

Jean-Pierre Gorin's Transatlantic Trilogy

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DIPLOMSKI RAD

Jean-Pierre Gorin's Transatlantic Trilogy

(Smjer: Književno-kulturološki, američka književnost i kultura)

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I. Introduction

There is no doubt that Jean-Pierre Gorin's position in film history is singular. Entering the world of cinema in the late 1960s, quickly forming the Dziga Vertov Group with none other than Jean-Luc Godard and then collaborating with him on a series of films which are, perhaps, *the* decisive turning-point in Godard's ever-changing career is in and of itself unique. The fact that, after the dissolution of the Dziga Vertov Group, he left France for America to teach film at the invitation of film critic Manny Faber (who would become a mentor of sorts to Gorin) only adds to this uniqueness, especially if we take into account that Farber was one of the earliest American supporters of the French New Wave (Godard in particular) and "the first American critic to render serious appreciations of Howard Hawks, Samuel Fuller, William Wellman, Raoul Walsh, and Anthony Mann" (Polito XVII), who exerted an enormous influence on the New Wave, years before the French critics-turned-filmmakers made them part of canonical film culture (Rosenbaum, *The Farber Mystery*). However, Gorin himself remains a non-entity in film history, partially due to the legendary reputation of his mentors (Godard in particular), but also because the films themselves were poorly distributed, modest and quite uncategorizable (Ulman).

Gorin's own account of Farber's influence, to which he owes modesty more than anything, in many ways hints at the central preoccupations of what is to follow:

Seriously, the meeting with Farber was a determining one. As determining in a sense as my encounter with Godard years ago. The reading of his film criticism gave me a very different key to American cinema than the one I used in France, a way to ground it in the culture and its language, to pry it away from its own mythology. But more importantly, it's from reflecting on his painting, his main activity for years by the time I met him, that I learned the most. The lack of closure in his canvases, the endless "and . . . and . . . and" mechanism that shapes them, his relentless way to multiply the entries and the exits into the material, his way to map his own life by incessantly reordering the jetsam of the culture, his hatred for Big Ideas, his insistence on dodging clichés. All that struck a chord. (Tillman and Gorin 37)

Kent Jones points to Gorin's focus on language as, perhaps, the primary concern of the three feature films Gorin made in America. In these films, says Jones, "varying styles and modes of American speech ravish and are ravished in turn" (Jones). This statement is, in many ways,

quite precise. As we will see, language (both as image and as sound) is central to all three films, largely due to the fact that Gorin is incessantly drawing parallels between American and European (film) culture throughout the trilogy. Hence my decision to dub these films the Transatlantic Trilogy, in spite of the fact that the last of them is not concerned with the relationship between America and Europe, but with the relationship certain Americans have with their native land, Samoa – as Farber himself says of Gorin’s work: “His subjects – pockets of intense activity off the geographic mainstream – echo his own life” (Farber, *The Hidden and the Plain* 775).

II. *Poto and Cabengo* (1980)

Gorin's first American film, described by him as “an investigation, a film ‘around’ an event” (Tillman and Gorin 34), takes as its point of departure the fact that the titular twin sisters have been made into a small sensation by the media due to their seemingly unintelligible speech, a creolized language developed between the two of them. The film, focusing on their story and the various adults who shape it, is essentially “about unstructured discourse (the language of the twins) surrounded by structured discourses (the discourse of family, the discourse of the media, the discourse of therapy, the discourse of documentary filmmaking)” (Sobchack 21), with the title itself borrowed from their language, Poto and Cabengo being the names Ginny and Gracie use to address each other.¹To quote Gorin himself:

There are as well other structured discourses at work in the film: the discourses of science, capitalism, and education. They are each a method of using words that presumes a type of authority. Clearly the twins’ unstructured discourse challenges discursive authority: it erupts as a subversive act which has not been authorized by any social or ideological establishment (Tillman and Gorin 35).

As befits a film about various modes of discourse, Gorin employs several kinds of images, pitting them against one another, forcing them to continually undermine and dislocate each other. These include panels taken from *Katzejammer Kids* comics, still photography, archival

¹ Before settling on *Poto and Cabengo*, Gorin scrapped two other titles – *Two Spoke Together* and *Everybody Talks Funny*. For sharp insights into the process that lead to his final choice, see »Jean-Pierre Gorin.« *BOMB* (1988): 34-37.

video and documentary film footage, the last of which makes up the bulk of the film's runtime. On top of this, he makes use of images of newspaper articles (reducing them to their sensational headlines), intertitles and crawling text – words as images. However, the film also relies heavily on the absence of images, leaving us “in the dark, frequently refusing sight an object, making us listen as much as we see” (Sobchack 24). Sound is, to Gorin, just as important as the images.

