

Casey McKinney  
LOST IN THE 70'S:  
THE ART OF DAMON PACKARD

'Give not that which is holy unto dogs, neither cast ye pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you.'  
– Matthew 7:6

'I wasn't raised religious... thank God.'  
– Damon Packard

#### Initial impressions

Someone, a large imposing man, walks into a music video/commercial production house in Hollywood with an armful of watches for sale, looking vaguely homeless and cramped from the stacks of am/fm radio headphones around his neck (also for sale). He's polite and somewhat shy, and before leaving, having not made a sale, the man offers to the company's secretary one of his latest videos, for he too, apart from being a watch seller, is a filmmaker.

This video is passed along, after not being viewed by the right people, to one of the newer employees, who by chance, on a whim, takes the video home and watches it. This newer employee (who also happens to be a friend of mine) is much taken by what he sees – two hours of visceral, brutal, lyrically edited footage, mostly consisting of what appears to be an endless trailer of Super-8 and Super-16 film sequences, all seemingly crafted at some point in the 1970's, and all credited to the name of Damon Packard. Titles include *The Early 70's Horror Trailer* and *Dawn of an Evil Millennium* and hints at a longer sword and elf fantasy piece called *Apple*, but the

dizzying cutting makes one wonder where one film ends and another begins, or if the pieces exist at all, except in teaser, trailer format. My friend then passes the video along to me.

For those romantic indie music aficionados out there, one may be apt to think, upon an initial Packard viewing, of the music of Robert Pollard, the mind behind Guided By Voices, of which maybe 90% of the man's voluminous discography exists as one minute, often one or two chord riffs punctuated by hallucinatory lyrics, seemingly recorded on the spot, and packaged without bothering to remove the hiss of the eight track. The effect of Pollard's music on the listener is that these seeming toss offs suggest the germ of the most lavish and perfect pop songs ever imagined. *If only they had the right production.* And yet, though still a huge fan, after hearing the results of Pollard's later, more produced efforts, which are, relative to the works of hordes of other rock musicians, in fact perfect pop songs, I still favor those pieces magnetized to tape in those moments of inebriated inspiration – that the power of the song lies in a collaborative effort between the listener and the potentiality of the song fragment.

This is how I understood the works of the mysterious Packard for the year or so between this initial introduction and the day when I first came across his feature film *Reflections of Evil*. The early fragments were like some kind of great lost work, a celluloid samizdat that nobody knew about and probably never would, save for some outside savior, a Wilde-ian critic-cum-artist, or at the least, the accidental critic, like say Henry Darger's landlord, which is the more apt description of my role in regards to Packard (except that Packard's still very much alive). I passed around copies, put up clips on my website, did my best at proselytizing in a second hand, ill informed, Apostle Paul kind of way.

And though bumbling as I was, the reaction was pretty good. But the general consensus was that it was too out there for the regular theaters, and really just too narrative to be shown in a gallery – which is a sad thought, since when most people think of the current narrative art film, the only name that comes to mind is the stony baroque monolith of Matthew Barney. It's a sadness compounded by the realization that not too long ago there was a veritable plethora working in the form, the likes of Stan Brakhage, Paul Morrissey, Kenneth Anger, George Kuchar, Jean Cocteau, the early John Waters and others who skirted the line between the darkness of the art house theater and the immaculate white void of the gallery.

Beyond the problems of trying to introduce narrative film into the cloister of the art establishment, there is also the problem of explaining the work, which requires a particular armory of language. Even if the stance is 'art for art's sake,' such is a stance that must be defended articulately. And when you are talking about someone who has never been to art school, let alone film school (except community college for a bit in order to borrow equipment), the deal is lost from the get-go. True, there have been those few who have emerged out of seemingly nowhere (instruction wise) who have ascended to the level of museums and history books – Joseph Beuys out of the cockpit of a Nazi fighter plane, Raymond Pettibon cut his teeth doing album covers and flyers for his brother's punk band Black Flag, and Warhol got his education drawing shoes for fashion ads. But then again, all of these artists changed the way that art is understood. The language was there, but it came from the outside. Warhol could just say: "Gee whiz, I don't know" about his art, and that in itself spoke volumes. But then that was also a representation of the

times. Reticence fit in line with movements as a whole. Minimalism carried over into speech even, and fused with Pop.

### First meeting

My watch says zam, but it's not raining, it's not cold, and there are no scary mansions in sight. Of course that last fact is debatable. Down the street on Sunset glows the baby blue façade of the behemoth Scientology center, and the once crumbling, vine-covered mausoleum-of-a-residence known as the Hollyhock House, a Frank Lloyd Wright, still looms on the nearest hill, a lonely mound of green now encroached upon by a Rite Aid and a Fat Burger at the place where Hollywood Blvd meets Vermont. But the former abode of oil heiress Arline Barnsdale has been closed for repairs for years now, so it's not so creepy anymore. As I watch Damon flip through a menu, I can't help but wonder if Barnsdale's ghost is happy with the facelift. No (thinking better of it), she's probably just ready for the workers to get lost. And so the only thing frightening here tonight at Fred's are the processions of modely, stoned looking hipsters sauntering past our table.

Damon orders a patty melt, although he means a tuna melt. He only figures out the mistake after he's asked how he wants it cooked.

"Really? Well what choices do I have?"

"Medium, medium-rare, medium-well, you know," the waitress says. She's especially bouncy for some reason, as if her 50's retro diner outfit comes packaged with a certain bygone chipperness, a vibe complemented by stockings, a bow, chewing gum and all.

"I guess I'll take it medium-well... no wait a second."

Packard's on my tab, He's already had a chocolate

sundae, and the tuna melt and onion rings are desert. He requests ranch dressing for dipping, and when the first cup runs out, he orders more. He's talkative and lucid (these being his prime hours) and just off of work for the first time since '99. Ever approaching the nadir of being 'completely utterly broke,' the delivery job is an odd bit of providence for someone with no insurance and the kind of eyes that never seem to focus on anything but his own thoughts. Some friends have said that he has the countenance of a savant. If I didn't know better, I'd say he appears blind. In any case, he is known for getting lost.

