



MOVIES 1970 - 2014

# The Drink Tank

## 397



# Movies 3

## *The Movies of Our Lifetime*

These are some of the films I love from my lifetime. Not nearly as many as the previous ones, largely because I've written about them so often before, but here be the ones that tend to change my life, if only in a little way.

SECTION 1  
**THE MOVIES**

*December 2014*

*Editors*

*Chris*

*Vanessa*

*James*





1970 to 2014

## **The Films Chris Loves**

1776 - A Musical

The Adventures of Buckaroo Bonzai - Sci-fi

The Usual Suspects - American Indy Cinema

Italian for Beginners - Dogme95



# The Boys in the Band

*A Review by Bob Hole*

*The Boys in the Band* (released March 17, 1970)

Directed by William Friedkin [*The Exorcist*; *The French Connection*]

Written by Mart Crowley (play and screenplay)

## Starring:

Kenneth Nelson – Michael  
Frederick Combs – Donald  
Cliff Gorman - Emory  
Laurence Luckinbill – Hank  
Keith Prentice – Larry  
Peter White - Alan McCarthy  
Reuben Greene - Bernard  
Robert La Tourneaux - Cowboy Tex  
Leonard Frey – Harold

I finally saw this movie in order to write this piece. My gay card has been punched. And anyone who hasn't seen it – and I don't just mean any gay men – should run out and rent, download, gett, borrow, this movie. What the hell was I thinking not having seen it?

The action takes place roughly in real time, at a party thrown by Michael (Kenneth Nelson; *Hellraiser*; *Nightbreed*) for birthday boy Harold (Leonard Frey; *The Magic Christian*; *Fiddler on the Roof*). Invited to the party are their friends, all of them gay residents of New York. Accidentally, a probably but maybe not straight friend of Michael's, Alan McCarthy, joins the party and hijinks ensue.

Not those kind of hijinks.

This film was the first "mainstream" film to openly portray gay male characters as themselves, as more than a stereotypical incidental caricature. Though these are all caricatures too. There's the extremely "nelly" one – Emory [Cliff Gorman in a fantastic performance]; there's the one who tried to make it as a straight man and still kind of passes – Hank (Laurence Luckinbill; *Star Trek V*; *The Final Frontier*); and there's the wide variety of people that might be found in any group but just happen to be in this group, and just happen to be gay.

And they're not just gay. They're gay in 1968 (play)/1970 (film). The Stonewall Rebellion happened in June 1969, and its implications were not yet fully realized by the time the film was made. (The Stonewall Rebellion is the name of the riots beginning the night of June 28, 1969 that is celebrated world wide as Pride.)

At that time, the default belief was that being gay was "wrong", "sick" and so forth. There was a lot of self-loathing gays at the time (and since, and now) and certainly among the characters of the film.

Some critics believe this location in a specific time and place dates the film. But I can't agree. The story, the dialog, even the setting seem timeless. If you've ever been to a party, or in any type of group setting, you've probably seen these characters. Maybe they weren't gay, maybe they didn't act exactly as shown here, but they're around and we all know them. Or we are them.

Self-loathing among the characters is shown from almost the beginning. Through the film it is brought to the surface in all the characters, including Alan. Excepting the one character, a hooker, that you might expect it to be most pronounced in, in some other film.

The main action of the film is a telephone game, where the guests at the party are forced to confront someone they love that they haven't told. Though it could be traumatic to anyone, for a formerly closeted gay man (as all of them are), this could be devastating even today, let alone at the time of the play.

The game comes about as a vicious prank by Michael, who is trying to force a confrontation with Alan, his college roommate. But the viciousness is turned on everyone in turn.

No one is spared being torn open by the rather likably horrible Michael. No one except birthday boy Harold, who we find out is even more able to tear people apart when he turns on Michael near the end of the film.

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"It's one of the few films  
I've made that I can still  
watch."

William Friedkin

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The Boys in the Band was  
the basis for the first porn-  
parody title: *The Boys in  
the Sand*

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Despite all the horror and nastiness, you realize that this is just another night at a party for these characters. This is one of the ways they interact, and that really, they have no choice. They have to cling to each other, as much as they tear each other apart. There is love here, not just hate, and most of the hate is turned inward.

The performances in this film are spot on. There is not a false note, as would be expected from this cast, all of whom originated the rolls off Broadway 18 months before the release of the film.

Most of the actors have had regular working acting careers, at least those among them who survived long enough (several died young), or chose to (Reuben Greene retired and is apparently living somewhere and has effectively disappeared from public view shortly after the movie was made.).

This was and is a ground-breaking movie and play, and important from a film history perspective. I think it's also important as a commentary on people, and their relationships whether you're gay or straight, or something else.



# 1776

*BY CHRISTOPHER GARCIA*

Every year, my Uncle Wayne and I would watch *1776* on July 4th. It quickly became my favorite musical. I was always a History Geek, and a Musical Theatre Geek, too! This had to be the best combination of both!

You see, what *1776* does so well is the little things. There's the way that enemies become friends, that the strongest positions can bend just enough to make things happen, and the audience isn't the only one who understands what that means to the future of the newborn country. The story isn't 100% accurate, Peter Stone had to make allowances for narrative, but in many ways, it's an excellent document on the founding of the USA.



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“Who sails the ship back  
to Boston, laden with gold  
see it gleam. New  
England can boast of the  
Ivory Coast, hail Slavery,  
the New England Dream.  
Gentlemen, I make you a  
toast - Hail Boston! Hail  
Charleston! Who stinketh  
the most!” My favorite  
lyric ever, *From Molasses  
To Rum To Slaves*

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But what sets it apart is the level of performance from everyone. William Daniels is John Adams, and he's perfect for it. He gives off a sense of unlikeability that is so thorough, but at the same time, you want him to succeed. Somehow, he makes the audience want to be on his side, though every trait he presents is appalling! It's great!

Young Edward Rutledge is played by John Cullum. He's the towering star of the picture, and his solo number, *Molasses to Rum to Slaves* is a powerhouse that never fails to bring down the house. Thomas Jefferson, played by Ken Howard, is so slyly acted that it barely matters that his singing doesn't match the rest of the cast is unimportant. Everyone in the film performs magnificently, but none more so than Howard diSilva.

His Ben Franklin is as accurate as any that has ever been put on film. He's pithy, his thoughtful, he makes every line feel like it came out of his brain instead of one of Franklin's writings. If there is ever a book written about portraying historical personages, he **MUST** get his own chapter!

