



NOTES FROM UNDERGROUND THE MUSHROOMS OF MARYON PARK

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Cinema provides one of our most seductive and pervasive illusions. We may pursue sinful pleasures, ponder the meaning of life, travel to the antipodes, play extreme sports, shop till we drop...but most of us would rather just watch a movie. The dialectic of illusion and reality in cinematic experience has been debated since the art form began, and the true masters of film have explored this interplay in ways and forms too numerous to summarize easily. In the movies we find escape from the banality of existence and the monotony of work: a truism bandied about repeatedly. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein immersed himself in the movies (always a front-row seat), whenever his lucubrations on language and logic induced a brainache. The film experience is subjective and fantastic, and the box office is an objective measure of a grand shared illusion. Aldous Huxley

recognized the soporific tactility of cinema in his dystopian fantasy *Brave New World*; Huxley called movies "the feelies." Movies are a touchstone for the representation of disaster: survivors of catastrophic experiences commonly admit "it was just like a movie," as if lived reality could be compared to nothing else. Cable television, the DVD, the rise of the documentary, and YouTube have only compounded the complexities of what Hollywood has wrought, and the result is kaleidoscopic, maddeningly impenetrable in its totality. As watchers, we have been re-cast as voyeurs; upon watching, each of us instantly becomes a critic. In his film *Lunacy* (2005) the Czech surrealist Jan Švankmajer, has captured the resultant mayhem quite perfectly:

The subject of the film *Lunacy* is essentially an ideological debate about how to run a lunatic asylum. Basically, there are two ways of managing such an

institution, each equally extreme. One encourages absolute freedom; the other, the old-fashioned, well-tryed method of control and punishment. But there is also a third one that combines and exacerbates the very worst aspects of the other two, and that is the Mad House we live in today.¹

Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow Up* (1966) is a classic exploration of the illusory nature of reality depicted in cinema that questions the "filmic" as a stable means of representation. Saturated in the ambience of the mod Sixties, the film presents a snotty, self-absorbed fashion photographer who, on a whim, snaps a roll of film of a man and woman cavorting innocently in Maryon Park just south of the River Thames in Charlton, London. The woman (Vanessa Redgrave) demands that he surrender his film to her when she notices this surreptitious intrusion of their privacy, but the photographer, played brilliantly by David

Hemmings, refuses to give it up. He toys with her just as he does the blasé models that work in his studio. In a scene that methodically dilates the metaphor of *film*, he develops enlargements of the photos from his negatives, and blows them up yet again to discover one that reveals a hand-held pistol protruding from the nearby foliage and another a corpse in the grass in the background of the park. Convinced that his photos are evidence of a murder, we see him twice return to the park; once to confirm his discovery of the corpse, the second to find on the grass...nothing at all. We are left to ponder the fateful reversals of appearances in the photos and in the movie itself, in which the reality depicted is both superabundant and quixotically depleted.

Are there mushrooms, too, lurking in Maryon Park? We should expect to find mycelium of the "corpse finder," *Hebeloma syriense*, but the illusive corpse in *Blow Up* was too fresh and evanescent, and the fruiting bodies failed to appear. At first glance, mushrooms in cinema may also seem evanescent, even inconsequential; but when we blow up the random snap-shots of fungi embedded in the history of film we begin to make out the familiar delineation of trite misappropriations of science submerged in a swamp of unconscious fears. Predictably, mycophobia bobs to the top of this cesspool like a creature from a black lagoon, and whenever fungi appear in the movies there invariably lurk murder and madness. Fascination with mycology in popular culture is the single requirement for our study, for mushrooms are indeed to be found amongst the detritus of everyday life – we need only to discover how and where to look. Siegfried Kracauer observed in his seminal study of German film, *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947), that cinema captures "an endless succession of unobtrusive phenomena," and we find in film, as in all other media, the "sedimentary products of a people's cultural life." Films survey and record the entirety of the visible world; consequently, "whether current reality or an imaginary universe ... [they] provide clues to hidden mental processes." We needn't doubt whether there are any mushrooms depicted in the movies, we need only ferret them out from the layers of detritus deposited in the sediment.²

