



THEY LIVE

D. Harlan Wilson



CULTOGRAPHIES

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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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WALLFLOWER PRESS
LONDON & NEW YORK

A Wallflower Book
Published by
Columbia University Press
Publishers Since 1893
New York • Chichester, West Sussex
cup.columbia.edu

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A complete CIP record is available from the Library of Congress

ISBN 978-0-231-17211-0 (pbk. : alk. paper)
ISBN 978-0-231-85074-2 (e-book)

Book design by Elsa Mathern
Cover image: *They Live* (1988) © Universal



Columbia University Press books are printed on permanent
and durable acid-free paper.

This book is printed on paper with recycled content.
Printed in the United States of America

p 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book emerged from a place of primal fear and genuine wonder; I will always be grateful to the editors of the *Cultographies* series for giving me the opportunity to write it. I am also grateful to Wright State University-Lake Campus for the sabbatical from teaching that allowed me to perform the majority of my research. I want to thank my wife, too, for putting up with my antics and, as always, being my first and best reader.

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-ery 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 months 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 mindscreen 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).

1

THE CULT OF THE EIGHTIES

REAGANISM

The 1980s began as a hopeful period in the United States. Americans anticipated a return to the romanticised prosperity and 'moral values' of the 1950s that were trampled during the 1960s and 1970s. Stephen Feinstein explains:

The decade of the 1980s in the United States was a very different time. ... The social upheavals in the 1960s brought about by the Vietnam War and opposition to it continued into the 1970s. Americans in the 1970s also witnessed the sorry spectacle of the Watergate scandal and President Richard Nixon's resignation from office. And the 1970s ended with the humiliating episode of Americans being held hostage in Iran. By 1980, it was time for a change. Americans were tired of political protests. They were eager to feel good about themselves and their country again. Sensing their mood, Ronald Reagan campaigned for president on the theme of re-newing good feelings about America. (2006: 5)

These feelings belonged mainly to right-wing conservatives for whom Reagan functioned as the ultimate posterboy, if not saviour. 'For those happily on the right, the election of Reagan was evidence not that the next stage of decline had been reached but the point at which the liberal sixties might finally be expunged from national memory' (Thompson 2007: 9). Reagan implied such a turnaround in his physical stature as much as his ideology, policies and personal history. With wisened good looks, thick, immaculately groomed hair and a confident white smile, all set atop a dark, broad-shouldered, conservatively tailored two-piece suit, he conveyed an image of entrepreneurial masculinity – strong, wealthy, patriarchal, capable of guiding the nation to utopia. Sometimes he swapped the suit for jeans, a denim shirt, cowboy hat and boots, a fashion statement that connected him more intimately with American history and the wilderness that men dressed like him colonised and 'conquered'.

Hollywood stardom further reified Reagan's American-made image. Beginning in the late 1930s, he appeared in scores of films and television shows before turning to politics and becoming governor of California in 1967. As a child watching his State of the Union addresses – or rather, watching my parents watch the addresses – I knew he had been a famous actor. But my only frame of reference was *Bedtime for Bonzo* (1951), a comedy where Reagan's character attempts to educate a chimpanzee using 1950s child-rearing methods in order to prove that nurture, not nature, is what constructs identity. I don't recall seeing the film. I have vivid memories of media imagery featuring Reagan with a monkey, imagery that may have been circulated by democrats in order to undermine him, or at least make him look funny, during his two presidential campaigns. Notwithstanding *Bedtime for Bonzo*, the actor-cum-politician's celebrity status enhanced his appeal, fuelled by the pathological rigor of American image-culture. 'Reagan's presi-

gency [was] the natural political counterpart to an eighties culture driven, and dominated, by the production and circulation of the image' (Thompson 2007: 4–5). Reagan's 'celebridency' was advanced even more by 'a use of cinematic references and clichés in order to secure his political legitimacy' (Thompson 2007: 99) – a curious case of rhetoric constituting image.

The president's religious beliefs coincided with his economic policies. Bourgeois, Christian, white, right-wing and republican – much like George W. Bush in the 2000s – Reagan favoured the rich, affiliated himself with neo-Christian morality and pitted America against a foreign nemesis, cultivating the notion that the nemesis would soon infect and annihilate America ideologically, economically and actually.¹ Taking all of these factors into consideration, the analogy between Reaganism and *They Live* is overt and resolute; without this president, I seriously doubt the film ever would have been made, at least in its current form as a critique of class divisions and capitalist power. If nothing else, the aliens represent what Kenneth Jurkiewicz has referred to as 'the implacable forces of rampant, merciless Reaganomics' (1990: 35). While this is perhaps the most important cultural signifier in *They Live*, the 1980s reflects a much wider spectrum of influence.

