

text by PABLO DSTAIR  
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a pilgrim shadow:  
THE CANYONS as  
El Dorado



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*NOTE: This text does not purport to represent with 100% accuracy anything except for the author's subjective remembrances. Any party specifically mentioned who wishes to comment on the accuracy of any part of this essay is encouraged to do so.*

Judy's in the bedroom, inventing situations  
Bob is on the street today, scouting out locations

-The Talking Heads, *Found A Job*

## THE SET VISIT

I'd written an essay for *The Arts Magazine* concerning cinema through the filter of a new film called *The Canyons* and *The Arts Magazine* had suggested I finagle my way onto set, that they would have a photographer at the ready, that a 12-page photo spread would be made to accompany my little musings on persona and audience and meta-cinematics.

After much polite back-and-forth, Braxton Pope, the film's producer, was kind enough to allow myself and a photographer ride along privileges during the final days of shooting and added in the delicious extra of a side trip out to Bret Easton Ellis' house, Ellis being the film's screenwriter.

This invitation came in on Wednesday morning and our privileges were to begin at 6PM the same day—the film was being shot in Los Angeles, so I would have to leave immediately from my home in Vegas.

Perhaps I should have had some qualms when I contacted the photographer and he claimed to have no prior knowledge of any engagement with *The Arts Magazine* and only the vaguest memory of a man who may or may not have been *The Arts Magazine's* CEO, but as the photographer was a laid back sort and assured me he would be down for it, regardless, I had no qualms at all.

My wife had the presence of mind to make me purchase clothes that actually fit and were not emblazoned with logos for soft drinks or breakfast cereals, I got on the road just as the desert landscape was swallowed into a long gulp of black and



sped along to *Gogol Bordello* and then *Bob Dylan* and then *The Thrills* and then *Dylan*, then *The Arctic Monkeys*, *Dylan*, *The Redwalls*, *Dylan*, *The Vibrators*—on and on and on through the nothingscape.

Stopping for gas, the photographer sends a text and is a little bit nervous about showing up to set without me—our first invite was to a shoot on location in a small apartment somewhere. We agreed that he would wait for the Thursday all-day ride along, I cringed sending Braxton the news, got back in the car and drove.

It was something around half past midnight when I got in to LA, Jackson Pollack eyed and needing to void the coffee and Red Bulls—I slowly cruised the street with the apartment complex where things were happening, but decided it might not be wise to show up bugging folks at the end of their workday, baggy old travel pants, Fanta Grape logoed to my chest, sans photographer and doing a potty dance.

So from one overpriced hotel to another—no rooms, no rooms, a nice old man calling around everyplace he could think of, silently looking at me with a sigh after the seventh call—laughed out of the Beverly Hilton for saying something along the lines of ‘Anything cheaper?’ until finally landing around 3 AM at a lush Hyatt and shelling out three hundred for a room they’d be nice enough to let me have until two in the afternoon.

Wednesday I met with an actor who was also the writer of another film I was doing a piece about, endured the strangest and most subtextually threatening taxi ride conceivable, extended my hotel stay based on no will to change hotels despite the price tag, and wrought with paranoia found that I still had not received a reply from Braxton about the where and the when for the meet, next morning, and equally no word from the photographer on whether he wanted me to pick him up, had his own car, how far out he was from things et cetera.

But cigarettes on the darling little balcony, quick spot of courage from the minibar, staunch resistance to the wide array of MILF porn on demand and I slept.

Woke to find that—scientifically—the Internet in the hotel had not been working since about nine o’clock at night, meaning the ten o’clock at night message from Braxton with his home address and the meeting time of 10 AM had not been received until I checked my e-mail around 8:05, days first smoke hardly even lit, wrongfully cursing myself for having ‘slept in’ and slapping at the buttons of my telephone.

No message from photographer.

Texted him.

No reply.

Quick panicked e-mail to Braxton that maybe it would be best to meet him at the second stop on the itinerary, but right after SEND decided not to stay in the room long enough to let him reply (which he did, I later found out) instead just did an abbreviated sink shower and downing hotel coffee too hot, out to the garage for my own car (never trusting a cab in LA, again).

My bad habit of always picking the wrong way to turn if ever I am not quite certain at an intersection was not enough to keep me from arriving at Braxton's house, ten o'clock to the tenth of a second. Walking up to the door, making sure none of the tags of my new clothes were left on, I remarked that it was smaller than my own home, but quickly humbled myself with the obvious fact that it likely cost five times as much to live in.

A gorgeous woman opens the door, kind of a pistol shot beauty, and I vaguely think I see Braxton in back, the very creeping feeling that the two of them had either just finished or else had been interrupted in some intimate moment by my knock. But I am invited in pleasantly and told to have a seat, which I do, across from a strikingly large taxidermy beaver.

While Braxton spoke to me casual first-thing-to-say greetings from behind the door where he was dressing, I nosed through his honestly impressive collection of books and became jealous of the various autographed things up on his walls.

Our day, Braxton says—asking the second time about my already shabbily explained absence of photographer—would consist of a drive into the hills of Malibu for one location, back to his place to set up for a driving sequence with James Deen (Deen's last day of filming) perhaps a side trip to see Bret, and then to a closed set for an Amanda Brooks, Nolan Funk hot tub scene where, if we did not get round to Bret's, Bret would be kind enough to show up.

'How did you hear about the project?' asks Braxton.

My convoluted explanation of the initial discovery of it, a mention that it was Paul Schrader's involvement that first caught my eye and then Bret Ellis had sealed the deal—adding in that I was also pleasantly surprised to see Braxton's own



name due to recalling that he had produced a horror film called *Penny Dreadful* I had watched a year or two before. A kind of dubious breath and facial expression from Braxton, we talk briefly about how that film, in particular, wasn't the proverbial feather in his cap, I start to feel awful for mentioning it and do my best—hopefully steering left of sounding like a full on twat—to say that it must be odd to be a Producer, because on paper I imagine the project seemed an excellent idea.

Blessedly, the conversation shifts to how he knows Thom Jones quite well and that we should get going.

Braxton was good enough not to argue with me about paying for his coffee and—thank God—a message from the photographer comes in that he’s sorry, his phone had been dead the whole day previous and what time and where was the shoot. Holding the phone up as proof, I ask Braxton where’s best to join up with the photographer, the Malibu house seeming ideal due to Braxton’s descriptions of its beauty, but more practically it being best to meet back at Braxton’s for the Deen shots.

Slight relaxation, I ease into the passenger seat and Braxton starts the drive.

After five minutes of explaining myself, in general, to Braxton—peculiarly deciding to do so by listing off a series of people he has never heard of who I think are assholes—I deprecatingly mention that I have a tendency to start lobbing very esoteric comments and questions and that he should feel free to ignore me when this starts up, in earnest.

‘No worries.’

And Braxton explains how he has a production company with Bret and how after he and Paul and Bret had been trying to get another movie made they decided to shuck the usual Studio route and pay for it themselves, splitting cost three ways, supplementing with crowd sourced funds. The Studio System seems to be something he quite in the marrow has a disdain for, which is refreshing to hear—it is common, in my circles, to hear a ‘screw the system’ type speechifying, but it is one thing when it isn’t an option to ‘go corporate,’ quite a different kind of animal to hear it from someone who pointedly has the option and calculatedly decides against it.

As we wend up the Malibu hills, the conversation settles on the beautiful state of contemporary television, much praise of Vince Gilligan’s *Breaking Bad* and some theory as to the shifting audience reception and perception of ‘actor’s performance’ now that such crackerjack long form work is readily accessible to view, my angle being that the A-list, Academy Award type praise is not long for this world in the face of such extended and brilliant small screen performances on a weekly basis, and about how Big Stars cannot function as readily on the small



screen and how fundamental shifts in the perception of Television-As-Cinema are coming. Then I worry I am sounding too militant, as after all Braxton is producing a film, not a television program, but before I can fret too much we meet up with the film crew for the last leg up the hill.

