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Wormwood

February 17, 2018 | by [Aram Yardumian](#) | Filed Under: [Film](#) | [Leave a Comment](#)

'But still I was ordered to believe, even where the ideas did not correspond with, even when they contradicted, the rational theories established by mathematics and my own eyes'

– *Augustine, Confessions* 5:3 [6]

'For secret assassination the contrived accident is the most effective technique. When successfully executed, it causes little excitement and is only casually investigated'

– *A Study of Assassination, a CIA Manual*

According to Augustine, his break with Manichaeism came when he was ordered to see truth in descriptions of the stars and sky that defied all rational inquiry. In one of the most influential personal decisions ever made, he turned from a world of imagined ideas—gnostic metaphors for the eternal conflict of light and darkness that had through corruption become stand-ins for natural law—toward the calculable, the skeptical, and the rational. The image of Augustine refusing the religious rhetoric of the day, which he could not accept, and entering upon a difficult and uncertain truth, but ultimately the possibility of secular miracle, is but one way to watch [Errol Morris's 2017 miniseries, *Wormwood*](#). For the turn from imagined ideas, even at the risk of a bitter, delirious end, is also the story of [Eric Olson](#), whose life Errol Morris follows in this film, through its multiwoven structure of past and present day—the bottomless well of conspiracy and the price of pursuing the truth about the mysterious death of his father, [Dr. Frank Olson](#), a senior bacteriologist with the US Army Chemical Corps. The name of the series is double-layered, for *Wormwood* is the star of poisoned waters (Revelation 8:10-11), and also the bitter consequence of the pursuit of forbidden knowledge (Proverbs 5:3-5).



Wormwood opens with the voice of Eric Olson reading from Revelation 8, a passage that never sounded truer as when we look down from the 10th floor of the Hotel Statler onto the street where Dr. Frank Olson had plunged to his death on November 28, 1953, and entered the realm of the mostly forgotten. Why this passage? What does it mean to him? The first official version of the tragedy stated that Frank Olson had ‘fallen’ from the window. But one cannot exactly fall from a hotel window. The word ‘jumped’ was also included in the literature on Olson’s death, as was the word ‘accident’. While non-comportment of terms didn’t alarm the rest of the Olson family, Eric couldn’t be left alone. How can you arrange this triangle of terms (fall, jump, accident) to be sorted out in any possible way? The world, for Eric, who was a teenager at the time of his father’s death, stopped making sense. The mind blazes conspiratorial trails to break through the cul-de-sac of logic. The reliability of knowledge and that impossible Freudian problem that memory and the imagination are the same faculty. You lose the baseline of assumptions, Eric said, because you are questioning everything. He had the choice to lose himself in a nonsense fable, as his mother had done. (‘You are never going to know what happened in that room,’ his mother, Alice, had told him routinely before her death in 1993), or to risk pursuing clarity about a crime that involved the US Government.



It would be more than twenty years before the next faint signal appeared in the darkness. The **1975 Rockefeller Commission Report** — that watershed moment in the history of American intelligence agencies—revealed, among other things, the involvement of CIA chemist [Sidney Gottlieb](#) in an LSD experimentation program which had led to the death of a researcher which the New York Times named as Frank Olson. The family was not notified by way of confirmation of this fact by the government, but Olson’s former boss at Camp Detrick, Vincent ‘Vin’ Ruwet, did confirm it. Soon after, the Olsons found themselves in an audience with President Ford in the White House, thus becoming the only family ever in the history of the USA to receive an apology in the Oval Office for the misdeeds of an American agency. But according to Olson family attorney David Kairys, this meeting served to seal in the situation by not saying anything direct about the incident, instead congenially trying to convince them not to go to the courts, but rather to go through Congress. The law, so Ford explained, would obligate the CIA to reveal information. But the transparency was actually a smoke screen. The ploy (which Rumsfeld and Cheney were involved in) worked and the family decided not to pursue the situation through the Justice Department. A week later the family went to CIA headquarters for a lunch with then-director [William Colby](#). Colby gave the family a ream of documents that weren’t, in total, coherent. For one thing, they didn’t even indicate Frank was something other than a civilian employee of the Army, that is an employee of the CIA. Colby’s selection of documents was designed to give the family a little more than they had in 1953, but not enough to reveal anything more than they already knew: that Frank’s death was not suicide. They contained undefined terms such as ‘Artichoke’ and ‘Bluebird’ (references to a prototype version of MK-ULTRA, which were real-life CIA pharmacology-bacteriology projects). The Olsons were promised \$1.5m (whittled down to \$750,000) and they had to sign a covenant not to sue. And yet there was still no motive.



But it didn’t really matter. The mystery had finally been solved: on November 18th, 1953, Olson and other members of the Army Chemical Corps’ Special Operations Division of the Fort Detrick, Maryland were invited to a lodge retreat at Deep Creek Lake, not far from the West Virginia state line. There they met members of the CIA, including Sid Gottlieb, whose name was mentioned in the Rockefeller Report. On the second evening of the

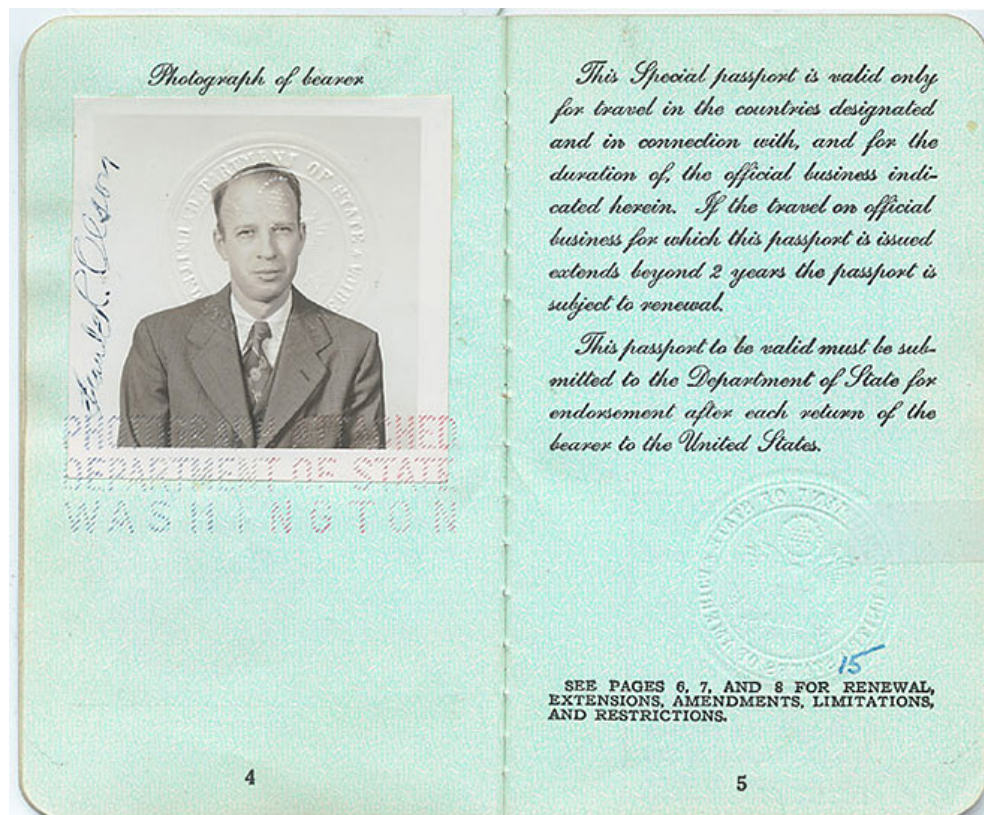
retreat, Gottlieb spiked the after-dinner drinks with LSD as part of an experiment. Olson did not react well to the trip, suffering a paranoid breakdown, and a week later, at Fort Detrick, appeared in Ruwet's office asking to be fired, or be allowed to resign from the Corps. Apparently someone, perhaps Olson himself, considered himself a security risk. Instead, he was assigned to a psychiatrist. Olson was driven by Ruwet and Richard Lashbrook, a CIA doctor, to meet Harold Abramson, who was an allergist, not a psychiatrist. He was also a CIA employee whom Olson knew years before in the context of chemical warfare development. Abramson was a proponent of administered LSD and gave Olson a bottle of whiskey, possibly dosed. They also visited a New York magician named John Mulholland, who seems to have attempted hypnosis on Olson. Ruwet, Lashbrook, and Olson settled in at the Hotel Statler and saw 'Me and Juliet' on Broadway. Then they returned to Washington, where apparently Olson's behavior took a turn for the erratic. He did handstands in Lashbrook's apartment and said he wanted to return to New York. Lashbrook drove him back, without Ruwet, and took him again to Dr. Abramson. Then, on the night of November 28th, Lashbrook awoke in the Hotel Statler to the sound of glass shattering, and a moment later Olson was found dead on the sidewalk below. He had jumped, apparently suffering from some kind of psychotic relapse from the LSD.