I set up a video camera thinking maybe it would spark some germane discussion. He goes for it for a bit but then starts gazing into the lens with this horrid expression – the proof of which is etched on an mpeg from which these notes now emerge. Picture a large man, 6 feet 4, 240 pounds give or take, kind of balding, but with some length to the hair, painfully wincing, staring down and into the frame as though recognizing his own image in the convexity of glass.

I put the lens cap back on.

"We'll just do the mic," I assure him. *Magic Man* by Heart begins playing from a speaker overhead. He gets more relaxed, interrupts the follow-up to a question about his family and starts talking about the song.

"This is my favorite part. This solo here. The part where it goes 'nnnnnnnn.'" "Yeah, my father was a gallery owner in Akron, Ohio. Pretty well known. Chrissie Hynde (of the Pretenders) used to work there. Mark Mothersbaugh from Devo used to come in... here it is. 'NNNNNNN.' That's 70's creativity at its best. (Packard goes NNNNN, the guitar goes NNNNNN) Do you hear that?" As he speaks, a 2-dimensional Charlie Chaplin, Lauren Bacall and others look on from across the street. "Is that Schwarzenegger?" Damon asks. "I

think it's Leonardo DiCaprio," I say, referring to the most pronounced and (surprisingly) burly looking figure depicted in the wall mural.

Trying to stay on track, there are more questions about his past. But between licks from his sundae straw, he keeps coming back to connections, Hollywood connections, which makes sense, since he just spent almost a half million dollars inheritance making a movie that most will never see. A good bulk of that that money he invested in pressing about 25,000 DVD's and distributing them to everyone he could think of in Hollywood with half a name – for free that is, pro bono – as a kind of self marketed 'screener,' the kind the MPAA just recently decided to ban. Packard only got responses from the oddball here and there: the semi-tragic John Landis of *The Twilight Zone: The Movie* infamy, an aging Wilford Brimley, giallo style Italian horror movie überfan Sage Stallone (the son of Rambo and Rocky), etc. Stacks and stacks of DVD's were left outside of some of LA's classic movie houses, on the doorsteps of the offices of directors like Oliver Stone. Homeless people were hired to give them away to people on the street. And some got worried. Jim Belushi got his agent to send legal papers to have the madness stopped. There was a buzz certainly, but where would it go, and what was it all about?

### Reflections

The movie in question, *Reflections of Evil*, is in a sense a horror movie, but one that defies conventional notions of the genre. There is no identifiable, embodied representation of evil, a la a blade wielding psychopath like Freddy, Jason or Michael Myers – no real zombies except the schizoid homeless people that Packard's

protagonist Bobby (played by himself) stumbles upon in his quasi-Dante-esque adventure through the streets of Los Angeles. The sole ghost of the film is the sweet and lost phantom of Bobby's sister, who floats in and out of scenes in a flowing nightgown and heroin haze. The film's fractured plot follows the circuitous trajectories of these two characters – characters who, as we later discover, are *both* in fact dead, spinning their wheels in purgatory, and ultimately trying to reunite.

After an absurd and hilarious fake, overdubbed introduction by Tony Curtis (I'll get to that later), the movie begins in the weathered images of Altamont era American tv. Joey Heatherton, a former go-go dancing ingénue in slinky satin, serves up a Serta mattress ad, speaking in sublimated tones about how 'firmness and comfort' are the perfect combination for a good night's sleep. This is followed by introductions to ABC's Monday night lineup for the 1969–1970 season. We're asked to 'meet The New People,' watch a rather embarrassed looking Mick Jagger burst through a wall on Music Scene, and are welcomed to join George Hamilton and a sword wielding Lana Turner in the serialized drama *The Survivors*. A warbled ditty then beckons 'Meet us in September,' while the ABC logo in spacey, mirrored graphics (lifted from the 'Jupiter and Beyond' time warp sequence in Kubrick's *2001*) streams into the horizon. Between ads we glimpse the audience of this anachronistic tv set, an old California style redneck couple – the man, bald and beefy like a bulldog, sporting coaching shorts and a wife beater, tilting back a beer from the helm of an EZ chair. His wife, waifish, yet with a similarly tense, curmudgeon quality, is planted in her own chair to his side. They look drugged, brain dead.

From the appearance of the film stock in which the couple are shot, it's clear that they are living in the relative present, yet the ads and the program that they're

watching, ABC's Wednesday Night Movie, are not. As this movie within a movie begins, we are introduced to Packard's signature style – his eerily accurate simulations of late 60's & early 70's cinema. The credits roll, and a sequence, shot in 8 mm, shows Julie, dazed and running in her nightgown against the classic 70's corporate/mall architecture of the now mostly deserted Eagle Rock Plaza in Los Angeles. The scene works as a kind of abbreviated version of Damon's earlier short film, *The Early 70's Horror Trailer*.

Daryl 'Duke' Haney, who plays one of the disgruntled CGI (Computer Graphics Interface) animators in Damon's newest movie – a send up of George Lucas' ongoing new age pomposity and his retreat into cinematic mediocrity, simply titled *The (Untitled) Star Wars Mokumentary* – explained the effect that these two pieces have, how they both perfectly recreate one of the strange 'archetype(s)' of that era (as Damon put it), of lost, frightened, drugged-out looking women running in slow motion in their pj's.

"People try to do these 70's knockoffs, but it never really comes off quite right. It kind comes off like camp.... But he had gotten it *just right*. The girl looked right, the nightgown looked right, the architecture looked right, the angles looked right, the music used was just right and it was weirdly kind of respectful. I read reviews of the film and was interested to hear what people were saying, and they just kept on about Dario Argento, as if he was the only person doing that. But I can tell you as a person who was a kid at that time, I remember... it was exactly as Damon said. It was everywhere. It was all over television, on Night Gallery and all these shows, and he got it just right."

