

Extras

MAHFUZ SULTAN

The year 1956 was an *annus mirabilis* for background actors; the artists formerly known as film and television extras. Cecil B. DeMille's remake of *The Ten Commandments* used 14,000 extras and 15,000 animals. Michael Anderson's *Around the World in 80 Days* marshalled almost 69,000 extras spread out over 140 sets, 112 locations, and 13 countries – not to mention a cow that ate from a tree on cue and a housecat capable of sustaining concentration over several takes. These directors and their peripatetic crowds were a microcosm of the world akin to that Borgesian map; the one that was the size of the empire it described and “coincided point for point with it.” Anderson suffered from the delusion that to represent a journey around the world on screen, one had to reproduce it to a near impossible degree of fidelity. A crowd of thousands on screen required its assembly in real life. One can imagine the sense of unreality that a journalist must have experienced while watching DeMille in jodhpurs and tinted casino hat – atop a citadel of scaffolding and tarp – shouting orders at thousands of thronging slaves. All of this in an overcrowded Paramount studio filled with sand or in front of a life-sized reproduction of Sethi's Jubilee city near an oasis of trailers in a Southern California desert.

The sheer profusion of background actors and animals must have been about far more than mere verisimilitude. A handful of supernumeraries in period costume or a familiar language spoken in an alien ictus are more than capable of conjuring up a remote period for a theater audience. The sweeping shots over the crowds must have been ends in themselves; displays of profligate studio wealth; a circus. Even while clad in the tunics and sheaths of Ancient Egypt, these crowds of extras generated the already familiar sensation of urban spectacle – standing its full height, outside the

theater, in the neon glare of the midcentury. The tracking shot over an impossibly large crowd is a fundamentally urban gesture; one unimaginable from the steps of a temple or a Pharaoh's balcony. They performed the variegated and kaleidoscopic immensity of the city better than any walk through the metropolis. The mob could be taken in all at once through the eye of a camera from an upholstered theater. They were continuous with the audience, stand-ins for the crowds of urban dwellers that filled the theater every evening. As in the endless ambulations of film noir, the epic was the most rarefied of love letters to the mess and boil of the city.

Moreover, the extras were the protagonists of such films. Their directors and writers created narrative through the repeated collisions between the crowds and leads. They were about the immersion of solitary, aloof aristocrats in the mob. There was Charlton Heston dragging a crowd of slaves across the Sinai and David Niven pursued by hundreds through the corridors of Delhi. These mobs were challenged then subdued by the hero. In time, they even learned to love him. Moments of chaos were bookended by scenes of Parnassian remove; Moses and the Pharaoh speaking on a plinth over the Nile's heaving floodplains or Phileas Fogg and Passepartout floating over Hong Kong in a hot air balloon. These films were set the to the iambs of Shakespearean war scenes – the staccato cuts back and forth between the equestrian lords on the chatting on the hill and the non-speaking roles clashing shields on the fields below. One of the most iconic scenes of the postwar era was in Carol Reed's *The Third Man* (1949): Orson Welles looked down at the ruins of postwar Vienna from the top of a Ferris wheel and told Joseph Cotton just how small, expendable, and insignificant the crowd was. He was talking about the extras, the background actors of modernity, the audiences that fill the cinemas and the margins of history.

As far back as the collision of Czarist troops and workers on the Odessa steps in *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), film has documented

modernity through the writhing of its crowds. In the silent films of Eisenstein or D.W. Griffith, the movement of the masses and the antagonism between different crowds propelled the plot forward. The moments of individuation were mere breaks in the larger movement of populations. Films such as *Potemkin* were somehow always about the extras. The same could be said of George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) with its armies of urban zombies. A zombie bite transformed leads into extras – like the spread of a virus – and consigned them to the undifferentiated army of the undead. To fear the zombie bite was to fear conformity. The story is one of star actors fleeing the terrifying anonymity of the Screen Extras Guild. The zombie film is the triumph of the extra par excellence; it is a fear of the crowd that grows so frenzied that it ossifies into form. This mob is far different from the one DeMille's Moses subdued out in the Sinai. Romero's heroes carry rifles, they toss pipe bombs. The crowd of zombies cannot be saved or transformed, it can only be eliminated with extreme prejudice.

The Matrix (1998) is another work where the collision between lead and extra is at stake in the narrative. The only characters capable of being inhabited by Agent Smith and his army of suit-wearing antivirus software are the extras. Any person outside the main characters are a potential threat. As leads, Keanu Reeves (“Neo”) and Lawrence Fishburne (“Morpheus”) have the privilege of appearing in their actual bodies, outside the urban simulation, in the ‘real world.’ The crowds of bizarre Los Angeles are condemned to shadow and simulacra – only main characters are given back their bodies. This is an extreme condition, one in which extras are reduced to the suspirations of computer software. If zombies are a crowd that wear their madness in their flesh, then these crowds are terrifying because they have no flesh at all. *The Matrix* is a zombie movie in science fiction drag.