BIG HAIR

In the twenty-first century, the phenomenon of Big Hair is often 'blamed' on the 1980s. But it has recurred as an intoxicating vogue for centuries. Consider the fashion craze in the seventeenth century sparked by Louis XIV of France, who began to wear loud, lavish wigs to conceal the spectre of impending baldness (see Kwass 2006: 642). In the next century, French *maîtresse-en-titre* Madame de Pompadour gave life to the notoriously tall hairdo of the same name. And later, in the nineteenth century, American freakshow magnate P. T.



Los Angeles
hair metal band
Nitro outfitted
in signature
Jurassic
bouffants.

Barnum turned Big Hair into literal spectacle with his 'Circasian Beauties', orientalisised women made to look foreign and exotic by flaunting great wigs (see Thomson 1996: 249–50)

Big Hair holds a privileged position in postmodern memory, however, and unlike these localised examples, its thoroughbred emergence in the 1980s denotes a widespread social and cultural formation. For me, it symbolises the colourful modes of excess and abandon that distinguished the period, ranging from Reagan's socioeconomic policies to, say, the antics of rockstars (and rockstar wannabes) as depicted in *The Decline of Western Civilization, Part II: The Metal Years* (1988). Shot between 1986 and 1988 by Penelope Spheeris and released the same year as *They Live*, Big Hair abounds in this documentary of the Los Angeles glam-rock scene and its culture of reckless substance abuse, idiotic delusions of grandeur, and rampant egomania and squandering. Of course, such behaviour – and the hair that signified it – was not limited to Los Angeles. Nor was it limited to music scenes.

EXCESS

American excess became a moral obligation in the financial world, leading up to the stock market crash of 1987. Prior to

the 1980s, 'US stock trading was in a state of depression' yet 'between 1980 and 1988, 25,000 merger and acquisition deals were completed, worth a total of \$2 trillion' (Thompson 2007: 10, 11). Truly this phase is enframed by the guiding proverb of arbitrageur Gordon Gecko in Oliver Stone's *Wall Street* (1987): 'Greed is good.' But reservoirs can only hold so much water, and eventually they go dry. A hearty disavowal of reality thus authorised the fiscal life of 1980s America, particularly among the wealthy, who were empowered/deluded by Reagan's 'no-holds-barred form of capitalism' (Boozer 2007: 168). This mindset led to a number of economic woes. Inflation spiked early in the decade, setting the scene for the savings and loan scandal and an engorging national debt, both of which reached a climax at the end of the decade.² These instances of pecuniary Big Hair widened the gap between rich and poor, inciting a kind of Marxist sentiment in the latter. This sentiment manifests palpably in *They Live*. The film endorses the call-to-arms of the 'Communist Manifesto': proletarians must rise against and quash their bourgeois masters with an eye to accomplishing class equality in the not-too-distant future. Violence paves the way to class equality.

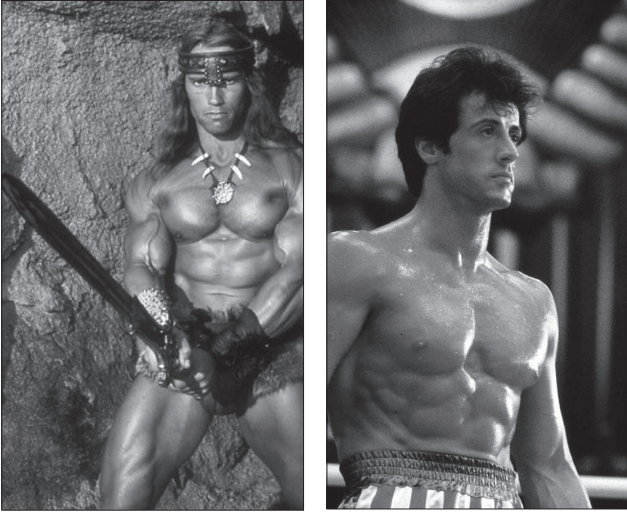
Nada is a symbolic prole who, in the end, uses violence to single-handedly overthrow the alien bourgeois capitalists by exposing them for what they are. More specifically, he uses the force of his masculine body to expose their grotesque, inhuman bodies and incite mass hatred for them. *Ideology stems from the flesh*.