Everyone bought the story. It was just strange enough and just believable enough to pass muster for both conspiracy hounds and government agency apologists who felt comfortable that a few misguided individuals had been responsible for the tragedy. Even the venerable **Seymour Hersh**, who helped break the story, bought it. But Eric didn't. The event had the convenience of taking place during the most fecund decade of American conspiracy, in the context of Cold War paranoia and Joe McCarthy; the Cuban Project and Korea—a war nobody really understood; germ and ideological warfare and sodium pentothal, brainwashing, mind control, and the Manchurian Candidate. And it was a time when the United States was actually concerned with its credibility abroad. It was gleefully easy for the conspiracy theorists to buy a story as far out as secret LSD experiments conducted by the CIA, but immensely difficult to fathom that simple rational inquiry would go far beyond that. First, and what had haunted Eric most, was the hotel room window. It is tremendously more difficult to jump through a window in reality than Hollywood would make it seem. Room 1018a of the Hotel Statler (now Hotel Pennsylvania) was equipped with a radiator under the window, and Venetian blinds. For Frank Olson to have successfully dove over the radiator and through the closed blinds and the safety glass he would have needed a velocity upward of 20 mph. Not even an Olympic athlete can gain that kind of momentum in a hotel room. And then there was the letter the Eric Olson received in 1975, soon after the Rockefeller Report, from Armand Pastore, the night manager at the Hotel Statler the night Frank had died. Pastore described how he had gone outside and found Frank on the street. He claimed that even after hitting the street, however improbably, Frank was still alive for a moment, mumbling. Pastore ran inside and checked the calls from the room. The switchboard said there had been one and it had been so short she had listened to the whole thing: 'Well, he's gone.' / 'Well, that's too bad.' Which sounds like notification.

Wormwood marks a new level of expansive development for Errol Morris, whose previous film works were either feature length or episodal series. This four-and-a-half hour, six-part Netflix series allows the story to develop free of the 90-minute storytelling arc, with great detail, and with intensity. *Wormwood* is recognizably a Morris production in its format as part-docudrama and part-interview, accompanied by sections of archival and found footage. But here the reliance on two of Morris's trademarks is reduced—and the metaphoric visuals that built a sense of tension and reflection in *The Thin Blue Line* and the *The Fog of War*, and the [Interrotron](#), which is entirely absent. *Wormwood* is more than a docudrama about a relatively obscure American conspiracy story, it is a sprawling multilayered study of knowledge and epistemology. While perhaps not presenting a development of epistemological theory since *Believing Is Seeing*, *Wormwood* is an expanded setting in which the limits of knowledge in film and dialogue. Dialogue, sometimes presented as monologue, drives all of Morris's films.

Interlocutors such as Robert MacNamara (*The Fog of War*), Donald Rumsfeld (*The Unknown Known*), Fred Leuchter (*Mr. Death*) employ confessional and obfuscatory strategies to talk about themselves. But in the crucible of the interview, and without Errol Morris setting up rhetorical pratfalls, their words begin to pick themselves apart, reveal deeper layers of elenchus and doubt. For the same reason Donald Rumsfeld comes off as fatuous and slippery, Robert MacNamara comes off as earnest and open: they remove one mask only to find another mask beneath it. Rumsfeld, for his part, refused to admit they were masks, and in doing so revealed himself all the more.

Wormwood is different, because Errol Morris is not doing any interrogating. Nor, this time, is he encouraging a single subject to perform auto-archaeology. *Wormwood* is more a film about an obsession, that of the film's real subject, Eric Olson. It is through him the epistemological work is done. Eric is intelligent, reflective, talking about his own memory and the significance of moments, collages (Ruwet had given Eric a photo enlarger, and a jigsaw, which turned into collage art with psychotherapeutic value); and the realization that he has lost himself in order to find the answer, and as a practicing psychologist, knowing that answers don't restore the self that is lost while you search for them. The dramatic renderings aren't reenactments. They're not [Rithy Panh, for example, rounding up former Khmer Rouge guards at S21](#) and making them act out their old routines on camera. If anything, *Wormwood's* format reflects how collage art is supposed to work therapeutically, in allowing contradictions to be articulated as real, and memories as more like screengrabs. Like *Rashomon*, they're not searching for an identical truth, even if Errol Morris believes a single truth is out there. Eric Olson, for his part, Like Augustine, could not live with faith alone in a story that didn't add up, complicated however much by the irrationality of memories, and however little by the warnings of all those along the way who said to turn back. Talking about the CIA killing your father is one thing, but taking steps to investigate it, Eric said, amounted to 'leaving the known universe'.



After the death of Eric's sister, Lisa and her family died in a plane crash, he began to look into his father's death once again. He got to know Armand Pastore. He visited Lashbrook and Gottlieb in their respective retirements—they gave him next to nothing. (They found Gottlieb, Eric recalls, raising goats on a farm, preaching the values of world peace and ecological awareness). He went into Room 1018a. He held a kind of consecration with some friends. Eric spent the night in the room. If his father was suicidal, as the CIA reports had suggested, why would you put him ten floors up over 7th Ave? After that he phoned a family friend, Dr. James Starrs, an expert in exhuming bodies, which they did ostensibly to reinter it next to Alice. The forensic team found decisive evidence Frank had been murdered: no evidence of going through glass, despite the window being broken, and the medical report saying there were 'lacerations' and an impact on the skull above one of the eyes, that could only have been administered by a blow inside the room, not hitting the street. Later, the CIA assassination manuals were released, and they all say the most effective method is to push someone from 75 feet, after giving them a blow on the head, above one of the eyes, to render them unconscious. Eric goes to see Harry Huge (pron. Huey), a DC lawyer to assess the potential punitive damages, but Huge could not take the case because his firm represented the CIA. Stephen Saracco, assistant district attorney in Manhattan, looked into the matter as a cold case. But the CIA wouldn't cooperate with subpoena. Then, former CIA director William Colby disappeared in a bizarre canoe accident—Colby's son believed it was a suicide-disappearance stemming from guilt and remorse—if anyone had been aware of everything that happened to Olson, it would have been Colby. Eric never found out what, if anything, Saracco got from the CIA because it was under Grand Jury secrecy. Lashbrook could not travel to testify, as he was too infirm, so they deposed him at his home in Ojai CA. Whatever he said was kept secret. Shortly after Saracco interviewed Ruwet, the latter died of a heart attack in church. In the end, Saracco closed the case and could not conclude anything. Eric's obsession deepened and after a few years convinced Harry Huge to open a case under the Federal Torts Act. Problem was, the family had signed a covenant in 1975. In 2014, Eric went back to Seymour Hersh. Hersh advised Eric not to get deeply involved with this, as a warning for what he might overturn. But like the ghost of Hamlet's father saying, 'Remember me', the compulsion to proceed—at the risk of destroying everything around him—was too strong. 'Once you start looking into your father's death,' Eric said, 'you go to the end.'

