

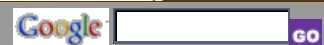


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The Lost

PopMatters @ SXSW 2006

Film Day 3: Other Bodies, Other Selves

[15 March 2006]

by Tobias Peterson
Email Print Comment

This year's festival is a scene Fellini would have been proud to shoot. And I haven't even gotten into the theater.

"Have you seen fuck?" the small, mousy-haired woman asks me earnestly. As my mind reels for possible answers to this question, I scan the convention center in search of hidden cameras. None reveal themselves, and I opt for a brief "no", rather than a more involved "No, but I've seen some serious shit that I could tell you about". Undoubtedly, this would only lead to an even more bizarre conversation and, if possible, more confusion.

My puzzlement must be evident. She goes on to explain: "Fuck.. You know, the *movie*."

"Ohhhhhhh." Things, to my disappointment, grow clearer. Rather than a surrealist profanity artist, this woman is instead schlocking for a festival entry entitled *Fuck* (more on this film later). Undaunted by my ignorance, she proceeds to try to sell me merchandise, to boot. Only at South by Southwest could someone ask you about fuck and then offer you the t-shirt. Again I say "no" as, outside the convention center, a huge green, phallic mascot stands waving at passersby. It's "Podcast Pickle", posing for pictures with festivalgoers and generally delighting the crowd. For me, this fellow (for some reason, he strikes me as masculine) stamps the goings on with an official seal of the bizarre. All in all, it's a scene Fellini would have been proud to shoot. And I haven't even gotten into the theater.

Cruel and Unusual
Director: Janet Baus, Dan Hunt, Reid Williams

4:30 PM, SATURDAY MARCH 11TH - AUSTIN CONVENTION CTR
4:30 PM, TUESDAY MARCH 14TH - ALAMO S. LAMAR 1
9:30 PM, FRIDAY MARCH 17TH - ALAMO S. LAMAR

The transgendered have enough to worry about. Facing a society that aggressively marginalizes them as psychologically deranged at best, those who suffer from

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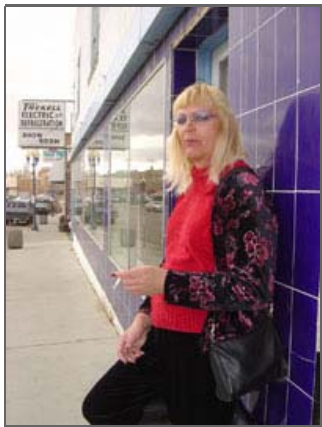
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MPEG4 TRAILER

"Gender Identification Disorder" (or GID, as psychiatrists have termed it) are marginalized in a way that few among us can imagine. With no legal protection to ensure their equal treatment, transgendered workers are very often denied jobs, medical care, and many other basic human rights guaranteed to vulnerable minorities under the Constitution and other subsequent legislation. This might help to explain why, as *Cruel and Unusual* tells us, three times as many transgendered people wind up in jail as compared to other minority demographic groups. And once in prison, as the film documents, the real nightmare begins.

Directed by Janet Baus, Dan Hunt, and Reid Williams, *Cruel and Unusual* examines the tribulations of four transgendered, male-to-female prisoners serving time in jails around the country. Their experiences, one might well imagine, redouble the idea of prison. Denied recognition of their sexual identities and grouped solely according to their visible genitalia, these women (for that's how they, and those closest to them, regard themselves) are locked up in the general male population of prison, a group that sees the women solely as targets of sexual abuse. Some transgendered prisoners fight, in vain, to resist their attackers.

For their own protection, many of these prisoners are sent to solitary confinement for months, even years. They escape one form of brutality but encounter an equally damaging psychological trauma by being completely shut off from the outside world. Others, desperate to change their sex and denied hormone therapy by the prisons, resort to mutilating their own genitals with razorblades. One such prisoner, Linda, severed her testicles and her penis on two separate occasions, and was still denied proper care and medication by the prison.

In a world that recognizes only two exclusive camps when it comes to gender, *Cruel and Unusual* reminds us that these prisoners are serving two kinds of sentences. While they may be responsible for the crimes that land them in jail in the first place, their harsh tenure in prison speaks to the life sentence that they are already serving as transgendered members of society. In light of this, the film makes a strong case for legalized protection for the transgendered community, both in jail and in the free world. For many, we're meant to see, the two worlds are indistinct: the transgendered are already serving a prison sentence, doing time within their own bodies.