It strikes me that I never did manage to remember the name of Paul Schrader's film *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters*, and that, worse, I'd not confirmed that it had been by Paul Schrader (odd permutations of names gurgled in my head: Paul Simpson, Peter Schrader, Peter Schaffer, Paul Saunders) because I had hoped to mention my love of it rather than any usual Schrader fare upon being introduced. But my noia about this is abruptly put to bed when the cars pull into the house and Braxton leans across to say, 'A few points of protocol with Schrader. Try not to talk. Just kind of hang back and do as little as possible. He can be an intense guy when he's working' me going nod nod nod, Braxton's instructions quite pertinent as he had been listening to me blather on nonstop for almost forty minutes.

The Malibu house was where the bulk of the core film had been shot, a gorgeous place donated for the duration of filming by the friend of a film backer. Not usually taken in by views, I am nonetheless floored by the panorama, the whole thing given a tinge of almost old world beauty by the fact that the two young children who lived there were playing in the grass of the steep inclines and the homeowners were mingling with Director-of-Photography et al.

It was an establishing shot being done, no cast present. Schrader at one point checks the shot through the camera and says 'Can we have them move the dog food bowl out of the way?' A moment of unadulterated magic, this master then casually pacing back and forth (a brief, pleasant handshake introduction to me) water bottle in hand.

Another such moment: me attempting to get cell phone signal because now, again, no word back from the photographer, while one of the crew, in hush voice, mentions to Braxton 'You know we don't have permits for the filming we're doing later, today?' Braxton offhand replying it would be

alright, he'd mock up some piece of paper that should be enough to get them out of trouble should trouble arise.

Braxton says we should bounce, inquires again about the photographer, and I hem haw something, never wanting to be breathing air that isn't in the presence of film crew, of go-getters, of do-ers.

Back to the television thing, Braxton mentions how originally when David Chase was shopping *The Sopranos*, it was meant for the Fox television network and how it had almost gone down that Jim Belushi would play the part of Tony, something, Braxton said, that while he and I might find absurd, made, to executives, good sense because at the time Belushi had a hot sitcom and was well loved by the proletariat.

Then we spoke in endless praise of Louis C.K.'s program—the man a true auteur and I felt good that I said it was like watching an art film on television each week, nothing so surprising since McGoohan's *The Prisoner* as 'spy show' in the sixties, then again felt alright that to Braxton's mentioning C.K.'s choice of film style (his particular observational slant being outside of the realm of what was considered 'funny' in appearance or content) I remarked that the humor was more akin to Beckett-esque existentialism, even absurdism and Braxton told me how C.K. had been tweeting and generally asking around if anyone had particular cinema lenses because C.K. was the sort of artist so deeply invested in the nuance of each thing—Wes Anderson, we mention, Chantal Akerman, Jim Jarmusch.

This veers in to me rapping about how having children only increases the artistic output and imperative, then, non-sequitur, how my wife wears the pants in our relationship.

'The way it always is,' Braxton says, self-referential smile and nod.

And when I mention we're in Vegas for my wife's teaching job he says how he wants to do something in Vegas—mentions a book called *The Delivery Man* which I vaguely remember writer friends of mine praising all the time—but says that it's contrary to how one would think, but Vegas isn't the most film friendly place on Earth.



‘What would you do a film about, in Vegas? What’s the Vegas story we haven’t heard about?’ he asks.

It’s sad to say but I have nothing ready as reply, so only manage some vague riff about off-strip casinos set in the half formed suburbia, million dollar houses separated only by two blocks from run-of-the-mill and even run down house/apartments, how these casinos don’t cater to tourist but to locals and how it must be surreal for cab drivers to pick up the croupier, the gamblers, the welfare louts, the bored wealthy all within spitting distance of each other, if not right next door,

how these places were the Nega-Vegas as far as common perception went, these casinos not at all primary, but almost like ticks feting themselves on the bloat of penned animals, the cab drivers milling in front like the germs that mix with the swallowed blood.

Not a very good pitch, but it hardly mattered because we were pulling in to park and so it was 'to be continued' (at least I hoped and tried to jumpstart some better idea as we got around the corner, up the driveway).

My first impression of James Deen, in the flesh, was brief and inconclusive: he was talking about how he might not be so comfortable with the crew mounting a camera to his very lovely car. Shortly after, I nodded a Hello to him as I exited Braxton's house and he entered—his appearance was slighter than I had expected, but his presence was, honestly, immediately rather magnetic, something I would have called 'brooding' if not for the wide smile and unaffected gait, so I labeled it 'thoughtful-bordering-on-pensive,' instead.

I tried again to raise the photographer—this being our only chance to shoot Deen—and before the reply came in I chatted with the Key Grip, explaining my more-or-less unnecessary presence, how I was supposed to have a photographer with me but Lord only knew where that bastard had got to. The Key Grip pointed to the Director-of-Photography, explaining the man was a genius and if I needed photos, I should talk to him.

Message in from the photographer: *Sorry man, my ride canceled on me, looks like I won't be showing up, sorry to be so last minute.*

Technically, he was several hours past last minute, but leaving that on one side I called him, got his voicemail, so then texted about I would gladly cover the fare for a taxi and could drive him home personally.

No response. No response. No response.

Around this time I wandered over to where my car was parked in Braxton's driveway, several crew members milling there, James Deen sitting on a stone wall in reserved conversation with them. Deen was relating some story from his childhood. Letting a last sigh about the bad news tucked back in my pocket with my phone, I listened for a moment.

‘When I was six, I used to drink my dad’s beer, I knew where he kept it...at school, for a long time, they thought I was retarded...but it was just I was drunk, six-years-old going to school after drinking beer...that’s what they thought, though, I was retarded. And they were right. Because I was six and drinking beer and then going off to school.’

His face was neither aggrandizing nor deprecating, the story seemed more inward than out, as though he wasn’t expecting the actuality, the depth of it to hit those listening, that only the surface was what would be responded to, a wine note of sadness to his brow and the line of his mouth not lost on me.

As I moved away, someone asked him was this his first time acting, had he done plays as a kid or anything. Deen—a smile, honestly amused not by the question but by the quiet absurdity that such a thing needed to be asked—eyes widening with the obviousness of it said, ‘Of course. As a kid. Who hasn’t done a play as a kid?’

There was a chat going on inside that I nudged my way in to, sinking into a seat. During this, Deen entered with the make-up girl and they went around to get him prepared. The chat was Braxton talking about a panel he had been on, someone going on to him about the lack of quality in indie cinema, espousing the virtues of studio strictures or something—Braxton, of course, related that this had been an irritant, that he could not understand the commentary (though he admitted, of course, there was bad indie cinema, he wasn’t rose tint about the intricacies of any platform). I ‘hear-hear-ed’ him, relating, from the POV of my lowly circles, that the same conversations were on repeat regarding indie publishing, the stigma that still hung, the automatic-from-the-hip opinion of many that anything not commercial was strictly amateur.

Schrader was seated nearby during this and after the make-up girl stepped out to delightedly explain that Deen was dancing in his boxer shorts—repeating it twice so that the gravity of the levity would not be lost—he said quietly, but not to himself, that this was the first film he had worked on where the Director and the DP had to wait for the camera. Perhaps taking a cue from the make-up girls musicality in repetition, he

shifted and said, a bit more to those in back, ‘I said: this is the first film I’ve worked on where the Director and the DP have to wait on the camera.’