Not only did he get it right, but the key to getting it right, as Duke appropriately puts it, is Damon's respect of his subject. Some fans of Packard, like Mel Vapour,



the director of The Berkeley Video and Film Festival, see Damon's work as honoring a certain 'B-movie aesthetic.' For Vapour, names like Roger Corman, the king of cheapies, come to mind. But Damon himself would never agree with such an assumption. His heroes are serious, and for the most part, mainstream filmmakers, people like Spielberg at his best moments. And while he may be interested in the look of say Night Gallery, it's not for the kitsch value. Damon's simulations of his favorite era are more of a stripped down refinement of the period's best qualities – explorations of innovative camera techniques and analogue attempts at recreating altered states of consciousness. To mime this look, Damon employs the use of lens flares, slow motion, spot diffusion, mirror props, kaleidoscopic filters, superimposition, and the warping of film in order to produce a kind of fun house mirror effect. The achieved result is simultaneously psychedelic and formalist.

When the opening credits of *Reflections* finish, we return to the present and the old couple. There's a commotion outside and the old man gets up to check it out. As he walks to the window, he crosses a wall displaying a large Nazi flag with rifles mounted across the center of the swastika. The old man sees Bobby outside on the street, stumbling around, getting barked at by dogs, while suburbanites hold themselves as they flee his presence. This Bobby character, as Damon explains, is a hyper-exaggeration of himself during a rough time – an overweight, sugar dependent crazy person, trying to sell cheap watches for a living, ruled by a dominating grandmother, and not able to escape this perdition – not even able to ever catch a bus. Damon's a big guy, but Bobby is huge. Layers of shirts and pillows accentuate his weight. Bobby, like Damon, also has stacks of headphones that crowd his neck, and a giant bundle over his

shoulder that spills papers and garbage out on the street. He yells back at the noises around him as though he's being assaulted until he finally takes a seat and starts wolfing down a pile of liquor candies – candies that he subsequently vomits up in a manner that would make even Linda Blair wince.

Cutting back to the haunted TV set, a clip from a commercial shows a puddle of brown gunk going down a drain after two women fret about the efficacy of their cleaning supplies. "I can't get rid of this ring (one looks at the other's wedding ring)... *No, in my bathroom bowl!*" Then another – a hand spreading chocolate icing on a cake – "Betty Crocker's Ready To Spread Frosting is homogenized so smooth that..." while the THX quality sound effects of the spreading in the foreground grate on the nerves like someone digging through a pile of gore. In the meantime, Joey Heatherton keeps on dancing, and the old couple frantically look for a phone number to order a lynch mob after Bobby – "I'm gonna call the boys, Frank will handle it."

At this point in the film, the cuts are fast paced. There's a lot of information to process and motifs to sort out. Basically there's a sense that people are living in extreme fear. And the television seems to be the prime contributor to that emotion. The fact that the ad images are old, and, by today's standards, clumsy and transparent in their manipulations of the psyche, only serves to magnify the absence of representations of a slicker, more modern TV ad culture. When, later in the film, we are introduced to modern media images, they have evolved into a more insidious level of skill.

Damon started shooting *Reflections* shortly after the death of his grandmother, upon which he received a somewhat substantial inheritance unexpectedly (the aforementioned half-a-mil). As long time friend and collaborator on Packard's projects, Chad Nelson,

explained, before she died, all Damon had pieced together was “a seven or eight page treatment. There were a lot of elements missing from it. It was this long rambling concept of a film. But he got the money just at the time that he had this long, rambling concept, and so he made the movie page per page verbatim based on this seven or eight page treatment. It never went into script format. He just started shooting it. He bought all of this equipment and started making the movie [1].” Damon purchased “about 6 or 7” 16 mm camera’s, film stock, a digital-8 camera, a new Apple G4 and Final Cut Pro software and hit the streets in early 2001.

As we leave the house of the old couple, the film shifts back to a couple months prior. Bobby is less deranged, thinner and more polite. He’s out on the Hollywood Star Walk trying to sell his watches, but no one is buying. Everywhere he goes people are fighting on the streets. At times he is able to keep up his good spirits, but after a good sugar binge (like eating a whole cake in seconds), his mood shifts in a sort of Hyde manner. He starts screaming at the others screaming back at him.

The film sort of drifts at this point. The biggest overall criticism of *Reflections* is the slow pace and repetitiveness of this middle section. But then a real life event that Packard never could have predicted changes the course of the film as it’s being made – the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent hysteria that follows. Suddenly much of what Damon had already filmed takes on this prescient quality. People, in a state of paranoia, without seeming cause or provocation, are attacking each other. That creepy, Kubrickesque ABC ‘Meet us in September’ ad takes on a new meaning. Packard uses some of the media hysteria occurring outside of the production to give his film new life and focus. We see John Ashcroft on Fox News (not from the old couple’s set) being asked about the terror attacks and

what follows. Posed the question of whether it looked bad that the President spent all day on September 11 in apparent hiding, flying around the Midwest instead of taking his position back in Washington as Commander & Chief, all Ashcroft can say is: “We are pursuing a number of leads and progress is being made.” When asked if we are going to have to “sacrifice a number of civil liberties to wage a war on terrorism,” Ashcroft (via Packard’s cutting, but not far from the truth of the Attorney General’s characteristic evasiveness) again gives the same reply. Newspapers in stands that Bobby passes by read headlines like ‘Beyond Fear’ and ‘Total Paranoia.’ And when it’s later revealed that Bobby is dead and in purgatory, these time specific facts underscore the notion that we are all now in a similar comatose state – having been bludgeoned into insanity by a dead and mechanistic media. And, once again, going back to horror archetypes – there is another that Reflections plays upon, that of the haunted television set trying to suck people into another dimension (think *Poltergeist* and *The Ring*). Only Packard’s TV is perhaps more scary, because it is real.

