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Who?
Identity in Film (Photo-Robot)

With its frequent and transparent thematization of the identity in various contexts and on many levels, film is an excellent source for reflection on the issues of identity and the artistic methods of its conceptualization and rendering. In this text I comment upon some aspects of and approaches to the identity using filmography[1] from the *Photo-Robot* workshop.

Akira Kurosawa, *Heaven and Hell (Tengoku to jigoku)* (1963)

This film's motive comes from the highly nuanced manifestations of social identity, particularly of the economic standing of the individual. The air-conditioned house on the hill, in which the main character lives, is the offensive status symbol that provokes the villain to kidnap his son and simultaneously works as a clue that helps the police investigation. The elegant thoroughness with which this film dramatizes and covers the story makes it also highly influential to the identity of the subsequent procedurals – the movies that cover complex criminal operations and police investigations.

Billy Wilder, *The Major and the Minor* (1942)

The secrets of sexual identity, the fragility of gender identity and sexual preferences are all cynically and playfully tackled in this film. It runs within the context of 'Lolita syndrome' which is always quite provocative as, by indicating the male affinity toward young, sexually capable and controllable females, it implies the biological nature of th Čudotvorni mač e conflicted sexual interests. Its cynicism, and in that sense its realism, is manifested in brilliant verbal allusions, and also by only showing the gender identity plots but not commenting upon them, which makes it highly superior and much more exciting than the 'talkative' films of the same subject matter, particularly Stanley Kubrick's *Lolita* (1962).

Charles Vidor, *Gilda* (1946)

The complexity and enigma of (hetero)sexual tensions or sexual attraction that often tells us many things about ourselves we would rather not know, make the basis of this exceptional *film noir*. Its important aspect is the relativity of the individual identity, in this case the love/hate basis of the main characters' relationship that establishes and sustains their personal identities. The *film noir* genre, that generally handles its narrative elements openly and clearly (except for the plot in some cases), is very useful for the conceptual and formal analysis of the identity.

Irvin Kershner, *The Eyes of Laura Mars* (1978)

The sadistic aspect of the 'gaze' as the process and phenomenon of the culturally codified visual identification is superbly criticized through the world of fashion photography, making one of the two main

themes of this film. The other one is the obscurity of the individual identity (the superficial insight into the self) which is manifested in the fact that people often destroy or get destroyed by what they love most.

Jean Jacques Beineix, *Diva* (1981)

By skillfully balancing on the edge of highly stylized kitsch, this film conceptualizes and visualizes the complex, composite character of the individual identity, and the identity of film as an artwork and cultural product. *Diva* is one of the most influential films in the European cinematography of the Eighties and Nineties.

John Boorman, *The Emerald Forest* (1985)

The relativity (the socially conditioned) and fragility of the personal identity in the highly technological civilization are confronted in this film with the psychological qualities of the personal identity. The basis of the film is shamanistic practice that connects the human with nature providing the individuation through physiological and non-verbal mental processes. It is also one of the principal factors of creativity that is highly neglected and suppressed in the contemporary culture which prefers the pseudo-rational and pragmatic approach.

Joseph Ruben, *The Stepfather* (1987)

A witty critique of the rigidity and senseless arbitrariness of cultural conventions that regulate the limits and control the functioning of the social institutes such as family and thus establish its members' public and individual identities. Through its 'sociopathic and dysfunctional' antihero, this film manifests the fact that the social conventions are essentially defined by the pathology of the majority is carefully concealed and simultaneously instrumentalized by every ideology. *The Stepfather* is the horror movie to the same degree and in the same sense in which the society itself is horror.

Kathryn Bigelow, *The Hurt Locker* (2008)

Besides being currently the only decent film about the war in Iraq (from the invaders' perspective), *The Hurt Locker* discreetly but strongly and compassionately thematizes the enigmatic abundance and unpredictability of the psychic factors of the identity. The danger and the space between life and death that are ruled by the chance, instincts and intuition, actually define the hero of this film. On this conceptual level it can be compared with *The Eyes of Laura Mars*.

Mike van Diem, *Character (Karakter)* (1997)

This layered and intelligently structured film openly addresses some of the key components of the character: the origins and effects of the emotions, the value and price of the socially conditioned ambitions, the uncertainty, complexity and consequences of intimate relations and, probably most important, the relativity of individual identity to the position and situation from which it is perceived. By revealing the brutal and infamous father to be a sophisticated wise man, the consequent and modest mother to be a capricious despot, and their hard working and successful son to be rather limited in the

end, *Karakter* efficiently operates the idea from The Rolling Stones' song *Sympathy for the Devil*: Just as every cop is a criminal, And all the sinners saints.

Philip Davis, *I.D.* (1995)

Stereotypes, consumerism, superficiality, routine and opportunism which constitute the social identity of the late capitalism, and which render the identity not only unstable but also extremely dubious on the ethical grounds, are humorously utilized in this film. By designating the transgression and the energy of violence, that make the main protagonists really feel alive, as just another hypocritical cultural model, the film smartly transcends the traditional, and in my opinion artificial, nature/nurture dilemma. It also makes an interesting predecessor and introduction to the more complex film by David Fincher, *Fight Club* (1999).

Richard Fleischer, *The Narrow Margin* (1952)

Much more than the personal identity games of its characters, the directorial, narrative and visual qualities of this compact and effective *noir* b-movie have significantly defined the stylistic identity of thriller, action and gangster film from the Fifties until today. With the idea that the person is identified primarily by the direct action, by doing and achieving, not by talking or thinking, it conceptually influenced a number of later important films, such as William Friedkin's *The French Connection* (1974).

Tomas Alfredson, *Let the Right One In (Låt den rätte komma in)* (2008)

This film brilliantly turns the very identity of the horror genre and vampyre cultural tradition into the metaphors of enchantments, troubles, excitements, and charms of the adolescence. In the sense of identity, the adolescence is a very important period of human life that fine arts and culture, being made primarily by the aduls, usually either neglect or exploit, for example in the children merchandise industry.

These examples illustrate the thematic scope and complexity of the approaches to identity in film. They indicate the disproportion between the plan of identity in film and the experiential horizon of its average viewer, as a reminder of Ovid's observation and Oscar Wilde's aphorism that 'Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life'.

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[1] The complete workshop filmography also included: Jan Švankmajer, *Dimensions of Dialogue*, 1982; John Schlesinger, *Marathon Man*, 1976; Joseph Sargent, *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three*, 1974; Juzo Itami, *Tampopo*, 1985; Paul Schrader, *American Gigolo*, 1980; Vojislav Nanović, *The Magic Sword* (*Čudotvorni mač*), 1950.