Wormwood, as a test of epistemological efficacy, is unavoidably a film about memory. Eric talks about psychological identification theory, and how sudden disappearance affects this. His memories of his father are fragmentary and vague, and influenced by films and photos. He doesn't remember the funeral, but does remember being taken to Vin Ruwet's house instead of the graveside, and feeling utterly lost at the Ruwets'. He remembers Ruwet coming over nearly every night for martinis with his mother, guiding her steadily into safe, easy alcoholism. Ruwet had been charged by the CIA to 'keep track of the wife'. He rummaged through Frank's belongings and removed most of them, but left behind, accidentally or purposefully, some information about Deep Creek. Lashbrook, when Eric visited him, was unable to sustain a consistent version of the story: was the window smashed or not, was he asleep or not. Lashbrook also revealed Gottlieb was in NYC the whole time, apparently forgetting that he was supposed to keep that secret—or perhaps allowing his guilt to overcome him just enough. Even if we, like Plato and Augustine, believe the very possibility of knowledge—its origin and continued existence from moment to moment—requires something beyond subject and object, beyond humans and the world, there is still the problem of finding it, extracting it. Errol Morris's operating procedure is Aristotelian, in that it requires no transcendent reality, and thus the knowledge held in the memories of men is subject not only to distortion, but to extinction. And the CIA, for all their disorganization, was remarkably good at not leaving behind empirical clues to the past.



And if [Wormwood](#) is a film about memory, it also a film about possession. The knowledge of what happened to Frank Olson, and why, carries with it, in [Tylorian](#) terms, a kind of mana, or, in keeping with the series title, a bitterness—the poisoned waters of the mind. Those who possess it are few and burdened, if not by guilt, then by the immense power one holds over the perception of American history, and over the course of individual lives.

*Eric Olson isn't one of those people.
Seymour Hersh is.*

It is difficult to say who suffers the most today. Here is wisdom: the image of Robert Lashbrook, played by Christian Camargo, sitting in the bathroom, his face buried in his hands, after two heavies have thrown Frank Olson out the window. Turned out Frank's project at Fort Detrick was developing aerosol-deliverable anthrax—this, from a man who couldn't stand watching lab monkeys perish. Also turns out Frank had witnessed what was known as a 'terminal experiment' on 'expendables' (captured Russian agents or Nazis) at an American-British research base near Frankfurt. Something that didn't sit well in his stomach. He told his wife that he was 'all mixed up'. That horrible, sinking knowledge that eats you away, alive. A 1949 Army security report stated, 'Olson is violently opposed to control of scientific research, either military or otherwise, and opposes supervision of his work.' Norman Cournoyer, an Army intelligence veteran said Frank was beginning to transform his experiences into ethical problems in a night course in philosophy he attended at the Catholic University of America. He was highly concerned that biological warfare had been employed in Korea, and he was known to have been associating with the pacifists who protested outside the gates of Fort Detrick. 'He was turning, no doubt about it,' Cournoyer said. If LSD was ever actually administered at Deep Creek, maybe it was to get Frank talking, find out what he knew, and to determine what kind of risk he posed. The night before he tendered his resignation to Ruwet and asked to disappear he had gone to see [Irving Pichel's biopic Martin Luther](#), which follows Luther to the apogee of spiritual crisis, and his challenge to the Catholic Church, with the famous line, 'Here I stand, I can do no other.' Frank Olson was at the center of Detrick, and Detrick was the center of both biological warfare and covert operations. Olson was, you could say, the most dangerous person in the whole Cold War for what he knew, and here he was, turning. The US Government didn't have Siberia to send people to, to get rid of them, to pay the price for that horrible knowledge enters in through your eyes and becomes your permanent possession. This brings us to the final and most important of Errol Morris's layered uses of 'wormwood'. When Hamlet

murmured, 'Wormwood, Wormwood' (III:2) during *The Mousetrap* he was referring to the disease that was eating Denmark, and which he wished to expose; but also, maybe, to something else: in Shakespearean England, wormwood was a bitter used to make vermifuge, a syrup made to kill dangerous internal worms.



Times Quotidian

...an infinite number of thing to speak of

Incoming! Travis Preston Gives It To Us Straight

May 25, 2013 | by [Guy Zimmerman](#) | Filed Under: [Performance](#), [Theater](#) | [3 Comments](#)

Prometheus Bound, *World Premiere, A new translation by Joel Agee, Directed by Travis Preston*
CalArts Center for New Performance, Presented by the J. Paul Getty Museum at the Getty Villa —

Pinned high on a gigantic metal wheel, Aeschylus' ragged Prometheus has, for the past eighty minutes, been spitting out toxic denunciations of all-mighty Zeus and his dictates. Hermes himself just arrived with the Big Chief's final ultimatum, only to be met with more curses and maledictions from the unrepentant Giver-of-Fire. Finally, Prometheus pauses and looks out, seeing in the far distance the glow of Zeus' destructive bolt on its way toward him like a heat-seeking missile. Lower down on the steel armature, the flock of women who have gathered in solidarity with the Titan make tremulous little cries and flutter like birds. The air above the amphitheatre thickens with expectant dread as the music rises toward a dissonant crest, the lights dying away.



Aeschylus's uncompromising monumentality reminds me always of [Richard Serra](#), whose sculptures wrench us into a state of empathy with expressive slabs of steel. In **Prometheus Bound** nothing much really happens up on stage; all the "action" is in our minds as we resist like bucking horses our underlying compassion for the defiant wretch tacked up there against the cliff. Inexorably, we are drawn by our own natures into a solidarity that undermines our customary submission to the dictates of necessity, and Aeschylus is enough of a prick to insist that we take this pill without sugar coating – "give up hope of results," as the Tibetans might put it. Finally, there's something onomatopoeic (big word, I know) about Prometheus, Bound in how Aeschylus's play carries us up a steep incline to the edge of a dark gulf and throws us off – the form of the play, in other words, reiterates the cliff-ness that also anchors its central image.

Preston's great achievement here is to insist on all this, and to bring it to life with forceful precision. He's aided in this objective by his fine cast (particularly [Ron Cephas Jones](#) in the lead), by [Efren Delgado](#)'s gorgeous wheel, by Musical Director [Ellen Reid](#) and by the accomplished jazz composer [Vinny Golia](#), who performs with the same inventive restraint he brought to Preston's Macbeth. Finally, translator [Joel Agee](#) has, to my ear anyway, captured the formal perfection and rhetorical sophistication of Aeschylus' dramatic poem in a mode of effortless clarity. Working together, this creative ensemble delivers a production full of resonance with our place and time; the pleasure comes in seeing forces that typically shape us from the shadows dragged into the light, where they may be appreciated as aesthetic objects.