While all of this is happening in the film on one level, most of the critical attention paid to the movie thus far in independent film magazines has been placed upon Packard’s satirical shredding of some of the demagogic figures in Hollywood – in particular, Stephen Spielberg, Damon’s childhood idol.

#### **Spielberg (a long aside)**

Born in 1967 (‘on the same day as Audrey Hepburn and Pia Zadora’), Packard is a child of the late 70’s and early 80’s cinema. His mother was an actress, his father a watercolor artist and gallery owner and his grandfather,

Sam Pollock, was a famous meat packer's union leader and the cofounder of Kaiser Permanente. Packard grew up in Akron Ohio, and moved to Chatsworth, CA to live with his grandmother a few years after his mother passed away when Damon was only an infant. A smart child with an overzealous grandmother watching his every move, Packard found escape and solace in the movies, spending most of his allowance at the theaters in malls, watching the kind of flicks most young boys like – action, sci-fi, fantasy and horror movies. The late 70's and early 80's were a pre-CGI effects golden era of these genres and saw the rise of the big spectacle auteurs like Spielberg and Lucas. Movies like *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977), *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Spielberg, 1977), *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Spielberg, 1981), *The Empire Strikes Back* (Lucas, 1981), *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (Spielberg, 1982), and *Poltergeist* (Hooper, 1982) transformed the movie industry, and had a life changing effect on the young Packard.

Packard acquired his first Super-8 camera in 1982, a trade for a video game he won in a Defender contest [2]. Over the next year he began producing short spoofs of his film heroes with a new friend who would become a long time associate, Paul Trainor [3]. As Trainor remembers, they started shooting on the first day they met. Having spent the first part of the day at a *Star Wars* convention, the two went home and immediately began working on “some kind of precursor to *Jedi*”. They filmed on the rooftops of parking garages at the Santa Monica Promenade, using unguarded power outlets for lights and equipment, and often came close to getting arrested. Already, by this point, Packard wanted to make his films have some of the look and feel of the big spectacles. But, being just a kid, he obviously didn't have an effects budget. So he was forced to be inventive to get the results he had in his mind. What he couldn't afford

to produce himself, he borrowed from other sources – videotaping clips from television, using tape recorders to record foley and effects sound, both from TV and other sources. He began building a library of sound and video that he could use to weave into his films in the editing room, amassing a huge cache from his favorite sound engineers at Lucasfilm. In order to make the borrowed clips seem less obvious, he learned how to superimpose them over his own footage – becoming in turn, if only by accident, a kind of master Dadaist.

From about 1984–1987, when Packard began working on his first noteworthy film, *Dawn of an Evil Millennium*, he was already becoming more daring with the editing process. He mastered compositing techniques, splicing explosions and sci-fi scenes from other obscure films into this epic zombie/cop movie. The sound effects were upped another ante, and he learned the rhythms of editing to soundtrack, utilizing everything from Tangerine Dream to Queen to pieces from *A Clockwork Orange*. During this period and on into the late 80's, Packard supported himself working as an usher at the Mann Theater in Westwood. There he met fellow usher, film buff, and future collaborator, Chad Nelson.

“I met Damon in April of 88, the year of *Beetlejuice*,” Chad told me in a phone interview. “He got fired for eating M&Ms... *and you know he bought them*, but he kept reaching into his pocket to munch on them while he was sweeping the carpets. Someone saw him, and he had been written up for some other things, but I guess the M&M's were the last straw.” For Packard, the main recollection as an usher was watching the same trailers over and over again, how even trailers for bad movies used to last forever then. “I was at the Regent for like a year,” Damon said, “and there was this trailer for *Explorers*. I mean everyday for a year I would hear that thing – ‘From the director of *Gremlins*, *Explorers*,’”

Damon said, speaking in a kind of twisted Doug Henning voice. “That was a time when movies would play for a long time, and trailers would just kind of... *do you remember those days?* Remember when you’d see a poster or a billboard and it would just stay up for like two years. Now a film comes out for two weeks and it’s old.”

Blame it on enduring those trailers or not, this was also the beginning of Damon’s fall-out with his love affair for film gods like Spielberg. “I’d say it must have been around the time of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. *Hook*? But then I liked *Empire of the Sun* a lot, and that came out just before. Since the late 80’s it has been kind of up and down with him. Yeah, since the late 80’s, which was one of the most horrible periods in history, which is very similar to what we are in now, except with cell phones and we have technology. We have the Internet and cell phones but it’s the late 80’s basically.”

It’s not surprising that, so far, his guerrilla marketing campaign has failed – one that has made him not famous, but infamous. Packard is an anomaly in Hollywood, or at least in the demographic of those who make films. As friend and fellow experimental filmmaker J.X. Williams put it: “In another dimension, Packard would be where Quentin Tarantino is... and vice versa.” What Williams means is, like Tarantino, Damon’s an obsessive cinephile, and all of his work is based on/references/steals from (sorry *appropriates*) the work of others. But whereas Tarantino managed to get entré into the Cineplex via his writing abilities, Packard has always been more of editor. And unlike Tarantino, or say Jean Luc Godard (another big appropriator), who both got their starts in film later in life (they both started out as critics – Godard from the pulpit of the French movie journal *Les Cahiers du Cinema*, Tarantino

from behind the counter of a video store), Packard has been making films for as long as he can remember. Still, even though he's been at it since he was 14, armed with only a Super-8, a little money and access to a Burbank editing room, and has managed to develop into a master stylist, in the end it won't matter if he can't convince a producer to trust him with millions of dollars for a feature. Duke (again) also brought up the Tarantino analogy:

“Damon's very locked into that (his particular) thing. In the way that Tarantino is, *but*, and weirdly enough I think there is a correlation there. Even though Tarantino is sort of a social disaster too, he is somehow able to communicate better than Damon. He's able to navigate through the world better than Damon, quite obviously because he is so incredibly successful. Maybe it's because he has a real gift for writing, which I don't think Damon does. I think that's one of the things that holds him back. He has a lot of ideas and he doesn't try to assemble them in any kind of order. In the usual way. It's just sort of a vague thing. I just don't think he could ever sit down and iron out (a script) in way that would be entertaining to a Lawrence Bender or a Harvey Keitel or someone like that. But I think they are kind of similar. Quentin is all hung up on the 70's like Damon is. But that's true of a lot of people from our generation. We're all about the same age, and younger people too, people born in the 70's have kind of a 70's hang-up.”