An air I was unfamiliar with—except for vague feelings of school and a teacher asking ‘Has anybody even read this chapter?’ working up from the lizard part of my brain—filled the room.

There was quickly the further problem that when equipment did arrive, a blue-tooth headset had not, prompting Schrader to quite stoically ask, ‘Goddamnit, do we want to start acting like we’re making a fucking movie around here?’ For exemplary emphasis, he asked someone if he was wrong, if perhaps he had mistaken them for someone working on the film when, in actual fact, they weren’t.

Options were flurrily discussed, ending with the decision that an electronics store nearby would be best, Schrader exiting stage-down-the-street with a real air of business, business to the point that not only might he walk the whole way to the store, himself, but that he might just as readily lilt into stalled LA traffic, tap the first window of someone who seemed to be talking to themselves and rip the necessary device from their ear.

Let me, not without pointedness, note that all of this was not done by Schrader with any hint of hissiness or gloom or Prima Donna—this was simply what needed to be happening and decorum in making it so was only as relevant as the moon is to the sun.

I meandered outside, trying to raise the photographer, again, at least get it from the horse’s mouth and stop it all with the cryptic texts.

No answer.

Fine.

I text him about is he just not coming out, even by taxi, or would he like to meet up at the evening shoot or what?

Deen was now dressed up and smoothed even in make-up. Various members of the crew were working out some sort of logistical thing in the driveway. Deen was a ways off, on the sidewalk beyond the bushes at the end of the lawn,



contemplatively pacing ten yards out, ten yards back—a random passerby approached and Deen made a wide, even overly gracious path for them, arms crossed, head bobbed, maybe running lines, maybe remembering the film in sequence up to the point about to be shot.

Phone still in my hand vibrated. Photographer says: *No. I'm just not going to be coming out. Sorry, again.*

To this point, I'd been staunchly resisting the urge toward the unfiltered Camels in my pocket (half flattened from sitting on them strangely at some point the previous evening) resisting

on the strength that Braxton had offhandedly mentioned he suffered from asthma and the crew's habit of smoking like tailpipes was an obstacle for him, but now...well, now what the fuck, right? I figure, fresh air all around, I figure I deserved it before being unceremoniously booted, which I surmised was a train only a short hill off, no conductor or else one realizing only just then there's no brake.

Deen continued to pace, his arm gestures increasingly unconscious, maybe concentration casually drifting to talking to himself.

To make me feel more appallingly Tom Ripley about my whole situation, on stepping back in to the house Braxton happened to be standing up, asked me what the word was from the photographer. The thing was, says Braxton, the shoot that night was technically closed-set due to the sexual nature of the content, so while theoretically I'd be welcomed to come along, regardless, it would be best if I had a real reason, otherwise it would all need to be re-broached with Schrader.

Feigning I still didn't know the photographer's hold up, I did have the decency to say something like 'Yeah, I don't know man, but no no, if the photographer doesn't show, I'll just head out, don't even mention it to Schrader or anything, you know?'

Whether he knew or not, I don't know, but I apologized again for the awkwardness, he told me 'No worries,' again with (preposterous considering where the hands on the clock had come to) an even higher level of graciousness, pointing out that things, as we all know, happen, said just to let him know when I knew, his real concern being for me, frankly, for the article, because this would be the only time to get Deen shot. To make me feel better (but actually, no fault of his, making me feel worse) he good naturedly told me that even though the set that night would be busier—full sound, crew, the this, the that—if the photographer saw a particular shot he wanted and didn't know how to 'Ahem' quite correctly to get it, just let Braxton know, he'd stand folks where we needed.

I wanted another cigarette, but after that, how could I?



Deen was being tended to by a young girl in an orange dress who worked Wardrobe, he making sure, almost timidly, that it was correct that he be wearing a certain black jacket in the scene (yes, he remembered, more confidently, because he'd been wearing a jacket in the footage of him getting out of the car). The wardrobe girl touched up the jacket collar, the shoulder tips, and Deen held her eyes to give an almost Victorian era 'Thank you,' then moved off where things were happening.

This same girl in the orange dress, soon after, was sat reading from a Perma-bound edition of Camus' *The Stranger*, (1954, Vintage pocketbook edition with the weird pantomime folks on the front) so I stopped short, ridiculously asking if I could hold it, please. When I did, it turned out she had stolen it from her library in high school, card pocket and card still glued inside back cover. Funny thing, though not a Perma-bound copy, I had stolen the same edition from my library in high school and on this basis we became fast friends—or at least she humored my blathering about all manner of this and that, perhaps a Francis Verber's *Dinner Game* type invitation brewing in her thoughts for me.

Various other members of the crew, ones not in that moment occupied with what was going on out driving, also sat around, each time one entered making an innuendo laden remark about the 'giant beaver' in the corner (or if the one entering didn't, one of the ones sitting would make another, pointing it out to them) so much to the point it seemed an in-joke from a sitcom I was studio audience to.

A moment I didn't quite understand concerning a woman asking a fellow to move a truck, the fellow, who seemed quite tired, responding only nonverbally by way of markedly not meeting her eyes. It seemed a thing, so always the good kid I tried to inject a sense of ease by saying I'd move the truck, but unfortunately was technically forbidden to touch anything. Maybe the truck got moved, I don't know.

Just as I was squinting at a photograph and answering 'I really don't know' to the Wardrobe girl's question 'That isn't really a picture of Braxton with a giant snake is it?' an unpaid

intern in a blue shirt sat down and he, I, and the Wardrobe girl began chatting, kind of about what each other did, kind of about Wes Anderson's obsessive attention to detail, kind of about how the unpaid intern looked like (it had been bothering me) a cross between an actor from the film *Reprise* (the one who doesn't shave his head) and (I said at the time) Wes Anderson (but later realized it was really Rufus Wainwright I'd meant) he saying people said he looked like androgynous David Bowie, which I could totally see, but only from his eyebrows, triangularly down to the tip of his nose.

After offering me a drink, seeming a bit surprised I only asked for water, Braxton, very paternally, said from across the room 'So, the photographer never materialized?' and it was clear that it made no difference, at that point, so I just pretended it was still a mystery to me. Braxton again said 'Not your fault,' I again said 'I know, but still, it's kind of me left with my dick in my hand here, being the imposition,' he again telling me not to worry, it's fine.

I said general goodbyes and Braxton stepped outside with me for a moment, saying it was still possible that I could come on set later, but he wouldn't know for a few hours. Told him I'd just be around, if I didn't hear, I'd head off.

Not really wanting to leave but unable to think of any rational explanation, especially now in the driveway, to suddenly explain that I needed to stay, I asked, very awkward-adolescent-knows-he's-got-no-second-date-on-the-horizon, if he wanted me to put together some ideas about a Vegas film, maybe shoot them his way.

I smoked and smoked and smoked and smoked and smoked in the parking lot of an Albertsons, calling whoever I knew on the phone and yammering at anyone of them who was available to let off pent up nerves and to convince myself I wasn't being lambasted by everyone back on set. In my distraction, at one point, I paid for fifteen dollars of gas at a station then drove away without pumping.

Gave it fifteen minutes past when Braxton said I'd get word if I was invited, then sent a text I was heading back to Vegas and thanks for the hospitality. He got back to me when I was

at a middle of nowhere gas station, which seemed beyond decent of him.

In the lot of this same station, after I'd bought coffee, some nondescript snack cake, used the toilet, and lit up a smoke, a man who seemed distinctly homeless—curious considering nothing mildly resembling a home seemed to exist anywhere remotely near where we were situated—asked me if I had batteries he could borrow for his flashlight, he'd give them back, he was asking just because he had lost his glasses 'somewhere over there'.

