

Kill the Biennale, Vol.I: My Own Private Biennale

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"Swoon took her boat show to the LIII Venice Biennale Opening, where it became invisible: so little visual impact looking out on the open Adriatic Sea from the Giardini."

Some years ago, Quentin Tarantino successfully challenged the notion that a movie has to last 90 minutes... Not for the first time: the industry simply went back to the roots of film as an art form (think D.W. Griffith, Cecil B. De Mille and other classics of the silent era, with some works clocking in at just under 12 hours), and only because it seemed profitable. I find it remarkable that it was Sergio Leone, Tarantino's master, who formulated the let's-go-back-to-the-origins axiom: his last movie, "Once Upon a Time in America" (the script from the book "The Hoods" he insisted he wanted to make into a movie when Hollywood came knocking after "Once Upon a Time in the West" in 1969 and offered him "The Godfather", which he declined: "The Hoods" was what he wanted to make then as he did 14 years later, when it was initially released, to his chagrin) had 10 hours of shot material. Leone thought he had creative control on the final product and sadly found out it wasn't so when he tried to release the movie the way he wanted it (this incident also begot the idea of "director's cut", much abused later

on). The movie was the epic of a lifetime and Leone literally got sick and died over this artistic debacle, the remaining four years of his life consumed in court battles to assert his prerogative to release the movie the way he wanted it and in hospital beds. Today it's possible to get the idea from the DVD: the movie is still less than 4 hours long, sometimes the narrative is obviously interrupted or patched with not too congruous segways. I wish I could see it the way Leone had meant it to be, but Leone's legacy of creative martyrdom has been a mixed blessing: Hollywood has finally realized that it doesn't need to adhere to its "modern" 90 minutes formula, that a story can be parceled and sold in two or three different viewings, for double or triple the money: audiences, if properly lubricated with tons of media buzz, will keep coming back to the multiplex and pay. So we are blessed with Kill Bill and cursed with Lord of the Rings, Star Wars prequels, Pirates of the Caribbean and endless Harry Potter adventures (though in a slightly different production category). What's relevant is that Hollywood adapted its business model, even to include cost effectiveness and shoot two or three movies at once. Aside from the congruity of a story continuing with the same characters and production design, this may generate a new French Film Theory sub-category: gone is the sensorial displacement (or at least subliminally perceived and compensated for) found by the viewer when shown a sequel that wasn't contemplated when the "original came out". No More De Niro's impersonating young Don Corleones, no more Tom Hagen's gone missing from dubious sequels. From a narrative point of view, I think it is better to have a story broken down in installments rather than successive installments posthumously added on to try to cash in on a franchise because people want more of the same shit, which isn't always true... But I am getting carried away here: after all this is supposed to be about the LIII Venice Biennale and this is to say: the story is being parceled in different installments, as this is getting too long (for this blabberer) to do all in one go, every time I sharpen my editing knife, the piece ends up getting longer. Don't despair though: I can't promise Uma Thurman somersaulting in sexy outfits, but I will personally try to kick the shit out of the bad guys, if only figuratively. But don't imagine we are done with opening niceties, yet. I've never seen the movie "My Own, Private Idaho", but I imagine it to narrate living an alternative reality in uncomfortable place/space contexts. So, dear reader, suspend your disbelief and journalistic expectations: what follows will be more an "Alice in Wonderland" meets "Total Recall" than Jerry Saltz report from the Venice Trenches (or Moats, as the case would be). Unless Jerry decides to cut and paste from my report like he did two years ago (Hi Jerry! Good to see you here in My Own Private Biennale, you look great as always!). As you will see, choosing a movie I have not seen as a comparison term will prove less than casual. And like at the movies (at least some of the better ones, the one which inspired the title of this whatever included), there will be subtitle for subheadings.



Swoon's Descent Down the Hudson

The season of "Shit" and its deign conclusion

Unknowingly, I started writing this piece last fall. I was struck by how not one, but two shows were entitled simply: Shit. I will never know what they looked like, though reading through reports filed by people less presupposing than I, as I chose to not go to either "Shit", they were, reportedly (and coincidentally) completely different shows and concepts. Soon afterwards, Swoon's Descent down the Hudson on a flotilla of Coast Guard-wise unworthy ramshackle vessels and trailing multi-artist, multimedia collective in tow (think soapbox stage as opposed to Mathew Barney production values) docked at the Trump City Piers and by contrast offered a fresh, ingenuous approach to art and art making: quite the opposite, I posited, in a piece that I never finished. Swoon supposedly took her boat show to the LIII Venice Biennale Opening, where it became invisible: so many boats, boat shows and showboats, so little visual impact on punters looking out on the open Adriatic Sea from the Giardini. Oh, Hudson Piers of Yore, where art Thee? As congested as New York Harbor can be, there are locations where one has to compete only with background and landscape, natural or manmade. The same can't be said for Venice: beauty, natural or otherwise takes the Lion's share (be it Saint Mark's or other).