**Damon, Spielberg and Duke on a roll  
(another way too long aside)**

Duke by the way is one of Damon's more recent friends, and he came into the relationship with some of the same misconceptions and surprises as my own. Duke's a



writer, having penned several screenplays, stuff like *Friday the 13th part 7* (which doesn't mean he's not a serious guy). His story of meeting Damon (which works best unedited) captures the disconnect between what fans see as great in Damon's work, and what Damon perceives of himself.

"I met Damon in February of this year. I sought him out. I was over at Burke Roberts one night and everyone started talking about Damon's movie. How it was being left in alleys around LA. How you can only watch two minutes of it at a time, how it's repetitive, but it's great, hilarious. I had a real hunger for a true underground movie scene in LA. I come from a punk background, and am like a committed life long bohemian, and so I thought, finally here is someone who thinks like me. I had to hook up with this guy. I found the website ([www.reflectionsofevil.com](http://www.reflectionsofevil.com)) and contacted him through that and I tried to invite him to a screening of a movie I was in, but that didn't work out. And then there were subsequent invitations and those didn't work out. But Damon and I were corresponding by that time and the correspondence was leading into some very strange areas, in the sense that... well one of the things that really interested me about *Reflections of Evil* is that I really hate Stephen Spielberg. I kind of sort of erroneously hold him responsible for the state of American film as it is today. You know due to the success of *Jaws* and his celebration of schmaltz and these sorts of childlike emotions that he always plays on. I don't think the guy has an adult mind. And I think his movies have always amounted to a kind of hypnosis, along with Lucas, who is another person that I really dislike. I think they are kind of the twin towers of the decline of the American cinema.

And so I just assumed – because I had heard that Damon had sort of savagely parodied Spielberg in this

movie – that he was going to think just like me. And after I looked at the *Reflections* website I had seen that a lot of Damon’s observations in the interviews he had posted were very similar to mine – that there were so many rules that you have to follow, and society has gotten paranoid, you know you couldn’t shoot anywhere without people freaking out, and I thought this guy has completely the punk attitude, and he’s against all of the things that I am against. And then, well, low and behold, over the course of this correspondence Damon is holding up Spielberg as a hero, and he’s talking about the beauty of the music of John Williams....

And so the first meeting was really strange. I didn’t even know what he looked like at the time. He finally drove up and sat down. His glasses were askew and he seemed kind of befuddled, which I since have learned is kind of his usual state, and I set about to try and communicate with him in a very... you know, just trying to get down to brass tacks, a kind of *who are you?* And I was immediately just trying to challenge him a little bit, and....

*It’s interesting that you met him without seeing....*

What’s that?

*No go ahead, you’re on a roll.*

I am on a roll. Yeah he was resistant to a lot of the things I was trying to say. I was trying to point out the contradictions between who he was, and the things he professed on his website and yet here he was, yet again, telling me about the beauty of Spielberg’s movies and all this and uh... at one point I kind of exploded, and by now I think you can easily imagine me doing,

*Kind of like in the Star Wars Mokumentary?*

Oh yeah, exactly, well you see, that’s where that comes from. So I kind of went on this rant about Spielberg and I was like he’s this, he’s that, and then I said, you know, he’s illiterate. *Read a fucking book bitch!* That’s just the

kind of thing I say all the time, and people who know me expect it from me, they don't even comment on it. Damon didn't really react very much, but as the conversation went on he got into this really technical conversation with my friend Burke and I kind of withdrew from the whole thing. I didn't think there was any kind of connection at that point with Damon and myself. I considered the whole meeting sort of disappointing. He kept saying to me things like, "my god, you're so analytical." And I said Damon, you know analysis and action are one for me. I felt like he was saying that I was shitting out these long thought turds, like they were just nails and tacks. And Damon, you know grew up in California. I don't think he's accustomed to meeting people like that. There aren't a lot of them in Hollywood. But it was very funny, the next time we exchanged emails, he sent me something with the headline 'Read a fucking Book Bitch.' And I asked him, did I say that? And he said, "yeah you did." And although he gave no indication that he was paying attention at the time, I mean he didn't laugh or anything, but I guess he had singled this thing out as a kind of catch phrase or a line and so... that was interesting, and then he called me up and asked me to do this film. (This scene eventually plays out in the *Mok* with Duke this time attacking Lucas with the same 'Read a book, bitch' line.)

...On some level he is like the comic book guy on *The Simpsons*, except that he's not obnoxious like that. He absolutely has these... things that interest him and he's really not terribly interested in exploring anything outside of them. And you know we had a terrible time – I had a terrible time – when he came over to pick me up to shoot the *Star Wars Mokumentary*. First of all, he got lost on the freeway about eight times. I mean I wanted to kill him, and I was sitting there like, I mean this is fucking passive aggressive. He kept saying, "There's