Ron Cephas Jones (Photo: Craig Schwartz)

Prometheus's indictment of Zeus is actually quite subtle. Rather than denying Zeus's power, he simply insists on viewing Zeus as himself subject to the impermanence common to all created entities. Born to Cronus, and already the father of other gods (Dionysus, for example), Zeus is a historical being, Prometheus insists; immortal or not, his position at the pinnacle of divine power will come to an end. Throughout the text, Prometheus invokes *techne* – the Greek word for craft, practical knowledge, the understanding of material assemblages that

allows us to take them apart and then re-purpose them in skillful ways. Opposed to this form of understanding is the notion that when parts come together they fuse into new wholes defined by an inviolable unity that is stable and inert. This stable unity, in turn, relates to an abstract ideal that exists in some transcendent realm, a realm from which we can derive the categorical imperatives that define proper behavior, and even the concrete laws that must be enforced by police and judges and guided missiles. While only the very wisest among us can really comprehend these ideal forms, there is something the rest of us can do...which is very simply to obey.

Aeschylus's tragic vision comes as a welcome relief from our endless cultural obsequiousness. With each snarling screed, Cephias Jones's Prometheus counteracts the narrative toxins forced down our throats at the local Cineplex, where each month the hero of some new Marvel franchise draws on extra-special powers to meet some extra-special threat to the consumerist perfection we have been trained to view as our given right. These comic book values, juvenile and dangerously proto-fascistic in their alluring triumphalism, have seeped into our political discourse along channels greased by the investment of billions of dollars by right wing ideologues (the [Koch brothers](#), typically). Through the genius of a well-funded "perception management" industry, our imaginations have been colonized by doctrines of self-righteous greed and resentful hatred which every spiritual tradition in human history has denounced as the sound evil makes when it speaks.



Travis Preston

I found the heartfelt applause at the close of the play oddly inspiring, suggesting that Preston and his fine company have managed to transform Aeschylus's masterpiece from a venerable chestnut into a production that speaks with force and clarity about issues confronting us today. The temptation is to encase such works of art in a sarcophagi of dull abstraction by calling them "timeless." But Preston's Prometheus, Bound speaks to us so viscerally precisely because, in the age of Occupy Wall Street, our relations are being distorted by the same material forces and processes that gave rise to tragic drama in the first place, two and a half millennia ago. I'm referring here to the birth in Athens of metal coinage and the money-based exchange economy it brought to life. Anthropologists of money — [David Graeber](#), for example — are now underscoring how this development

conferred on certain individuals a terrifying new power over their fellow citizens. The Athenians in particular were struggling against the political figure associated with these developments: the tyrant. Graeber, one of the founders of Occupy, has written an important book *Debt: the First 5000 Years* shedding light on how this contest is encoded in the cultural DNA of the West, the source at once of Athens' cultural dynamism, and of the potent artistic forms that express clear-sighted alarm about the implications of that dynamism on psychological as well as social levels.

Looking around me at the people – most of them my age or older – who had made the trip to the Palisades on this balmy night, I felt certain that the overwhelming majority of them had experienced a steadily increasing sense of alarm over the past three decades at the markers we are being dragged past. And, along with that alarm, comes perhaps a steadily increasing miasma of confusion and paralysis, a nagging sense that some action is called for, but what could it be? Four decades ago, when productions like [Richard Schechner's Dionysus 69](#) underscored for this generation in its youth the relevance of Greek tragic drama, everything was falling apart. Today the problem is, rather, excessive unity and hierarchy – Zeus on steroids. Instead of disintegration and social chaos, endemic resignation is our problem – resignation specifically to a regime of values everyone knows is, not just indefensible on moral grounds, but also suicidal. And, as if all political structures had crumbled along with state socialism in the rubble of the Berlin Wall, we are told that, in Margaret Thatcher's resonant phrase, there is no alternative. No alternative, they say, to our pre-schools awash in the blood of children gunned down by NRA maniacs armed with semi-automatic weapons. No alternative, they tell us, to an economic system in which our lives are reduced to endless rounds of anxiety and servitude for the benefit of a tiny, self-elected elite. No alternative, we are told, to a foreign policy based on brutality and death from the skies in the form of armed drones. No alternative to the burning of the hydrocarbons that are altering the basic chemistry of the planet in ways that guarantee massive suffering in the immediate future.

The defenders of the status quo seem to have all the answers on their side, whereas we have only questions – and how can questions ever compete with answers when the point is decisive action? Also, the more the world of facts undermines the utopian image of the beneficent market solving all our problems, the more certain those who defend this storybook world become, and the more emphatically they promote, in their certainty, more of the same. Cephas Jones's Prometheus, pinned to his steel cliff, is having none of any of that, and his insolent defiance in the face of the pure might of Zeus is bracing. Such defiance turns us to face a cliff of not-knowing, where, with some courage, we may locate the collective responsiveness we need to co-create a new way forward without violence. This is the cliff of the open question, the source of difference, creativity and multiplicity – the open space without coordinates out of which the new always arises.



Life Could Be a Dream: Relax and Rolex

August 9, 2013 | by [Rita Valencia](#) | Filed Under: [Film](#) | [2 Comments](#)

“The Act of Killing”, directed by Joshua Oppenheimer, 2012 –



The death squad captain swaggers out of his local bar still humming ‘My Way’, while his victims rot in the river and the cleaning ladies toil through the night mopping up the blood. Subtract the victims and the stench, the toil and the blood from the scenario: the killing and the killer remain. Filmmaker [Joshua Oppenheimer’s The Act of Killing](#) recasts the Indonesian mass killings of the mid 1960’s as a personal narrative told in lush dramatic reenactments conceived and directed, ostensibly, by the perpetrators. It’s a film that quotes Bollywood gleefully. It also may seem to owe much to Bataille, Genet, and Pasolini, although all of them were responding in a historically and philosophically engaged way to WW2, totalitarianism, surrealism and the intellectual foment of their times. Oppenheimer’s moral compass remains spinning indefatigably offscreen, not because we are watching a killer not brought to justice, but because we are being shown killers as a variety of moral freaks who populate an ahistorical world where violence is the product of an entertainment industry which dominates the human imagination. The context is not Indonesia in the Vietnam/Cold War era, it is the world of big screen gangsters and exploitative entertainment violence that anyone in the movie marketing business knows is the stock and trade of the “international” market. The filmmaker claims his work was conceived in the shadow of [Abu Graib](#), and informed by the acts of sadism very much in the public eye at the time, the reality show genre coming of age in a horrifyingly spectacular way.