The songs are great, but it's the debate over the matter of American Independence that really shines. There are twenty minute gaps in songs that are filled with brilliant debate and historical detail. I can't argue with the choice, because the moments where the actors are bringing their characters' views to the front are easily the best in the film!

I've lobbied for it to be included on the National Film Registry for years. It's a film that not only tells the story of America at it's earliest, it tells the story of a America even more divided than it is today. Yes, there's not a single ethnic character in the entire film, but the discussion of slavery drives the plot and the finale. It's one of the best discussions of the matter in a historical context, and it really details the second set of steps that led us to where we are today.

Watch it. Show it to your kids. It's an important film and should be an important part of the American experience.



# Mr. India & The Superhero Movie

*BY CHRIS GARCIA*

If there is a way we can define the age of film we're in, it is the age of Heroes. Specifically, we're in the Ages of Superheroes. The Superhero film has become the most profitable kind of film, and we're seeing at least a half-dozen of them a year, almost all of them among the biggest drawing films at the Box Office. You can always tell when things have fully seeped into the fabric of Hollywood when people start making good parodies of them, followed by excellent indy film versions. I'm not sure if Birdman qualifies as both, but it's GREAT!

Superhero films have been around since the 1940s, but it was really the 1970s that launched them to the top of the charts. The first of massively important superhero film was Richard Donner's Superman. Yeah, it was great, but to me, there was a formula that was forming and we didn't see it fully-formed until the 1980s. It was so fully formed, that a Bollywood film took it and made it the basis for one of my favorite films – Mr. India.

Now, to really get at Mr. India, you have to know two things – Bollywood and the Superhero film. In Bollywood, the films are often secondary to the music. Why? Because there was no good music distribution method in India before the internet age. Movies, and live performance, were the primary techniques. Also, until more recently, it wasn't a synch-sound world, which meant that you could have playback singers doing all the singing and it was perfectly acceptable. Still happens today, as synch isn't universal in Indian Cinema. Then there's the acting. Since they're not delivering lines live, the acting tends to be bigger, less nuanced. This isn't universally true, but the comedic delivery tends to be big and broad, and the facial acting is often gigantic. In a way, Bollywood's musical cinema is closer-related to Silent Cinema, especially comedy.

Superhero films are based around three things – Science Fiction, a sense of duty, and a villain. The first of these is the most flexible. It can also be fantasy, but really, in practice, it's almost all Science Fiction. The Flash gets his powers because of a lightning strike and a chemistry set. Superman comes from a distant planet via spacepod. Green Lantern is gifted the ring of power. It's all SF, no? The science fiction is the basis for almost every superhero, and without it, there's no way it can work. A world where everyone has superpowers is lame, it just flat doesn't work. I've seen it, and it's dull because there's no way to elevate a hero or a set of heroes. There has to be that elevation.

Second, and only slightly less important is sense of duty. You can't have someone with superpowers who just doesn't feel like serving. You can have someone who is reluctantly pushed into duty, but that sense of duty has to come out. It's almost always the driving force, and that's where the conflict begins. It doesn't have to be service to mankind, either. It can be something small, local, close. If they aren't driven to serve, somehow, then there's no reason for the story to happen at all. It's almost always this drive that brings them into conflict with the villain.

And the villain is so very important.

The Villain must be big, threatening, as powerful, if not more powerful, than the hero. They must be memorable, perform a terrible thing, often in the name of 'justice' and then twist things dark. Often, the villain has to be over-the-top or it just doesn't work.

Now, Bollywood has produced a few great science fiction films, and a couple of good superhero movies, but none of them come close to the level of Mr. India. The story is actually straight out of Julia Schwartz's run editing DC comics. Arun grew up an orphan and has taken in a bunch of young orphans himself. Making ends meet isn't easy, and there's seldom much food. Eventually, a chance meeting with a reporter, played by the amazing Sridevi, leads her to move into the house with Arun and the kids. A brilliant scientist has created a watch that makes the wearer invisible. Arun takes the watch after henchmen for the evil Mogambo have killed him. Mogambo is brilliant, but evil, and as Arun uses the watch to become Mr. India, he's in direct conflict with him. This leads to the action-packed ending which, somehow, involves ICBMs.

Now, you can easily see where the Superhero Three-legged Stool stands. Science Fiction? Yup. A super-powered watch is the essence of SciFi! Sense of Duty? Orphans, man. Orphans. Villain? Oh, you bet.

The fact is, Anish Puri portrays the greatest cinematic super villain ever. Better than Jack Nicholson in Batman, even better than Michael Shannon in Man of Steel. He's maniacal and his timing is so perfect. Watching him, you'd think he stole Nicholson's Joker, but then you realise Puri was doing Mogambo 2 years before Batman! He even had a catch phrase - "Mogambo khush hua" or Mogambo is pleased. It was a great performance, and while he was probably the character who came closest to being recognisable to American audiences, really, the star of the show is Sridevi.

You see, there are a few actors in the world who can play the heroine as well as Sridevi, who may, in fact, be the reincarnation of Charlie Chaplin. She has his range, his ability to move between maudlin and hijinks, to command attention with a song, or to just make a face that says everything you need to say in a scene without saying anything. She has some great moments, like the Hawa Hawai song where she pretends to be a famous nightclub singer. She nails a comedy segment where she has the kids' soccer ball and they're pleading to get it back. Then, she pounds home the romance with a damn sexy dance number called "I Love You". Perhaps most apt in discussing her Chaplin-esque abilities is the section where she pretends to be Charlie Chaplin.

The entire movie is wonderful, and while Bollywood can be tough for an audience raised on American pictures, it's so worth seeking out.



# Unintended Cross-Culturalization: Watching Sixteen Candles with Ukrainians

*BY CHUCK SERFACE*

Since returning from Ukraine, where I served in the Peace Corps' Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) program, I've welcomed several former students into my home. From 2008 to 2010, I worked as a professor of English in the Department of Foreign Languages for Banking Business at Ternopil National Economic University, and I helped organize and participated in several seminars and summer camps throughout Ukraine, building quite a network of friends and colleagues throughout that country. Each September, I receive requests from former students and friends of former students for a place to stay over the Christmas holidays, when they are on break and exploring the United States. To study in American universities is quite an honor for young Ukrainians, who come on scholarships awarded through the Global Un-



# SIXTEEN CANDLES

dergraduate Exchange Program in Eurasia and Central Asia (Global UGRAD). For one year, they enter non-degree programs to gain leadership experience and to enhance other life skills. My house, then, has become part of the “Returned Peace Corps Volunteer (RPCV) Railroad.” Travelers usually stay for about a week, and I’ve hosted up to eight students at one time.