He pointed into the same glop of black and blank that had spread thick through the desert on my drive out and that would syrup it over all through the rest of my drive back.

## The Wrap Party

It was a few days after my return to Vegas—a few days and some harsh written words to *The Arts Magazine* and playing catch up with my day job from the time off—that the invitation to the Wrap Party popped into my inbox. It was exactly forty-eight hours before the event and an RSVP was requested. A breath of not thinking I'd be able to make it, then my wife, always the more stable head, shook me by the lapel and said not only was I going but she was going, too. Miraculously quick arrangements were made to have our children watched and seven hours before the event we began our trek back through the desert.

The sun lit and heated the permadust as we drove—we passed the mysteriously placed Chuck E. Cheeses, we squinted at the sudden towns that existed for no other reason than to be highway rest stops, we waited a half hour for two sandwiches to be prepared at a random Subway Subs.

The valet took our car as we glid in to the LA hotel, time enough before the party was slated to begin, we leisurely dressed and stopped for pasta at a quaint, almost surreal, French strip mall restaurant, the owner conversing with us through the whole meal.

At the entrance to The Churchill, we explained we were there for Braxton Pope's party and were directed up the stairs, seemingly among the first to arrive. The bar was being set up,



the woman tending good enough to prepare my wife a vodka cranberry and to pour for me a double shot of bourbon.

‘Which bourbon?’

I asked for Bulliet and of course, showing her good breeding, she not only said they had it, but enthused that it was the best bourbon there was.

Braxton broke away from business a moment, shaking hands it was good to see me, shaking my wife’s hand he was glad to meet her, glad we had made it. It turned out that just earlier that same day the final shots of the movie had actually been

filmed, something I'd garnered via twitter. Braxton and I briefly discussed that and the guerilla style driving shots done a day or two previous I had seen a post about, both of us remarking that this was really the finest way to go about filmmaking, that it carried risks which were appropriate and I ended that I was glad Braxton et al. had gotten away with it.

Left to our own devices, my wife and I quickly discussed options—as this was a group of people with history and a mutual accomplishment between them, there to see each other in celebration of such, we could either stand around and talk to each other or do our best to have people suddenly discover they were talking to us, though little idea where had we come from or how long had we been creeping up. My tactic, I decided, was to shun tact and to immodestly talk myself up, hopefully giving off some whiff of being a true Cosmopolitan/Continental; my wife, more cleverly, decided simply to be genuine, alluring, charming and to bask in the easy fact that anyone would rather actually be speaking to her than to me.

We spoke to an assistant editor, getting the details of his daily interactions with the higher tier editor, left him alone, as it was clear he was trying to make it across the room, then mingled with a beautifully accented Soundman and with the father of the Wardrobe girl, this fellow, in an incredibly positive way, reminding me of Danny DeVito in Lethal Weapon 5 from *It's Always Sunny*.

The upstairs seemed all at once to be at capacity as I swung to the bar for a refill, my wife gently reminding me that I actually hadn't eaten any pasta so to beware that devil swill.

Paul Schrader entered in a suit, fifteen times as suave and sharp as the rest of the party combined. There was a radiating level of glee coming from him as his shoulders dance-bobbed with each step, like springs and taps had been affixed to his shoe soles, his toes, he touched the shoulder of everyone who passed and made Hellos and pointed two finger greetings to those all around, good to stop for any photo.

Winding up beside him at the bar, he said 'How are you?'

I introduced my wife and mentioned how he and I had met

briefly, rabbit nods from him and wide grin that he remembered, was happy to find I had made it out. I told him Congratulations on getting the picture off and he, like giddy, touched my arm and said 'Should be good, should be good.'

The man seemed to own not only the room but the larger part of the free world and made a constant energetic orbit around the cheese and vegetable platter, flitting this bit or that into him as he laughed, shook hands, welcomed hugs.

My wife had never heard of or seen James Deen before, so it was delightful that when I pointed him out—making his way through the crowd toward us, toward the bar—she, within two seconds, hardly a full glance, raised shoulders to ears, began hopping, giggling and schoolgirl told me 'Oh my god' quick two hand hug to my shoulder, then all attention on him.

Taking the helm, my wife introduced herself with her name and the words 'I'm a high school teacher, so I need to take a picture with you, so my students can find it,' Deen putting palms together, tips of longest fingers to chin, head bobbed and unconscious grin almost Aw shucks. He was on his way to get a drink, but promised he'd swing back by, which he did, only a moment later, holding two beers.

'It took long enough to get the one, so I figured just get two.'

He set them down, prom-vogued with my wife for a snap, then she moved to whisper something in his ear, he moving in the way one appropriately should move to hear whatever it is a woman wants to say that quietly.

Less to work with, I mentioned the first naughty scene I'd ever seen him in and, akin to how one might not remember a classmate from third grade after a decade or two, he said he couldn't, being frank, say that he really had any memory of the name of the woman I mentioned, laughed, and again promised to come back by.

Promptly informing me that she was utterly crush-struck—if not smitten, if not full on smote—my wife patted my arm and discreetly separated herself from me, telling me to find someone to talk to.

The Key Grip, now in stunningly coral polo shirt, was moving by and so we spoke, me giving him an abbreviated

version of how *The Arts Magazine* had boned me, he again pointing out the DP, telling me not to let the man get by me, that he'd arrange for photos if I still needed them. Somehow—perhaps bourbon related, perhaps not—the DP did slip by, the Key Grip retuning, noting this, and asking how had I let that happen?

So, we went over together and had a nice chat, me asking what sort of compensation might be required for pictures, the Key Grip finally declaring that he got a good vibe from me, so they would be gratis, he'd just need my contact. I gave it and the fellow held up some electronic device asking me had he jotted it in right—I said it looked right to me and it did in the sense that it looked like a well-lit bauble of light with some watercolor squiggly inside that maybe loosely resembled some of the letters of my name.

My wife came over, reiterating her adoration for James Deen as a human being, primly seething that she had just been outside, about to share a cigarette with him when, suddenly, she got waylaid by another backer who wanted to talk the ins and the outs of something or another with her.

'Anyway,' she asked me, 'why aren't you talking Bret?' pointing to the man, he already in conversation with a few others.

'You're Bret, right?' I asked, extending hand, hand taken with an 'I think so.'

A conversation was in progress about the possibly forthcoming adaptation of *Lunar Park*, which I resisted as much as I could pointing out as my drop dead favorite of his work, instead saying that the adaptation seemed tricky, but from what I'd heard Roger Avery was connected, which gave me hope.

My wife said she loved *Lunar Park*, insisting that Bret, himself, should play the lead, eruditely pointing out that, as art, it only made sense, the book being Bret, as though his previous work existed merely to allow it to come after. She admonished him when he said that, interesting as that might be, he did not want to keep an actor's hours and she said she hoped he'd held onto the rights to the work so that the plug could be pulled on





the film if the thing wasn't being rendered appropriately, adorably pivoting from this with a blush that she couldn't believe she'd actually introduced herself by saying 'I loved *Lunar Park*,' Bret giving a smile, shyly saying 'It's okay,' and squeezing her shoulder into his, a hug.

Somewhat on the same subject, I chattered about how it seemed an impossibility that the final portion of the novel could be filmed, the thing not really, it seemed, meant to be a filmable literature, Bret agreeing and also agreeing that

oftentimes egregious film adaptations are made of literature, some words best left where they lay, the example brought up of the adaptation of Saramago's *Blindness*, me saying it was awful, Bret more to the point saying 'It was total shit.'

As he was on deck to review one of my books, I said it was only polite to ask him would he prefer a novella collection or a thick fat 500 page novel.