The Act of Killing has been compared to [The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On](#), by [Kazuo Hara](#), but that was a traditional documentary steeped in history and journalistic bravado, while this film is pushing the genre by using collaboration between filmmaker and subject as a central strategy. *The Act of Killing* has some things in common [Werner Herzog's](#) 1995 made-for-television work about the alleged murderer/composer, [Gesualdo, Death for Five Voices](#), also told in artful reenactments. The big difference is that in *Death for Five Voices* the artist's hand was clearly Herzog's whereas here the creative roles are not entirely defined. Its world is the unsavory, contemptuous corruption of tropical despots and a cowed citizenry. Looking at the grim little towns, the generally modest quality of life of the protagonist/perpetrators, the crimes did not net them great riches, but they remain heroes to their parent organization, the [Pancasila Youth Movement](#), a paramilitary death squad at the time of the 1965 Indonesian coup that evolved into a citizens' lobby supportive of Suharto. It became known by its current name in 1981, and presently retains about a half million members. It remains a thuggish group and is reported to have beaten and/or threatened those who are associated with this film—journalists and the filmmakers themselves.



In a recent Q&A, Oppenheimer asserted this film was made “in collaboration with a community of survivors”, who have been deprived of the truth by a government still largely under the control of the perpetrators. It will be of great benefit to Indonesians if some measure of truth and justice comes from this film in wide release in Indonesia (an unlikely scenario right now). Still I am puzzled by the seeming contradiction when Oppenheimer also makes the claim that the active agents in the creative work of the film are not survivors but perpetrators. Enter, the telegenic Anwar Congo, who maintains a dapper “gangster” facade, his gap teeth and tiny neck so snap-able, his fragile lithe body of a Jiminy Cricket with all the cartoony charm; and his sidekick, also a perpetrator, fat, ugly and a cross dresser. “Relax and Rolex” was the motto of the Indonesian gangster community. Each shamelessly enumerates his methods of killing, with demonstrations. Anwar is even willing to play victim in one scene that ends up getting unexpectedly intense. (“I would call ‘cut’ if he was too deeply into it,” Oppenheimer said.)

One of the charms of the world of this film is how it demands that you let go of what you think is real and dips you head first into a delusional kaleidoscope of strangeness, banality, and psychotic pain, right into a literally gut-wrenching moment of truth, as the happy-go-lucky protagonist confronts the reality of the crimes he has committed and retches violently...a documentary filmmaker's version of a wet dream come true. (He was not about to call cut at that moment.) Anwar Congo and his killer buddies seem to have devised exquisitely produced and lavishly funded sequences of over saturated color, stunning natural beauty and freaky makeup jobs which teeter between fine art and amateurship.

Given the weirdness of doing mass murder Bollywood style, and drilling into the core of a truly twisted mind, potential for midnight movie audiences/cult movie status is high. Oppenheimer is framing this film as an altruistic work of social justice—which it belies with its reveling in sheer strangeness. Oppenheimer's camera frames the ultimate outsider art, and then lets it roll beyond. One scene appears to be a real village going up in flames. A sobbing child is traumatized before our eyes—it was hard enough for the jaded Hollywood audience to see the scene as a “movie”—much less a five-year-old. With the bamboo hut remains still smoldering, a (former) murderer holds the child on his lap and tries clumsily to console him, praising him for his realistic performance and wiping away the boy's tears. We are shown real moments of weariness from the chorus of female dancers after they are filmed in gauzy sumptuous long shots against a scenic waterfall—stunning imagery that maybe refers to Congo's longing for expiation of his sins but is more likely a scene of his being greeted in paradise and rewarded for his acts of audacious sadism. The line between documentary and fiction is blurry: when we see a Chinese merchant being shaken down for protection money we aren't sure we are watching verité or a reenactment. A television studio taping is supposed to be verité but seems to be staged for this documentary.



The film teaches us that the literal translation of the Indonesian word for ‘gangster’ is ‘free man’, a fact that is repeated during speeches at the Pancasila rallies that appear in the film. Congo, like many of his fellow criminals, was recruited by the army to kill. The killings have left him a haunted man, and have created a hollow and paranoid community of the guilty who are now living in a fragile state impunity. The Indonesian leadership has quashed attempts at creating truth and reconciliation commissions. Political Islam has played a role in the cover up, since Muslims had an extensive role in the murders, albeit under coercion, gross manipulation and deception. The film presents contemporary Indonesia as a traumatized populace in the grip of a ruling class of the guilty and

people whose lives depend on protecting them. The relatively large number of collaborators who have survived certainly provide a buffer for the status quo, since the last change they would want would be a government that wished to prosecute their crimes—however, their crimes leave them in a peculiarly vulnerable and tenuous position.

“I am always gazed at by those eyes I did not close” —**Anwar Congo**

The narrative arc of the charming sociopath Anwar Congo cries out for this film to be a moral tale of comeuppance, or at least a karmic reckoning. Anwar Congo is deeply aware of the horror he has visited on so many people, but finds it impossible to admit this to himself. The eyes of his victims watch him, he says, because he did not close them. He talks about visiting a witch doctor who explained that his problems sleeping, and the persistence of haunting images, are the result of a nerve disorder. (This is common nomenclature for psychological problems in some Asian societies.) We watch the unfolding of a man’s memory, with its flourishes and its absurd grandiosity, showing off how bad he was, how he strangled, beheaded and burned. He keeps up the façade for a while. I was reminded of Genet’s descriptions of the stiff dignity of the petty criminals he met in prison, whose demeanor was all tough guy and insolence, masking a desolation wrought by multiple personal tragedies.



Congo’s impunity is ‘shocking, shocking’ to us here in the U.S. (where we put our killer George Zimmerman on trial before setting him free) but even more shocking to us is the openness of the perpetrators. Where we come from, this openness is unseemly. The identities of drone operators are at least hidden, like executioners. People are not allowed into slaughterhouses. Generals are not encouraged to brag about their war crimes. One of the main amusements of watching *The Emperor’s Naked Army Marches On* were the tea rituals with which the protagonist was greeted by the war criminals he sought to “out”, that devolved into fist fights when he confronted their refusals to admit to the truth (in their case, cannibalism of the native New Guineans, or, when the natives proved too quick at escaping, lower ranking soldiers). In *The Act of Killing* we see not just one but many who speak boastfully of their murders, and only bridle when pressed with the notion that they were wrong in killing and ought to face justice. “History is written by the victors...isn’t that what your Winston Churchill said?” smirks one of the killers.

In 1965 the Indonesian government was led by [Sukarno](#), the first president of Indonesia, a formerly heroic national figure in winning independence from the Dutch(1949). He became increasingly anti-western as the Cold War era wore on and Western economic imperialism became the new mode of conquer. In the mid-60's his leadership was definitely on the wane: attempts at land reform had created schisms and antagonism throughout the archipelago, the economy was in shambles and it was a time of great hardship for the Indonesian people. The [PKI](#), a communist/leftist party, was pressing for a more socialist agenda; within the army, rivalries were heating up. Then all hell broke loose when an armed group calling itself the 30 September movement murdered six senior army generals and a lieutenant. The perpetrators were all disaffected military, whom later historians believe were elite PKI—though they did not represent the rank and file or those who simply agreed with the socialist principles of PKI, who later became victims. The Army Strategic Reserve, led by [Suharto](#), seized upon this event to launch a propaganda campaign demonizing the PKI at all levels. Through concerted and comprehensive disinformation, the army was able to mobilize a number of militias and other citizens groups, by presenting versions of the coup story tailored to stoke fear and paranoia. For every group of citizens the army wished to employ in killing, the narrative was custom made to give them a legitimate reason, even need to kill—and often the reason was simple coercion...See an excellent review of the history of that time and the various literature on the killings [here](#). According to an article in Wikipedia, the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta handed over 5,000 names of presumed communist sympathizers to the Indonesian army during the massacres, and the full extent of American complicity is unknown. Estimates vary, but perhaps a million people were killed. Indonesian history is extremely complex and grows more so in recent years, with the rise of indigenism, environmental politics, and a return to tribalism and other forms of cultural traditionalism, and the ubiquitous presence of NGOs, which always raises the question of, “Do you know where your NGO gets its funding?”

