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FILM-PHILOSOPHY

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'How Very Lacanian':  
From Fantasy to Hyperreality in *Basic Instinct 2*

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'Catherine is older in this film and the situations are different – she's challenging the whole psychoanalytic system...'

*Basic Instinct 2* production notes

'Heck, even the way she wears her clothes is fascinating. Her costume designer has given her a series of line-straddling outfits. At one point, one hand is gloved and the other ungloved, and several of her dresses feature one clothed shoulder and one bare.

It's as if the costumer is telling us Catherine is both a heroine and a villain. Or that the movie is both very bad and very good.'

Chris Hewitt

'How very Lacanian', psychoanalyst Milena Gardosh (Charlotte Rampling) observes at one point in Michael Caton-Jones' *Basic Instinct 2* (2006): a line that would become notorious.<sup>1</sup> The question is: just *how* Lacanian is *Basic Instinct 2*?

The astonishing opening scene, which wastes no time in immersing the audience in preposterous excess, does not immediately suggest Lacan so much as a delirial commodity porn confection of James Bond, Ballard and Bataille. The scene - auto-erotic in the double, Ballardian sense – sees Sharon Stone's Catherine Tramell pleasuring herself,

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<sup>1</sup>Peter Bradshaw's review in *The Guardian* (March 31, 2006), was one of many which found this line absurd. 'On being told that Catherine has disappeared from a drinks party she's hosting, Rampling tosses her head and says, with a little worldly sophisticated laugh: "She just walked out - how very Lacanian!" Oh yes! Ha! Lacanian! Very! Ha! If he hadn't died in 1981, Jacques Lacan could perhaps be brought on, like Marshall McLuhan in *Annie Hall*, to discuss this with Rampling.'

using the ketamined-out Kevin Franks (Stan Collymore<sup>2</sup>) as meat puppet sex aid, while she drives a Spyker C8 Laviolette at 120 m.p.h. through the heart of London. The viewer's immediate assumption, even before the Spyker speeds off the road and into the Thames, leaving the bewildered Franks to drown, is that this must be some kind of dream sequence or drug delirium. When the next scene – in which Stone is interviewed by flatfooted British cops as incredulous as we in the audience are – makes it clear that what we have just seen belongs to what the film is pleased to call reality, we wonder: what kind of a diegesis is it that expects us to treat a scene like that as realistic? The answer is a film that belongs to what Žižek calls the 'ridiculous sublime' (Žižek 2000).

*Basic Instinct 2* deserves the label 'ridiculous sublime' far more than the work of David Lynch (in honour of which Žižek coined the term). No matter how implausible Lynch's films might be, their illegibility and generic unplaceability are given an alibi by Lynch's 'artiness', which effectively subordinates the ridiculous to the sublime. Only a reviewer who themselves was risking ridicule would dare to ridicule Lynch's films now, because to do so would be to betray a lack of understanding of how Lynch's films no longer belong to mainstream cinema and its attendant expectations. *Basic Instinct 2*, however, actually provoked ridicule, as a casual perusal of the reviews on the site *rotten tomatoes.com*,<sup>3</sup> on which the film scored a mere 7% approval rating, quickly establishes. It is a film about 'risk addiction' that, rarely in a Hollywood culture that prefers to remain within the comfortable parameters of the safely mediocre, takes the risk of being bad. As a supposed sequel to Paul Verhoeven's postmodern erotic Thriller, *Basic Instinct 2* is a strange, sui generis kind of noir gothic camp. It is gothic camp not because it takes itself too seriously, nor because it sends itself up, but because we are not sure quite how seriously it wants us to take it. Watching the film is an uneasy experience in part because, although it is hyper-reflexive to the point where it is hard to think of one character, one scene, one plot twist that isn't a reference or an echo, there is nothing knowing about it. No matter how absurd the film gets, it refuses to raise its eyebrows. It flouts the cardinal rule of self-conscious postmodernism by keeping faith with fantasy. Fantasy, after all, *is* the ridiculous-sublime – that which, even when we are fully aware of its absurdity, does not relinquish its hold on us.