My group for Christmas 2014 included Sofia, Vlad, Yuliya, Dasha, Alyosha, Stas, Vitya, and Vika. Of this group, only one, Sofia, had been a student of mine in Ukraine. Toward the end of their stay, the group was preparing to catch a bus for Los Angeles, where they’d see Hollywood before moving on to visit Six Flags Amusement Park and San Diego. Instead of roaming about San Jose again, they asked if I’d watch a film with them, a comedy perhaps, one of my choosing. I thought John Hughes’ *Sixteen Candles* would go over well with them. In Ternopil, I ran a film club in conjunction with the local library and their Windows on America outlet, and I’d shown *The Breakfast Club*, which was a bit hit with my audience. How would my guests react to something else by Mr. Hughes and his muse, Molly Ringwald?

*Sixteen Candles* has become a mainstay of classic teen comedies from the 1980s. Ringwald plays Samantha Baker, an angst-ridden adolescent whose parents, due to the impending wedding of her old sister, Ginny, have forgotten her sixteenth birthday. Add to this her crush on Jake Ryan, played by Michael Schoeffling, the big man on campus romantically involved with the “perfect” Caroline Mulford, played by Haviland Morris. The plot itself offers nothing new to viewers, but quirky characters and dialogue loaded with quotable lines have cemented this movie into the minds of multiple generations. Anthony Michael Hall as Ted the quintessentially horny nerd and Gedde Watanabe as the foreign exchange student Long Duk Dong (the “Donger”) stand as pri-



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## In the United States, the busyness of our lives often drives us toward forgetfulness

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many examples of what endures so mightily in our collective memory. In the end, situations work out, except for perhaps poor Donger, left with a raging hangover and disconnected from his new girlfriend, Marlene the Lumberjack. If any of the above confuses you then see *Sixteen Candles* for yourself. Indeed, you must see it to believe it.

I hadn't intended this viewing with my new friends to morph into a cross-cultural exchange, but their comments and questions as the story evolved revealed not only aspects of the film I hadn't considered before, but aspects of American life as well. This reminded me of how hard I'd worked to facilitate such discussions during my film club in Ternopil -- and how perhaps I hadn't needed to work so hard after all. Dasha, for example, expressed great concern that Samantha's parents wouldn't remember her birthday ever. Americans know going into *Sixteen Candles* that this parental oversight would rectify itself somehow. The rules of comedy demand that they eventually remember. I reassured Dasha without springing any spoilers on her.

But then I thought more deeply on the issue. The sixteenth birthday, the "Sweet Sixteen," is a well-known milestone in the United States and other nations, especially for young women. In Ukraine, however, all birthdays carry equal weight, since each year marks successful survival. Weddings too are enormously important and celebrated for days on end. Entire towns become involved in the festivities, and I spent many a summer weekend enmeshed in processions or relaxing on the balcony of my sixth-floor apartment, watching stadium-quality fireworks blossom in the night sky above Ternopil. Once, a colleague decided that she wanted no party for her birthday, opting to let the day pass quietly. Good luck with that, because other colleagues discussed this lack of interest for months, with no shortage of outrage. In Ukraine celebrants provide their own cakes to share the good fortune of having survived another year. To forget, even with a sibling's wedding looming, is gravely upsetting. To choose not to participate . . . well, you can imagine.

While answering Dasha, I noticed that the others were equally interested in my reply. In the United States, the busyness of our lives often drives us toward forgetfulness. We'd like to think we wouldn't forget a child's birthday, and in fairness we probably wouldn't. However, we can understand how it might slip our minds. This idea, however, boggled these Ukrainians. Recently, a meme on Facebook pointed out the apparent shallowness of sending birthday greetings to acquaintances we barely know. Each year, I answer at least 500 greetings from friends, three-quarters of which come from Ukrainians. They never forget. Dasha's question then revealed no naiveté, but the strong Ukrainian trend to remember and celebrate important events. In light of this, I realized that no Ukrainian could have produced, directed, or written *Sixteen Candles*, because who can even imagine forgetting birthdays?

Next, the issue of Long Duk Dong arose. The double entendre in his name required explaining, but more so I wondered how they as exchange students felt about his predicament. Critics have dinged Hughes for applying blunt, Asian stereotypes with the notable exception of Roger Ebert, who praised Watanabe for bringing true depth to his performance. Interestingly, it wasn't so much the behavioral stereotypes that bothered my guests as much as the lack of verbal understanding between Long Duk Dong and his American hosts. The thickness of his accent, his awkward syntax, and his malapropisms more resonated with these students. Stereotypes arise from misunderstandings or an unwillingness to understand how others from different cultures present themselves. For these Ukrainians, this mostly involves language. Each was required to pass rigorous testing in English to study in the United States, but still they lamented their accents and lack of proficiency. How could they as Ukrainians best represent their people to us if their English was hampered by thick accents and misapplied articles?

Americans should feel this depth of commitment to language, but most do not. Second-language education in our schools lags far behind international standards, adding credence to the stereotype of Yankee arrogance with our breezy attitudes about how the world perceives us. I remember struggling deeply with Ukrainian. Most were grateful for my attempts, a few were not. Years later, there I sat in my own family room with eight

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Anthony Michael  
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young people asking how they could best eliminate their accents. "Christ, most of them speak better English than I do, and they're worried about their accents," I thought. I'll think about that again the next time someone "humorously" posts a sign in "Spanish" that reads "No Entry-o to Estay Building-o."

Hilariously, Anthony Michael Hall's character, Ted the Geek, taught us that nerds are the same in the United States and in Ukraine. The Ukrainian word for nerd, "ботан (bo-TAWN)," derives from botanist, indicating a person who is overly studious and not athletically inclined. No cross-cultural confusion when confronted with Ted -- no, sirs and madams. Unfortunately, all ladies present answered strongly in the negative when I asked if they'd date a nerd. Well, I wasn't asking for *myself*!

In the end, *Sixteen Candles* was rousing entertaining for these thoughtful scholars as well as thought inspiring. These visits provide not only opportunities to reconnect with old friends and to make new ones, but now I'll consider my DVDs as chances to learn more about myself and my world by viewing featured narratives through their eyes. Each year, different groups pass through my house, leaving refrigerator magnets and other knick-knacks as small gestures of thanks. The magnets with their depictions of Cossacks, political slogans, and Ukrainian flags mean the most to me. One magnet even commemorates the centennial anniversary of Stepan Bandera, a noted twentieth-century fighter for Ukrainian independence. By looking at these, I'm reminded of what I continue to learn about language, the importance of respecting customs, and of the valuable friendships I forge even years after my service. I hope they received the same from our shared experience with American cinema, even if my selection represents a rather light-hearted example. I hope -- no, I know -- that they appreciate such opportunities as much as I do.