The version of Indonesian history that links widespread terror and depravity to the political ambitions of the power elite is not the version you will see in *The Act of Killing*. Oppenheimer opens his film with a quote from Voltaire: “All murderers are punished unless they kill in large numbers and to the sound of trumpets.” A great quote, but not for this film—Voltaire, the grandmaster of political analysis and historiography, is speaking of acts of war carried out by armies, generals, states and kingdoms, not foot soldiers, militiamen, or opportunistic sociopathic dupes. In a statement on the film's website, Oppenheimer writes:

“Anwar and his friends had helped to build a regime that terrorized their victims into treating them as heroes, and I realized that the film making process would answer many questions about the nature of such a regime – questions that may seem secondary to what they did, but in fact are inseparable from it. For instance, how do Anwar and his friends really think people see them? How do they want to be seen? How do they see themselves? How do they see their victims? How does the way they think they will be seen by others reveal what they imagine about the world they live in, the culture they have built? The film making method we used in The Act of Killing was developed to answer these questions. It is best seen as an investigative technique, refined to help us understand not only what we see, but also how we see, and how we imagine. These are questions of critical importance to understanding the imaginative procedures by which human beings persecute each other, and how we then go on to build (and live in) societies founded on systemic and enduring violence.”

Foundational to Oppenheimer's stylistically bold film is this notion that it is the psychology of individuals—their “imaginative procedures”—that drives them to persecute, and that this is what shapes society. Every telling of history is a story with a “moral” that resonates within the codes of its own worldview. The historiographical implications of Oppenheimer's work point away from the role of elites in driving the mass slaughter and towards the machinations of the individual pathology. In the case of Anwar, Hollywood movies fueled his imagination. He is an imitation of the gangsters he saw in action movies, as he tells it. The assumption that “our” propensity for

consuming pop culture and desiring to imitate the violence so carefully rendered for our entertainment makes us a violent society is a big question that seems to shield us from looking at the real guns aimed at real people who have historically been on the wrong side of power at the wrong time. The casting of mass killings as an aberration of an individual's imagination becomes a regressive, ahistorical position, and in this case ends up distorting the truth. The actual history of the events of 1965 and 1966, as in most genocides and mass killings throughout history, have much more to do with political factors than anyone's imaginative propensities. Historians agree that a concerted propaganda campaign drove the killings. People were lied to and used to wipe out a manufactured opposition to a military that wanted power. They may have had a propensity to believe the lies and take up violence because of prejudice, fear, greed or ignorance, but to use Anwar Congo's case as exemplary is downright misleading. Most of the militias had vested economic interests that would be served, were either tribal or Islamic—having fears stoked around their cultural and religious practices and identities being wiped out—or they were the victims of coercion to kill or be identified as the enemy.



The other curious part of Oppenheimer's statement is "How do Anwar and his friends really think people see them?" This seems to be the operating dynamic in this film, that is mainly an ode written by the (evil, brown) protagonists to themselves, put on display by a western filmmaker who knows better and is quite naturally morally superior. It's true that there are some quarters within "first world" society where image is of primary concern: the entertainment industry, fashion, the ruling classes, certain corporations...realms in which no expense is spared protecting and/or burnishing image. Go to poor ethnic neighborhoods and you won't see this. For Oppenheimer to posit that culture is built upon people's notion of how they think others will see them is revealing. For it also calls to mind the mistaken ways people think others see them, and here we have a hapless attempt at image building which makes for that piquant freakshow aspect—certainly this is one of the main reasons why this film got the imprimatur of [Errol Morris](#). The "reenactments" that Oppenheimer enables Anwar Congo to produce are really more Bollywood than Hollywood. In Bollywood films, Westerners see a kitsch paean to Western film making. People in India find this entertainment to be genuine; we see it as a genuine imitation of what a dominant culture ("we") originated, never mind that the cultural references might all come out of Hindu mythology, Indian history, traditional dance, etc. As westerners, watching scenes in the Oppenheimer film where an obese, sweaty mass murderer dolls himself up (like "our" Divine), or dancing girls in plumed costumes strut in a stiffly choreographed line from the mouth of a giant fish, a subtly derisive amusement is evoked, a superior chuckle which a privileged audience experiences watching the

product of a less sophisticated artist, an “outsider”, who just happens to be morally inferior (oh the horror, LOL), and he’s brown to boot. This is the very [soul of the kitsch experience](#). The overlay of our Western sensibilities sticks to the material like plastic wrap, but to unpack *The Act of Killing* it’s necessary to look past the film that Oppenheimer is asking us to see, to look through Anwar Congo’s seductive psychic fragility, to the larger forces that were at work. Despite the filmmaker’s comments, the great pathos that this film ultimately achieves is how the magnitude of Congo’s crimes, and the spell of the delusion that has kept him going, cracks open through the act of making art—however duped he was into making it, another cruel irony—and ultimately how that art-making brings Anwar Congo to a deeply physicalized moment of despair and remorse. You can’t really call it a moment of truth, because the hands pulling his strings will remain unknown, and he’s still in a Plato’s cave, where he will no doubt stay for a long long time, right next to his director, his audience and his victims. He now lives in dread, “free”, not declared guilty, not in imminent physical danger, but his dead will keep looking at him with the eyes he did not close, in dream after dream. Whether or not he will see a day of judgment is truly not the issue; it is a spell-binding story, and just like those spell-binding stories of fantastical Manichaeism spun out of Hollywood, so beloved to the protagonist, there’s nothing like a good bad guy.





Inside the Artist's Studio: David DiMichele

May 23, 2011 | by [Constance Mallinson](#) | Filed Under: [Art](#) |

Inside the Artist's Studio is an ongoing series exploring issues on contemporary art through direct encounters with the artists themselves.



The Gallery In Ruins –

In his 1986 book *Inside the White Cube* based on a [1976 series of Artforum essays](#), artist and writer [Brian O'Doherty](#) examined the pristine white gallery space as the required context and condition for appreciating contemporary art. He wrote of such spaces, “The outside world must not come in, so windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white... The purpose of such a setting is not unlike the purpose of religious buildings.” As with congregants in any religious space, once within the gallery a special group shares its solidarity with art world values. The gleaming White Cube frames the artwork and confers on it an aura of being an enduring masterpiece. It has been essential for the reception, success and enshrinement of Modernist and contemporary art. In photographs of gallery installations, anything other than art, including human viewers, had to be eliminated to maintain the sanctity of such a space and its devotion to pure aesthetics. Large scale Modernist painting was dependent upon these high temples where Abstract Expressionist or Minimalist canvases fulfilled the expectations for radical new visions. By the late 1970's, however, a variety of experimental practices such as earthworks, extreme body performances like Chris Burden's self-inflicted gunshot wounds, as well as hardcore

Conceptualism with its dematerialization of the artisanal object, began to change the nature of gallery spectatorship, aligning the disembodied aesthetic eye more with the body and mind. Artists exited the White Cube for a myriad of alternative contexts from the streets to remote outdoor sites and relied on photo documentation as proxies for real time experiences.

