

CULTOGRAPHIES

CULTOGRAPHIES is a new list of individual studies devoted to the analysis of cult film. The series provides a comprehensive introduction to those films which have attained the coveted status of a cult classic, focusing on their particular appeal, the ways in which they have been conceived, constructed and received, and their place in the broader popular cultural landscape. For more information, please visit www.cultographies.com

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For my daughters Maddie and Renee

INTRODUCTION

THE BECOMING-PIPER

Two one-liners leap to attention like divining rods:

[1] 'I have come here to chew bubblegum and kick ass – and I'm all out of bubblegum.'

[2] 'Life's a bitch – and she's back in heat.'

Most twenty-first-century American teenagers probably don't know where these words come from, who speaks them, or what they mean. The source may even elude their parents. But something familiar – a sense of comic irony, a shiver of existential dread – echoes down the hallways of memory. In the real world, *déjà vu* is the limit. In *They Live*, the one-liners possess a special valence, signifying the alpha male pathology of the protagonist who utters them, Nada, as well as the alienating (and alien-infested) world he struggles to negotiate and disempower.

Likewise do the one-liners resonate on a meta-narrational level. Nada is played by former professional wrestling superstar Roderick Toombs, better known as 'Rowdy' Roddy Piper.

At the time of *They Live*'s release in 1988, he had reached the apex of a profitable career. Developments in cable television, pay-per-view, and the promotional efforts of media moguls Ted Turner and Vince McMahon had established professional wrestling as one of the most lucrative entertainment industries. In this pretend-battle 'sport', there are heroes, villains and characters who oscillate between moralistic poles. While he had moments of likability, Piper was almost always *bad*; racist, misogynistic, smart-mouthed and demented, his asshole seemed to have no boundaries. His role as Nada is comparatively tame to his role as professional wrestler, but the latter inevitably informs the former, and as the film progresses, we witness a distinct transformation in Nada from mild-mannered, lower-class, conformist American patriot to volatile, classless, individualistic American anarchist.

This transformation evokes Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of the becoming-animal, a complex process whereby one experiences a pathological metamorphosis, for better or for worse, sprouting the wings of angels or the fangs of werewolves and vampires; whatever the case, the process vies for agency. In *Kafka: Towards Minor Literature*, Deleuze and Guattari write: 'The becoming-animal effectively shows a way out, traces a line of escape, but is incapable of following it or making its own' (1986: 36–7). Many of Kafka's stories feature characters who change from humans into animals as a means of escape from oppressive patriarchal forces; the evolving physical body claws for a desired terminal identity. Nada experiences a similar crisis. Throughout *They Live*, he bears the cross of the becoming-animal, which is to say, of the becoming-Piper, a burden that culminates in his death as he 'shows a way out, traces a line of escape' for humanity. But it is through the act of becoming-Piper that the aforementioned one-liners exhibit a deeper resonance. To become Piper is to become violent, to become sexist and

hypermasculine – to become an American hero...

Of course, as a teenager growing up in 1980s Midwest America, idle theorisations escaped me. I thought Roddy Piper was cool. He had a cockiness and flair for mockery that my friends and I aspired to emulate. Our relationship was to some degree contingent upon the dynamism with which we ridiculed one another, as is often the case among teenage boys jockeying to establish a (masculine) sense of self. Piper served as a fine model. Other wrestlers came to prominence in the 1980s – Hulk Hogan, Ricky ‘the Dragon’ Steamboat, Jake ‘the Snake’ Roberts, the Honky Tonk Man, Randy ‘the Macho Man’ Savage, the Iron Sheik, Andre the Giant, Big John Studd, King Kong Bundy and Jimmy ‘Superfly’ Snuka, all of whom flaunted their own signature moves and personality traits. But none of them commanded our attention like Piper.

As with teenage boys, professional wrestlers assert identity by way of derision, and the sharper and wittier the derision, the better. Nobody could contend with Piper. At a height of 6’2” and an average weight of 180 lbs. in his early career (see Slagle 2000), he was smaller than most of his peers; linguistically, however, he towered in the sky like a mountain god. And he fought dirty. We liked that. We knew wrestling was fake – physically gruelling, but rehearsed and performative – and we knew wrestlers were actors. But that didn’t stop us from losing ourselves in the drama of their counterfeit lives.

Piper’s appearance in *They Live* only stoked my affection. The film was directed by one of my favourite filmmakers, John Carpenter, whose body of work consistently frightened and intrigued me from a young age. I saw my first Carpenter film in 1982 on my eleventh birthday. After enduring two month’s of whining and pleading, my mother finally broke down and took me to my first R-rated feature, *The Thing*. I had never seen anything like it. The flailing tentacles, the buckets of blood, the boiling flesh, a *pectoralis dentata* that chomps off