**Me, Evelyn, & The Godfather**  
**Part II <sup>15</sup> by Chris Garcia**



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# “Is Fredo gonna be alright?”

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AMC used to show The Godfather movies all the time. There were weeks where it might show The Godfather back-to-back for two days, then Godfather II for the next two days, then Godfather III for two more, and then on Sunday do an all-day Godfather Trilogy marathon. It was almost laughable how much mileage they got out of that one franchise.

At the time, Evelyn was maybe 5 or 6. I'd leave work, pick her up at school, drive her home. I was usually exhausted and had to sit on the couch for a bit before I started dinner. Inevitably, it would be very early in the film, usually at some point during the opening wedding scenes. We got a VCR when I was 4 and I watched The Godfather with my Dad a bunch. Yes, I know I wasn't old enough, but I turned out fine, right? Evelyn was way more interested in playing in her room than watching some old musty movie with me, so it was mostly OK.

Mostly OK until one evening when The Godfather Part II was on AMC. We got in just as the shots of the house in Lake Tahoe and the opening credits rolled by. For some reason, Evelyn wanted to cuddle up on the couch and watch the movie with me. I was exhausted, so I put my arm around her and we watched. Evelyn got into it. She loved it. She was really deeply involved with the movie.

Especially with John Cassele's character Fredo. He was the runt of the Corleone litter, and more importantly, he sold out the family to Hyman Roth's people, almost costing them their lives.

Now, and I should say SPOILER WARNING, the end of the film, one that I'd seen at least ten times, is Fredo getting killed out on the Lake while fishing. It's covered up as an accident, and it leads to the dissolution of Michael Corleone's marriage. It's a lovely scene, where Fredo's about to go off fishing with his young nephew, only to end up out on the water with one of the family's button men.

As that scene was coming up, Evelyn stood up and looked at me with her giant, cow-like kid eyes, just as Fredo was about to push off onto the Lake.

“Is Fredo gonna be alright, Chris?” she asked.

Whaddya say to that? This could have been one of those moments where a childhood ended. I was worried that there was no good answer, save for one.

I pulled the little girl in for a giant hug.

“Let's play Candyland,” I said, breaking the hug and turning off the TV.

Same movie, a year later. She was watching The Godfather, Part II while I was making dinner. She then wanders into the kitchen at one of the commercial breaks.

“Chris, what's an abortion?” she asks.

This time, I punt.

“Ask your Mom when she gets home.”

“OK,” she says, then skips back to the living room, whistling the theme song.



## AN APPRECIATION BY CHRIS GARCIA

There are a number of exceptional documentaries in the years between *F for Fake* and *Fast, Cheap, & Out of Control*. Those two tent poles are really high, but in-between, there is much of the best work of Mr. Les Blank. His films range from powerful short subjects to full-blown feature works. He's probably best-known for working with Werner Herzog on two projects – *Hearts of Darkness*, a making-of picture about making *Fitzcaraldo* and *Werner Herzog Eats His Shoe*, in which Herzog actually eats his shoe. While Blank's work is far less recognised than Herzog's, it really did have a profound effect



# A Film by Les Blank

on many documentarians, and even viewers. In 1980, Blank directed a film that I consider to be his masterpiece: *Garlic is as Good as Ten Mothers*.

First off, I want to explain why it's so important to me. I grew up in the Bay Area during the 1980s. I was around while the Bay Area food scene was in-flux. I can remember my parents, who were far from foodies, talking about places like *Chez Panisse* and *Gourmet Ghetto* in Berkeley. This wasn't really a monolithic foodie revolution, like we're seeing today in Cleveland or Chicago, but it was far broader. We were seeing local food folk, the start of Farm-to-Table, California Cuisine (though the main thrust of that was in SoCal), and an explosion in ethnic and fusion restaurants. We used to regularly eat at one of the earliest European/Chinese restaurants, *O'mei* in Santa Cruz. The food was great, still is, and it really opened my eyes to what that sort of cooking could be like. I was never aware of a time when I didn't have Soy (or Almond) Milk available, or could go to a store and find a large aisle of Asian/Kosher/Mexican food items in the Safeway, or a dozen different kinds of mushroom just about everywhere.

This is the world that Blank is documenting in *Garlic is as Good as Ten Mothers*, and it's amazing. Blank does a great job of using music not only to form the backbone of a montage, but to highlight the spaces between interviews. The heart of any Blank film is a series of interviews, but they're seldom talking heads. Often, it's voiceover on some fascinating, often arcade, task. The best example of that is the stuff and cooking of an entire suckling pig at *Chez Panisse*. The music that plays over the scene, a simple number from the Balfa Brothers, is slow-ish, but somehow it's deliberate, as if it's determined to give the scene a sense of fo-

cused purpose. When I think of *Garlic is as Good as Ten Mothers*, that is the scene I think of. There are many continuous shots of people cooking various dishes with lots of garlic, and they make for very fun viewing. It made me think about food the entire time I was re-watching it. The way it was edited, cut by the fantastic Maureen Gosling, emphasized well-structured shots, but more importantly, it makes the entire film move with a pace that is neither plodding nor frenetic.

Les Blank doesn't assert himself into his films, for the most part. Unlike Errol Morris, who is a huge part of any of his Docs, or even Herzog's doc work, Les Blank plays the subtle master at his work. The interviews always seem to draw out the best of every subject, and he cuts himself, and often his assistants, out of the film. He doesn't like to have too much of a footprint, with little narration and little text. There are a couple of exceptions to that, such as a series of brief interviews with kids on a play structure, and a few quotes that are spoken towards the end of the movie. These kind of stick out very starkly against the background of the rest of the films not-nearly varite style.

And then there's Anzonini del Puerto. He was the butcher of Spanish Bulls in Andalusia who came to Berkeley and stayed to pretty much launch Spanish cooking in the East Bay. He performs a couple of songs, and is shown making sausage (I believe it's a form of *Marguez*), and does an interview/demonstration of how the poor people of Spain ate tomato and garlic sandwiches during the Spanish Civil War. Les' editor left the translator's questions in, and Anzonini gets testy with her when he answers her questions. It's an amazingly charismatic moment from one of the most important figures in *Gourmet Ghetto* history, and one who is almost completely forgotten.