MPEG4 TRAILER

Darkon

Director: Andrew Neel & Luke Meyer

Cast: Skip Lipman, Kenyon Wells, Daniel McArthur, Rebecca Thurmond, James Iddings, James Shirk, Domenic Prince, Andrew Mattingly, Gary Black, Fran Kanach, Leah Kanach

6:45 PM, SATURDAY MARCH 11TH - AUSTIN CONVENTION CTR

1:30 PM, MONDAY MARCH 13TH - ALAMO DOWNTOWN

9:00 PM, FRIDAY MARCH 17TH - AUSTIN CONVENTION CTR

Perhaps you've seen them at your local park. You might have encountered them on your weekend jog, blissfully trotting along the path when you come upon a group of screaming adolescents in cardboard helmets, walloping the bejesus out of one another with foam-tipped swords and crying "for sooth!" and "have at thee!" And, more than likely, you went quickly on your way, muttering something about "Dungeons & Dragons dorks" as you did.

Well, OK. Maybe that was just me. But, after watching *Darkon*, I've come to recognize my insensitive prejudices. The film sets the record straight about these LARPerS (Live Action Role Play), exploring the complex and rich world that they inhabit as an important source of community. Specifically, we follow a group of players who inhabit the mythic realm of Darkon (aka Baltimore, Maryland), a fictional world comprised of various countries and tribes that battle one another for influence and territory. The group, we learn, has converted the sprawling suburbs of the city into a detailed map comprised of hexagonal land holdings. The more "hexes" a

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We Are Scientists

kingdom occupies, the more influence its members have in the game. Such territory is most often won or lost on the battlefield, where players don hand-sewn costumes and elaborate armor to settle the matter as knight of old used to do, more or less.

The conversion of strip malls into imaginary city states may seem like idle fantasy, but the film is sympathetic to the Darkonians, foregrounding interviews with players who make the compelling case that this kind of imaginary escape is really no different from other strategies that people employ to forget the dull and drab surroundings of their unremarkable lives. More than one participant voices a deep dissatisfaction with their job or relationship, and to a person, the players assert the importance of Darkon in providing an exciting escape from the humdrum world of strip malls and nine-to-fives. As the film's tagline reads, "Everybody wants to be a hero."

As *Darkon* chronicles the pursuit of this excitement, the players enjoy a highly complicated relationship with their alter egos. Characters in Darkon are frequently the embodiment of who the player would like to be in real life. An overweight kid who's nervous and shy around girls, for example, becomes a womanizing rogue. The copy clerk who suffers daily abuse at work becomes a backstabbing tyrant who vents his pent up aggression on the field of battle. And while the participants themselves repeatedly make a distinction about what happens in the game and what happens in real life, the line is not always so clear. Betrayals in the realm of Darkon lead to broken friendships in real life. Imaginary relationships with other characters cause complications with spouses who, understandably, don't see their husbands running around in the woods with scantily dressed nymphs as simply partaking in harmless fantasy play.

The film, too, takes Darkon seriously, which is what makes it so rewarding to watch. It could have easily poked fun at the players, asking us to laugh at their elaborate illusions and awkward anachronism. Instead, *Darkon* invites us into their world, employing sweeping camera cranes to endow key battle scenes with all the drama and excitement of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Thanks to these tactics, the audience is drawn deeper into the intrigue that threatens the stability of the realm. Will Laconia manage to lead a rebel alliance against the imperial forces of Mordom? Or will the dark elves help the Mordomian empire stamp out their attempted insurrection? *Darkon* manages to transform these fantastical musings into serious, intriguing questions, making me re-evaluate the medieval antics of those kids I used to scoff at in the park.



MPEG4 TRAILER

Shadow Company

Director: Nick Bicanic & Jason Bourque

Cast: Robert Young Pelton, Peter Singer, Cobus Claassens, Neall Ellis, Alan Bell, Frances Stonor Saunders, Slavko Ilic, Madelaine Drohan, Stephen J. Cannell, James Ashcroft

2:00 PM, SUNDAY MARCH 12TH - AUSTIN CONVENTION CTR

11:15 AM, TUESDAY MARCH 14TH - AUSTIN

CONVENTION CTR

7:15 PM, SATURDAY MARCH 18TH - ALAMO S. LAMAR 1

The images are indelible. The charred and mutilated bodies of Blackwater private security contractors shown hanging from a bridge in Fallujah, Iraq, was a shocking revelation for many onlookers and in a variety of ways. First, this was one of the initial indications portrayed in the mass media of the level of Iraqi anger directed at American occupiers. Second, however, this terrible carnage turned the spotlight on a group whose presence in Iraq had been previously unknown to a great many: mercenaries. *Shadow Company*, directed by Nick Bicanic and Jason Bourque, is a look into this, well, shadowy group of ex-soldiers and hired guns, who purposefully put themselves in harm's way. Not for the honorable clichés of God or country. But for lots and lots of good, old-fashioned cash.

