* and instead of Gary Busey as Buddy Holly, he's played by one of the rock and roll guys, with Richie the acoustic bass player for the Crickets, and Jimmy Stewart as a record executive who wouldn't, of course, do any singing.

Actually, I don't think the man in the wheelchair would ever get cast for a part in a musical, rock or otherwise, not even *Pennies From Heaven*. He's a Bruce Dern type, a bitter man with a dark past. Or, as he's already in a wheelchair, he could be Raymond Burr in *Ironside*. Nothing like a courtroom and a trial for that intense excitement, drama, and awe once found in the church or theater.

When the sun goes down, people either stay in and watch TV or go out. As I said, Sandra disappears. Richie stands in the doorway till pretty late in the evening, then wanders. The neighbors below me cook and listen to music. Larry and Martin, a couple who run the Thrift Shop on First Avenue, usually pick up Harvey, who has a bad heart, and take him to one of two hangouts, B and Seventh or Bar Beirut. Every neighborhood needs a couple of bars, every neighborhood movie or TV series needs a meeting place, where the richness and complexity of human life unfolds in a series of interlocking vignettes. The bar on Avenue B and Seventh is my choice since it's already been used for numerous Miller Beer ads as well as for Paul Newman in *The Verdict*.

Imagine the place. A corner building. Red and green glass windows on two walls of the bar, so that the light filters through in color and

it's always dark, even in the afternoon. Pinball machines. A locked toilet that costs 25 cents to use, to keep junkies out. A TV above the door. A horseshoe-shaped bar. The jukebox is good and loud, draft beers still cost a dollar. It's *Cheers* or *Archie's Place* except the ethnic groups are different. For the regulars, it's a home away from home.

Tonight at one end of the old horseshoe-shaped bar sits Harvey, unemployed salesman, a *Death of a Salesman* type, except I don't imagine he's had children. Just out of the hospital—another heart attack—Harvey hasn't stopped smoking or drinking. He's with Larry and Martin, and they're not fighting with him about it. Since AIDS hit the block—two young men died recently—and the city, so many people are sick, I don't see them arguing as much. Larry's got his arm around Martin's back. To me Larry looks like James Woods, especially in *Salvador*. Martin doesn't look like anybody. He waves to Susy when she walks in. No one waves to Roberta but me. Her cars must all be parked and the dogs walked. Now she can relax, drink a whiskey sour and shoot the breeze, if anyone will talk to her. Richie never comes in. He sometimes stands outside, like a watchdog, acting protective.

I take my place at the other end of the bar from Harvey and watch him flirt with Kay, a relative newcomer to the neighborhood. Larry and Martin are talking animatedly to Susy. She certainly doesn't look pregnant. I've heard that Kay's boyfriend took a walk, a permanent one. Tonight she'll even put up with sad, chubby Harvey.

Kay's wearing a cut-up T-shirt with a Bruce Springsteen logo on the back. She reminds me of Sally Fields. Her small breasts are encased in a pushup bra. She likes wearing a pushup bra, to get a little cleavage. I watch Kay look at her breasts resting in their cups of cotton, silk, and lace, then she looks at Harvey. Tomorrow she's going to have a mammogram because she's over thirty-five. One out of ten American women, she tells him, gets breast cancer. Then she drinks a shot of vodka and rolls her blue eyes at him, as if she were Demi Moore in *St. Elmo's Fire*. They talk about disease. His heart. Her breasts. AIDS. Kay's good friend Richard died two months ago, and she still can't believe it. Life, she tells Harvey, wasn't supposed to be like this. Kay slides off the barstool, goes to the jukebox, and plays "Born in the USA" and "Girls Just Want to Have Fun."

Joe the bartender is nothing like Archie or Ted Danson, the guy from *Cheers*. He's a tall black guy, sort of like the lead in *The Brother from Another Planet*. Joe lived in Harlem before moving down here. He's

friendly but cool, suggesting that when he works, he works. He keeps his eyes on the couples and singles around him. Sometimes I watch the scene through his seasoned, professional eyes as they pan the bar, scanning the crowd for trouble and requests for more drinks. He doesn't betray much. He tells Larry and Martin the rumor is that Edouardo, who lives two houses from Susy, got caught dealing heroin, and he and his older cousin are in jail, probably at Rikers.

Edouardo's about eighteen, Hispanic, the oldest of seven children. Seven children from the same mother—she moved to New Jersey about when I moved in—and three different fathers. Their grandmother, who always looks tired and usually carried an open can of beer in a paper bag, lives with them and takes care of them. In their crowded apartment Edouardo—or Eddy—screams at his brothers and sisters, controls the TV set and leaves the lights on all night so that the youngest ones find it hard to sleep. On the block he plays the big man and struts his stuff, even holds doors for the “ladies.” Then he laughs behind their backs. I wondered why I hadn't seen him around lately.

Standing outside the bar is his sixteen-year-old sister Maria. Months ago Maria and I were in the corner bodega, the one run by three Syrian brothers. A man walked in and in front of everybody started shouting at her: “I'm your father. I don't want you on the streets. ¿Comprendes? I'm your father.” As if we were watching television, a soap like *Dynasty* or a docudrama about a family in trouble, the Syrian grocer and I pretended not to hear, pretended to go about our business. When Maria left with the man who claimed to be her father, she didn't look at us, stood up tall, stretching her small frame, and projected a sullen dignity which I respect. Ahmed says to me, *Family Court*.