The film is maticulously designed, but of particular note are the titles, hand scratched, it seems, by Lucita Fernandez. They're really striking, I think based off of a Mackintosh typeface, I think. They are one of the ways I can identify a Blank film: by the use of those beautiful hand-done titles.

The film is not quite a love letter to the Bay Area food scene of the 1980s, but it is an incredible document of that time. I lived through it, but was far too young to really appreciate it. I found the food scene in the Bay Area way too late, not until my 30s, and some of the players were the same as those depicted in the documentary. I am so in love with this film not only for the aesthetic quality of the film, and the fact that I loved Les Blank as a human, is that it is an important time in the homeland that I missed. I've grown more and more attuned to the East Bay (dating Linda, an Oaklander, for 7 years, and as I write this, I'm hanging out in Alameda) and this is a wonderful view of it. I can not get the images of the time this documents out of my head, and that's wonderful.

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**“Mr. Blank may not be convinced that garlic would keep Dracula at bay. However, he seems to believe that garlic lovers have some closer connection to life in general than those of us who turn up (or off) our noses at the mere thought of a meal composed entirely of garlic dishes, from soup through dessert.”**

**The New York Time**

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# Guy Maddin's The Saddest Music in the World

*by Chris Garcia*

There is a brand of experimental filmmaking that is actually approachable by the general film-devouring public. While not everyone can handle Von Trier or Kenneth Anger, but when you've got a director like Canada's Guy Maddin. His works aren't completely accessible, but they are a good way to get your feet wet with experimental cinema because he gives you a story that you can follow. It might not be a logical story, or really very consistent, but it's a story.

When I was first getting experimental feature films, the first one I started with was Maddin's *The Saddest Music in the World*. Almost instantly, you discover the key to the abstraction Maddin undertook. He shot it as if it were being produced in the early sound era. It's black-and-white, but there are moments of color that look as if they were shot in two-strip Technicolor. It's a lovely film, the grainy look gives a powerful texture to the entire film. The acting is broad, but Mark McKinney manages some wonderful nuance in his performance as a huckster trying to win the contest to determine what country has the saddest music. Isabella Rossellini is exceptional as well, though she goes a bit over-the-top.

The really crazy stuff is how the story plays out. They invite a band from every country to compete head-to-head in a 'Sad-off' where Rossellini, the heiress of a Beer empire, decides who is the saddest. Of course, there are family dynamics, including an amnesiac ex-wife who has returned as the girlfriend of her ex-husband's brother. Weird, but there is no camp in this one. Instead, it's homage, dipped in avant garde. The visuals alone make it worthwhile, but the script and sensibilities make it fantastic.

*The Saddest Music in the World* is not quite genre, but it's also not at all Mainstream. It's experimental, but only just. I won't say it's the best movie you'll ever see, but it's one of the best films to introduce yourself to avant garde feature filmmaking.



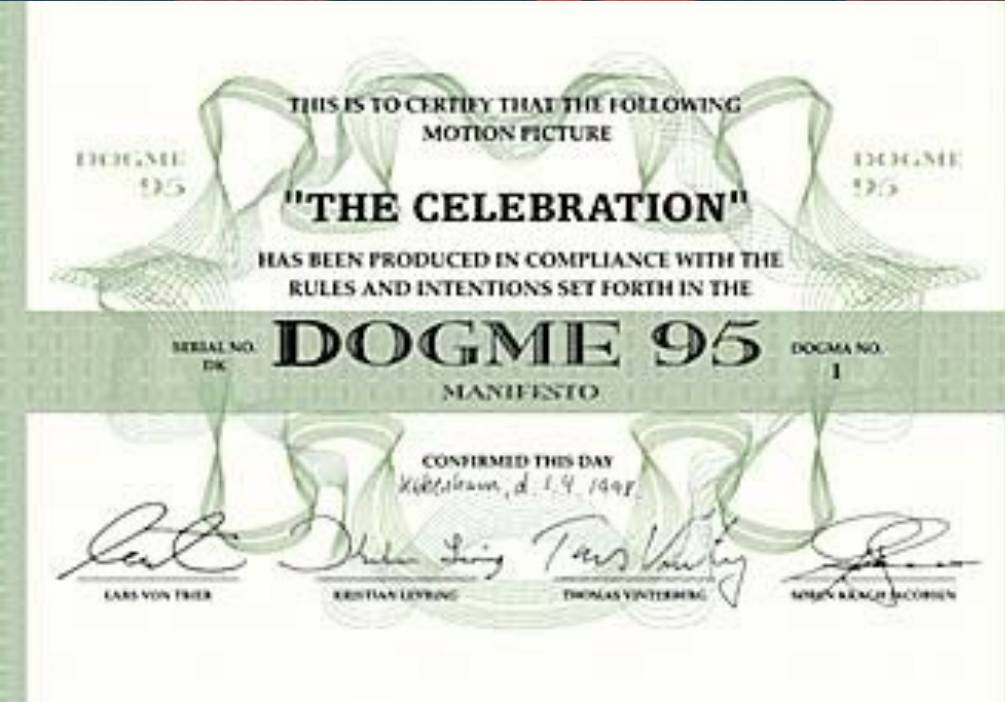
# Dogme 95

*BY CHRIS GARCIA*

The first Dogme film I ever saw was Jean Marc Barr's *Too Much Flesh*. It wasn't actually Dogme, but he had made a Dogme film in the same trilogy called *Lovers* and he used most of the same techniques in *Too Much Flesh*. It's an interesting thing, Dogme. It's the process of documenting a non-existent event, really. You've got rules, hard rules, and it's difficult to produce anything that would be seen as traditionally showable. You can't use extra lights, you have to use live sound, no piped in music or foleyed sound, no bringing in props. They rules are strict, but you have an out – you get to make an apology. I don't believe anyone has made a 100% Dogme film, so they have to confess to all their sins, write down where they



DOGME 2:  
"IDIOTERNE"



added lights, or piped in music, or brought a prop. That's one thing that is so very nice: you can cheat and as long as you admit it, you're golden!

The funny thing is that Dogme is pitched as being the New Avant Garde film. Well, it was in 1999, at least. It was bold filmmaking at a time when bold wasn't so bold anymore. The first Dogme films were tough, they tackled things that in 1970 would have been a big deal, but by 1995, they were kind of old hat. They tackled them in a different way, true, but as far as subject matter goes, they weren't too heavy.