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<sup>2</sup> The casting of Stan Collymore as a disgraced footballer was a hyper-real touch. Collymore is a former footballer who was involved in a number of tabloid scandals, including a 'dogging' incident.

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/basic\\_instinct\\_2/](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/basic_instinct_2/)

Fisher, Mark (2007) "How Very Lacanian": From Fantasy to Hyperreality in *Basic Instinct 2*, *Film-Philosophy*, vol. 11, no. 3: pp. 74–85. <<http://www.film-philosophy.com/2007v11n3/fisher.pdf>>  
ISSN: 1466-4615 online

'Basic Instinct' was a poor title for the first film, but it is clear – within the first few moments, described above – that it is spectacularly inappropriate for the sequel, which glories in the fact that, far from being 'basic' or 'instinctual', human sexuality is always mediated through fantasy, fashion, technology and social role. The proposed but abandoned subtitle, 'Risk Addiction', would have been much better, but – given the first scene and the rest of the film's preoccupation with self-destructive modes of enjoyment that lie beyond the pleasure principle – *Death Drive* would have been far more apt.

*Basic Instinct* (1992) was a mediocre reworking of the postmodern noir template established in *Body Heat* (1981)<sup>4</sup>. *Basic Instinct* was notable only for the then unprecedented (in mainstream cinema) explicitness of the sex and for the icy assurance of Stone's performance as Tramell. Verhoeven reputedly cast Stone because she resembled Kim Novak in *Vertigo*. With Tramell, there wasn't a 'real' Judy behind the cool blond facade as there was with Novak's Madeleine; nor was there a manipulating male figure constructing the Tramell persona to entrap other males. Tramell was her own construction, a facade without an interior, cruelty without instrumentality.

The real enigma of the first film did concern the banal question of whether Tramell was a killer or not, but the nature of the desire driving the movie. It was posed in the infamous leg-crossing scene; was this a female fantasy of a woman subduing men with her sexuality and her confidence, or was it a male fantasy of abasement before a dominatrix? Stone gave the Tramell character a depthless invulnerability, a crystalline poise; her trademark expression a sneer-smile, expressing open contempt for those who desired her. Stone's advance on the Kathleen Turner character in *Body Heat* (and even over the Linda Fiorentino character in *The Last Seduction*, which wouldn't come out until 1994, two years after *Basic Instinct*) was her libidinal inscrutability; she wasn't using her sexuality as a means to an end, she was just using it. She presented men with what Irigaray called 'the horror of nothing to see': 'her sexual organ represents the horror of nothing to see. ...A "hole" in its scopophilic lens' (Irigaray 1985, 26). To the men who wanted her, Tramell presented the vacancy of what they desired, knowing that they couldn't stop hallucinating a depth that she didn't even pretend was there.

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<sup>4</sup> Jameson's analysis of *Body Heat* as an exemplary postmodern text in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, remains essential.

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Both *Basic Instinct* and its sequel face the problem of restoring a frisson to sex in an era when its easy availability renders it banal. For both films the solution was to reinvent the constraints that give sex the allure of the forbidden. Thus the hero-dupe of the first film was a cop investigating Tramell, and in the second one it is the therapist assigned to treat her (Morrissey's stiff and proper Dr Glass) – the demands of social role magically transforming the eminently attainable Tramell into the lustrous Forbidden Object.

*Basic Instinct 2* sometimes feels that it is as much a sequel to Cronenberg's *Crash* as to Verhoeven's film. Cronenberg in fact worked on the film in its early stages, as Sharon Stone explained in an online interview with Melissa Walters:

[Walters:]What happened to David Cronenberg? Wasn't he attached to direct this film at one point?