Despite the implications for the traditional white gallery space engendered by those artists, the White Cube endured, morphing into a marketing tool and signifier for sophisticated branded commodities as much as the inner sanctum for contemplating contemporary art. Painting and sculpture, in addition to perennially facing challenges to outdo their predecessors in novel forms and aesthetic boundary breaking, have been dependent on gallery space to present the fullest appreciation of their qualities of scale, and subtleties in color, touch, and texture. Immaculate dedicated spaces, however are facing an existential threat, not by artists who question the elitist gallery system necessary for enforcing art world hegemonies, but by the economics of 21st century White Cube operations and the introduction of pervasive digital hegemonies. Radically altering the perception and reception of art objects, the computer screen is now the essential environment for viewing art; any art object—whether virtual or existing—has become instantly accessible and consumable. On-line galleries are proliferating along with journals, curatorial websites and cyber sales venues. As a result, direct tactile experience of art objects is decreasing. (Ironically, during the great Modern-isms, the catalyst for new approaches to painting was art's internal fetishization of "progress".) In this situation, White Cubes have had to become ever more spectacular and impressive to attract viewers, as has the art contained in them. But the writing is on the spacious track lighted walls.



This is not to suggest that epic, entertaining installations such as [Kara Walker's warehouse sized Aunt Jemima sphinx](#), [Yayoi Kusama's infinity mirror installation at the Broad Museum](#), and Jeff Koons' future LACMA's \$25 million steam engine adornment, will not continue to draw throngs. For artists without the celebrity

status/resources required to realize such projects, however, ambitious on-site projects are increasingly unattainable. Diminishing gallery and museum opportunities and viewers' increasing preferences for the convenience and ease of on-line imagery and the virtual have added further challenges. Rather than abstain from such sculptural explorations, however, multi-media artist **David DiMichele** has satisfied his penchant for expansive installations as well as handmade objects by creating what he calls "**Pseudodocumentations**" – illusionistic digital versions of small scale hand crafted sculptural dioramas mimicking current or historical largescale artworks. Built in a cramped cram packed garage at his Altadena residence and amusingly belying the grandeur he dreams of, the box constructions last only long enough to be photographed and digitally manipulated for large Digital Chromogenic prints. In these miniaturized stage like settings, he enacts his art fantasies, often reprising historical artworks and movements as believable evidence of existing full-scale exhibitions. He comments, "There a basic idea of deceit that's built into the entire enterprise." The theatrical device, which never gels as parody, promotes critical reflection on the nature of the unique or original art object and the many ways contemporary art is experienced.





Having come of age when Robert Irwin, Richard Serra, James Turrell, Gordon Matta Clark, and Robert Smithson were challenging the definitions, contexts, and means of art experience, DiMichele draws inspiration from a time when the possibilities for innovation in the visual arts were not compromised by million dollar budgets, art star obsessions, a crowded playing field, and postmodern ennui. Many of those artists haunt DiMichele's finished photographs. Their work has been re-staged and repackaged for a different milieu. A replica of Smithson's famous *Spiral Jetty* winds its way through arched cutouts on a mirrored "floor". Mounds of asphalt "dirt" and salt crystals allude to Barry LeVa's renowned interior scatter works from the 1970's. Miniature black or white "primary forms" referencing Minimalist masters Tony Smith, Carl Andre, Donald Judd, Robert Irwin and others hang on walls, are scattered across or overflow facsimiles of famous museum halls like the Getty Villa or the Whitney. A "room" filled with a Cubistic proliferation of pure white boxes and canvases illuminated with track lighting, renders the White Cube into an object or subject itself. Industrial materials like rubber and foam tubing and plastic light rods playfully capture the feel and aesthetics of sculptural pioneers Robert Morris, Eva Hesse, and Dan Flavin. Lending credibility to these reconstructions is the skillful illusion of their installations in voluminous galleries as sculptural tendrils and tentacles serpentine dramatically through skylights, ceilings, and doors; piles, pours, and accumulations of various materials lean against walls or are stacked shoulder high. Dwarfed by the spectacles, realistic walking and gesturing figures—surrogates for real time viewers—appear to observe and interact with the installations.





These productions require finesse as a painter and sculptor, albeit one whose miniscule brushy canvases or Surrealistic organic forms parading in tiny tableaus are made in the service of their photographic destinations. These are also rich in historical associations such as when he recalls Hans Hoffman, the iconic Abstract Expressionist who sought to represent deep pictorial space through pure form and color manipulation. By placing multi-colored mini paintings at different angles and in overlapping configurations and allowing for shadow play and perspective in his set ups, Di Michele can transform the elements in a flat painting into the illusion of a walk through space. As a result, the transcendence traditionally associated with abstraction has been somewhat mockingly dismissed. Hoffman might be horrified, but DiMichele digitally accomplishes what Hoffman was not always able to pull off. Likewise, DiMichele can fill the “walls” of a model with Pollock-esque drips that absorb and envelop viewers in ways the AbEx master could never have imagined. Lest art historical quotation be the only game, DiMichele creates more personal expressions as when he uses thick gnarly skeins of paint as a sculptural material within his fabrications. Likewise, black painted branches, jagged bark, and wire serve as gestural analogues, whipping balletically through space in a constant interplay between two and three dimensions in the finished photographs. There are certainly precedents and congruities in the work of James Casebere and Barbara Kasten, photographers who painstakingly fashion artful 3D constructions solely to be photographed. These artists probe the relationship between art, reality, and photographic reproduction, endlessly scrutinizing the truths and fictions of the photograph. Among the many questions these works raise are whether the masters themselves are now seen primarily in reproductions, and whether, as the Conceptualists argued several decades ago, an image derived from any artwork can present or deliver an idea as effectively as experiencing the actual art object. In their Baudrillardian world, viewers’ perceptions have been thoroughly conditioned and colonized by images; an object exists to be reproduced, so any literal encounters with objects can be dispensed with. If so, is DiMichele offering a nostalgic simulacra? Has “the creative act replicat[ed] itself to become nothing more than the sign of its own operation”? In a world offering infinitely consummable effects, is authorship, even ownership, important?





Along with such questions, is a great Oedipal struggle DiMichele wages with his heroic forebears and with the power structures that support and control an artist's production and desires. Artists must always unmake their history to create something "new". His photographs in essence abandon the objecthood of the original artworks, destroying their auras and by inference, the esteemed venues for creating and preserving those auras. Clearly DiMichele has ruination on his mind. "Pseudodocumentation: Destroy the Gallery" (2017) depicts giant rusty Richard Serra-like steel shards piercing and slashing the gallery space like so many giant knives. Chunks of ceiling and metal scrap litter the floor implying a kind of payback or death wish for the masters of old. Similarly, "Pseudodocumentation: Broken Plaster"(2011) portrays the interior of a gallery space covered with hundreds of crumbling plaster chunks, eerily reminiscent of scenes of recent Syrian devastation or the aftermath of a natural cataclysm. In an unfinished work seen in his studio, spectators stand at the foot of towering sculptures arising anew from this sort of rubble, perhaps to interject a small nod to creative destruction. In another the artist has scattered shattered and broken glass like sections of fractured arctic ice flows or the smashed remains of a thousand picture frames. Such images of collapse suggest the forces of entropy, acts of disruption, deconstruction, dystopian allegories, and the rebuking of progressive narratives. Tim Edensor writes of ruins long symbolizing "the inevitability of death and decay, the fragility of life, and of the material world.....the ruin itself embodies the events which led to its present state and conjures the processes which led to the demise of the building.....and all that occurred within" While DiMichele does show his photographs in galleries, there's a tragicomic sense of self sabotage or at least a heavy dose of irony in doing so. For as the display of art turns more and more to the digital realm, such ruinous images seem to portend the extinction or irrelevance of the White Cube. DiMichele may have broken the spell of the White Cube in order to critique monolithic forms of art presentation and reveal the usurpation of cultural authority over an artist's visibility via the internet. A ruin, though, always has the potential for yielding new possibilities. While the notion of seeing art *non habes corpus* is

troubling for many, at a time when thousands of artists want their fifteen minutes of fame, competition for gallery space is fierce, and resources more and more limited, artists like DiMichele might just be saving the idea of art.