Let's start with *Festen*, or *The Celebration*. It's officially Dogme #1, and while Dogme rules state that directors may not be credited, it was directed by Thomas Vinterberg, who came up with the whole Dogme concept with Lars Von Trier. It's the story of a 60th birthday party at a family-run hotel in Denmark. The son of the honoree returns to confront his father about the years of sexual abuse he and his sister suffered at their father's hands. The way he does it, by making toasts during the dinner, is almost Bunuel-ian. It's a tough film, incredibly well-acted. In fact, if you simply lit it better, dealt with some of the sound issues, it would be a top-notch Danish movie. There's a LOT going on in it. There are secondary and tertiary stories roiling, ranging from the older generation of the Danish upper-middle class' racism to how dealign with depression can become an off-hand, continual pursuit. There's a fine combination of absurdism mixed in with emotional power and just flat-out good storytelling.

The second one was Lars Von Trier's entry called *The Idiots*. This is one of the few Dogme's I've never managed to watch, though I've owned the DVD since about 2003. It's about a group who goes out and plays idiots, that is they act like they're developmentally disabled, and that allows them the freedom to do whatever they want. Apparently, there's live sex, and in his confession, Lars admits that he used porn actors for the scenes. The DVD I got was from China, so it won't play in my player, but at least it's in my collection!

The next on that really matters is my personal favorite. Not only my favorite Dogme, but one of my favorite films period. *Italian for Beginners* is a romantic 'comedy' in the sense that it's not all about death and destruction. In other words, it's the Danish



definition of comedy. It's about... well, that's hard to determine. It's either about a group who meets at Italian lessons who grow together and form bonds romantically, as well as socially, or it's about a pair of long-lost sisters who are forced to reconnect and choose the Italian class to do it in. That first description seems more like *Community* than anything else, but it's still a lovely film.

Lovers number 5, and it's OK. *Julien Donkey Boy* is Harmony Korine's entry and it's not great, but it's watchable. *The King is Dead* is really good, as is *Camera*, which is *Dogme #15*. From there, they get more hit-or-miss. *Open Hearts* might be the most accessible to American audiences, and one of the best acted. It's really smart and while I'd hold back saying it's a feel-good picture, it's powerful filmmaking.

The thing is, Von Trier and folks decided in 2005 to bring the whole thing to an end. It was just making for a new sort of formulaic picture. The topics were maybe a bit racier, a bit more naturalistic than the mainstream, but in their own way, they WERE mainstream. They were the mainstream of the Avant Garde. Where you had directors doing really experimental things by 2005 was no longer on the big screen, but on television. While we've yet to get a truly Avant Garde television series in the US, with *Twin Peaks* coming the closest, you can see the ripples that the *Dogme* films made in how much of what is shot today is done. The handheld camerawork that we're seeing everywhere was around for decades, but after *Dogme*, it's everywhere, especially in big budget pictures. The idea that you can shoot on location is old old old, but using it as a method of bringing not only authenticity but emotional impact to scenes is one of the strong suits of *Dogme*. The biggest impact is that it introduced the idea of cleaner production techniques. Yes, the Big Budget picture is alive and well, but since the more confined form was introduced, many actors have stepped out using the *Dogme* concept. *Dogme* really forced film snobs like me to reconsider what we'd consider acceptable for film as far as presentation goes. *The Blair Witch Project* is almost certifiable as a *Dogme* picture, and it was certainly influenced by the style. That alone makes me think *Dogme* was important.

But Avant Garde?

Not quite.





# Nick + Nora's Infinite Playlist

"Nick & Nora's Infinite Playlist" is an example of a rare case where the movie is very different from the book in some key ways, but both are insanely good. What they do have in common is the main premise — the excitement of being young and looking for affection and great music — without the usual corniness of Hollywood.

Nick is the only straight member of a queercore band. He has just been dumped by his girlfriend Tris, and by dumped I mean crushed into a squirming pulp of emo boy.

by Jenny Veile- First appeared at

<http://librariansareweird.com/2009/07/20/nick-norahs-infinite-playlist->

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**"Look, other bands, they want to make it about sex or pain, but you know, The Beatles, they had it all figured out, okay? "I Want to Hold Your Hand." The first single. It's effing brilliant, right?... That's what everybody wants, Nicky. They don't want a twenty-four-hour hump sesh, they don't want to be married to you for a hundred years. They just want to hold your hand."**

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Norah would do anything to avoid talking to Tris and has been trying to get over her quasi-ex-boyfriend Tal, so, when Nick asks her if she will be his girlfriend for 5 minutes she plays along (in the movie Norah makes the first move). This first kiss soon leads to a night of falling in and out of love, laughter, angst, and of course music that captures the frantic energy of this night (also heightened by being in NYC). If you are not young, it will make you wish you were again.

Nick and Norah are straight-edge (label or not). However, I would be remiss not to point out that there are many references to underage drinking and sex, but it is a story about teenage love after-all.

The book, by Rachel Cohn and David Levithan, switches back and forth between the title characters' points of view (a chapter at a time). Unlike the pair's "Naomi and Ely's No Kiss List," which takes a similar approach, but fails miserably, this technique in "Nick and Norah" allows the reader to have a sense of intimacy with the characters and avoids it becoming a book that only one gender will enjoy (the "No Kiss List" is a sad disappointment in contrast). This back and forth is especially effective in the sexy scene later on in the book (no spoilers from me!). I will say that while both book and movie have versions of this...um... climactic scene, the book is much more saucy (see it pays to read kids!).

The movie has a wonderful cast that infuse the script with humor (including a running joke about a piece of gum...trust me). While clearly Michael Cera and Kat Dennings shine in the lead roles, it is also the supporting cast that make this film a must have. In the book Tris is more relatable, but movie Tris (Alexis Dziena) is deliciously hate-able. The book shows her in more of a humanized way. Speaking of humanized characters, one of the shining points to both reincarnations are the gay characters. Instead of being token, they are just characters (key characters). Their sexuality is obvious, but not anymore-so than the straight characters. Rafi Gavron (Dev), Aaron Yoo (Thom), and Jonathan B. Wright (Beefy Guy) are fantastic (and not too bad to look at either). Despite her troubles throughout, Caroline (Ari Graynor) also still manages to look smoking hot...most of the time. Her comedic instincts took the film to another level. Jay Baruchel is convincing as Norah's ex. All I have to say is Tal "brings the Jew fire" and I can totally see where Norah was coming from dating him.

The movie rocks — as evident by the soundtrack that features artists like Vampire Weekend, We Are Scientists, and Bishop Allen. I would also suggest purchasing the soundtrack. It is a fantastic trio of materials for a YA collection.