MASCULINITY AND THE BODY

Big Hair is a telling extension of the body. An even more resonant symbol for this sort of cultural hyperbole is the body itself, especially in media representation and cinema, where

an excessive masculinity rapidly came to prominence. Any form of excess produced by the human subject is a compensatory effect of some traumatic kernel; when threatened, masculinity bucks and flares, vying to reassert power and control in the social matrix. Constance Penley and Sharon Willis argue that masculinity is 'both theoretically and historically troubled', and in the 1980s, 'under the pressure of feminism and gay politics, and as a result of the demands of advanced capitalism for new kinds of workers, men [were] being asked to respond as men in new and different ways' (1988: 4–5). Coupled with the imminent threat of Soviet takeover and nuclear disaster, these crises of class and gender spawned new modes of action and representation for maleness, modes that took shape on the growing variety of data screens that increasingly defined the daily lives of urban and suburban Americans.

In cinema, the epitome of the übermasculinised body surfaced in the audaciously muscled action heroes portrayed by Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone, movie stars who dominated the Hollywood blockbuster market. Prior to becoming an actor, Schwarzenegger almost single-handedly popularised the sport of bodybuilding; the culmination of his rise to fame can be seen in *Pumping Iron* (1977), a documentary of the 1975 Mr. Olympia and Mr. Universe contests. Thereafter he turned to acting, and just a few years later, he commanded the science fiction and fantasy genres with films like *Conan the Barbarian* (1982), *The Terminator* (1984), *Predator* (1987) and *The Running Man* (1987). Stallone appeared in action-packed cop, war and boxing dramas, most prominently the *Rambo* and *Rocky* franchises. The religiously glossy, overinflated, supersculpted physiques of each actor became fetishistic objects of desire – ironic silage for the male gaze, which had formerly eroticised the female cinematic body. Brian Caldwell writes:



Rock-hard insignias of Hope under the threat of phallic apocalypse.

Schwarzenegger's body has ... been described by one critic as 'a condom stuffed with walnuts', whereas Stallone ... has been referred to as Fenimore Cooper's 'leatherstocking on steroids'. More significantly in terms of filmic representation, Gaylyn Studlar and David Desser refer to Stallone's 'glistening hypermasculinity' as John Rambo and note how this 'emphasized in the kind of languid camera movements and fetishizing close-up usually reserved for 'female flashdancers'. (1996: 134)

In this era of Big Hair, Big Money and, ultimately, Big Fear and Paranoia, the male gaze turned inward, onto the male form, jacking it into phallic spectacle. Desire shifted from the sumptuous feminine (as exhibited by actresses such as Brigitte Bardot, Natalie Wood and Farrah Fawcett) to the Stal-

lone/Schwarzenegger monster-hero – monstrous because of its hyperreal stature (made possible by anabolic steroids and human growth hormones³), heroic because of its infliction of violence upon terrorist forces.

By way of image and brutality, Stallone/Schwarzenegger assuaged a national anxiety incited by Reagan's Cold War America. *Rocky IV* (1985) emboldens this dynamic. Shot midway through Reagan's presidential career during the height of the Cold War, the film tells a clear-cut tale of good and evil. Stallone-Rocky represents the adamant, unshakable and moral (if dull-witted) American subject. Equally muscled and gleaming in the ring, Dolph Lundgren plays Ivan Drago, metaphor for the machinic, soulless, Orwellian Russian subject. Any critique of Reaganism is veiled at best; the simplistic narrative fails to problematise either half of the good/evil binary. Still, the film serves its purpose: not only does Rocky defeat Drago in the climactic match held in Moscow, the Russians are wooed by his mettle and grit, and before he knocks Drago out, they start chanting his name. *Rocky IV* culminates with a short motivational speech by the winner in which he implores everybody to get along, saying, 'If I can change, and you can change – everybody can change.' The film dispels the Cold War with blockheaded politics ... but it dispels nonetheless.

While not as chiselled, oiled, and hyperreal as the benchmark Stallone/Schwarzenegger, Roddy Piper's body-image stands out in *They Live*; lean, hard and donning a mullet hairdo reminiscent of Stallone-Rambo, he signifies the masculine spectacle and desire of the 1980s. Whether Carpenter intended it or not – although he probably did, given his penchant for satire and burlesque – Piper-Nada extrapolates Stallone/Schwarzenegger, parodying their roughneck personas and critiquing them as sites of power and agency. Consequently Piper-Nada is a simulacra, a copy of a copy – what Jean Baudrillard would call the 'desert of the real itself', cast

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