[Stone] You know, we love him, of course. He's so talented and so amazing, and how great was *Crash*? Ohmygod. He is the most gentle, interesting, intelligent, sophisticated person and one of my most things—it's a little private thing but I'll share it with you—Marty Scorsese wanted to see *Crash* so I made a surprise dinner party for him and invited David Cronenberg over to the house and screened the movie. Oh, what a fun night! You know, that was a biggie. He had really great ideas, but that would have been a very different kind of movie. I think that in the end, people just got kind of afraid that maybe it wouldn't be so commercial, because, not to say that some of his ideas didn't remain in the movie because they did, but what's funny enough is that some of his ideas that they were the most afraid of remained in the movie.

The 'Cronenberg traces' in *Basic Instinct 2* turn out to be the most 'Ballardian' touches. (Even Tramell's first name seems to be transformed into a reference to Ballard's 60s and 70s work, in which 'Catherine' was a frequently recurring name.) Setting the film in a phantasmatic, cybergothic London means, in fact, that *Basic Instinct 2* recalls aspects of Ballard's *Crash* that Cronenberg's version of *Crash*, with its North American setting, didn't get to. (One of the main disappointments Iain Sinclair expresses in his book about Cronenberg's *Crash* concerned the switching of the setting from a very precisely evoked West London in Ballard's novel to an anonymous Toronto in Cronenberg's film.) There was

little in the San Francisco of *Basic Instinct* – all late night bars and ocean-side drives – which would have been unfamiliar to a detective from the era of Humphrey Bogart. But the London of *Basic Instinct 2* is something we might have imagined when reading *The Atrocity Exhibition* or *Crash*. The film offers what Linda Ruth Williams called ‘an anti-heritage view of London,’ presenting a London with all of the ‘picture postcard’ landmarks – Big Ben, Tower Bridge – erased, a city that is instead presided over by Foster’s phallic Swiss Re building (the so-called ‘gherkin’<sup>5</sup>). In addition to the Swiss Re tower, production designer Norman Garwood – who, according to the production notes, ‘wanted to champion the amazing new architecture that’s emerged in the city over the last 10 years and blend it with the classical, established London’ – used the Natural History Museum in South Kensington, the Old Billingsgate Market, County Hall on the South Bank, Imperial College, the Tanaka Business School, and the ‘Gothic style’ Royal Holloway college as the components of his urban phantasmogoria.

Roger Ebert, one of the few critics to admit to have enjoyed *Basic Instinct 2* (Ebert confessed, in fact, to being the victim of a compulsive jouissance: ‘I cannot recommend the movie, but ... why the hell can't I? Just because it's godawful? What kind of reason is that for staying away from a movie?’ [Ebert, 2006]), precisely savoured ‘the icy abstraction of the modern architecture, which made the people look like they came with the building’: a very Ballardian effect. Ballard’s principal area of interest has always been environment and architecture rather than technology: even the car in *Crash* functions not as a machine but as a screen on which fantasies can be projected and a scene in which they can be acted out. The ‘very Ballardian’ is also the ‘very Lacanian’. As I have previously argued (Fisher, 2006) Ballard and Lacan can both be seen as inheritors of Masoch in their emphasis on an erotics

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Bradshaw singles the use of the Swiss Re tower for derision in his *Guardian* review. ‘And, please, what is it with the Swiss Re “gherkin” building? Why is it that every film set in London has to feature the gherkin? It used to be that London films had Routemasters sailing past the Palace of Westminster as their establishing shot. Now it’s that bulbous, squat glass edifice poking up into the skyline as characters hurry in and out of cabs. Morrissey’s office is actually in the gherkin, one of the most implausible sets I have ever seen, with its cross-diagonal struts visible on the windows overlooking the city.’ He goes on to scoff that, ‘Our poor capital city adds nothing to the film, and the film contributes nothing to London; it might as well be set on one of Jupiter’s moons for all the atmosphere that is injected.’ Yet *Basic Instinct 2*’s use of the Swiss Re tower is far more assured than Woody Allen’s in *Match Point* (2005), a film that is ridiculous in quite a different way to *Basic Instinct 2*. Caton-Jones’ ‘anti-heritage’ view of London contrasts with Allen’s unintentionally comic American tourist’s eye London in *Match Point*. Caton-Jones’ vision of London is also far more vivid than Cronenberg’s own rendition of the city in *Eastern Promises* (2007).

of the superficial, which revolves around objects (empirical as well as psychoanalytic-transcendental), clothes and scenes.

