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Wolf and Fish: Born to Be Trailers



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By Dan Sallitt

Modern movie audiences take previews of coming attractions seriously, and the trailers for Carroll Ballard's *Never Cry Wolf* and Francis Coppola's *Rumble Fish* seem to be the current favorites. Though critics don't spend much time in movie theaters with regular audiences, I did manage to catch the *Rumble Fish* trailer and was reminded how perfectly suited Coppola's visual style is to the preview. Any few randomly chosen minutes of either of these films could be used to make a knockout promo—a characteristic that has something to do with why the films fail.

More and more, the prestige products of the American cinema have come to resemble two-hour-long trailers: Each image grabs for all the gusto it can get, as if story, character, narrative rhythm, etc., had ganged together and refused to provide aesthetic support. Ballard and Coppola stand proudly in the forefront of this movement, but I single them out only because their films have been released at nearly the same time; greater or lesser manifestations of this phenomenon, which might be described as the autonomy of the visual, are a dime a dozen these days. (Coppola, who produced Ballard's debut film *The Black Stallion*, is particularly adept at digging up and sponsoring prac-

tioners of this dubious style, but he certainly doesn't have a corner on the market.)

Though it's hard to judge at this point, I imagine that *Never Cry Wolf* is going to be very successful with critics and public alike, and that *Rumble Fish* will meet with a more mixed response on both fronts. Ballard's film certainly seems to me the more acceptable of the two. Its story, about a scientist (Charles Martin Smith) deposited in the Arctic to spend six solitary months observing the habits of wolves, has a pleasant contemplative aspect that Ballard does not ignore entirely and that Smith's gentle narration brings out nicely.

The word that comes immediately to mind in connection with *Never Cry Wolf* is "mythic." The word has gotten a pretty good workout over the last few years, principally because it is one of the few nice-sounding words that can be applied to disconnected images. It implies that the image described as mythic somehow transcends the particular and moves directly to the level of the general. It also implies that this image hooks up directly with our collective unconscious and need not derive its power from context.

What this boils down to in terms of our experience of the movie is that a mythic image asks for a direct response from us, rather than the indirect response that comes from an active consideration of the fictional world of the film. When Ballard plans, say, the first appearance of the wolves, he calculates its effect entirely in terms of what would spook us most if we were standing there with Smith. Lighting, composition, and focal length combine to produce an abstract image of Wolf, suitable for viewers taking the movie one image at a time.

I cannot get past the fact that I am not standing there with Smith. The only way to enter a film without shutting down

one's awareness of reality and unreality is to ponder the fiction, to take every event in the film as it relates to its own fictional universe. But Ballard is not interested in the internal connections of the universe he has created. Though his opting for the mythic produces only a mild sense of impropriety in the case cited, the same decisions produce complete bewilderment in other scenes. The film's biggest emotional peak, a scene in which Smith must finally discover whether his beloved wolves are in fact the dangerous predators that the government insists they are, is conceived in terms of the character's anguished dilemma but rendered with imposing telephoto images that convey a fuzzy grandeur utterly unrelated to the scene's meaning. Smith's nudity in this scene and the shots of him running amid the pack of animals reinforce the idea that he is becoming one with his natural surroundings, an idea that sounds quite interesting until one realizes how it makes nonsense of the scene's content, which posits a very human conflict between duty and emotion.

Whereas Ballard's stock in trade is his exploitation of striking natural images, Coppola has become addicted to spectacular compositions. Neither knows how to put two images together to achieve a clear effect in a low-key situation; they descend to routine or even to incompetence in the unspectacular moments when great directors shine. If Ballard has the edge over Coppola, it is because he is better able to avoid situations in which he would embarrass himself.

The autonomy of the visual is less interesting in Coppola's films because it is so blatant. One moment the camera is on the ceiling; the next moment it's on the floor. Given the degree to which it seems to have influenced the director's placement of climaxes, S. E. Hinton's story about an urban teenager (Matt Dillon) trying to emulate his cool but mysteriously disturbed older brother (Mickey Rourke) might have been laid in during post-production.

Still, just as an advanced case of a disease is the most instructive for a medical student, we can learn more about the ill effects of visual autonomy from this film than from almost any other. *Rumble Fish* seems shapeless, not because the script is shapeless but because Coppola has put such heavy visual emphasis on every scene that the dramatic structure simply vanishes. Similarly, the shallow characterizations do not arise only from the emotional clichés at the heart of the movie. A moment of development needs to be handled with less emphasis than a payoff scene and, by refusing to ease up, Coppola substitutes bad climaxes for what could have been good buildups. I could go on, but I've already attacked Coppola in print once this year over *The Outsiders*, and some discretion is in order. The important point is that the director's love of visual splash is destructive precisely because it is his first priority.

One more similarity between these two films deserves mention. Both are unashamedly sentimental at their core. *Never Cry Wolf* is, in essence, a film about lovable animals persecuted by the human race, and Ballard relies heavily on our natural emotional response to furry things in building his manipulative hero-villain scenario. Likewise, under a very thin veneer of urban realism, *Rumble Fish* jerks tears unashamedly for its two tormented protagonists, making up for its shortage of substance with an excess of schmaltz.

This similarity is no coincidence. No film maker addicted to autonomous visuals wants to be thought of as a flashy but empty technician. Since real emotional resonance is impossible when the film makers' tools are not in the service of organic artistic concepts, the only option left open to these people is unearned emotion. So we are regularly presented with the paradox of films that combine state-of-the-art technology with the most unsophisticated emotional pleading imaginable. The spirit of Frank Capra has found a home in the computer age. 