The film parses together interviews from a variety of experts, ranging from the academics to policy makers to Stephen J. Cannell, the creator of the A-Team. The most compelling interviews, however, are with the current and former employers and employees of these private military companies (or PMCs as they'd prefer to be known). Their stories reveal a much more complex consideration of this mercenary phenomenon than might otherwise be expected. Money, it seems, is not the sole motivation at work for them. Many private contractors turn to this line of work only after retiring from the military and failing to find gainful employment elsewhere. (After all, decades of weapons and combat training are not

necessarily what corporate America is looking for on a resume these days.) Further, there are moral considerations at stake for many contractors, which influence whether or not they accept a contract.

Of course, there are others who are not so scrupulous, which is where the problem comes in. While the charge that the PMCs in Iraq today are carrying out the dirty work of empire is an ongoing debate, there's certainly no denying their increased presence in that country. *Shadow Company* charts a significant increase in the hiring of private security firms in the time following 9/11. Today, the film reports, these companies constitute a \$100 billion per year industry. The film informs us that the ratio of private security personnel to US troops in Iraq is at 1:10, and that more PMC employees have been killed in Iraq than from every coalition country besides the US, *combined*.

And just who is policing this "coalition of the billing" as author Robert Young Pelton terms it? The answer, it's revealed, is simple: nobody. Iraq, in the film, is likened more than once to the "Wild West", an area where 40 percent of the security contracts are granted without bids to outfits that may or may not have personnel qualified to be running around with fully automatic weapons in that extremely volatile environment.

Importantly, though, *Shadow Company* is careful not to condemn all PMCs. Instead, its job (as director Nick Bicanic asserted in the post-screening Q&A) is to raise these types of questions, not answer them. One of these questions is: In this new era of corporate outsourcing, what is gained and what is risked by farming out the tasks of armed conflict to third party armies? The answers remain to be seen. One thing's certain, however. It's clear that such questions have yet to be asked in any substantial way by the US government, which continues to shower these companies with cash without providing for any official oversight. For now, we're left to rely on films like *Shadow Company* to press for a more thorough approach to a war that's being increasingly fought by proxy.



[MPEG4 TRAILER](#)

The Lost

Director: Chris Sivertson

Cast: Marc Senter, Shay Astar, Alex Frost, Megan Henning, Robin Sydney, Erin Brown, Ruby La Rocca, Eddie Steeples, Dee Wallace-Stone, Michael Bowen, Ed Lauter

9:00 PM, SUNDAY MARCH 12TH - ALAMO S. LAMAR 1
6:45 PM, TUESDAY MARCH 14TH - ALAMO S. LAMAR 1
4:15 PM, SATURDAY MARCH 18TH - ALAMO S. LAMAR 1

As it's based on a Jack Ketchum novel of the same name, I can't fully hold the filmmakers responsible for the rambling gorefest that constitutes *The Lost*. While he's apparently drawn praise from the likes of Stephen King, Ketchum's book (he also penned the film's script) can't be much more than a pulp horror tale, designed more for shock value than any deeper exploration of human nature. At

least, that's what this souped up B-movie of a slasher flick reflects. Those who like their films bloody and mindless, however, will find that *The Lost* provides all the gruesome eye candy they could ask for.

The story centers around the dark figure of Ray Pye (played by a frenetic Marc Senter), a diminutive, gregarious psychotic who works at his mother's motel and stuffs his cowboy boots with crushed beer cans in order to face the world eye-to-eye. Eerily polite and effusive, Ray is essentially a darker incarnation of Patrick Bateman, Christian Bale's charming maniac in *American Psycho*. Unlike that film, however, *The Lost* is not driven by any kind of social comment and, instead, seems content to revel in its own bloody miasma. The film's plot is essentially a detailed sketch of Pye's murderous campaign against women, begun when he shoots two girls on a camping trip just for kicks. Though the police know he's guilty, a lack of evidence keeps Ray out of jail and free to visit abuse on his unfortunate girlfriend, women co-workers, and random hook-ups over the next four years.

Things take a darker turn, though, when Ray's rejected by a one of his would-be conquests. He snaps, shoots his mother, and takes three girls hostage, stuffing them in the trunk of his car. Fueled by massive quantities of drugs and rage, he takes his victims to a cabin in the woods where he also abducts a pregnant couple. *The Lost's* climatic finish, such

as it is, is blood soaked and grim, the extremes of violence writ large against a soundtrack of thrash metal. And while this might provide a visceral thrill for some, I was left wondering at the point of it all.

When Ray name checks Charles Manson before cutting out the unborn child of the pregnant woman he's just shot, I was left asking myself; Are we being forced to consider the dark machinations of a lunatic mind? Is this an extreme homage to the B-movie horror films that have come before? Is *The Lost* just an exercise in shock value? No answers were readily forthcoming. Instead, the credits rolled, ending a film whose elusive purpose made its title all too appropriate. "The Lost" could easily refer to its creators, or its audience, or, sadly, both.

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