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What Rough Beasts

Fast, Cheap & Out of Control
Directed and produced by Errol Morris
A Sony Pictures Classics release
At Film Forum
Opens October 3

U-Turn
Directed by Oliver Stone
Written by John Ridley,
from his novel *Stray Dogs*
A Sony Pictures release
Opens October 3

BY J. HOBERMAN

I'll take my Big Themes under the Big Top. In *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control*, Errol Morris presents The Meaning of Life—or at least his own version of the old TV show *Animal Kingdom*. In this self-described “ridiculous elegy for the end of the millennium,” our favorite docu-epistemologist intercuts interviews with a topiary gardener, an MIT robot scientist, a melancholy lion tamer, and a guy with an inexplicable jones for the ugly, hairless, nearly cold-blooded slug that is the South African naked mole rat.

The circus is Morris's ruling metaphor for his densely edited meta-meditation on the Fate of the Earth (interspersed are clips from juvenile 1930s serials starring animal trainer Clyde Beatty). Deploying all manner of extreme camera tilts, switching from pixillation to slo-mo and back, yoking together a wide variety of film stocks, *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control* is more garishly expressionistic than previous Morris efforts—it was largely shot by Oliver Stone's favorite cinematographer, Robert Richardson—with a found Fellini quality accentuated by Caleb Sampson's faux Nino Rota score.

Still, tawdry title notwithstanding, this is a subtle side-show: plants are cut to resemble animals and animals imagined to think like humans; machines are designed to behave like insects even as insects provide the social model for certain evolutionarily bizarre animals. Indeed, *Fast, Cheap* is itself an unusual life form—telling all four tales more or less simultaneously. The structural precedent is D. W. Griffith's 1916 *Intolerance*, which similarly conjoined a quartet of stories into one overarching narrative, cutting back and forth between the fall of Babylon, the massacre of the Huguenots, a contemporary tale of miscarried justice, and the Passion of Jesus Christ. Scarcely less cosmic, albeit not so grandiose, Morris expands upon the Griffith worldview to conjure up a vision of pre- and posthuman history.

A movie that finds the evanescence of life in the nocturnal spectacle of a floodlit topiary garden in the rain and records someone describing their sublime moment of eye contact with a mole rat, *Fast, Cheap* programmatically blurs the boundaries between life and machines, animal and vegetable, human and . . . whatever. The study of mole rats is explained as a means of “self-knowledge,” rather than “scientific exploration,” while lion tamer Dave Hoover theorizes that his animals are confounded by the four legs of a chair brandished in their face because they can only focus on one thing at a time.

If the wild-animal tamer and the topiary gardener attempt to mold divine creation to human ends, the robots and mole rats are more mystically understood by their enthusiasts to em-

body a blind, superhuman life force. “I switch the robot on and it does what is in its nature,” Professor Rodney Brooks tells Morris. The movie's suggestively lurid title comes from Brooks's proposal that, rather than one, 100 tacky little robot explorers be sent on an expedition to Mars.

Parallels proliferate. The Clyde Beatty serial is set in a mole rat-friendly labyrinth of underground tunnels; a crude robot attack in a '50s sci-fi film is instinctively fended off with a chair—unsuccessfully, of course. The insects that provide the model for robot sensors and the mole rats with their ideal social organization feast upon the shrub menagerie: “It's a constant battle all the time,” the topiarist states. The circus blends with the chaos of the storm threatening the glamorously photographed topiary garden. Brooks suggests that carbon-based life will be replaced by silicon-based life; an earth-

quake rocks the Clyde Beatty underground. Will the mole rats inherit the earth? The gardener swears he'll keep his shrub-cut animals (as long as he's alive, that is).

What we have are two optimists and two pessimists—or rather, two futurists and two men who face a disappearing past. To which philosophy does the filmmaker subscribe? In a reverse zoom, Morris ends his movie by dedicating it to his own late parents.

the grossest grease monkey in creation (Billy Bob Thornton), an irascible blind Indian sage (Jon Voight) tending a dead dog, and a mighty suspicious sheriff (Powers Boothe), not to mention a dusky little cock tease (Jennifer Lopez) with a saber-toothed husband from hell (Nick Nolte).

Like *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control*, *U-Turn* is also a sort of bestiary. Everyone has their totem animal. Crows caw, bears snarl, vultures vulch—and who planted that dang scorpion on the tap-water spigot?! Can this be the artist that Garry Wills celebrated in *The Atlantic* as America's Dostoyevsky?

Penn plays a natty asshole with enough zip to mask his character's stupidity, accumulating stigmata as he staggers through the movie's big scenery, double-vision dissolves, and subliminal shock cuts. But Stone's empathy for his characters is somewhat less than underwhelming. “You don't know if you want to kill me or fuck me,” taunts Lopez—poised, if limited, in a seriously underwritten role. (The rote misogyny is compounded by casting Claire Danes as a piece of dumb-as-dirt jailbait.)

These must be the latter days. (I read in *The New York Times Magazine* of Stone's conversion to Beverly Hills Buddhism.) That, reviewing *U-Turn* from the lofty heights of the Telluride Film Festival, *Variety* could find this fricassee of NBK outtakes ranging in tone from the desultory to the dopey to the downright terrible to be “imaginative, daring, and energized,” not to mention loaded with “hilariously surreal asides,” is a tribute to either the rarefied Rocky Mountain atmosphere or cozy film-klatch self-congratulation or both. Suffice to say that *U-Turn* is an unbelievably clumsy and pretentious attempt to make the sort of mock noir the Coen brothers invented with *Blood Simple* or John Dahl knocked off so sveltely with *Red Rock West*.

“Nothing,” the blind Indian tells us, “makes the Great Spirit laugh harder than a man's plans.” Almost nothing. Turn that car back to the '60s, man! A few more little U-turns and I fear that, pace Richard Nixon, we won't have Oliver Stone to kick around anymore.

A FEW ANTIDOTES: Claire Denis's lovely *Nenette et Boni*, which I reviewed here when it screened at MOMA last winter, is a brilliantly edited, sumptuously impressionistic account of teenagers in Marseilles; Terrence Malick's 1973 *Badlands*, in a new print at Film Forum, is the Apollonian counterpoint to Stone's Dionysian NBK. Those searching for something new at the NYFF could do worse than *La Vie de Jesus*, for which, my spies tell me, there are still plenty of tickets.



Something wild: Dave Hoover taming a lion in *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control*

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