'It's up to you, no, it's up to you,' he chuckled and touched my arm and he said 'It's so weird that when I agreed to review the books for this, all these people said Oh, poor Bret, has to read those books. I like reading books! I like to read manuscripts! I don't know where this idea came off that I'd find it a burden.'

As long as I was asking, though, he inquired as to how long the novellas were, me getting brass tacks that it was either three novellas, totaling 250 pages between them, or the 500 page novel—he, sip of wine, leaning in to a laugh, said 'I won't lie then, how about the novellas?'

The correct answer and it warmed me that he'd said it.

I felt Bret was being penned in by random half-drunkards he had no prior acquaintance with, so needing to differentiate myself from that lot I excused myself, saying I'd swing back, glanced around to find my wife busy across the way, mingling with Deen and various people.

The room was becoming more pointillist in nature by the moment, despite my compulsively cleaning my glasses, but nonetheless I wound back round to the bar. Deen showed up to replenish his beers and I apparently decided (for reasons still under investigation) that the thing to do was to badger the poor guy in to taking a shot of bourbon with me despite his polite, 'No no, nothing hard, beer is good.'

'Have a shot Deen.'

'Haha, no thanks.'

'Well, alright, suit yourself. I guess I'll write down in your file that you don't think it's a good idea to have a shot with a random man and something about a firm anti-bullying stance.'

Quite the gent—as even in my state I knew this was not the finest of all impression possible I was making on him—he said,

lifting his new two beers, ‘No no, man. I’m not drinking hard liquor...because I don’t want to drink hard liquor.’

Thankfully for us all, at that moment a woman touched my shoulder then took Deen’s wrist and moved him back into the bustle.

Told my wife I thought I’d been strong arming Deen, for some reason, and so he’d scampered off, she explaining that it had seemed to her, from where she’d been observing, that Lindsay Lohan had just come over for him.

‘Was that Lindsay Lohan?’

It had been, which didn’t make me feel any particular amount better about anything.

‘I guess I should have said something to her, yeah?’

But no, probably not.

My wife had been downstairs, again, when Lohan had arrived with small entourage. In the ruckus, Lohan’s mom had stood near my wife, inquiring as to what part she had in the film.

‘No, I’m just a backer,’ my wife says.

‘I’m just a mom,’ Lohan’s mom says back.

‘I’m a mom, too!’ says my wife.

‘Isn’t it wonderful being a mom!?’ Lohan’s mom sings, leaning in and taking my wife in a deep embrace of camaraderie.

Sometime later I had wound up speaking to Chris Schellenger who, on my complimenting his white suit and asking if he had a part in the film, informed me he played the role of Jayden. Also in tow was Schellenger’s equally sharp dressed friend—blue shirt, skinny tie—and we remarked how only the cool people at parties hung around outside the toilet, like us.

This reminded me how I needed to use the toilet, so I did—or else went in and just washed my face, or else did use the toilet and then washed my face, either way returning to the conversation about Chris’ singing career, me insisting, when he explained that he was soulful but not at all a crooner, that he ought to incorporate some Dylan—my suggestion was that he do a rendition of *Brownsville Girl*, but mostly just, I explained,

on the strength of his hair and the lyric 'they were looking for a man with a pompadour/I was crossing the street when shots rang out'.

Either Chris gave me a card or else I had taken another card someone else had given me sometime before out of my pocket, absently, assumed it was Chris' and told him 'Thanks while I put it back in.

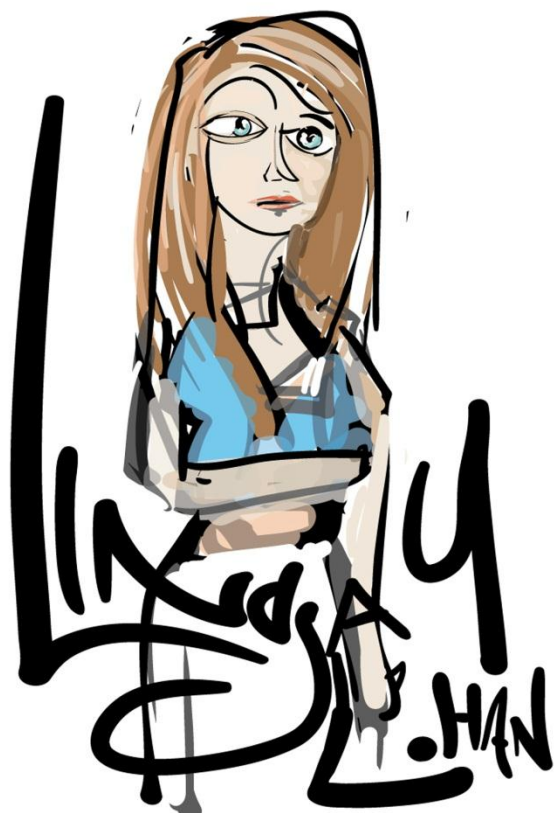
Cross-dissolve to me slowly making another approach to Bret, momentarily caught up in conversation with another backer about 'essaying' and 'magazine writing' and how to 'make a living at it,' which is something I had no viable input on.

I found it strange when the person speaking to Bret excused himself, touching my shoulder and telling me it was 'my turn,' as this remark seemed to have nothing to do with Bret having the mindset that people got 'turns' with him, but either way I asked Bret how things had been since I'd been away and probably I spilled some bourbon on my shirt, but in an understated kind of way.

Another person there was talking about *Imperial Bedrooms* and whether or not that was something that would be made a film, but I decided to Bogart my way in and to speechify about a particular nuance in a particular series of phrasings in the book that I had really adored, the rhythm of a particular end note to one of the short passages, the musicality, perfect for the blunted, 'noia-noir' the piece was and from what I could tell Bret seemed to remember that exact bit or perhaps just liked the sound of slurred words so wanted to encourage me on.

We rapped briefly about such little nuances in prose from the perspective of Writer versus Reader and likely I would have cornered him and gone on about my philosophical stances on the undeniable separation in the identity of literature from those two vantages, how the one does not require the other and never will, but Bret had to attend to being photographed with people and also I may have inadvertently started badmouthing someone or something without knowing why and so he figured he might as well go.

Either way, it was a well-timed parting and following it was a



conversation I remember images from but no words.

One part of my brain reminded me that going back to the bar was not a sound course to tack my particular ship, but another part, which seemed to be dressed much cooler and I really wanted to hang out with, insisted that I shouldn't listen to myself as much as I did, so I didn't.

The hour must have struck something or other, because I was informed that, as if by magic, it was now a cash bar, frowned, but paid ten dollars for that last drink.

When I looked up, the Unpaid Intern was there. I explained

I'd been looking for him, as well as for the girl from Wardrobe, then we discussed how all of the best contemporary cinema was coming from Norway and Finland. He corrected me that *Noi* (the film I was using as proof) was actually from Iceland, which I felt terrible about mixing up, but more importantly I decided I'd chosen a good new best friend on the strength of his even knowing what I was talking about.

My wife joined us and while she and the Unpaid Intern spoke I became highly conscientious—an identifying mark of my good upbringing that I get this way when inebriated—that we get the fellow's contact information, reminded him to give it to us between every three sentences he and my wife traded, to the point I'm sure he found it easier to just it to me over and over again rather than explain each time that he already had.

I had the good sense to not bother Bret again, even though my wife tried to assure me he seemed to have been enjoying our talks—mostly I avoided it because the only thing I could think of to bring up was to ask him if someone else he'd been talking to had been offering money to back another film or else had they been trying to sell him a plat of real estate—really, I couldn't remember just what it was that I'd heard and I felt it gravely relevant to get the facts right for the record.