The recent documentary *Know Your Mushrooms* (2008) by Ron Mann seems a logical point of entry since it is devoted entirely to amateur mycology, promising in its tag-line to "end fungi-phobia." *Know Your Mushrooms* has the advantage of being the only popular documentary film that attempts to embrace mycology holistically, but its grasp of the subject is so tenuous that what results is superficial pastiche. Here is a film whose special effects and factoids only brush the surface of science, whose thematic construction around the Telluride Mushroom Festival skirts the deeper history of that unique event, and whose clumsy montage flirts with the imaginary but fails to deliver the goods. In the soundtrack, as a *Lepiota* bursts into a spray of fireworks, the Flaming Lips sing dreamily "Now I know the way the sky gets blue" – this is but the nebulous froth of the be-shroomed. Miniature bolete icons remind us that Mann has arrived at his conception of mycology by way of the Super Mario Brothers, and though the sprung rhythm of the film produces a few funny transitions, the production is frivolous and ultimately deflating. The enduring value of the film surely resides in the interviews alone. There are but few precursors to *Know Your Mushrooms*: Rachel Libert and Angelica Brisk's *Mushroom* (1995) covers similar terrain as Mann's but focuses on the more mundane and commercial Kennett Square mushroom festival, Peter Boulton's academic film *Fungi* (1984) revels in slow-motion exactitude, and Bruce Connor's *Looking for Mushrooms* (1959-67) experiments with psychedelia. The Czech film *Houba* (2000) claims to be "a film essay which tries to explain nature, science, and civilization through the structure of fungus."³ There is little else, and we reach the melancholy conclusion that mycology remains grossly under-represented in documentary cinema. Nowhere do we find the history and science of mycology treated with such painstaking appreciation as in David Lebrun's marvelous documentary *Proteus* (2004) on Ernst Haeckel and the radiolarians. Mycology still awaits the arrival of its own Jean Painlevé.

If documentary disappoints, why should we expect popular cinema to understand the fungi or to valorize mycology? Naturally, individuals and

cultures that find meaning and utility in mushrooms will hunt them, eat them, write about them, heal with them, paint them, and even photograph and film them. Sacha Guitry's *Le roman d'un tricheur* (1936) is a case in point. Guitry's film (in English, *The Story of a Cheat*) awards back-handed appreciation of edible fungi in French culture by way of a fatal poisoning. The young "cheat" of *Le roman d'un tricheur* belongs to an extended family in Vaucluse; his parents are hard-working grocers. Caught pilfering the family cash-box, his father berates him as the family of thirteen begins to dine on a savory dish of woodland fungi collected by a deaf-mute uncle. "No mushrooms for a thief!" his father commands. The entire family then eats and succumbs; the cheat alone survives, by virtue of his crime: "A dish of mushrooms and overnight I was alone in the world." As a cinematic device, toxic fungi here provoke a jump-cut to a life of chicanery, and they signify the radical notion that reward and punishment are entirely arbitrary. Our narrator is duly impressed by the sovereign power of nature's *tricheurs*, and he mordantly reflects on their potency to cheat people of life: "Anyone who has never seen twelve corpses at once doesn't know how many corpses that can be."⁴ He realizes that it is the unpredictable and uncanny morality of mushrooms, not their aromatic succulence, that governs fate itself. Cinema will find a way to transform this proposition into a standard pattern of aberration and evil.

From Georges Méliès to Walt Disney mushrooms appear with regularity in science fiction and fantasy animation, but these genres will not concern us much here. Alfred Hitchcock, a name synonymous with cinematic suspense, pulls an agaric from his pocket to afford us the next clue as to where all this is heading. *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) is Hitchcock's small-town idyll that pits a wholesome American family against the intrusion of a skeezy relative on the lam. The relative, Uncle Charlie, played by Joseph Cotton, is adored by his niece Charlotte, his young namesake also called "Charlie." The story entwines a double psychodrama: the uncle gradually displays the menacing irrationality of a murderous perv as the niece loses her innocent admiration of him in coming to realize he is a serial killer. *Shadow*

of a *Doubt* is Hitchcock's *Blue Velvet*, and its arch sub-plot involves Charlie's father Joe and his natty friend Herb, both of whom are fascinated by murder mysteries, always theorizing about the perfect murder, and little aware they have a murderer in their midst. With a hint at *Le roman d'un tricheur*, Herb interrupts the family dinner with a strange consideration:

Herb: Joe – I picked some mushrooms before dinner, Joe.

Joe: You don't say?

Herb: Mushrooms mean anything to you, Joe?

Joe: Well, I eat mushrooms on my steak when I'm out and the meat's not good enough as it is.

Herb: If I brought you some mushrooms, would you eat 'em, Joe?

Joe: Suppose I would? Why?

Herb: You see? [reveals some mushrooms in his handkerchief]

The worst I'd be accused of would be manslaughter. Doubt if I'd get that. An accidental death, pure and simple. Basket of good mushrooms and two or three poisonous ones.

Joe: No, no. Innocent [person] might get the poisonous one. I thought of something better when I was shaving.³

Herb has neatly summarized a staple premise of future murder mysteries, to become a theme with variations for Agatha Christie and others. This seemingly trivial snippet from *Shadow of a Doubt* presents, literally, a classic recipe for murder; more significantly, it contextualizes mushrooms in the *psychodynamics* of murder, an association from which the fungi will rarely depart in cinematic drama. Uncle Charlie is a deadly *Amanita* in the guise of a mentally unbalanced, devious human killer.

