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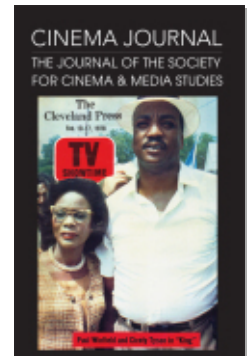
Abel Ferrara (review)

Mark Jancovich

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Films and history, however, are ultimately beyond the authorial control of Kitano. When *Takeshis*¹ was completed and premiered at the Venice International Film Festival in 2005, Kitano confessed that he became “really exhausted” and felt “sick” while watching it. He “was not able to catch up with” his own film and thought, “What the hell is this?”¹⁴ The auteur’s supposed transcendental worldview, if there was one, was swallowed up in the complication of the loaded viewing perspectives that Kitano’s work presents. *

14 Kitano, interview in *Bessatsu Kadokawa*, 15.

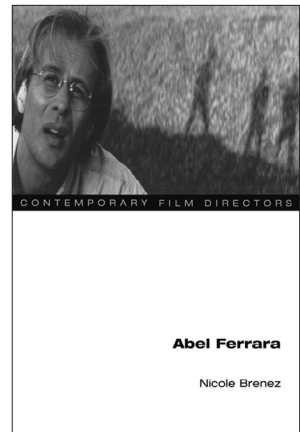
Abel Ferrara

by Nicole Brenez. University of Illinois Press
2007. \$50.00 hardcover; \$19.95 paper. xiv + 210 pages

by MARK JANCOVICH

Nicole Brenez’s volume is an unapologetic championing of Abel Ferrara’s films that not only draws on a long tradition of cinephilic writing, but also explicitly identifies itself as a species of cinephilia. It even suggests that “Abel Ferrara himself” is “someone whom every cinephile immediately recognises,”¹ thus positioning its author as a cinephile and its topic as a figure with whom every true cinephile is already familiar. The book passionately asserts the director’s importance, placing him in a league with “those grand eccentrics who maintain the fragile continuity between the industry and the avant-garde,” figures such as “Joseph von Sternberg, Erich von Stroheim, King Vidor, Orson Welles . . . and Nicholas Ray.”²

Brenez praises Ferrara’s films for their preoccupation with compulsion, and for their characters, who exist in a state of “impassioned bondage.”³ Driven by obsession without compromise, they risk “every



1 Nicole Brenez, *Abel Ferrara* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 151.

2 Ibid., 4.

3 Ibid., 80.

danger” and “venture forth alone.”⁴ If many of his protagonists are serial killers, criminals, and crooked cops, it is also implied that these figures share qualities with both the heroic director and the adoring critic. *The Driller Killer* (1979) is explicitly discussed in these terms: “[The film’s protagonist] commits an act that consists of penetrating bodies until they die, through the front, the eye, the stomach. Artistic torment is transposed into criminal life. *The Driller Killer* composes a sublime eulogy to art as ultimately a matter of life and death.”⁵

The book identifies the director as an auteur overtly opposed to a corrupt world of mass cultural forms: “Abel Ferrara is to cinema what Joe Strummer is to music: a poet who justifies the existence of popular forms.”⁶ However, popular forms are not presented as valuable in themselves, for the author claims that, without figures such as Ferrara, “the genre film or the pop song would be no more than objects of cultural consumption.” Brenez complains about the ways in which “‘popular’ is confused with ‘industrial,’” but she shares much the same contempt for popular films as Adorno and Horkheimer and only differs by arguing that exceptional figures, such as Ferrara, are able to “redeem genre cinema” by appropriating and transforming it. In short, if art is a matter of life and death, the “culture industry” is still a dead and “dirty terrain” while Ferrara’s films are “a critical revitalization of the codes of genre cinema.”⁷

This revitalization is achieved through “negation” and transgression, with “no implicit belief in an ideal perfection or state of innocence,”⁸ and with characters who “allegorize not fixed notions but questions or problems.”⁹ The films also share certain structural features. For example, Ferrara often structures his films around “a single major fold, where the beginning finally meets or ‘touches’ the ending to offer a striking comparison, or a more gradual pleat, where the major fold is progressively translated throughout a series of small folds . . . over the entire structure of the film.”¹⁰ For example, *Bad Lieutenant* (1992) opens “on a daily situation . . . in order to arrive, finally, at the catastrophic version of this final scene,”¹¹ a procedure that “brings to light the intolerable character . . . lurking in the inaugural ordinary scene.”¹²