Check out extras and read the first chapter of "Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist" by Rachel Cohn and David Levithan at:

<http://www.randomhouse.com/teens/nickandnorah>

Then watch the trailer, make a playlist, and search NYC for Where's Fluffy at:

<http://www.sonypictures.com/movies/nickandnorah>



# R for Real

## *An examination of Catfish in Light of Welles' F for Fake and Hoback's FRICTION*

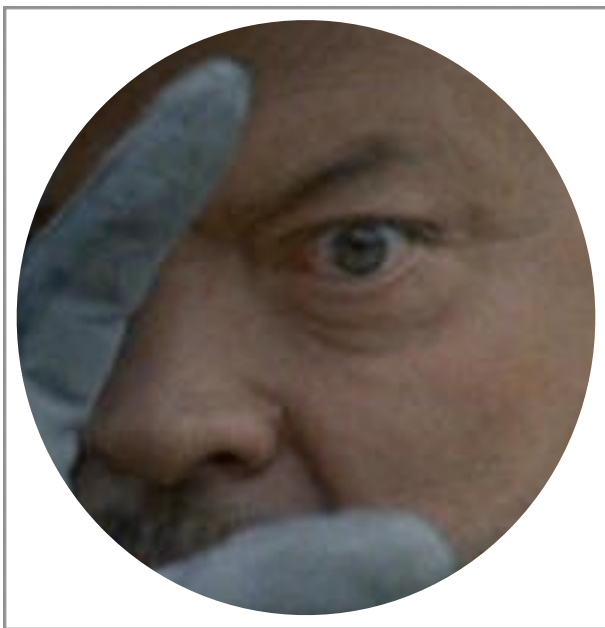
*Catfish* may, or may not, be at all real. It could be the negative world *Blair Witch Project*: non-genre, non-dangerous, non-vomit-inducing camerawork. *Catfish* has made viewers question whether or not the tale of a brother of a filmmaker stumbling upon a family that is too good to be true. While I watched it, fruitlessly wondering when we were going to get a glimpse of a guy dragging an axe towards our film crew, I could not help but look back on what I consider the two best films about lying I've ever seen: *F for Fake* and *FRICTION*.

*Catfish* tells the story of Nev Shulman, a photographer and NYC hipster of the goofy kind. His life is the life of a young New Yorker and he does a lot of artsy stuff. His brother, Rel, is a filmmaker and starts documenting the interaction between Nev and a family he encounters through Facebook. The family is headed by Angela and features several highly-talented (and some very attractive) members. The contact seems to start with a painting and, perhaps, a nod to the film *My Kid Could Paint That*. The painting, which is really pretty good, was supposedly painted by the youngest member of Angela's family, Abby. That leads to an interaction where Abby's paintings come to Nev every now and again (packed in boxes full of paper towels) and then starts to include various other members of the family, including eldest daughter Megan. Megan and Nev start to have a Social Netrelationship that evolves into phone calls and eventually sharing music.

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“I did promise that for one hour, I'd tell you only the truth. That hour, ladies and gentlemen, is over. For the past seventeen minutes, I've been lying my head off.” *F for Fake*

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And that's where the deal starts to fall apart. Nev realizes that the songs aren't hers but from various places on the net. That's when he starts looking into the truth of the situation... or more accurately, the lies. Turns out that Abby's not a child prodigy, most likely, that she's not got a gallery showing her work. Megan's none of the things they claim she is either, and she might not actually exist. An honest-to-Ghod confrontation happens when Nev & co. visit Angela & Fam in Michigan.

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This happens to be the point where I instantly started to flash back on two films that asked questions.

The first was *F for Fake*, Orson Welles' final completed film and one of the best documentaries ever made. It's a visually striking, narratively arresting film that starts as the simple tale of an art forger (who would much rather be referred to as THE Art Forger) and a writer who also becomes a forger and the island of Ithaca, though it later becomes a tale of Welles seeing how deeply people can be sucked into a misdirection and then playing with the audience. It's the kind of film only a master of sleight-of-hand would be able to pull off. Here, we know some of it is true, there's no question, we read about it in the papers or the history books or *The Big Book of Hoaxes* from Paradox Press. That is situated nicely abutting the fictional story of the great Pablo Picasso and another, even better art forger than THE Art Forger.

Only thing is, he tells us at the end that we've all been played for suckers at the end of a magician's glove. We're flat-out told that there was truth (the first 60 minutes) and there were lies (the last thirty) and that everything else is left to the viewer. Did we get pulled in because it was so plausible when compared to the other stories which we knew were real? Was it so plausible because though it was more outlandish, the story of Picasso & The Forger, and we wanted to believe that something so strange could be true?

Or did we not believe retroactively, discarding that past where we were fooled and adopting a hateful attitude towards the film and filmmaker that gave it to us? *Catfish* doesn't give us that moment. It never says 'Guess what? It's a work! You're all FOOLS!' letting us off the hook for our naïveté. *Catfish* fails to give it to us, and that says that it must be real.

Right?

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"They used to tank cod from Alaska all the way to China. They'd keep them in vats in the ship. By the time the codfish reached China, the flesh was mush and tasteless. So this guy came up with the idea that if you put these cods in these big vats, put some catfish in with them and the catfish will keep the cod agile. And there are those people who are catfish in life. And they keep you on your toes. They keep you guessing, they keep you thinking, they keep you fresh. And I thank god for the catfish because we would be droll, boring and dull if we didn't have somebody nipping at our fin."

Vince Pierce

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That's where the next film comes in. Cullan Hoback is a hero as far as being a filmmaker. At the 2010 edition of Cinequest, Hoback debuted *FRICTION*, a film that played with many of the ideas that Welles had played with, only with documentary style and a narrative piece to work with. The entire film was designed to make you question, to make you guess, to make you angry at yourself for either believing or refusing to believe. It is, in fact, a litmus test. You are judged to be either a cynic, a romantic or a simp depending on how you view it. Your reaction to the film is far more important than the film itself. Why? Because the film is not what you think it is, no matter what you think it is. It is not an amorphous blog, it is a structure, a bold and strong structure, but one that has the single purpose of holding whatever you hang upon it.

The thing is, it's fiction. Yes, I'm certain that Cullan will disassemble me for saying it, but it's not a documentary, though it takes much of its reality from the fact that it portrays itself as a documentary that evolved out of a narrative based on a documentary premise. The characters are called characters, though they are actual versions of the actors who are portraying them, sharing names and pasts and the like. The thing is, they are scripted to go and tell a story and the documentary is supposedly created as that project goes off the rails. But it's a movie. Popcorn, Coke and squeaky chairs, regular theatre movie. It's not a doc, though it pretends to be. It's similar in approach to *Blair Witch*, though much more of a thinking viewers film instead of a genre-soaked sensory experiment. It does not tell you it's a fake.