The characters in *Basic Instinct 2*, such as they are, have no more depth than the buildings they move through or the clothes they wear. Stone's wardrobe and jewellery – assembled by long-time Gus Van Sant associate Beatrix Aruna Pasztor – is certainly far more important than anything she says, the clothes far less off-the-peg than the character. Or rather: the dialogue is as showy and superficial as the jewellery and the shoes, with psychoanalytic and philosophical references – Milena Gardosh's 'how very Lacanian' remark, Tramell's 'don't feel so bad, even Oedipus didn't see his mother coming', and an enjoyably preposterous Nietzsche-quoting academic-analyst who might well be based on Žižek – displayed, with an ostentatious casualness, like so much theoretical finery.

There were misleading complaints by some critics about the reliance on nudity or sex in the film, but this is to miss one of the most interesting aspects of *Basic Instinct 2*. The film is much more about what Stone wears than what she doesn't. 'Everything interesting begins in the mind', goes the film's tagline, and *Basic Instinct 2* would have been far more courageous if there had been no meat sex whatsoever, if the relationship between Stone and her therapist, Dr Glass (David Morrissey) had taken place entirely through roleplay and fantasy. The meat sex, when it arrives, is crushingly disappointing, a dissipation of the libidinal tension that the film has produced up to that point.

Where the 'sex' in *Basic Instinct 2* is interesting, it conforms to Lacan's famously multivalent formula, 'desire is the desire of the Other'. For Lacan, desire, that is to say, is not primarily the desire to possess the Other, but to both *have* and *be* what the Other wants. Something is desirable because the Other wants it, and what the subject most craves is to be the object for the Other. But what the Other wants can never be known – not because the Other deliberately conceals their desire, but because the object of their desire is necessarily concealed from them, the hole in being that is the condition of (im)possibility for subjectivity. The structure of desire is such that any individual empirical object will fail to satisfy it: presented with a particular object, the response will always be, 'no, that's not it'. It is the function of fantasy to substitute for the unknowable real desire. Since we cannot know what the Other wants, all we can do is fantasise about (being the object of) their desire.

For the most part, the erotic encounters in *Basic Instinct* are not about the simulation of a sexual relation that, according to Lacan, does not exist, but take place

precisely under the sign of a non-relation, or a relation between fantasies. They are about playing with the Other, about watching the Other watching you, and recounting fantasies of the Other's fantasies. Dr Glass, who is professionally required to listen to Tramell's fantasies, predictably becomes the object of those fantasies. Needless to say, this is far from unusual in the analytic situation: Freud of course realised very early on that the famous 'transference' of affect to the analyst was an occupational hazard which all psychoanalysts must face. But the well-read Tramell is aware of this, and one of the enjoyably unresolvable enigmas posed by her infinitely superficial character – no matter how many layers are taken off, there is never any depth to encounter – is the question of whether Tramell is merely acting out the role of a patient fantasising about her analyst in order to trap him. Once Glass becomes the object of Tramell's fantasies – or rather once the question of whether or not he is the object of her fantasies is opened – she inevitably becomes the object of *his* fantasies. Glass fucks another woman while looking at a photograph of Tramell on one of her book jackets. He follows her into Soho to watch her being fucked, only for her to discover him in his surreptitious scopophilia, enjoying the humiliation of being seen watching her.