The Master Framer

July 7, 2015 | by [Alissa Guzman](#) | Filed Under: [Film](#) |

A Week with Wim Wenders, March 2015 —



MoMA's recent [career retrospective](#) of **Wim Wenders**—the iconic, modest, humorous, down-to-earth filmmaker with an uncanny knack for bringing magic to the ordinary aspects of life—screened 20 restored films and numerous shorts in sixteen days this March. The retrospective kicked off just weeks after Wenders was given the lifetime achievement award at the 65th Berlin International Film Festival. In New York City for the screenings, speaking before and after each showing, the retrospective gave an eclectic set of followers the chance to see

Wim Wenders' films in their rightful format, as well as hear from the man himself.

I found myself surrounded nightly by a familiar set of faces, and spent the week wondering why each of them, like myself, came consecutively. From older, German attendees with distant ties to Wenders himself, to aspiring

young filmmakers who came to meet a hero, the venerable director behaved in a slightly embarrassed manner when confronted by admiring viewers. A captivating speaker, Wenders has the kind of charisma we associate with actors, sweeping in and out of the theater in elegant Yamamoto trench coats sporting boyishly wavy hair. Unfailingly generous with his time, we'd stumble out of the theater hours after the film had ended. Against the backdrop of New York City in March—cold and rainy with streets full of soggy trash as winter's snow began to melt—my week with Wim Wenders was one of idolatry and inspiration.



[Written in the West](#) (1983), an unobtrusive collection of everyday images Wenders shot while scouting locations for his now-revered film *Paris, Texas*, tells us everything we need to know about the director. Though shot with a 5x6 medium format camera with carefully considered composition, the images are snapshot-like and perfectly capture the themes his films explore in detail and with nuance: travel, history, memory, American influence and the act of searching. Shot while driving through California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas, he defines the West as a landscape that promises a vastness and a sense of possibility it never quite delivers. Wenders says “*dreams are the language of cinema,*” and his photographs, much like his films, suggest that while dreams might not die, they never come true either. Documenting small towns, shabby yards, dusty business and dingy restaurants, a sense of American wander, aspiration and delusion is encapsulated in each image.

Moving from his photographs to his films, Wenders' signature sense of framing remains as omnipresent in his work as the road, rock & roll or romantic metaphor. Confessing to be a "failed painter," Wenders says he learned everything he knows about filmmaking from painting. Inspired by 20th century American artists who made the canvas look seductively cinematic, from Edward Hopper to Andrew Wyeth, Wenders seems to work in reverse, turning his still images into roaming films. From the library-haunting angels in *Wings Of Desire* (1987), pursuing books of August Sander portraits, to the journalist and protagonist in [Alice In The Cities](#) (1974) discharging Polaroid after Polaroid, the self-imposed limits of a painterly frame is his cinematic constant. In *An American Friend* (1977), a terminally ill frame maker who lovingly creates handcrafted picture frames, is coerced into becoming an assassin. The literal manifestation of Wenders' own obsession, the framer's meticulous creations exist in stark contrast to the world of murderous chaos that descends around him. Order and perfection, Wenders' film suggests to himself as well as his viewers, is just a well-constructed lie.



If his first medium was painting, Wenders first profession was travel. Born in Düsseldorf, the target of strategic RAF bombing during WWII, he grew up in a destroyed city. He described realizing that it was, "just us who were frantically rebuilding and who had no past, only a present and a future. Everything I liked was American," Wenders recalled, "and all I wanted was to get away. Even as a young boy, traveling was my nature." While it's too simplistic to say that his films are road movies, a great many of them are, from *Alice in the Cities* to *Kings of the Road* (1976). They are not about the road itself, however, in a Kerouac sense of the word, where the road acts as a place where unexpected adventures are found and experienced. Wenders uses the road as a simple cinematic device, albeit one with political undertones, to keep the camera moving. His sense of travel is documentary—countless nearly abandoned movie theaters are incorporated into *Kings of the Road* like evidence

of a vanishing culture—and his characters wander not for experience but because they are searching for something lost: a pre-war society, a mother, authenticity, morals, the American unconscious.



Wenders' use of metaphor is arguably the single greatest aspect of his films, and what sets him apart from his [New German Cinema](#) contemporaries. Declaring himself a “hopeless or hopeful romantic” perfectly describes his sensibility and aesthetic. If Wenders uses the road to create movement, then travel is a metaphor for the endless searching his characters endure. Though Wenders films are unceremoniously full of the ordinary—normal people, affordable cars, boring roads, small towns, simple dialogue, flawed characters with indiscernible motivations—they are also full of powerful metaphor and allusion. Wenders says the best thing about cinema is “*its ability to touch upon the sacred,*” and as a viewer it's impossible not to wonder what makes his simple metaphors so profound.

The answer seems to hinge on individual preferences and conceptual leanings, and Wenders asks his audience difficult metaphysical questions. As Peter Handke's poem [Song of Childhood](#) alludes to in *Wings of Desire*, Wenders asks adults childlike questions. Do we prefer cynicism or romanticism? Do we see existence as beautiful or something tinged with tragedy? Are we living as we should or ignoring the things we once appreciated? His characters, like ourselves, are caught up in their own meandering stories. An aged man in *Wings of Desire*, looking in vain for his pre-war Berlin, is searching for the intangibles the war stripped away. The pre-adolescent Alice in *Alice in the Cities*, searching for a grandmother she doesn't quite remember, is mourning her lost innocence and rapidly disappearing childhood. The protagonists in *Kings of the Road*, searching for work and a reason to live while traveling the border between East and West Germany,

contemplate masculinity, ideology and the consequences of an aimless life. The epic angels in *Wings of Desire* seem to echo Wenders' own statement that *"life is all there is, and death doesn't exist."*



Sitting alone in the movie theater night after night, kept company by distant friends as the lights dimmed and the credits rolled, I remembered my teenage self who first discovered Wim Wenders. It was that eccentric drawing teacher in art school who introduced a group of yawning freshmen to *Wings of Desire*, and a photography professor turned mentor who handed me a copy of *Written In The West* like it was the answer to all my questions. All things being cyclical, my week spent with Wim Wenders brought me right back to a long ago debate in high school on the precarious existence of modern day heroes. I wish I could tell that English teacher—trying desperately to spark the minds of his listless students—that heroes do still exist and they can still inspire.



Wings of Desire Poster in the writer's studio



Times Quotidian

...an infinite number of thing to speak of

Anthology: Ten Years of TQ – Robert Kato

January 9, 2019 | by [Robert Kato](#) | Filed Under: [Photography](#) |

From Robert Kato's [seeing iPhone](#) –



Portrait of a Leaf, 09.27.2011



Standing Still,03.03.2012



rikka style before nine, 05.23.2012