'Well, you should at least say good-bye to Braxton,' my wife says and I nod, agreeing.

She reminds me a moment later and I nod again.

'Where is he?'

'He's right there,' she said and pointed about eight paces off, me dutifully turning my head in that direction, then scanning the room, then informing her I wanted to say Bye, but I just didn't know where Braxton could have been at just that particular moment.

'Right there,' she said, politely giving me the benefit of every doubt.

Repeat of my previous actions and then she made the executive decision to whisk me out the door. Spotting Deen, she stopped short, told me 'Stay there.'

From what I could tell through the sandy dishwater my eyes

had settled to, Deen was surrounded by several young women, my wife skirting patiently the outside of the group, not wanting to come off importunate. When it came to pass that one of the girls stepped aside to speak to some other folks, freeing a pocket of clear sight-line, she met Deen's eye and pointed at him, stretching past arms-length, and he immediately parted through the others present to approach, an overt point right back at her, just grin and motion.

'I wanted to say goodbye,' my wife said.

'You're trying to get me in prison,' Deen replied, opened arms full, leaning in to an embrace.

My wife held the hug the count of five six seven, saying into his shoulder and ear 'I'd never try to get you in prison.'

She took a step back, told him it had been really great to meet him, he saying likewise with her, and then I found she had got me down the stairs and we were already half a block away from things.

We walked the mile or so back to our hotel, me apparently in a state described later as 'still fun' but certainly without my land legs. I either noted that I found the lack of homeless interesting and that the aesthetic of this part of LA thrilled me to the point I wish I were painter or just dreamed I said all that at some point, but in any event I reminded myself not to try to make any sort of amorous moves when I got back to the hotel as, even in my state of underneath, I knew that to do so would only be a disappointing olive-in-place-of-cherry on the sundae of the evening. I was proud of myself for having such presence of mind, though nevertheless I apparently attempted some sort of inarticulate courting ritual before my falling off the bed, this settling the matter as though *deus ex machine*.

As always after a fling with bourbon, I woke suddenly and dubiously clear headed—wouldn't be able to get back to sleep if I tried, but also not quite ready to do anything except ask if something unfortunate had happened I wasn't remembering. My wife assured me that she had diffused any possible final act faux pas and I should rest assured I'd likely be considered harmless and tall, nothing else.

'Good.'

She called to check on the kids and then rolled to one elbow and told me she was totally in love with James Deen, now—totally in love—and expounded on his virtues and charm in a kind of singsong pentameter for a few minutes.

‘I’ll get you one of his movies,’ I said, thinking to make it a flirt, but she rolled to her back and gazed cleared eyed to the ceiling.

‘No. I like that I’ve never seen his movies. I don’t care about that. I just really like him.’

Gas station breakfast, rest stop lunch, we drove past vanishing city and through yeast spreading desert, nursing vague headaches and sore throats, me a small sense of forgetting something I wanted to remember and noticing for the first time how my wife drove with one foot on the seat, knee gently tapping the glass of the window. I mentioned it and she said she always drove like that, and whether it was true or not, I was thrilled not have known it until that moment right then.



“Andy Warhol, Silver Screen  
Can’t tell them apart at all”  
Cinema, Persona, Perception, and *The Canyons*

by Pablo D’Stair

The following is the text of the original essay for The Arts Magazine.  
Subsequent to the events in the previous essay, this material originally  
appeared at BRWC: Battle Royale With Cheese

**If you happen to be me**, you first became aware of James Deen via his seduction of and subsequent fornication with Mrs. Lexi Simone on the venerable adult film website *My Friend’s Hot Mom*. If you happen to be me, you first became consciously aware of Lindsay Lohan while you were stealing product and grifting cash from the register at Hollywood Video, her face in duplicate on the box for *The Parent Trap*, always just out of the corner of your eye. If you happen to be me, those two things happened in the same year, though the former piece of film post-dates the latter by more than a half decade.

And now, another half decade has passed, and Lindsay and James are in a film together. But that might not mean what you’re thinking from those remarks, above.

The film is *The Canyons*, penned by *l’enfant terrible* novelist Bret Easton Ellis (*American Psycho*, *Lunar Park*) and directed by Paul Schrader (*Affliction*, *Auto Focus*).

## I

We need no ghost come from the grave to tell us that Warhol's idea of 'being famous for being famous' has taken such root in the psyche of modern American society that it is not only the status quo for legitimized 'fame', but has, paradoxically, also become the idealized apex point of it for many aspirants, especially those with eyes set on the silver screen.

At a basic level: once, the idea was to have a talent and be known to excel at it; then this became that the idea was to have no talent, particularly (or at least not a practiced talent) but a persona which could replace the value of X talent in the equation; then the idea became to, quite literally, excel at having no talent and, really, no persona, in itself, of particular note.

But beyond this basic level (which will play itself out, revealed to be the big yawn that it is, every time, before repeating) much more interesting things, singularities, anomalies, start cropping up. Because in the current climate, what is to be done when there is talent, practiced talent, but it must traverse the temporary tower guard of talent being seen as something quite close to a handicap? And how does Art—especially art trying to exist outside of traditional commercial bounds—deal with presenting an actualized idea, let alone a philosophy, to a world which thinks that only not having such things is having such things?

Well, let's have a look, using our two friends from before, as Lindsay Lohan and James Deen represent two very particular and peculiar examples of non-balancing Warhol-ian algebra.

## II

Lohan, it might be said, is a very pristine example of the mutation of 'being famous for having once been famous.' Now, I use such phrasing not in a pejorative sense, as Lohan is

certainly far from without talent. But the average half-informed, tabloid-common knowledge of various goings on in the actress' life, it cannot be denied, has in the last few years become the far more identifying trait she bears, as far as 'persona'. Indeed, it is the un-deniability of actual quality, actual talent that makes such commentary not fleeting, but, in our current economy, substantive.

We never hear of the on-set exploits of background performers, whether they involve hissy fits, drugs, shut-ins (or all of the above) and we seldom are concerned if Jane Nobody accused of Crime Something-or-Other shows up to court in Bumblefuck, MA wearing a designer dress which really shows off her toned legs. Those people have not showcased a talent and so their falls seem to be of the 'prat' variety, not nearly as interesting as falls from Icarus-ian heights.

Lohan has shown talent and so her humanity is more of the poetical sort, such that Dylan could well have been referring to her when he sings 'she knows there's no success like failure/and that failure's no success at all.' And so while her presence in any film is, surface level, understandable (at least as much as any working actress' presence in any film), there is a particular question begged when we know she was distinctly sought out for a role in this specific film.

At a snap, it seems simple enough to theorize an answer in the artiste vein. After all, if Jorgen Leth cast Patrick Bauchau in his third re-filming, at von Trier's prompt, of *The Perfect Human* due in part to Bauchau being interesting on the strength of his seeming 'well bruised by life' why not the same of Lohan? It is, after all, life and particulars wrought from it that draws writers to write, actors to act, and expressers of the world to express in all forms. It is, it might be said, only the peculiarities of a contemporary American culture seeking to reappropriate such things for more base and flaring-out purposes that keep truly nuanced and interesting lives relegated to loose speculative fodder or 'Where are they now?' narratives to sell ad space. Perhaps it is commentary through art on this aspect of the 'collective unartistic us' which brings Lohan to the top of the pile, a statement of celebration at what made celebrity celebrity

to begin with, when celebrity still had its roots in the term 'celebration' rather than a bastardized sense of setting apart those who have achieved something we have not as the 'reprehensible them.' After all, La Rochefoucauld (and others before and since) so rightly pointed out that 'It is not enough to succeed, a friend must also fail' so why not look at Lohan as exemplar of the ultra-American reimagining of this, perhaps 'It is not enough to succeed, we must make that success a failure.' Indeed, as long as I seem keen to throw quotations at this, it is irresistible to suggest that Lohan personifies in a most singular fashion—or should—what Hal Hartley mouthed via *Henry Fool*, that 'We know we have fallen, because we know who we are.'