something wrong with my mind, you know I'm like this, I get lost," and I was boiling, and meanwhile he was playing Yes on the radio, and like I said, I have very specific musical tastes, contemporary stuff like Trail Of The Dead and Unwound and Fugazi and stuff like that. Fucking Yes to me is like being put inside the Iron Maiden. And I kept saying, Damon, you know, how can you listen to this shit? And he'd go, "Oh it's beautiful. It's like Opera. Can't you hear it?" And he would turn it up even louder. Then he put on the John Williams score from *Space Camp* of all things. And I said Damon this is shit, this guy's a hack, I mean he can fart this shit in his sleep. He doesn't give a fuck. And he said, "no, no, it's incredible. I really think that if he were living in the 18th century he'd be considered one of the great composers. He'd be like Mozart or something. The only reason that people don't think of people that way is because they do movie scores." Which I think he has a point there. Finally, the only thing we could reach a compromise on was, he put on a Pearl Jam CD, which was about as close as you could get to where I was – and I fucking hate Pearl Jam. And then eventually he put on *The Clockwork Orange* score. And he played that, and played that, and played that forever too. And later, when he dropped me off, I brought him in and I thought, I'm gonna turn him onto some new shit. I thought I could play some shit in here that he would like. I thought, for example, he would at least like Nick Drake since he's like a big Carpenters fan. And it was like good god man, he failed the Nick Drake test. I don't know anyone who doesn't like Nick Drake. Only if you are the hardest hip hop or hardcore... I mean even my mom would like Nick Drake. And he's from Damon's era and everything and Damon just turned his nose up at it. He didn't like one freakin' thing I played for him [4]."

Anyway, sorry about that rant. It's funny if you know either of the guys. Maybe it's funny anyway. And it sort

of mirrors my second experience hanging out with Damon. Here's notes:

### Lost, skating, and a mantra

8pm, Scene 2 – Out on the street, standing on one of the more suburban hills of Echo Park Ave, waiting for Damon. I get a call from his perpetually static-cursed cell phone. He's lost, and when he finally shows up, I learn that his scheduled rendezvous to be costume fitted for a part in an independent film has been cancelled. He's on the phone again trying to sort things out. "Just get me a 46" or a 48" long. 46" should work. Try to get a double.... Big, huge, the biggest you can find," Damon says, laughing, talking to one of the production assistants.

His ride is a Honda SUV, on the new side but kind of ragged out, and a little small for a guy needing a double sized suit. Climbing in, my knee hits the glove compartment, which is open, spitting out various items – Comtrex cough syrup, a bottle of ginkgo biloba, 2 toothbrushes and a few CDs – Jerry Goldsmith's score for *The Haunting*, other soundtracks, the new U2. "Yeah I'd say my favorites are John Williams, Alan Silvestri (the film composers), U2, oh and of course The Carpenters, in no particular order," Damon says. "*The Haunting*? Bad movie, good score." I imagine a life lived to soundtracks. Good soundtracks from bad movies. It takes a certain ear to notice. To find something redeeming in a film like *Predator*. In another compartment of the car, he has stacks of these finds.

With the fitting cancelled, there's time to kill, so we head back up to my friends' place where I am staying to make plans. The ultimate destination is roller-skating, near Venice at a party that one of Damon's friend's,

Shawn Yanez, is having. Actually it's a friend of Shawn's that's throwing it, a comedian party. The whole place rented out. Shawn's another one of the stars of Damon's *Star Wars Mokumentary*.

"It's one of those classic 70's rinks," Damon says, which starts this kind of repetitive dialogue about all things related to his favorite decade. Back in the car, Damon tunes the radio to K-BIG 104 for LA's Saturday night disco program. My friends, Matt and Trinie, have decided to come along, and Matt's telling me how everyone in LA is now listening to this show on Saturday nights. How you will pull up to intersections, and you hear the same mix, all over LA – Donna Summer, Barry White, The Bee Gees. I can't help but think: *Didn't this revival already happen once in my lifetime?* But for Damon, it's no revival, but a continued obsession, a state of arrested development perhaps, as one of his friend's put it. The era seems to envelope his entire being, as if something awful and tragic happened to him during that time which he is trying continually to go back to and resolve. He'll tell you it has to do with the movies – a loss of innocence and intelligence that happened in the 80's, a period that spawned such awful movies as *Zapped!*, *Rambo*, *First Blood Part II*, and a slew of movies by the Corey's (Feldman and Haimés). Remember *Dream a Little Dream*? In which a noticeably cracked out Feldman comes out of the closet as a Michael Jackson imitator? That was the 80's.

"This is a classic 70's song.... Classic late 70's... early 70's... only in the 1970's... see that building over there, classic 70's architecture," Damon says in spurts, his inflection shifting each time he mentions that clean round figure, the variance in pitch connoting mines of meaning only he could understand, his lucidity and expansive dialogue from the previous night funnelling away into a single mantra. (As Duke would later put it,

being in the midst of more than one person and without a camera...) Damon froze.

After getting lost again for about thirty minutes we finally make the rink. Damon's been talking about this bank where he shot a scene for *The Early 70's Horror Trailer* – his ode to a certain bygone aesthetic, to a time when less advanced technical capabilities, coupled with a still nascent independent spirit that had begun to flourish in Hollywood in the 60's (following the anti-trust break up of the major studios in '48, the end of the production codes in '51, the rise of TV and its competition with film, and American exposure to the burgeoning European new waves of the 60's), spawned new innovations and experimentation in American film. Especially in the horror genre. Independent directors like Wes Craven and Tobe Hooper picked up 16 mm cameras and made movies on relatively nothing. The grittiness of the film stock, and a reliance on clever editing rather than expensive effects, only added to the confused nightmare qualities of their productions. As we pull into the parking lot, Damon nonchalantly says, "Oh there it is." The bank.

And somehow I begin to feel that this whole getting lost bit is a ruse. He's never lost. He's just trying to find other places to shoot. Lost in soundtracks, he....

Cut to: The whole 70's bit is getting ridiculous. There are white guys with big afros and mustaches and huge sunglasses and satin jump suits on roller skates doing tricks in the parking lot, like they just wiped the sand off their wheels, having emerged from the boardwalk of Muscle Beach circa *Pumping Iron*. I get the feeling it's even a little much for Damon, who though mired in the same decade, abhors the kind of kitsch revivalist look of say Oliver Stone. And we are surrounded by people who look like extras from *Born on the Fourth Of July*. Only more groovy. Less wheelchairs and politics. A simulacrum of decadence and perfection....

And so on...