Comorans on Display Outside the Giardini Entrance

Swoon's was just another MIA exhibition, whereas the boats taken from the Comores Islands, in spite of being mostly a feat of cultural entrepreneurship by a former unknown vying for attention, rather than expressing true creative energy or questions of re-contextualization, had at least a visual impact. These were traditional cargo boats outlawed by the Comoran government in a radical effort at modernization, disassembled, shipped to Venice in containers that were then placed inside the re-assembled boats. And the unknown Japanese gate-crashing the wet center stage in front of the Giardini Entrance, tentatively governing his paper-made (apparently) boat complete of paper made giant red goldfish, made a comedic counterpoint, with real rescue boats falling for his antics and stopping to offer help, before realizing none was needed. It must be remarked, though, that the visual impact of a succession of battleship-size yachts walling off of the waterfront immediately following the entrance to the Giardini (and its implied display of vast economic power) takes another lion's share: anybody walking to or from the Biennale, can't avoid it, just like in New York one has to walk through the Midtown skyscrapers to get to MoMA.

I will close this long preface (part I of it, with thickening layers of histrionics and historical references) adding that before editing this piece, I re-read my report from two years ago just in fairness to potential readers and to my impelling Alzheimer's. I already wrote 2 years ago about the mirthless anachronism biennials incarnate: after all, Venice invented the franchise in the year 1895.

Now, in the dim light of the financial crisis, mega-surveys seem even less proactive (or pro-creative, to make an etymologically accurate joke, no double entendre meant) while their bent toward pro-fit seems even less probable for two reasons: the high cost of the productions, both of the event itself and the pieces produced seems an insult to thrift the times call for, while the possibility of return for the investors who foot the bills are less secure. The PR return also seems questionable: assured for the big fish, not for everyone else. In art, like in war, today commercial battles are fought donning the cloak of defenders of ideas and civilization, and often it is a war of pre-emption. Italy is a country where newsstand look like super-compact supermarkets, stocking thousands of titles and where newspapers have been adapting to survival in the digital age for years: their brands becoming a distribution franchise for books, CD's DVD's and other products that are sold with the paper for a reasonable, optional increase on the paper's price.

For weeks prior, Italian magazines and dailies had been awash in ink baptizing the new bi-yearly art caravanserai that just opened in Venice, trumpeting more shows, more celebrities more, more... just more. The extensiveness of the media campaign is unusual, but consistent with the ethics and practice of the government in power now. Of course the media-saturation strategy is preemptive: flooding the media creates a buzz of expense account paid journalism, which creates the impression of critical acclaim *before* critics have even seen the show. Acceptance seems established, so the impact of negative criticism will be minimized, since it will be in dissonance with the predominant discourse. If you are well versed in Italian politics and culture, the motive is easy to find: the Venice Biennale is deemed a propaganda project of great importance and as such is being made resonate with the echo given to important government projects. Italy's current Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi knows how to do one thing and that is to stay in the eye of the media. He mutated the axiom from Mussolini, his operational (if not ideological) mentor: like him, he cares for nothing but staying in the saddle and by this he shows a visceral understanding of his audience/market/electorate. Suspending (at least for this paragraph) judgment on the Italian Political Collective Unconscious, I will quote an episode from the diaries of the controversial intellectual Curzio Malaparte (a true man for this season, though he's been dead for a half century: most remembered for commissioning Adalberto Libera the Capri Villa Casa Come Me, on whose Staircase/Roof Brigitte Bardot is immortalized in the most memorable scene of Godard's *Le Mepris*). In their first face to face meeting, after chiding Malaparte for something not flattering enough he had written, *Il Duce* enunciated, protervely, his media motto: "As long as IT is talked about" (my emphasis), IT, really being himself. Warhol mutated that into the less confrontational: "there is no such thing as bad press." But Warhol didn't go into politics (at least not running for office). The artistic reference is less then casual (again, like many others in this piece): Mussolini had, in my view, stolen the approach to communication from the inventor of Futurismo, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. It is commonplace that Futurists were Fascists and indeed many were party

members, attracted to the Fascist Party war-mongering platform: War is the Hygiene of Peoples, Marinetti proclaimed in his 1909 Manifesto Futurista. But a simple comparison of dates (The March on Rome that put Mussolini in the Prime Minister seat did not take place until 1922) will make clear that Fascism borrowed from Futurism and indeed Mussolini fashioned his roaring speeches on the inspiration of Marinetti's readings "Parole in Liberta`" ("words let loose in freedom" would be a good rendition), which sometimes attracted neighbors' ires and even police attention.

Il Duce, a committed Socialist well before the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics was founded, was jailed several times as such in his youth. His career as a leader started at "Avanti!" Forward!, the Socialist Party organ, which he edited for several years; his political "development" is worth a wikipedia reading. Berlusconi, who is also a media publisher, was an Italian Socialist Party member in more recent, much less militant times, though he never was in jail, yet. Mussolini must have been consumed with envy when Marinetti, up to then a war correspondent for aesthetic reasons (he justified war ideologically and loved it, wanted to be close to the action) scored the ultimate media coup: through his working knowledge of journalistic procedures, he landed his Manifesto Futurista on the front page of *Le Figaro*, *The Parisian Daily*, and *The New York Post* of its day, who published it because of the shock value of its proclamations. And that is how Futurism began. This year the centenary of this event is being celebrated (for those not astute enough to have surmised that already) and the crypto-fascists in power now in Italy have decided to go for a second milking of Italy's main artistic contribution to the XX century.

End of Volume I, more to follow swiftly.

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