I'm pretty sure Maria is working the street. Tonight she could be dealing herself or dope. This is a crack and cocaine area, unlike Tenth Street, which is primarily grass. Anyway she never comes into the bar, maybe because it's mostly white, then black, hardy ever Hispanic, or maybe it's because she respects certain traditions, like a girl doesn't go into bars alone. Maybe it's just that they won't let her in, she looks her age, or they know she's a hooker. I'm not sure. Edouardo used to come in sometimes. Both of them frequent Bar Beirut on First Avenue where the motorcycle crowd hangs out when they're in town.

Joe hands me a draft beer and says, conspiratorially, “I couldn't see you living in the country. You're a real urban woman.” He's never said

anything like that to me before, and since I'm there invisibly, a kind of Hitchcock walk-on, I'm reluctant to become part of the action. Kay, who's never really talked to me before, overhears Joe's remark, and for reasons I'm not sure of, doesn't go back to her seat next to Harvey but sits down close to me. She does most of the talking, and I realize she's flirting with Joe. They talk about real estate—what landlord has bought which building, which ones are being warehoused—and about the squatters on Ninth and C, the closest Manhattan comes to having a tent city for the homeless. It looks something like England's Greenham Common.

Kay orders a martini and Joe, to lighten the mood, says he's just heard on the news that martinis are the favorite drink of 11 percent of Americans. Kay says martinis make her think of thirties movies, a different time. What about *Moonlighting*? Joe asks. Roberta takes a stool next to Kay and talks about a story she heard on the news. A pet psychologist refused to divulge the name of the golden retriever she was working with "because of the confidentiality of the doctor/patient relationship." Then Harvey, still chasing Kay, wanders over and pretends to be talking only to Joe about the porn he's been renting from the video store, the one that's also a dry cleaner, owned by Kim, the Korean who's got a lot of good selling ideas. That's the way Harvey puts it.

Highlights from the Iran/contra hearings play on the TV above the door and everyone but Joe turns to watch, listen and laugh. One old guy screams support for Ollie North. He's drunk, says Martin. But he's not alone, says Larry. Roberta switches from pets to vets and tells the story of her window washer, a Vietnam vet who said he wouldn't ever fight again unless they were landing on Coney Island. If I were really part of this movie, I'd ask who are "they"? But I don't and instead think about the man in the wheelchair who never comes in here, but has been known to go to the pasta restaurant on Avenue A and sit in the window glowering.

Kay remarks that Freud once said Coney Island was the only place in the US that interested him. This gives Harvey a chance to talk to Kay again, and he says, "You one of those Freudians?" She throws him a disgusted look. Now he realizes she'll never sleep with him. Martin and Larry probably are aware that Harvey, who gets very aggressive when he drinks, is about to lose it, having lost an opportunity with Kay, and they take Harv by the arm and lead him out of the bar.

It's not such a hot night at Seventh and B. Kay says Bar Beirut is

better on weekdays. She says she's just gotten a part in an independent film being shot in the neighborhood. The mood changes when Susy strolls by, her arm around another young woman. Joe, in an uncharacteristic gesture, takes out a teddy bear from behind the bar and hands it to her. Susy's friend looks angry, as does Kay. It's all in close-up: their anguished faces, Joe's mischievous grin, Susy's sense of her own power, her hands on her slim hips. Sets of eyes dart back and forth. It turns into a rock video, something like Michael Jackson's *Beat It*, and I see them all moving around the bar, snapping their fingers, taking positions and pulling knives out of their pockets. What's going to happen? I ask myself, wandering home. How's it going to end? Will Susy sleep with Joe and desert her girlfriend? Or will Kay outstay Susy and land him, if she really wants him?

I've often wondered what it would be like to shoot a bar scene using as extras all those actors who work as famous look-alikes. These characters could wander back to the block, each to her or his own particular place on it, with their own thoughts about the night they've just had. If Susy were the dance instructor in *Dirty Dancing*, and Joe turned into Patrick Swayze, and Kay into Jennifer Grey, they'd dance out of the bar and into the street, exploding in an ecstasy of pelvic thrusts and utopian feeling. The extras, of course, would all join in. Or, as in *Hill Street Blues*, it could end in a freeze frame with Susy opening the steel door, while Kay and Joe kiss in the foreground.

I don't like endings. Besides, though the night has drawn to a close and is a natural ending, the next day Tenth Street bustles again. Roberta's revving her engine. Richie's upset and is shouting about Bush and the CIA. The thrift shop has opened a little late, because Martin's hung over. Jimmy Stewart's in the window, staring. And Kay and Susy pass each other on the street, but don't say hello. I decide that Susy did sleep with Joe. When an ambulance pulls up next door, its siren blasting, I run to the window, wondering whose life might be in danger. Last week an apartment house went up in flames, the fire engulfing and destroying three floors within minutes. Everyone watched. Disasters bring people together. I hope they're not taking Richie away again.