After a while at the rink, in the midst of all of these quasi-celebrities – people like David Cross from HBO's Mr. Show – Damon iced over even more. Sensing his unease, I gave him my video camera and went out to smoke. We didn't stay too much longer, and so the only evidence of Damon's experience is what I later discovered he had filmed – girls in thigh high striped athletic socks and satin short shorts wheeling round in round. Very... well...70's.

**In any case...**

Back to *Reflections*. So there's this 70's versus Now thing, and this Spielberg thing, and the film functions as kind of a bridge between the two. Damon, as Bobby, personifies what is created in the wake when fantasy becomes nothing but vapid explosions and digital stuntmen. Julie represents what is lost, a physical representation of a more innocent time.

After seeing Bobby stumble around Los Angeles for a while longer, perhaps a bit too long, there's a flashback sequence that explains how Julie came to be in her present state. The scene takes place in Universal studios, circa 1971. Bobby, at age 5, and his sister, then a teenager, and the grandmother are riding along on the studio trolley, listening to a fake tour guide give a spiel on everything gay about Hollywood. "It's here where Boris Karloff made a gay advance toward Lon Chaney, who also happens to be Tony Curtis' gay lover. Anthony Perkins.... (with such and such...) mannerisms and an emaciated physique, a hallmark of gay men. Currently on lone from Warner Brothers is *The Omega Man* exhibit starring Charlton Heston, directed by Boris Segal. Charlton Heston, as you know, is an idol of gay men, but is not gay himself.



Anyway, I'm running out of wind here (though I shouldn't forget to mention that Packard is now banned from Universal Studios for life for his filming stunt there. Ironically, in this monument to film, you can bring all the camcorders you want to the park, but whip out a Super 8 and you're in big trouble). Basically the film continues with Julie running away from her family at Universal. Going off and doing drugs with some guy named the Golden Guru. She then comes back to the lot and spies a young Stephen Spielberg shooting his second movie, a made for tv production called *Something Evil*. She ends up overdosing on heroin, and enters purgatory via this train tunnel, which serves as a wormhole, along with the television set to that other dimension. Bobby continues on in the same state until he almost gets arrested out in Valencia, in the same cul-de-sac where *E.T.* was shot. He fights off the cops, steals their patrol car, and screeches off, winding up in Universal Studios. There he gets on the *E.T.* ride, which acts as another wormhole, and winds up in the Magic Mountain amusement park, where he finds his sister on the "*Schindler's List* ride" (of all things). There she tells Bobby that he died on the *E.T.* ride years ago of a sugar overdose, and that she has returned to help him escape purgatory. In the midst of all of this are about a zillion Spielberg spoofs, and other pop culture riffs.

#### Where next?

A month slips by since I last saw Damon. Halloween comes and goes, the flu season kicks in, and we have sporadic telephone conversations. Sometimes he picks up the phone whispering because he's inside a movie theater. "No, no it's all right, just a stupid trailer. How's it going?" On one occasion he's gone to see *Kill Bill*

*Volume 1*, the new Tarantino. On another, it's the remake of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. The first he says he likes okay – “more than my friend's,” the second he says is terrible. But then he'd already predicted the Bruckheimer version of Tobe Hooper's classic was going to be a bomb. The perpetual student, he went anyway to see if there were any good morsels to glean. Maybe Steve Jablonsky's soundtrack would be interesting. No... it isn't.

I think it was during the credits of *Chainsaw* that he tells me about car troubles. How his timing belt went out, meaning he might lose the delivery job at the senior's home. Days later I read that *The Star Wars Mokumentary* wins the Grand Prize for Mocumentary at the Berkeley Film and Video Fest just a year after Damon's *Reflections Of Evil* won that festival's Most Innovative award. When a friend from Los Angeles tells me that *Reflections* will be featured in the Red Hat Film Festival in Los Angeles, I go to Damon's website to confirm the date and the first thing I see is a disclaimer reading:

NOTICE:

THIS WEBSITE MAY BE SHUT DOWN ANY DAY NOW

See 'Find the Movie' for further info.

Additional bad news update 11-13-03

My car just broke down,  
timing belt went out damaging engine permanently.  
Now I am car-less, job-less and broke,  
this is not a good time.

I give a call to his cell phone and get a similar message. It's in the straightest, flattest voice I've heard from Damon yet, almost unrecognizable as his own, saying something about how the line will be shut down any day now because of non-payments. Panicked, I check the web again. There's a good, albeit brief, review of

*Reflections* in the *LA Weekly*, a preview for the upcoming screening. I begin to wonder which momentum will win out – the slow growing attention to his work, or his painful financial demise. I think back to one of the questions I asked that night on the way to the roller rink.

“Did you really live out of your car for awhile?”

“Oh no... Where did you get that?” he asks.

“Somewhere on the website,” I say.

After a pause, he backs up, sort of qualifying by saying that he did live in a tent for about a year in Hawaii while trying to make his sword and sorcery flick *Apple*. “It was nice,” he said. “I had a radio. Discovered (UFO enthusiast) Art Bell while I was there,” he said, laughing. “Yeah, listening to Art Bell under the stars.”

Out of communication, my only connection now is to watch some of the movies he said were influences – *Legend* (1985) by Ridley Scott, *Zardoz* (1973) by John Boorman, *Wizards* (1977) by Ralph Bakshi, *Demon Seed* (1977) by Donald Cammel, Ken Russell’s *The Devils* (1971), the first two *Exorcists* (1972 – Friedkin and 1977 – Boorman respectively), Coscorelli’s *Phantasm* (1979) and *Beastmaster* (1982). There’s a dive into the Kuchar brothers on a tip from J.X. Williams. There’s also a dip into old film textbooks in order to try and shake my memory and maybe make some sense of what Damon keeps reiterating about the state of movies today and why the 70’s were such a heyday.