The Thriller genre has always played upon the very familiar fear that we may know very little about those with whom we are most intimate, but in *Basic Instinct 2* the unknowability of Others – and more, the unknowability of our self as Other means that, by the end, all the narrative elements assume a kind of superpositional hyper-instability. Tramell snares Morrissey's therapist by claiming that she fears that her fantasies are making the murders happen, a reference to the concept of the 'omnipotence of thoughts' developed by Freud in *Totem and Taboo*. But is it Tramell's thoughts which are 'omnipotent' or is she herself a commodity fetish avatar from Glass's libidinal economy? Tramell even suggests this latter possibility to him: 'Perhaps I am acting out your unconscious desires'.

By the end of the film, the conundrum that *Basic Instinct 2* presents has passed from being an epistemological problem – 'whose fantasy is this?' – to being an ontological one – 'what level of reality does any of this have?' With Tramell acting less as a character than as a narrator-commentator, it begins to seem that the whole film may be collapsing into one of Tramell's 'grotesquely bad' fictions. It is almost as if Tramell is a dominatrix-manipulator at an ontological as well as a diegetic level, the Author-God commingling with her characters. By this stage, *Basic Instinct 2* comes to resemble *In the Mouth of*

*Madness* (1995), with Tramell playing a Thriller-writer equivalent to the Horror novelist Sutter Cane in Carpenter's film. In *In the Mouth of Madness*, Cane's immensely successful pulp fictions are destructive of the structure of reality itself, literally puncturing holes in the Symbolic Order (one scene sees the lead character, John Trent, walk through a chasm that has opened up in page of text). By the end of *In the Mouth of Madness*, it is clear that Cane is not the agent of the process, but a conduit which the (Lovecraftian) Old Ones are using to gain access to this world. Although Cane 'thought [he] was making it all up', he realizes that the Old Ones, the creatures from the Other Side – were 'giving him the power to make it real. And now it is. All those horrible slimy things trying to get back in. They're all true.' It is the radically unstable social ontology of late capitalism – in which any 'reality' is precarious and provisional – that allows the Old Ones to return, to 'become-real'. In Lacanian terms, this 'becoming-real' is a collapse of the Symbolic into the Real, the inevitable result of which can only be psychosis, John Trent's condition at the end of the film. Something similar appears to happen at the end of *Basic Instinct 2*, when it is clear that even Tramell doesn't know what has happened. The fantasies of the characters, the characters as fantasies, become like free-floating deliria unmoored from any individual psychological location. This is appropriate to Baudrillard's era of hyper-reality: an age in which, via the opinion polls and consumer surveys that are typical of the 'referendum mode', social reality is constituted by beliefs, but beliefs which no longer belong to any individual subject, nor have any referent beyond the system which solicits and circulates them. There is no longer any need for a referent, since the referenda are immediately productive - of social reality itself.

Baudrillard's *Seduction* is one of his most Lacanian works, but also the work where he is very clear about the way in which concepts such as 'otherness' have lost their purchase on a communicational culture given over to the 'proteinic connectivity' of the network. *Seduction*, therefore, could be read as a work of mourning for a moment of psychoanalysis and for a (Masochistic) mode of romance, the courtly play of signs between a beguiled subject and an enigmatic object. (Žižek demonstrated very well the continuity between Courtly Love, Masochism and the Lacanian account of love in 'Courtly Love, or Woman as Thing' in *The Metastases of Enjoyment*.) *Basic Instinct 2* effectively moves from being an alluringly quaint revival of the game of seduction (the fantasy exchange of Glass-as-subject and Tramell-as-sublime-object) to being about simulation and hyper-reality. By this point, Glass and Tramell are flickering figments, their ontological status continually up



for review. *Basic Instinct 2* exacerbates and accelerates that tendency in the postmodern Thriller towards permanent narrative instability, in which, for the purposes of 'twist' or 'double twist' endings, a character can continually be re-positioned (as devious manipulator/ innocent victim); but in *Basic Instinct 2*, this is pursued to such a point of ontological haemorrhage that the film passes far beyond any version of 'realism'.