For example, the film's first two minutes: Gorin, with his French accent, opens the film by saying, over a black screen, that you can only be a foreigner in a language other than your own, before showing us an image from a *Katzenjammer Kids* comic, or rather, the linguistic contortions (highly Germanized English) inscribed in its speech-bubbles. After we see the title card, we are once again deprived of the image and simply exposed to the sound of the twins' jabberwocky. We listen in confusion until the film itself asks what everyone is already thinking (an intertitle reads: “What are they saying?”), followed by an image of a headline – “Twin girls invent own language”.

Vivian Sobchack points out that Gorin “sometimes pans left to right across a headline to approximate our ‘normal’ mode of reading”, but that he also does the opposite, so as to counter “the authority of our culturally-specific reading process” (Sobchack 24). Thus, the camera pans left to right as we read the above headline, a *statement* about the twins presented to us in the way in which we are accustomed to reading text. On the other hand, the above *question* is an inter-title crawling right to left, thus producing a jarring effect, as any question should. The question itself is not a remediated image of a newspaper, nor does it tell us how to think about what we have just heard. Instead, it affirms the validity of a question so obvious that we might trick ourselves into not asking it at all.

Furthermore, not only is the girls' speech positively compared with the speech of witty cartoon characters before we even see them, its function as a media freak-show attraction thereby reduced from the outset, but the concrete history of their made up language, something which seems to escape the press who prefer to sell them as a wild phenomenon, is immediately hinted at through this apt remediation. Gorin emphasizes that the comic is “from the time of Ellis Island”, meaning from the time of massive transatlantic immigration in pursuit of the American dream. Thus, he immediately contextualizes *Poto and Cabengo* – the film is part of a long tradition of art made by (European) immigrants, art which aims to destabilize whatever notion of America it happens to run into by channeling it through its

cultural heritage. Considering the fact that Hollywood essentially owes its existence and long-term influence to European immigrants, Gorin opening his first American film by making this connection speaks volumes of his overall project, shaking up our outlook on mainstream cinema in the process.

As we later learn, the twins' mother is herself a *German* immigrant who followed her American husband to the USA, their language a product of living in a bilingual household and spending most of their time with their grandmother who doesn't speak a lick of English, outside of the occasional code-switch. The household's bilingualism takes center stage during the dinner scene which, according to Sobchack, renders the "active polyglossia" of *Poto and Cabengo* "acoustically transparent" (Sobchack 23). Apart from code-switching (mixed – gemischt; potato – Kartoffel; steak – Schnitzel; with - mit), we hear how the words Käse (cheese) and steak get mixed up with one another, or rather, we read the subtitles which help us get a grip on the family's myriad linguistic idiosyncrasies. What's more, certain sections of the scene are replayed without the image, emphasizing the musical quality of language while simultaneously complicating our understanding of the film's authentic, seemingly unmediated documentary images which sound, in fact, need not be synchronized with.

However, the images, too, play their part in bringing out the "fundamentally fictional [one might also add 'technically determined'; B.B.V.] aspect of documentaries" (Tillman and Gorin 36). As the camera is mostly focusing on the twins, it leaves the speaking adults either out of frame or simply faceless so that we only hear their voices while watching the twins react to them, repeating certain phrases they hear, deciphering their meanings; and the emphasis on off-screen space makes one more attentive to the sounds coming from it. The film is committed to their point of view in this scene, which in turn makes the adults and everything they say and do seem ever so slightly odd and incomprehensible. "I wanted the viewers to feel the twins made more 'sense' than anybody around them", says Gorin (Tillman and Gorin 35).

Furthermore, prior to this scene the film has been busy introducing us to the family members one by one as though it were offering the sort of character index found on the opening pages of a play, only to then play out this dining room-set *Kammerspiel* where all the characters are finally in the same place at the same time. Once we take this into account, the scene's very premise becomes subtly artificial, coded in a way that runs counter to any notion of "pure", unmediated documentation, serving as a shining example of Gorin's efforts to

destabilize the traditional documentary footage shot by veteran documentary filmmaker Les Blank who Gorin chose as a collaborator precisely because he knew that Blank would give him “the type of material [he] would have to fight against” (Tillman and Gorin 35). As we will see, this implicit genre framing becomes more and more evident with each subsequent film in the trilogy (the genre choice being largely influenced by a given film’s subject) and is here also present in the “fable-like quality” (Tillman and Gorin 34) of the twins’ story.