When I finally get him on the phone again, he’s (do you need three guesses?) at the movies, watching the new Richard Donner film *Timeline*. Donner’s one of the old horror/fantasy guard that Damon once had great admiration for, having directed such movies as *The Omen*, *Goonies* and *Ladyhawke*. But Damon laments that his new production is ‘astounding’ in how bad it is. He then tells me that the screening of *Reflections* at the Red Hat festival didn’t happen because someone forgot to

bring the DVD. "Can you believe that? There are 25,000 DVD's out there and this guy can't even bring his?" I ask him if he thinks it is a conspiracy, since it was to be shown at Disney Hall. Maybe someone got worried about the film's content, I ask. "Yeah that would be pretty funny. Disney Hall presents *Reflections Of Evil*," Damon says, mimicking a typical announcer's voice. "The worst part about the whole thing was that I was going to be paid \$250 to have it screened. I really could have used the money." As some sort of consolation, he was sent a trophy for his win at the Berkeley festival.

Asked what he wants to do next, he says he wants to make a very sweet fantasy film in the vein of *The Never Ending Story*.

"Are you talking about finishing *Apple*?" I ask.

"... It'll be a soft, haunting, mystical film... what's that? No, it's gonna be called *Legend of Rainsong*... [5] no I'm kidding. Yeah *Apple*. But I don't have a story yet. Well I kind of have one. I have a treatment. It's about the elfin girl Apple and her childhood friends. Only problem is that the story has these minor lesbian tones. And Apple's 14." He goes on to say that distributed somewhere else, that wouldn't be a problem. "Do you know that David Hamilton film, *Bilitis*?" I don't, but a quick search on *All Movie Guide* on the web pulls up this info:

1977 – France – 95 min – Feature, Color AKA *Bilitis*:

The Loves of a Young Woman

**Director:** David Hamilton

**Genre/Type:** Romance, Adult, Softcore sex film, Romantic drama, Erotic drama, Gay & lesbian films

**Flags:** Not for children, Nudity, Strong sexual content

**Keywords:** Girl, Love, Romance, Sexual-awakening, Teenagers

**Themes:** Sexual awakening, Boarding school life, First love

**Tones:** Sexy, Racy, Bittersweet, Earnest, Nostalgic,  
Passionate, Sentimental

**Moods:** Flames of passion

**Color type:** Eastmancolor

**Produced by:** Ectafilms / Films 21 / MIP / SNC

“...Yeah okay.”

“Well same kind of thing,” Damon says. “Big deal right? It was well received in Europe, but in America...”

### Tony Curtis and beyond the infinite

I mentioned before that at the beginning of *Reflections*, Damon had some fun at the expense of an aging Tony Curtis, dubbing over a clip of the actor introducing Charles Bronson for some ‘Laserlight Special Edition’ DVD re-release (note: Sylvester Stallone, upon viewing the movie after much goading from his son, said: “That poor Tony Curtis, Jesus Christ Packard must have paid him a hundred bucks, it’s really sad”). Stealing Curtis’ laudations of Bronson, Damon becomes one of ‘Hollywood’s greatest tough guys.’ At the beginning of the *Star Wars Mok*, Damon returns to more of the same Curtis/Bronson intro footage. But this time Curtis’ explanation is more telling of Packard’s current situation. As we see images of Packard transposed into scenes from various movies and television shows, Curtis explains the Bronson/(Packard) / (Packard)/Bronson dilemma. “He found that he couldn’t get lead roles without being a big star, and he couldn’t be a star without the lead roles. It was a Mexican standoff. Then he made brilliant move. He moved to Sweden.”

“Have you ever thought about trying your luck overseas? Pulling a Crumb?”

“Yeah, maybe I should move to Sweden.”

## Epilogue

I'm not really sure what I said in all of that. Probably left out a heap of stuff, like how great and funny and perhaps more mature the *Star Wars Mok* is (and made for nothing... he even looks kind of handsome in it). How Damon could be making a fortune as a sound editor if only he gave up his persistent personal vision and went to work for someone else. Or how it would be a shame if he had to do that. Remember when Andy Kauffmann hit his stride and just started doing whatever the fuck he wanted, in a career-be-damned kind of way – quitting Taxi and becoming a wrestler and working in a diner as an art project? Well the same kind of thing is happening in Hollywood again. Hopefully this time around, this kind of fragile genius will not go unnoticed before it's too late for the artist himself to see the collective nod.

You can order tapes and DVDs of Damon's work from [www.reflectionsofevil.com](http://www.reflectionsofevil.com).

### Damon's comments, corrections

- [1] "The treatment for ROE was about 11 pages, it was originally called 'Night Gallery Revisited.' It was NOT written AFTER my grandmother passed away. In fact I wrote it sometime in '99, basically one draft. Pretty much everything in that treatment ended up in the movie, it was all there. I wouldn't say it was a 'long rambling concept', in fact a very clear and concise one, now the movie may have ended up so somewhat long and rambling, but that's a different matter."
- [2] "I was one of the top Defender players in the country. This trade was one of the dumbest most regretful things I have ever done in my life, given that the camera was a half-broken piece of junk. I was just too young, too naive and too eager for a movie camera. It's memories like this that still bother me to this day, I mean even as an eager 14 year old, I SHOULD have known better."

- [3] “Trainor’s mother was the former producer/ casting agent ‘Chris Trainor’ who did the extra’s on *Blade Runner* and produced such classics like *The Blade Master*, and *Lone Runner* with Miles O’Keeffe (this is how I got Miles in one of my early Super 8 efforts).
- [4] “Duke’s comments about my disability in ‘communication skills’ (essential to ‘making it’ as a director) echo my own personal feelings as well, which rubs in the futility of it all. But I would point out Duke’s communication skills aren’t much better. He does say ‘like’ more within sentences, and tends to ramble to the degree of severe nausea. He may be right in pointing to semi-uneducated goofy-rumpled guys like Tarantino, but I would beg to differ that I at least would not be as obnoxious as Tarantino. I would like to live the life of a Kubrick or Gilliam.”
- [5] “a character from *Apple* stolen from *Elfquest*.”