And that's where *Catfish* come in. It claims, both in the film and outside of itself, that it is a real documentary of real events. There are moments where you think that they are winking at the viewers, telling us 'Hey, we're just messin' with ya!' and there are moments where they seem to be taking it altogether too naturally, as if they're working incredibly hard to make you believe that everything is on the up-and-up. Then there are moments where they HAD to have been playing it straight. Then again, they commit a federal crime by removing mail that isn't their own from the mailbox when they are at Megan's supposed farm. Why include a criminal act unless you knew that they were in the clear. Also, it seems a little too easy that two postcards he had sent were waiting in the mail for them to grab and bring back with them. There's a lot of strangeness going on, and you're questioning and questioning and I, for one, was waiting for the moment it answered the question: when is this going to become the horror film that it's obviously been setting up?

There are moments of Nev just giving the camera the kind of grin that seems to say 'I can't believe you fell for it!', but then there are moments, such as the reveal of the fact that the crew knows that Angela has been faking it which is done with such absolute lack of fanfare that you can't assume that it's been staged, but on the other hand, if I were trying to make sure that people bought it, I'd not have anything that went too far down the road. It's a genius move, if that's what it is. There is a subtlety to the scene, and the entire film, that is infuriating to those viewers who are watching specifically to find pits and fissures to start the picking apart. It's maddening to want that Orson Welles moment and not get it. It's even more maddening to look at the entire film and see that there are an equal number of points that both confirm and deny whatever premise you'd like to sell.

Viewing *Catfish* simply as a documentary about the uncertainty of identity in the world that Facebook built completely misses the point. The argument is the key. We have to answer the questions ourselves because those bastards who made the thing refuse to do it for us!



The Best Busby Berkley  
sequence of the 1990s – Michel  
Gondry's video for Daft Punk's  
Around the World

I am a huge supporter of the Music Video. Maybe it's the fact that I grew up in the 1980s, was watching MTV from the 2<sup>nd</sup> video they ever showed (I missed *Video Killed the Radio Star*, but was watching when they showed *Bedsetland*) and grew up waiting anxiously for the new World Premiere videos. I saw Michael Jackson's *Thriller* the first time it aired on MTV, same with Madonna's *Vogue* and *Like a Prayer*. I would watch at least an hour of music videos every day, and even into the early 2000s, Gen and I would watch *Top 20 Video Countdown* on VHS every Sunday morning. My all-time faves, Outkast's *Hey Ya*, Michael Jackson's *Smooth Criminal*, the Beastie Boys' *Sabotage*, and Guns 'n Roses' *Welcome to the Jungle* all told little miniature stories, easily digestible by the video-viewing public.

There was a lot more experimentation when MTV began to turn away from music videos in the later 1990s. We saw directors like Spike Jonze, David Fincher, and Chris Cunningham start directing videos and making incredibly strange miniature films for everyone from The Beastie Boys to Bjork. Perhaps the most experimental and surrealist of all was the genius Michel Gondry. His dream-like music videos for bands like Oui Oui were awesome, and *Human Behaviour* by Bjork, was a classic. In 1997 he undertook to create a music video for Daft Punk's song *Around the World*. It's a kinda simple song, even by the standards of electronic music. There's a simple series of rhythms and beats and it's nice and tidy.

The music video, though, is possibly the most complex video I can think of when it comes to signs, signifiers, and influences, both conscious and unconscious.

You see, the video takes place on a blackened soundstage where a stepped sort of platform with a ramp in front of it has been built. On the platform are 4 sets of four costumed figures – 4 guys in track suits with these weird boxes over their heads which have tiny heads on top of them. 4 women dressed in one-piece swimsuits with swimcaps on. 4 Alien-like robots. 4 female mummies. Those are your characters. They walk around, dance, style-and-profile, and move to the beat. It's neat, kinda hypnotic, and completely and totally in the style of Busby Berkeley.

You know Busby, right? The man who choreographed and directed some of the most incredible dance numbers in the history of film. Sometimes he would direct the entire film, often he would be brought in to direct specific musical numbers, usually impossible floor shows that would play out across a soundstage. They were grand numbers, huge extravaganzas that often had dozens of dancers moving in almost hypnotic unison. The way that Buzz would direct, with a lack of close-ups, with lots of long shots. This allowed the unity of the dancers to come across stronger.

Gondry used these same techniques in *Around the World*.

He didn't do a lot of close-ups, you got the movement of the teams almost in total, which allowed the various groups to come across with strong impressions. Gondry's eye is always dead-on, and the cinematography is so influenced by the work of Berkeley that it works to give a stronger appeal, improving the music.

Now, let's look at each of the character types. Let's start with the skeletons. You might remember me writing about the Silly Symphony cartoons in the last movies issue. The Skeleton Dance is one of the most famous of all pre-WWII cartoon, and the dancing skeletons are almost certainly a reference to that. The idea of using skeletons as one of the groups of dancers ties the video in with the history of animation quite closely.

Let's follow that up with the men in tracksuits (and kind of ignore the weird box things). The black tracksuit was highly identifiable in the early day of rap music with acts like Run DMC and LL Cool Jay. In fact, the tracksuits the guys are wearing are almost exactly the same as Run DMC wore in the video for *Walk This Way*. That ties the video in with the earliest days of hip hop and music videos.

Now, you've got the mummies. There are few other kinds of monsters that more indicate horror film than mummies. If you've got a mummy, you're no doubt looking at horror. There are no other applications! The idea of putting the mummy in ties the video strongly to the history of genre film, which is always a good thing. There have been dancing mummies on film before, too.

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**“Only Daft Punk can repeat three words over and over for four minutes and make it fucking awesome!” Internet meme**

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# Around the World

After that, you've got the swimwear women. They're an obvious reference to Esther Williams and her swimming spectacles, sometimes directed by Busby Berkeley. The four of them again tie the video into the history of dance on film. Watching both Williams' best stuff and *Around the World* again, it's obvious that the video is actually far closer to the Williams' numbers than the traditional dance segments that Berkeley did, largely because of the more contained nature of the shooting.

*Around the World* is basically the perfect tiny music video. It traps a world in a set like a sno-globe and shakes it up, allowing us to watch the flakes settle.