But, at more of a long drag than a snap, I think Lohan, in particular, has to be looked at less idealized and more as product, here. Because it is the very fact that she is not looked on as what I above theorize, generally, that seems at the heart of her presence, anywhere. After all, she does not shrink from the limelight—as *The Canyons* does not—to pursue the art of acting in film in the unadorned fashion of Ferrara's *The Driller Killer* or Carter's *The Creeper*, and has, we can't but admit, intelligently and resiliently trod the tabloid-cum-artwork genre of much of modern 'theatre'. Here, there is (as much as anything) a sense of acceptance of Brand-as Persona—to take a role in this film is because it fits a recognizable form of her, as much as her being offered the part could likely be due to the same. The unavoidable truth is that typecasting now takes place from life rather than previous performance, as life, itself, largely, has to be seen as performance if one wishes to perform for a living.

Now, gone are the days when Bresson could use so called 'non-actors' such as Martin LaSalle particularly because they are that. And largely the use of non-actors in modern films seems to have shifted to the philosophy that 'they don't need to act, because they naturally are what we would want an actor to do' as opposed to the earlier philosophy of 'we don't want trained actors, because we want the cinema to perform for them.' Lohan, perhaps, is here because she is a unique

commingling of actual and artificial, a prototype before we knew the engineering was desirable of the acting-of-reality as the reality-of-acting.

In any event, she is poised to be one of the more interesting examples, if not the stand-alone one, of an unbalanced Warhol equation. She will be a control built of variables. Instead of achieving 'fame' (which may or may not exist in a state any more surely than does a neutrino) she will carve out the new Mobius Strip of Warhol-ian physics, in which she achieves the state of 'being famous for being famous after being famous for having once been famous'.

I, personally, can only hope that such a thing is at the heart of her, particularly, being desired in the film, as it would be shameful to think that the most she could have been offered was a chance to get back what she had before it was taken away for the fun of being able to hand it back.

### III

A lesson that we collectively have learned (or should have) most recently from Steven Soderberg's *The Girlfriend Experience*, (some little time back from Catherine Breillat's *Anatomy of Hell*, though that is the stronger film) is that casting a pornstar into an art-piece film does not, in and of itself, mean or do anything. Indeed, it might be said to do the opposite (that is to say, it does and means nothing) as when I find remarks such as the following, from critics, I cannot help but shift oddly in my seat, take a deep breath in through my mouth and let it out my nose: 'Through [Sasha] Grey, Soderberg succeeds in making prettiness devastating.' After all, if this is meant to be a thoughtful, critical remark, I must take it to mean that, sans pornstar (Sasha Grey or otherwise) we have no film and, so, no comment on the 'devastatingness of prettiness'.

So, what does it mean to cast a pornstar? And what does it mean to cast a pornstar as the lead in a self-declared, outside-of-the-mainstream, very nearly *l'art pour l'art* film, written and

directed by such known, hep quantities as Ellis and Schrader? It means, at least for my purposes, another interesting Warholian anomaly.

Pornography, itself, is rich with paradox from all angles.

On the one hand, it would be easy to consider pornstars folks who have attained fame (I would say ‘their version of fame’ but, come on, it’s ‘fame proper’) for the most obviously and overtly superficial reasons—really, some might say, for nothing. Yet if one were to take just a moment to investigate even ‘casual porn viewer-culture’ (let alone ‘hardcore viewer-culture’) one would find the exact opposite to be true. There is a lowest common denominator in porn (it is apocryphally said that some directors are so disinterested in interacting with their performers they merely hold up illustrative flash cards from behind camera to let them know when to change position) but like in all cultures it is shunned by those ‘in the know’—it is in subtleties, deviations, and uniqueness that lasting presence or impact is made.

And furthering this line, it may seem that the very activity on display in pornography (let’s not pretend modern porn cares much for ‘the set-up’) is pint’s-a-pound-the-world-around, no real ‘performance’ to speak of. But just try to phone it in on a porn set, try to think you’ll have a following just because you keep a flat tummy or a false chest—dear me no, you can phone it in easier at Warner Brothers and keep a lasting stardom than you can at Wicked, at Brazzers, hell, even on the Bang Bus.

Then there is the paradox of why we respect a pornstar (and we do, we know we do). On the one hand, it seems to almost be as simple as ‘Well, they’re inventive, energetic, and get paid to have sex.’ But on even quick examination, this turns to the other hand, the realization that ‘They’re told what to do, utilize multiple takes, and, in effect, are only paid to have sex with people who are paid to have sex with them’ (which, that last part, is a curiosity, in and of itself, and the strongest argument for the true difference between adult film performance and prostitution).

It is impossible (and would be silly) to ignore the obvious: that casting a pornstar is done (not said cynically) as a badge of

more-or-less riskless 'bad-boy pomp'. It's not the same, certainly, as saying 'I cast the gigolo I picked up at Caesar's Palace last night' as there is an (we all know it) antiseptic sense of only faux-edge to pornography. It is enough to raise eyebrows and, if emphasized correctly when discussed, can seem like an injection of 'rawness' into an otherwise stuffy and artificial business.

Because we cannot forget, in this case—as in most—it is the non-porn-filmmakers who approach the pornstar, never the other way around.

So perhaps it is a straight on admission of the superficiality inherent in the 'Hollywood' system, a skewering of the old school version of every young man's dream. In this case, after all, it is well known how romanticized is the notion of James Dean getting discovered while pumping gas, what really then is the difference in James Dean being discovered while pumping ass? And in a way, nothing could be more fitting, a real life extension of Paul Thomas Anderson's adroit exploration of the hairline that separates performer from instrument in the eyes of both artist and audience. For really what is Deen if not a Dirk Diggler figure realized, at once interested in the willful indulgence his position allows him, yet someone concerned with 'making sure it looks sexy'?

And extending this to the notion of casting only serves to reinforce the possible explicitness in the choice—any audience Deen would bring (a consideration which it is ludicrous to think is not largely why he is here) would be brought to see 'a pornstar in a real movie' and not an actor giving another on screen performance. He allows for a hyperconscious focus on the illusion of the cinema, this very illusion meant to be centerpiece—the hep movie audience knows it's watching something fabricated in the same way the porn movie audience ignores it. It is as much Chesterton-ian as Warhol-ian, in that the masks of Purpose and Product serve not to conceal each other, but reveal the actual nature of film's alchemy.

Without question, James Deen, regardless of who he portrays in the film, is meant to portray 'James Deen in a film' more than anything else. His presence outside as much as

inside, so to speak, is meant as a kind of bludgeon (a jolt akin to hearing someone behind you suddenly yell Cut) and as an injection of noia (a suggestion that someone, somewhere, called Action, whether you overheard it or not).

#### IV

Filmmaking auteurs such as Michael Haneke have long relished in the process of indicting the audience in the cinema they view, making what is on screen aggressively about the very nature of individuals watching cinema on screen, delineating the morality of non-involvement, distance, regard. Rémy Belvaux, André Bonzel, and Benoît Poelvoorde, in *Man Bites Dog*, with equal parts irreverent mischief and dread sobriety, indict Art itself in the subject matter it investigates, suggesting flatly the upper hand of subject-and-experience over creator-and-participant.