However, if Ferrara’s films are profoundly moral—and every problem “is a social problem”¹³—his challenge is configured in a broad and abstract way that lacks specificity. As I have argued elsewhere, one problem with much cultist and cinephilic writing is that its celebration of privileged objects often results in an entirely inconsistent and contradictory sense of its Other, often imagined as “a loose conglomeration

4 Ibid., 68.

5 Ibid., 37.

6 Ibid., 1.

7 Ibid., 2.

8 Ibid., 3.

9 Ibid., 13.

10 Ibid., 15.

11 Ibid., 15.

12 Ibid., 17.

13 Ibid., 3.

of corporate power, lower middle-class conformity and prudishness, academic elitism and political conspiracy.”¹⁴ In Brenez’s case, she overtly states that “any cultural expression that does not hurl an angry cry or wail a song of mad love (often one and the same) merely collaborates in the regulation and preservation of this world,”¹⁵ and “this world” is one in which capitalism, ordinary morality, and generic codes are all fused together into a totalizing system.

Furthermore, despite her overt cinephilia, Brenez fails to acknowledge that Ferrara’s reputation originally had very little to do with cinema. For classic cinephiles, the specificity of the cinematic was fundamental. But, in the British context, Ferrara’s critical reception and fan following largely developed in relation to video. He first came to prominence in the UK when *Driller Killer* and *Ms. 45* (1981) were branded as “video nasties” and became central to a debate over the censorship of violent and sexually explicit material. The films not only attracted a strong fan following but also were championed by opponents of censorship.

As Kate Egan has shown, a fan culture emerged around these “video nasties,”¹⁶ a fan culture that was video-based, not cinema-based. This period saw the emergence of a whole generation of film fans whose access to film history was largely through television and video, and whose initial passions were often shaped through the consumption of video rather than cinema.¹⁷ Not only was Ferrara’s reputation largely established through the banning of two early films,¹⁸ but *Fear City* (1984), *The Gladiator* (1986), *China Girl* (1987), *Cat Chaser* (1989), and *King of New York* (1990) were only available on video in the UK or primarily found their audience via this medium. Furthermore, while *Bad Lieutenant* and *Body Snatchers* (1993) both had theatrical releases, they were released precisely at the moment when the video and cinema markets were converging;¹⁹ following these films, Ferrara began to move away from popular genres and became more clearly associated with a straight art-cinema audience. Brenez is most interested in the work that Ferrara produced during this earlier period, when he was largely working in popular genres and being consumed via video, and she has far less to say about his later work than she has about *Body Snatchers* and the films that preceded it.

14 Mark Jancovich, “Cult Fictions: Cult Movies, Subcultural Capital and the Production of Cultural Distinctions,” *Cultural Studies* 16, no. 2 (2002): 315.

15 Brenez, *Abel Ferrara*, 1.

16 Kate Egan, *Trash or Treasure? Censorship and the Changing Meaning of the Video Nasties* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2008).

17 Peter Hutchings, “The Argento Effect,” in *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste*, ed. Mark Jancovich, Antonio Lazaro Reboll, Julian Stringer, and Andy Willis (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2003), 127–141; and “Monster Legacies: Memory, Technology and Horror History,” in *The Shifting Definitions of Genre: Essays on Labeling Films, Television Shows and Media*, ed. Lincoln Geraghty and Mark Jancovich (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008), 216–229.

18 Furthermore, given that the moral panic over the “video nasties” concerned the domestic availability of certain materials, many of these films were only banned on video. See Martin Barker, *The Video Nasties: Freedom and Censorship in the Media* (London: Pluto, 1984).

19 Until the 1990s, the markets for cinema and video were significantly different, so that films starring, for example, Jean-Claude Van Damme and Steven Seagal could top the video rental charts but often failed to even achieve a theatrical release.

The problem with Brenez's study is not that it presents a passionate defense of Ferrara, but that it demonstrates no awareness of the conditions that give rise to this passion. Brenez not only ignores the viewing cultures out of which Ferrara's cult following initially emerged, but also romanticizes his oppositionality. She positions both Ferrara and herself as authority figures, who not only oppose the world but are "able to designate what is legitimate and illegitimate, on the one hand, and what can then be governed and policed as illegitimate or inadequate or even deviant, on the other."²⁰ *

20 Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 61.