The Beguiled (1971) directed by Don Siegel and based on a Thomas Cullinan novel, brings the association of mushrooms, madness, and murder to a sexual climax exceeded in intensity only by Pedro Almodovar's *Matador*. The story's setting is a private girl's school in Virginia during the Civil War. Operated by an attractive but matronly headmistress, Martha Farnsworth, the school seems an enclave from the horrors of bloody warfare. *The Beguiled* opens with a sepia-toned collage of battle scenes, and the action begins with the lovely young Amy hunting mushrooms

barefoot in the woods, wicker basket in arm. Without warning, a Union soldier collapses out of a tree into her path, and Amy falls backwards, spilling all her mushrooms. The soldier, Corporal John McBurney, played by Clint Eastwood, is bloodied and exhausted from flight; the camera focuses on his scorched face juxtaposed with the spilled mushrooms. He catches Amy up as they hide from his Confederate pursuers, and as they rest in a gully he salaciously kisses the 12-year-old girl expressly on her lips asking, "Old enough for kisses?" Old enough indeed: here is a screen kiss superseded in sublime perversity only by Dennis Hopper's bloody kiss in *Blue Velvet*, and it portends the crazy sexual machinations and romantic entanglements to follow.

Amy manages to drag "Mr. McB" (her term of endearment) back to the school, where Martha and the nubile schoolgirls nurse him back to a limping state of health. Starved for the company of a man, they all begin to solicit his attention. Tension builds on three interlocking questions: Is a soldier, though disabled, to be trusted in their home? Should they turn McB in? Is he sexually available? The oldest girl, Edwina, falls in love with McB, but she is upstaged by her flirtatious rival Carol, and the multiple layers of sexual intrigue skirt close to pornography. Implied incest between Martha and her dead brother, implied lesbianism between Martha and Edwina, scenes of promiscuous coupling in a dream sequence – all provide the backdrop to a seething climax: Edwina discovers McB in bed with Carol. Edwina beats him with his crutch, and he crashes down a long spiral staircase, breaking his leg irreparably. Martha is no stranger to difficult decisions: she and the girls amputate McB's broken leg, and he learns about it only when he revives. He believes the amputation (an implied castration) was motivated by Martha's jealous revenge, and McB designs to even the score. Now a cripple for life, he threatens the women in a drunken binge, and brutally kills Amy's pet turtle. Martha decides to be rid of the man once and for all, so she plans a dinner with a dish of poisonous mushrooms. Amy coyly tells her, "I know *just* where to find them." Dining together in a spurious moment of reconciliation, McB heaps

a hot black mess of mushrooms onto his plate, praising them lavishly: "they taste of the woods, of clean air, and the mysterious shadows where pretty little elves dance together." But Martha knows they taste of death, and she replies, "That's a romantic way to speak of mushrooms," and she stops Edwina from eating them just as McB, realizing he has been poisoned, staggers away from the table in agony. In the final graveyard scene, Martha suggests that Corporal McBurney died of heart failure, but Amy scoffs, "You think I can't tell bad mushrooms from good ones?"⁶