This is Cinema capital C, though, and despite its plumbing the more grotesque desires of a viewing individual, it nonetheless could never be said to have a viewer in mind to be witness who did not want to regard what they are made to regard, who was not keenly involved in their distance, their non-involvement, their 'place.'

But things have come to a point (through a process organic and untreated) in the modern landscape of interface with art, that far less erudite audiences take such things for granted, never have to consider what the conscious aims of any filmmaker are, never have to consider, indeed, the difference between a film and an audience to it. The lay audience—and even the more astute, eager one—these days comes pre-indicted, more than willing to accept that they are involved. Indeed, audiences today have, without a guiding hand, evolved in to an entity so keenly aware of their necessity in what is presented to them, they almost expect a process to be conversational, patronizing, directly about their reviews more than they, themselves, are even about their reviewing.

The very idea of meta-cinema has turned inside out. And



this can be handled by artists in one of two ways.

As always, there is lowest common denominator, so often on display whether named or considered. Nowadays, we hear John Big and Jane Starlet are rumored to be in a film together and the first, unabashed thought is ‘Oh, are they getting married?’ Or we hear Jake Hollywood and Cindy Hotlist are going to share the screen, prompting the immediately reaction of ‘Oh, I bet one of them will be divorcing either Jack Superstar or Janet Darling, pretty soon.’ And so a cinema is created for the life and lifestyle of those uninvolved in it, the notion of ‘vicarious experience’ now having fuck all to do with the celluloid spectacle-as-access-point-for-something-outside-of-oneself, everything to do with the orchestrated literature of synchronized tabloid presses, reissues (with commentary) of His/Her’s breakout performances—this new spectacle as access-point-for-having-no-need-to-consider, just to concur or agree-to-disagree.

But then there exists the more rarified handling, the one based on seeing this current state of unwitting participation not as full reality, but as an aspect that could be incorporated into not the easel, not the canvas, but the pigments the brushes are dipped in. An audience so self-conscious of itself, psychology would tell us, must at once be unaware of itself—an audience so in-the-moment that the past and future are never considered that way.

To incorporate in the art a consciously participatory aspect from the moment of creation is not that same as gimmick making. It is a way to make the ‘subject’ into the ‘subject matter’ in an evolved sense of how this was classically meant. The artist can conspire to make the audience not concerned only about either the film or only their reaction to it (the old school ideas of Film-viewer versus Film-lover versus Film-buff versus Film-aficionado) but of the very vulnerability of Film if these two things become so coalesced.

I mentioned before my reaction to one critic’s remark of Soderberg’s film, a reaction, I feel, that showcases the nowadays very fine line between something-worth-something-else and something-only-worth-itself—if Sasha Grey’s presence

was essential to the very message of the film, can the film be said to have a message? Perhaps and perhaps not. If an unknown actress played the role, would our (the audience's) unavoidable lack of real-world anchoring alter the very nature of the film? Perhaps and perhaps not.

It is becoming less foreign to think of the performers as part of the writing, to think of the directors as part of the scripts—whether they were considered so at inception of a project or not. Once it is 'a film by Paul Schrader,' it is no use asking audience to consider what bit was birthed by cinematographer, which bit by composer, editor, best boy electrician. Once a film is 'starring Lindsay Lohan and James Deen,' it is no use asking what part of their starring came from savvy agents, iconoclast producer, temp workers in marketing wanting to take a stab at something outside of their station. And audiences of DVDs with behind-the-scenes segments twice as long as the films and readers of the trade papers aware of a film before there is even a script are getting larger and larger, are becoming 'Audience' writ large. No longer is casual viewership of cinema casual, at all, even if to each individual viewer it seems like just that.

Both Schrader and Ellis, of course, know this. They have both, for decades, been an active, integral hand in forming the now general and unconscious ideology of what is American Cinema, what is American Culture and have both created works of wide acclaim exploring the nexus point of the two. But all of their conscious, concerted effort has so embedded itself in these ideas, that to anyone approaching their work (new or old) the results of said work is, to them, *a priori*.

So now, Ellis, Schrader and their ilk are left to take what they helped to create as merely the muddy building blocks everyone now thinks have been around forever. Now, they are left to do what all creators do: take what they already created and turn it freshly new for themselves.

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## V

I remember wandering a labyrinthine secondhand bookshop and finding a beat up, mass market edition of the screenplay for *Taxi Driver*, by Paul Schrader, and realizing just how much more I admired the thing on the page than even the pitch perfect presentation of DeNiro, Keitel, Foster through the interpretive lens of Scorsese. Those pages, to me, from that moment have always been *Taxi Driver*, the film an interpretative print of the original whole. It's funny, how when we think about the writing of a film, we think about the things that we see, the things that we hear. 'And the award for Best Screenplay goes to...' we hear and only maybe or maybe not wonder if those who gave the award gave it based on reading stacks of printed words or gave it, really, based on watching reels of image, light, hearing voice, orchestration. It's just one of those things—the writer of the film's work is so often considered only through the conduit of the finished collaboration.

Considering the literary influence Bret Easton Ellis has had in my life, it is odd to think that the only reason I became acquainted with his work was because of a brief snippet in an Entertainment magazine about how Christian Bale would be playing 'a wealthy axe murderer,' a role, according to this snippet, that originally was thought to be either for Leonardo DiCaprio or Tom Cruise. An 'axe-murderer' fan from way back, I looked into the novel this film was based on, a little book called *American Psycho*—which turned out to be as much about a 'wealthy axe murderer' as *Taxi Driver* was about a 'vigilante cab driver,' as I'd had it described to me before my first viewing.

That secondhand shop *Taxi Driver*, that Entertainment magazine, that shopping-mall SuperCrown *American Psycho*, those things happened on the same day, along the same bus transit line, me with a morning to kill before work at Baskin-Robbins.

In David Mamet's film *State and Main*, Joseph Turner White (Philip Seymour Hoffman) asks, 'What's an Associate Producer

credit?’ and gets as reply, ‘It’s what you give your secretary instead of a raise.’ I was not a secretary and my Associate Producer credit on *The Canyons* was not in lieu of a raise but instead came from my giving cash money as part of the film’s open source method of financing. This was something I did for the usual combination of reasons—eyes as big as city moons set on the constellation of participating in something that might get me breathing the same as air as two figures who influenced my own art in ways I cannot name, and the more base fact that incentives were offered which would get my words in front of eyes belonging to these self-same figures, whose words have taken up not only so much time in front of my eyes, but space inside of my head. A thing is always more than one thing, as I have been saying.

But there was another reason, still.

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If you happen to be me, an author, someone who never needs to hear another human voice if I don’t feel like it to do what I do, it’s funny that the idea of Literature always seemed so participatory, but the idea of Cinema always so individualized, as though what adorned the television screens I’d stay up until all hours watching leapt, full formed, from the will of some single figure, from the breath of Art itself.

If you happen to be me, when it turned out that Paul and Bret, Lindsay and James were all involved in making a film—a fact I became acquainted with only by happening to glance at someone else’s Twitter feed at random, some unknown-to-me person who had ‘followed me’ for Lord-knows-why—it seemed that there was something missing.

Me was missing. Me as modern audience, acting properly, the last glitch in the Warhol-ian string that is the ultimate balancing out of a new, variable cinema.

I am glad to have been there. Things just wouldn’t work, otherwise.

My very sincere thanks to producer Braxton Pope and the cast and crew of *The Canyons* for allowing me to tag along and bother them.

A special thanks to Key Grip Cole Chetney and Director-of-Photography John Defazio for providing some photography—while it was not used, due to circumstances, the generosity was amazing and deeply appreciated.

Please keep up to date on the film at:  
<http://www.facebook.com/TheCanyonsFilm>

-Pablo D'Stair