somebody's hands, a melted-off head that sprouts hideous insect legs – it fed my imagination to my detriment and benefit. In the years that followed, I became an ardent devotee of Carpenter, repeatedly devouring his movies at the theatre and on videocassette. Horror and science fiction movies like *Prince of Darkness*, *Escape from New York*, *Halloween* and *Big Trouble in Little China* opened up new realms of terror, adventure and insight for me. By the time *They Live* came out in 1988, I knew my Carpenter. I was sixteen and had been following the buzz for months. Trailers ran habitually on TBS, the television station based in Atlanta, Georgia, that in the 1980s boasted a virtual monopoly on professional wrestling broadcasts. Somehow I had even managed to acquire a promotional poster for the film, a considerable feat in the pre-Internet age for a Midwestern teenager from Grand Rapids, Michigan. It hung on the wall over my bed like a trophy. To clinch this spell of fanboyism, I even wore a 'HOT ROD' T-shirt to the opening night of the film, the same T-shirt worn by the wrestler/actor during 'Piper's Pit', an interview segment shown between matches in which Piper invariably belittled, suckerpunched and beat up his ostensibly harebrained interlocutors. I was not alone in my choice of clothing.

'Rowdy' Roddy
Piper licks his
chops as he
taunts fans from
the ring.



Needless to say, *They Live* exceeded my expectations. In retrospect, I realise that what I liked most about the film were its definitive cult elements. Over-the-top acting. Cheesy dialogue. Hyperbolic violence. Magic sunglasses. Gory alien faces. Wristwatches that open portals in the asphalt. A ridiculously long street fight that includes suplexes and body slams. And so on. These idiosyncrasies drew me to Carpenter's oeuvre in the first place. It reminds me just how much a cult aesthetic stems from male adolescent imagination and desire. That said, *They Live's* social commentary didn't escape me, partly because that commentary is egregious, mainly because of the culture of fear and paranoia I had witnessed growing up during the climactic years of the Cold War.

At school, at home, at the movies and on TV, a message was drilled into me: Russians are evil communists and they're going to nuke the planet. First, though, communism will infect America like a virus, rendering us Orwellian zombies at best ... This kind of mania made *They Live* as entertaining as it was chilling. The antagonists in the film are evil *capitalists*, but the theme of social and psychological invasion and control allied the aliens with the Russians – and the Cubans, who, in the wake of the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, an effort to oust Fidel Castro from power, remained a fertile communist threat, if only as a niggling reminder that *they lived*.

Two worlds coalesced for me in Carpenter's film: the real world of impending nuclear apocalypse, and the fictional world of professional wrestling with Piper in the catbird's seat. Both were 'rowdy'. And both interpellated me. Listening to inspiring songs on my Sony Walkman – ranging from R.E.M. to Iron Maiden – I envisioned myself in the effigy of Piper trouncing the Russians with arsenals of everything from flying kicks and atomic drops to machine guns and hi-tech cyberware. The event that unfolded on my mindscren belonged to a cult film, and I was the star, an increasingly fluid becoming-Piper

who dispatched the enemy *en masse*, saving humanity from extinction and preserving the moral economy of American capitalist life. As Deleuze and Guattari might say, I engaged in the same project as Nada, using the fantasy-agency of the becoming-Piper to 'show a way out' and 'trace a line of escape' from a matrix that I could not free myself from via my own volition and fortitude. This fantasy-agency allowed me to both cope with the looming horrors of the real while experiencing the real as a source of solipsistic *jouissance*.

They Live remains Roddy Piper's best film. Since then, he has continued to wrestle and act, making bottom-of-the-barrel Z-movies and TV shows, with some exceptions, such as a 2009 appearance in the raunchy American sitcom *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* as an over-the-hill wrestler named 'The Maniac'. I met him in 2008, twenty years after the release of *They Live*, at a horror convention in Maryland. I was promoting a new novel and Piper was a celebrity guest. Dressed in a dark blue jumpsuit, he hunched over a table in the dealer's room signing pictures of himself in movie and wrestling stills. He is old and weathered now, vaguely punch-drunk, and walks with a slight limp. We made small talk, and then I told him in some detail about the Cultographies title I had been commissioned to write on *They Live*. He listened patiently, made a frog face, and asked if I wanted him to sign anything. Getting an autograph hadn't occurred to me, but I snatched a photo of Nada from the table and handed it to him.

I felt a sort of light-hearted dismay when I noticed that Piper was chewing bubblegum.

As he scribbled down his signature, I remembered how different things had been in the 1980s. Piper and I – my *idea* of Piper and I ... we were different people, with different bodies, desires and self-concepts. The world we live in had changed, too, plagued by the spectre of global terrorism and new breeds of racism, misogyny and systems/screens

of control ... Then it occurred to me that things weren't so different. They were simply extended, extrapolated, more aggressively televised, *mediatised* ... Architectures of violence remain firmly erect. All that has changed are techniques of infliction, which evolved from the torrent of media technologies that exploded in the 1980s. For me, *They Live* not only marks the end of an era, but the beginning of a dangerous and exciting technological future. This is not surprising for a cult film clearly aware of itself as such. Contrary to popular belief, cult cinema, perhaps more than any other form, has been reliably *defined* by social, cultural and political critique. *They Live* certainly navigates this terrain. It is Carpenter's most politically charged film – a token example of cockeyed entertainment, yet also a critical attack on a world that, in the director's words, is 'fucked beyond belief, but it's the best there is' (quoted in Boulenger 2001: 44).