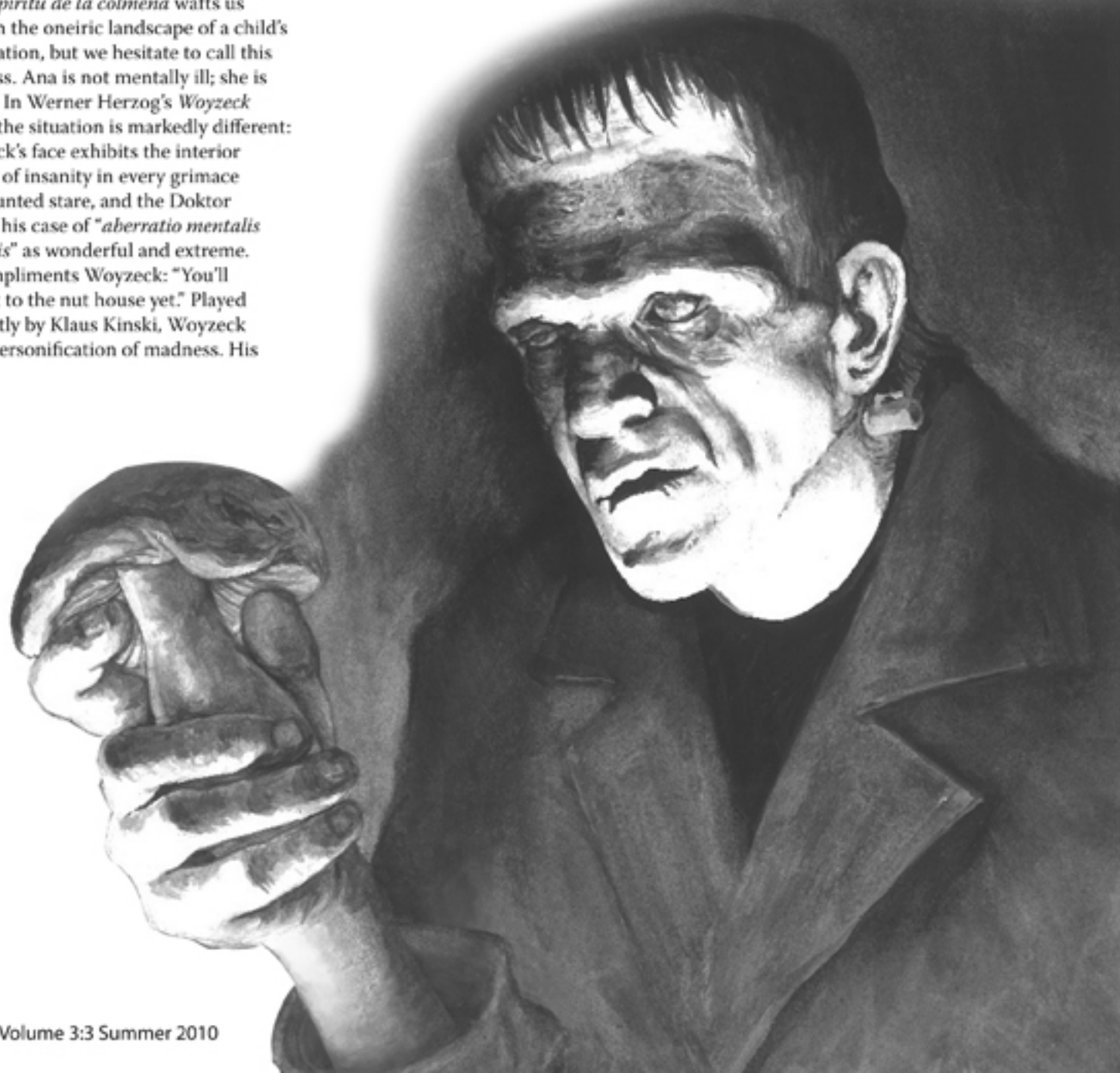
Poison mushrooms are conspicuous in *The Beguiled*, and so is the misconception that the deadliest will kill instantly. In Cullinan's novel *Amanita phalloides* and *Amanita muscaria* are mentioned by name, but these names form the limit of his mycological exactitude. By contrast, the Spanish film *El espíritu de la colmena* (1973) by Victor Erice (in English, *The Spirit of the Beehive*) is a magnificent example of the continuing fixation of fungi in the sinister yet highlighting authentic local traditions of mushroom hunting. The scene is a Castilian village in Franco's fascist Spain in 1940, and the story involves two young sisters, Ana and Isabel, who see James Whale's classic film *Frankenstein* at a local theater. Their father is an ardent apiarist on the family's estate; their mother writes romantic letters to an unidentified person in France. Six-year-old Ana is mesmerized by *Frankenstein*, and her reveries leave her in a state of precocious fascination with life, death, and the monster. Isabel warns her, "Everything in the movies is fake. It's a trick." But Ana believes otherwise, and she detects the impalpable spirit of the monster everywhere. When their father takes the two girls on a mushroom hunt, they discuss "brittlebills," "flyswatters," "trumpets," and chanterelles. He tells them, "If you're not sure a mushroom's good, don't pick it. Because if it's bad and you eat it, it's your last mushroom and your last everything else, too." He crushes a "bad" mushroom underfoot to make his point unforgettable. The lesson resonates in Ana's mind, and later, when she runs away from home, she finds a small, brown mushroom in the night upon seeing an apparition of *Frankenstein*. When she touches the

mushroom, the scene reverts to a fire into which her mother places a letter addressed to France. *The Spirit of the Beehive* weaves the themes of innocence and experience, cinematic illusion, and the displacements of memory into a story of rare poetic beauty by melding the occult properties of mushrooms into the metaphor of *Frankenstein* and all that its history entails. *El espíritu de la colmena* is an understated masterpiece not to be missed.⁷

In *Madness and Civilization* (1961), Michel Foucault identified and elaborated on several essential historical dimensions of madness: dream and delirium, passion and desire, animality, language and discourse, imagination and supra-imaginal.⁸ Ana's reverie on *Frankenstein* in *El espíritu de la colmena* wafts us through the oneiric landscape of a child's imagination, but we hesitate to call this madness. Ana is not mentally ill; she is a child. In Werner Herzog's *Woyzeck* (1979) the situation is markedly different: Woyzeck's face exhibits the interior torture of insanity in every grimace and haunted stare, and the Doktor praises his case of "*aberratio mentalis partialis*" as wonderful and extreme. He compliments Woyzeck: "You'll make it to the nut house yet." Played brilliantly by Klaus Kinski, Woyzeck is the personification of madness. His

mind seethes with apocalyptic visions: "The toadstools (*Die schwemmer*). Herr Doktor, the toadstools – did you ever notice how they grow in figures on the ground? If you could read that." Woyzeck participates totally in the animality of madness; clearly in touch with another reality, he reads arcane signs in the fruiting of mushrooms and murders his wife Marie from an uncontrollable force of nature, not from jealous passion.⁹ Ingmar Bergman's exploration

of Elisabet Vogler's mental distress in *Persona* (1966) similarly accumulates the associations of existential loneliness with the Holocaust, sexual confession, and... mushrooms. Alma, her companion (or double), convinces Elisabet to leave the psychiatric hospital for rejuvenation at a seaside vacation, and her former apathy gives way to simple pleasures, the first of which is collecting mushrooms. The two of them, wearing mushroom hats, leaf casually through identification guides



as they study their fungi. Immediately Bergman cuts to Alma reading the following to Elisabet:

The anxiety we carry with us, all our broken dreams, the inexplicable cruelty, the fear of death, the painful insight into our earthly condition have worn out our hope of a divine salvation. The cries of our faith and doubt against the darkness and the silence are terrible proof of our loneliness and fear.¹⁰

In all of these cases, mushrooms materialize suddenly as liminal entities from the natural order to substantiate the determinations of madness and extreme psychological states. They are *liminal* – betwixt and between, and they coordinate irrationality of mind with the irrationality of nature, signifying disorder, disease, and desperate passion. Small wonder that we find the star-crossed lovers in the trendy Sixties film *Elvira Madigan* (1967) starved, bankrupt, at the end of their tether, hunting wild mushrooms in the grass like animals after a shred of meat and puking them up afterwards.

Mushrooms that transport us into states of visionary rapture have also been vividly, often erroneously, presented in film. Ken Russell's *Altered States* (1980) is a sensational case of the fascination with mushrooms as the gateway to the psychic interior. Based on Paddy Chayevsky's novel, the film depicts a Harvard scientist, Edward Jessup, in hot pursuit of his own mind by way of experiments with sensory deprivation and *Amanita muscaria*. Whether he is searching for the cause of schizophrenia, his personal psychohistory, or the primordial root-source of human evolution becomes a bit unclear when the film veers off into science fiction as the plucky Dr. Jessup morphs into an electrified anthropoid that runs amok. The unabashed silliness of the concluding sequences of *Altered States* is mired in a mish-mash of trippy pyrotechnics and pseudo-science. Its most egregious mycological error is the attribution of an *Amanita muscaria* cult to Mexican aborigines in a scene that recycles Wasson's ethnomycology through every cliché of "entheogenic" experience. As Jessup and his guide trek past scores of natives hunting the fly agaric beneath rock columns shaped suspiciously like mushrooms, they arrive at a cavern where a stereotypical "Indian" tends a vile broth of vegetal matter

seething in a cauldron. Resembling a preparation of *ayahuasca* more than fungi, Jessup's blood is superadded to the bubbling mess for good measure. He tastes, and we are plunged into hallucination as the stroboscopic flux of his subconscious mind careens by, fracturing reality into micro-splinters.¹¹

Other films that take the phony fungal fast track into schizoid surreality include *Eliza's Horoscope* (1975), which serves up a specimen that looks like *Stropharia rugoso-annulata* flecked with dots of white paint (they crunch like apples when bitten) in a ritualistic sex orgy cum hippie baptism where Capricorns chant "Om" and dancers whirl ecstatically, moaning orgasmically, mouthing their mushrooms. *Eliza's Horoscope* is strictly for juveniles (Richard Manuel of The Band had, regrettably, a minor role in this sorry production). Nicholas Roeg's *Performance* (1970), on the other hand, may be the grand-daddy of psychedelic mushroom movies (if such a genre exists). Mick Jagger plays the pop star recluse Turner who meets the sadistic gangster Chas in a dilapidated London art studio, and *Amanita muscaria* stars as the shambolic catalyst that breaks through Chas's violent and homophobic exterior. Or so it seems. Gordon Wasson's *Soma* was published just as *Performance* was in production, and the iconic pileus of fly agaric crops up with a snazzy Ry Cooder slide guitar riff as Turner pretentiously recites passages from Jorge Luis Borges, taunting Chas from one species of psychosis into another. Turner's lover Pherber turns Chas on with *A. muscaria* – "How much did you give him?" "Two-thirds of the big one." – as the themes of artistic performance, underground subculture, and violent perversity smash up in a manic concatenation of contemporary and occult imagery. *Performance* was panned at the time of its release ("the most loathsome film of all"), but Roeg caught the accelerated pulse of a world unhinged – truly this was *Orbis Tertius* – by insinuating, along with Borges, Antonin Artaud's theory of performance as madness into a *mise-en-scène* of uninhibited sexuality and artistic abandon. "The only performance that makes it, that makes it all the way, is the one that achieves madness" – this is the mad, maddening credo of *Performance*. Appropriately, Turner/Jagger thumbs

his nose at this with the vituperative and cynical lyric:

*Come now, gentlemen,
your love is all I crave
You'll still be in the circus
when I'm laughing in my grave!*¹²