In 2007, nothing could be clearer than that 'news', whose features increasingly converge with those of a postmodern Thriller, shares this ontological precarity. The media coverage of the missing child, Madeleine McCann, has become a (hyper)-real life Thriller, in which – partly by their own complicity – the key players have become characters in a whodunit drama played out for the cameras, the newspapers and the internet. More than any of the obituaries for the recently deceased Baudrillard, it is the McCann case which has demonstrated the supreme relevance of Baudrillard's theses about hyperreality. The initial campaign calling for public vigilance in respect of the missing child looked like a grotesque satire performed in and by the hyperreal itself, a demonstration of Baudrillard's claim that all contemporary culture tends to the form of the Public Relations initiative. The internet and television campaigns, co-ordinated by PR and advertising professionals, were virally successful – not at returning the missing child, naturally, but at proliferating themselves, generating only a blank, pointless 'awareness' rather than any effective action. When the child's parents became themselves suspects in the crime, the coverage became a Thriller in rather a different sense, with the McCanns, formerly cast as the wronged victims, the subjects of the PR campaign and the objects of a consensual sympathy, now re-cast as potential child-killers. The subsequent crazed generation of scenarios and projections by the media – a situation amplified by the lack of any new, officially-announced evidence – produced a bewildering montage of speculations which did not even pretend to be coherent. Journalists have become Thriller writers, servicing a postmodern audience's need for a story to be continually re-written with new plot twists. The currently unresolved state of the case is ideal from the point of the confabulist-journalists because it makes the story open-ended in a way that no feature film can ever be. No matter how many twists a film may have, it has to end at a determinate point. The fact that *Basic Instinct 2* is a discrete cinematic spectacle means that, rather like *In the Mouth of Madness*, it remains ultimately a commentary on hyper-reality more than it is a participant in it. (This is not true of all films, since, evidently, many films do directly engender belief and induce [further] consumption. In an age of dwindling attention spans,

the function of a film might not any longer be to be watched, but to act as a promotional plane which lends lustre to spin-off commodities. As I have previously argued, [Fisher, 2001], *Star Wars* and *Transformers* provided the model for this type of 'SF Capital'.)

We are now in a better position to appreciate the significance of *Basic Instinct 2's* being set in a London dominated by Foster's Swiss Re tower. The Swiss Re building is a physical symbol of virtual capital, perhaps the most powerful one after the destruction of the Twin Towers, and 00s London is the world's Capital, the capital of Capital. As Marx predicted, as Capital becomes more abstract, it increasingly subjects the material of (what counts as) reality itself to perpetual machinic re-processing. The technique called 'retcon', or retrospective continuity – 'retrospective confabulation' might be an even better formulation – is by no means confined to media productions alone (not that, in the age of hyperreality media productions are confined to media alone, of course). As Steven Shaviro (2006) explains,

*Retcons* (short for "retroactive continuity") are common in comic books, TV series, movie sequels, and fantastic literature: an event in the course of the narrative changes the meaning, the content, or even the ontological status of events occurring previously in the narrative. For instance, when the character of Dawn, Buffy's sister, is introduced in season five of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, all the other characters remember her as having been present during the events recounted in the previous four years of the series, even though she never appeared in any of those episodes.

The instability produced and presupposed by Capital means that the past is subject to constant revision, like an editable digital document. By the end of *Basic Instinct 2*, when it is clear that nothing is resolved, or resolvable, we are very obviously in a world where everything can be reassessed or reframed at any moment: the world, that is, of ultra-precarious cybercapital, whose endlessly weaving digital labyrinths resemble the dreamwork itself; and when you watch *Basic Instinct 2*, it is as if you are watching Capital itself dream.

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ISSN: 1466-4615 online

*Basic Instinct 2* production notes.

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