Imagine the inverse as in Jorge Luis Borges' short story, *The Immortals*; imagine a completely depopulated city – mute and terrible. Marcus



Hammer Drive, 2002 from the series *The Valley*, ©Larry Sultan, courtesy of Estate of Larry Sultan.



Haskell Avenue, 1998 from the series *The Valley*, ©Larry Sultan, courtesy of Estate of Larry Sultan.

Flaminus Rufus goes out into the night and desert of the era of Diocletian in search of the river of immortality. He discovers the City of the Immortals, a graveyard of architectural types, stairways that terminate in thin air, and Escherian labyrinths. The tortured geometries imply equally tortured former inhabitants with disfigured bodies and liquid spines. As in Piranesi's etchings, there is a sense that the dungeons have assimilated the morphological qualities of the bodies that created them. Imagining such a city drives Borges' Roman soldier senseless with fear.

Borges is not unique in this regard: Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010) and Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979) use the demobbed city as unnerving dream landscapes. The few characters of Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002) awaken to a world decimated by an unknown virus. If the high epic of 1956 expressed a certain ambivalence towards the mob, towards the encroachment of the crowd on the life of the individual, then the narrative of the empty city expresses no less horror. One of the Immortals in Borges' story is Homer, the tutelary deity of the crowded epic. To render a world filled with countless more heroes than Homer could name, he turned to the Catalogue of Ships, to a list that implied infinity through the enumeration of figures beyond the logic of his narrative. Borges inverts Homer and naming him in the story is a mark of this gesture. He invents an empty city to communicate a horror equivalent to a horde of urban zombies on the loose. One does not need to describe a near infinite crowd of undead to generate the old terror, it is sufficient to imagine a geometry that implies infinite space in the absence of the crowd. The fear of the desert and the fear of the crowded city are obverses of a single irrational fear.

Nevertheless there are cinematic universes where the extra does not exist. The opposite of the epic is not the chamber drama. One cannot exorcise those armies of background actors by eliminating them from the frame altogether or by limiting narrative to a handful of speaking actors as in the worlds of Harold Pinter or Samuel Beckett. Eliminating the extra requires an alternative cinematic ontology, it requires pornography.

In his photo essay, *The Valley* (2001), artist Larry Sultan captured the strange dissonances on the periphery of porn sets. A film assistant sitting on a mattress, solemnly clasped hands in his lap, penitent, watching something (presumably sex) just outside the frame of the image; an actress trailed by several boxers around a deserted poolscape; an abandoned striped gazebo; a director standing in a doorway

observing an orgy with clinical detachment. These are the suburbs of the San Fernando Valley at the turn of the millennium and the salt flats of the American porn industry. Sultan turned his camera onto the crowds that gathered around such films. In porn, there are no extras. Every actor that moves out in front of the camera is a participant whether or not they engage physically. They are voyeurs no less complicit than the audience. On camera, one is always watching even when turned away. Porn occurs in a psychological interior and crowds of extras are inadmissible in the realm of fantasy; verisimilitude is a form of contamination, a reminder of the moral norms in reality that give porn its illicit quality. Furthermore, its taboo is in many cases a governing condition of its libidinous capacities. The basement computer, the wiped browser histories, and the tinted windows of Midnight Video Centers bear witness to this fact.

Porn is an economy of pleasure in which every activity serves the pleasure principle. The conversation between a pool boy and an abandoned housewife or the sudden appearance of a salesman are participants in dramas of delayed gratification. Sultan captures a film set in which every member is a professional participant in the action whether the camera is on or off. Neither his image nor the filmic universe he captures have background actors. The narrative – if there is one – is generated through the relay between the protagonists and the irreality of the world around the camera. The crowds in his images are neither the teeming masses of modernity nor the insensate predators of the zombie film, they are merely a crowd without a city, idle and faceless.

Incidentally 1956 was not the first time Cecil B. DeMille made *The Ten Commandments*. In 1923, he made a radically different version, one without the grandeur and flourish of its remake. He consigned the story of Moses to a short prologue and devoted the rest of the film to a contemporary morality play with four main characters, each of whom presented a different

cautionary tale based upon a Commandment. This version was about the conflict between theological edicts and the vicissitudes of modern life; the rules of the group intervening in the life of the individual. Conversely, in the remake, the Commandments were weapons wielded by a single individual, a whip to discipline a group of petrified slaves into an army of the faithful. Needless to say, there were far fewer extras in the original version. They occupied the background as foliage; the faded penumbra of film stock. The story of thousands was reduced to a small chamber drama – a pantomime of moral types – in the halcyon days before the Depression, perhaps before cinema learned to fear the crowd.