Mushrooms that embody the psychedelic flower of the Sixties and ramify through pop culture nourish the rhizosphere of everyday life from which carpophores burst forth in cinema. In *Le boucher* (1969; in English, *The Butcher*), Claude Chabrol converts the simple innocence of mushroom hunting in the woods into a scenario where mycology itself becomes the proscenium to the actions of a psychotic murderer. In this subtly paced thriller, the butcher of the title romances a pretty school-teacher who unwittingly discovers that he is a serial murderer. Their courtship leads to a frightening confrontation, and the climactic denouement occurs in a school-room where an oversized mushroom identification poster forms the backdrop to the butcher's suicide. Pleading for sympathy and understanding, he plunges the knife into his gut to take his life as the mushrooms in the poster peer silently on, a cinematic moment so fraught with import to set a semiotician's eyes atwinkle with signifiers and signifieds. *Mushrooms = Suicide* is the unequivocal message that unravels from what appears to be a typical mycology lesson in a modest and well-appointed schoolroom. To be sure, France is a mycophilic culture. But as we saw in Sacha Guitry's *Le roman d'un tricheur*, the lingering apprehension that mushrooms will (and do) bring catastrophe fixes an unsettling ambivalence whose symbolic complexities are perfectly situated for probing the dark side of experience.¹³ The French film-maker René Clair once complained that science had superseded the possibilities of satire, that scientists were making things difficult for cinema to achieve any true comedic effect. Clair offered this example:

It reminds me of my father, who was, in his day, a cavalry officer and an expert on mushrooms. He used to go into the forest on a fine big horse, with big bags strung across his saddle, and seek the mushrooms. When he returned, he would have the cook make a dish of his discoveries, and while we ate, he would tell us about what we were eating. He

would say that most of the mushrooms were ordinary stuff, but just as your fork was going to your mouth with a pretty little fungus, he would say that if its narrow yellow edge were only slightly broader it would mean death. I'm still afraid of mushrooms, and I don't think I have as much confidence in these scientists as I had in my father.¹⁴

Clair's reflection and Chabrol's *Le boucher* indicate that skepticism about mycology as a rational pursuit is engendered by anxieties that mushrooms edge us perilously close to the irrational, even to suicide and the collapse of faith, and always to death.

Pedro Almodovar's *Matador* (1986) inflates this apprehension in a sexual drama whose exhibitionism far exceeds *The Beguiled*. Viewers unfamiliar with mushrooms will overlook the symbolism of toxic fungi in *Matador* even though they connect several turns of plot. Diego Montes, a retired matador implicated in several murders, is pursued by Maria Cardenal, a lawyer who, like the matador himself, is obsessed with the technical perfection of the kill. In her case, however, the victim is always her sexual partner. At the instant of orgasm, she is fond of plunging a long needle into her lover's neck, mimicking the concluding stroke of a bull fight. The conflation of sexual climax and violent death in this lurid black comedy involves mushrooms not only as corpse finders but as phallic symbols in which taumachia becomes pornomachia. What is striking in the four key scenes involving fungi is not so much the inevitable linkage of *Amanitas* to the graves of murder victims, but the offhand precision that a mycophilic culture awards its mushrooms. In the first scene, Diego's student Angel identifies an *Amanita citrina* as poisonous ("Look, the color of the cap and the stalk, and the volva") just as we overhear the advice "Treat a woman like a bull. Let her know who's boss." In the second scene, *Amanita citrina* crops up again as a clue to a murder while in the third, police detective Del Valle differentiates *A. citrina* from *A. phalloides* in a public auditorium display of mushroom specimens. Del Valle pontificates, "Why is this mushroom poisonous? It's its nature. Just like our nature. Evil's inside it." In the final mushroom scene, he identifies *Russula cyanoxantha* as if it were the conclusive

clue to the murders. This synopsis scarcely covers the sexual intricacies and tortured sexuality of this startling film which, in broader perspective, is also a critique of Spanish fascism under Franco. As an exploration of criminal/sexual/psychotic behavior *Matador* has few parallels in its depiction of an obsession with sex/death. That mushrooms are implicated in this obsession is one of the perverse accolades that a mycophilic film-maker would give to his favorite sons.¹⁵

An excessive, taut thriller, *Matador* is not unique in its use of mycological metaphor to explore sexual psychology. The 1892 short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, which today holds a slight reputation as a feminist classic, was an earlier attempt to depict a woman on the verge of a nervous breakdown. In this case, the woman is a neurotic who takes to expressing her feelings in writing, culminating in passages describing an obsessive fixation with figures swimming in patterns over her bedroom wallpaper. The story is a fictional version of Gilman's own life: the famous physician Weir Mitchell figures in her story as he did in her own treatment. In the story, the woman projects a network of fungal imagery into the wallpaper, externalizing her mental breakdown. Again mushrooms, toadstools, and fungus emerge from the human unconscious as loathsome materializations of our fear of existence:

The outside pattern is a florid arabesque, reminding one of a fungus. If you can imagine a toadstool in joints, an interminable string of toadstools, budding and sprouting in endless convolutions – why, that is something like it. ... There are always new shoots on the fungus, and new shades of yellow all over it. I cannot keep count of them, though I have tried conscientiously. ... All those strangled heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus growths just shriek with derision!¹⁶

Bulbous eyes. Waddling fungus. Improbable that this could lead anywhere peaceful or safe. *Woyzeck? Are you there?* In a stroke the feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman anticipated fungus as an archetype of cinematic horror. There are few departures from the tedium of horror films, and the

movie *Shrooms* (2007) is no exception. Opening frame: five mushrooms, symmetrically arranged; pickers in the background, glockenspiel in minor key, macabre scenes, maggots, eyeballs of the dead: two girls from "Catholic University" travel to see Ireland, do *shrooms*. With that intro we find ourselves following six young adults with a yen for *Psilocybe semilanceata* who drive into a forest on a camping trip. The references to shroom culture accumulate like drifting spores: Carlos Castaneda shares company with *Mushrooms and other fungi of Great Britain and Europe* by Roger Phillips. One of the students points out that liberty caps are identified by the "little nipples that grow on the cap..." then cut immediately to the photo of *Phallus impudicus* on page 256 of Phillips.¹⁷ Such is mycology in the hands of director Paddy Breathnach. From arachnids to zombies *Shrooms* is awash in violent terror, and "death's head mushrooms" arrive as the agent that propels the six psychonauts into a living nightmare of banshees, leprechauns, and savages. We learn that the druids believed this mushroom imparted uncontrollable ferocity and the capacity for shapeshifting and communication with the dead. *There's something out there! Something evil!* Surely it's the sadistic monk who ate 78 death's head shrooms and murdered 78 people with a three-inch blade. In *Shrooms*, *Psilocybe* morphs into a Fungus of Terror as the narrative bleeds into bloodbath. This is visionary, boring, or revolting, depending on one's point of view.¹⁸ If one is partial to *Shrooms*, then don't miss the "hilariously bad" *Fungicide* (2005) and *Severance* (2006). In Guy Maddin's *Dracula: Pages from a Virgin's Diary* (2002), Dracula and Lucy prouette gracefully through a graveyard of giant fungoliths, but in *Shrooms* fungi are reduced to the lowest common denominator of sensationalism.

On the other hand, films that depict mushrooms authentically must be given their due. One is Frank Beyer's *Karbid und Sauerampfer* (1963; in English, *Carbide and Sorrel*) in which a sojourn across war-torn Germany finds the protagonist risking a search for "butter mushrooms" and chanterelles in a minefield just to find his next meal. Aleksandr Rogozhkin's *Kukushka* (2002; in English, *The Cuckoo*) is a

lively film set in Finland where an exuberant Sami (Lapp) woman teaches a German and a Russian soldier to reconcile their differences near the end of World War II. Russians called Finnish snipers “cuckoos,” but the wise Sami, wonderfully portrayed by Anni-Kristina Juuso, is the plucky cuckoo of this tale, a self-sufficient aborigine who knows her fungi and knows when to prescribe a laxative for mushroom poisoning. Like *The Spirit of the Beehive*, *The Cuckoo* contextualizes the mushrooms unobtrusively in an indigenous setting, avoiding the pseudo-anthropology of *Altered States*. Anni’s knowledge of the various psychoactive and toxic effects of fungi is profound for she lives in the most intimate rapport with her forest environment. She pokes fun at one of the men, “Gerlost’s eating mushrooms to commune with the spirits. Maybe he’s a shaman or a wizard!”²⁹ No surprise here that films depicting mushrooms with ethnographic veracity tend to originate in mycophilic cultures of Europe. Another is Aki Karismäki’s *Mies vailla menneisyyttä* (2002; in English, *Man without a Past*) in which there is a brief discussion of *Amanita muscaria* and its potency. But even here Karismäki seems to underscore the awful renown of the fly agaric by choosing to cut directly to a Finnish rock band performing the song “I’m haunted by the devil” for a derelict group of street people. Is this another reference to *Amanita* or an innocent transition? The accumulated, transcultural layers of meaning of this particular fungus – *Amanita muscaria* – are far too powerful to avoid.

From obscure films like *Work Is a Four-Letter Word* (1968) and *The Land of the Yodeling Mushroom People* (2004) that treat fungal hallucinogens to high-brow classics like Bergman’s *Persona*, mushrooms occupy an overlooked position as a cinematic motif. Conspicuous in fantasy animation, as in many Disney cartoons of the 1930s, they crop up again and again as toxic agents in murder mysteries, in drug-oriented films in the age of Wasson, and almost invariably signal an irruption of ontological fears onto the screen. The object of these fears may be the mushrooms themselves (mycophobia); but as we have seen, fungi afford labile expression to a multitude of deeper apprehensions. What flowers or

botanical phenomena have had such a pervasive connection to phobia in cinematic history? One thinks of the absurd histrionics of the cult classic *The Little Shop of Horrors* (1960) in which a carnivorous plant takes center stage, but in this it also approximates the mycological. The proprietor of the little shop is a man named Gravis Mushnik, and the characters include a flower-eating man and a man-eating flower.²⁰ *Mushnik!* Is this not “mushroom” crossed with “Sputnik”? If so, the Venus Fly-trap of *The Little Shop of Horrors* edges us closer than we might think to the mycological as a symbol of the fear of science, harking back even to *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919). In that film, the devious madman Caligari finds himself in a straightjacket as biomorphic, amoeboid forms swirl on the wall above his head: the scientist (mycologist?) depicted as insane authority.

Critique of science is not ordinarily the first order of business in the movies. Experimentalists like Stan Brakhage (*Song of the Mushroom*, 2002) or Bill Morrison in his hypnotic *Decasia: The State of Decay* (2002) have created extraordinary (though hardly popular) works of art by incorporating the physical effects of fungal activity and decay into the very film materials themselves, but this is far from the pop culture mycology of *Gilligan’s Island* (“roomis-igloomis”) or *Ghostbusters* (“I collect spores, molds, and fungus!”). In *Zelig* (1983), Woody Allen casts himself as a psychopathic changeling who takes on the personality of any person he meets. In a passing scene, a book cover depicts Zelig as a boy, hand-in-hand with a chameleon, crossing a footbridge in a park where giant mushrooms are growing: an innocuous image that again reveals the ineluctable association of mushrooms with mental aberration. Is the severed ear on the suburban lawn then that opens *Blue Velvet* unconsciously a specimen of *Auricularia auricula*? Was David Lynch influenced by an earlier treatment of the mushroom-in-the-grass theme in René Bonnière’s film *Amanita Pestilens* (1963)? How many times are fungi agents of the strange in *The X-Files* and *Bones*? What about the endless succession of drowsy blue caterpillars couched atop mushrooms in the many versions of *Alice in Wonderland*? In the

latest adaptation of *Alice* by Tim Burton (2010), the panoply of tutti-frutti fungi is little more than digital window dressing for a typical chase scene of typically ferocious terror, showing that parti-colored wonderland shrooms, in *this* movie, lead straight down the garden path to megabucks (in this case, the fifth highest grossing movie in history). *Alice* may indeed be the *locus classicus* for the fairytale mushroom, but the Marx Brothers (*A Day at the Races*, 1937) proved long ago that all of these cinematic mushrooms are strictly mental:

Groucho: Say, ... what’s that hairy fungus all over it?

Chico: Some fungus, eh Doc?

Groucho: Not a great deal, no.

Chico: Hey, you makin’ a mistake. That’s his head!

Groucho: Well, if that’s his head, he’s making a mistake, not me.²¹

Groucho’s witticism may serve both as critique of Tim Burton and critique of science.

Andrei Codrescu has remarked that “cinema provides models for imaginary worlds.”²² However, cinema fails to stimulate imagination when it panders to cliché (“more! madness!”); and whether we consider pop documentary or the blockbuster *du jour*, movies have only afforded intermittent clues to the mysterious loveliness of the fifth kingdom. In actuality, cinema has sustained our basic unconscious conviction that mushrooms are lethal embodiments of the irrational. In the Australian movie *Mushrooms* (1995) this conviction reaches an apotheosis of sorts. Two spinsters, Flo and Minnie, find a novel way to improve mushroom cultivation by feeding a dismembered human cadaver to their chickens, whose droppings then prove an excellent fertilizer for the mushrooms. Mycophagy is here exalted as cannibalism in disguise, and if this is the mycological budget of black comedy, one can only welcome a movie like *Avatar* (2009) with its complex mycorrhizal theme as a corrective. Little matter that *Avatar* presents an “imaginary” world in animation; there are some important environmental truths in it just the same. Perhaps it’s left to Jim Jarmusch to create the definitive movie about fungi. The lone mushroom sandwich reference at the

end of *Broken Flowers* (1999) was surely tossed off as a teaser, a mere hint of an appreciation of Aki Karismäki and his world. Jarmusch has remained in synch with what the film critic Manny Farber called the "termite-tapeworm-fungus-moss art" of film that eats away at its own boundaries to spiral inward toward authentic realizations of nature.²³ As theme and motif, fungi are cast adrift in the abandoned corners of cinema. Pauline Kael called the photographer in Antonioni's *Blow Up* an "accurate portrait of the sort of squiggly little fungus that is apt to grow in a decaying society."²⁴ This gratuitous characterization has some appeal. But we imagine David Hemmings snapping photo after photo of a cluster of *Armillaria* at the base of a tree or perhaps a pair of St. George's mushrooms standing proudly in the grass. Yet back in the studio when he develops his film we will see in the photo blow-ups only an empty expanse of urban lawn in the mid-afternoon sunlight. The trees are mute, the hedges rows opaque, and the tennis court is silent. There are no mushrooms in Maryon Park.

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Endnotes

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- ²⁰See Danny Peary, *Cult Movies* (1982) Vermillion, pp. 203-05.
- ²¹Marx Brothers *A Day at the Races* (1937) Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.
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