Perhaps the most striking instance of the film’s undermining of authoritative discourses as well as its tendency to resist “any drift into sophistication or severity” (Jones) is the one where we hear two linguists enumerating the sixteen different pronunciations of the word ‘potato’ the girls have developed. As Gorin himself says in the film, this is the verdict of scholars who have figured out how to understand what the girls are saying, thus rendering the media-produced mystery obsolete. That, however, does not prevent the twins’ discourse from undermining it.

We hear a male and female voice alternately reading the various pronunciations of ‘potato’, almost as if they were having an incomprehensible one-word conversation, and these jagged utterances (emphasized by equally jagged transcriptions, reminiscent of the *Katzenjammer* speech-bubbles, mere doodles to a layperson) poke fun at the deathly serious tone in which the linguists are pronouncing each variation, not to mention the “squeaky-clean cadences of the speech therapists [...] perfectly enunciating every syllable of their expert opinions” (Jones). The same happens while they read a sort of abstract, outlining the basic challenges and results of their research, while transcriptions crawl across the screen like lines lifted from a Dadaist poem. In Sobchack’s words (and her essay takes its name from this scene), “[t]hus, the myths of the unitary nature of language and the singular privilege of one’s own language perish” (Sobchack 25).

When reflecting on the difficulties of making *Poto and Cabengo*, Gorin is quick to point to the library scene, where the girls can be seen running around frantically. Having felt that the film was, at that point, escaping him, he added audibly non-diegetic pleas of his own during post-production, begging the twins to stop for a minute so that he could film them, while they just keep running away from the chasing camera. “I am there lumbering around with my film equipment and trying in vain to frame them into some scene, some conceit of my own” (Tillman and Gorin 35). Gorin’s handling of the scene offers a stark contrast to the ways in which practically everyone else has been trying to frame the girls by talking about

them, analyzing them, and, even more, to the repurposed archival footage of them shot during therapy sessions.

Regardless of whether or not we see them seated next to therapists who tower over them, asking questions and telling them what to do, or simply playing with each other, the inescapable pale blue background of these static shots makes the therapy sessions markedly artificial, staged. Moreover, the twins' doll-like dresses, strikingly incongruent with the sickly background, further accentuate the room's uncanny resemblance to a dollhouse – one cannot quite shake the impression that the girls are both trapped and exposed in this ostensibly friendly environment, framed into someone else's conceit. Unlike the library scene where they exit the frame chasing after books “as if these things were bound to secure their liberation” (Tillman and Gorin 35), here they are boxed in by the camera as mere test subjects.

Gorin accomplishes a similar thing with freeze-frames which „emphasize his subjects' isolation from the world around them” (Taubin). However, they do more than just that. In fact, the first time Gorin shows us that sound need not be synchronized with documentary footage, he does so by freezing one of the girls in place, severing her body from the voice which goes on to finish the sentence that the body started. Moreover, his freeze-frames are primarily close-ups of the girls' faces, ecstatic grimaces captured in the middle of frantic running. In a sense, they allow one to see both the macro (their isolation from the world) as well as the micro – the joy children feel when playing. It is precisely this editorial intervention of Gorin's and his frequent repetition of it that makes one see what was initially invisible; as Giorgio Agamben says of the effects of repetition in Guy Debord's films “the image gives itself to be seen instead of disappearing into what it makes visible” (Agamben 318), while simultaneously emphasizing the sound from which it is itself desynchronized. These frames, however, differ from the grimaces captured by the photos, one of which actually serves as the film's final image. If frozen faces accentuate the *moment* in which we see them freeze, the photo of the girls smiling (first seen during the character introductions; simple family memorabilia) ultimately serves as a black and white epitaph to *a time gone by*, a time before Gorin even began filming. Moreover, when the photo is shown at the end of the film, it becomes an epitaph to their shared language because their language has all but evaporated by that point, as that they end up being put into different rooms and schools as per the therapists' orders. In juxtaposing these two kinds of still images, Gorin demonstrates how ostensibly

similar images can produce drastically different effects depending on how they were made or in what context they were placed.

Something similar can be observed in a scene where Tom and Chris, the girls' parents, are seen talking to each other with no one else around; although talking to "each other" may not be the best way to put it. What they are doing is acting out a scene, one whose dialogue sounds as though it were ripped from a tacky commercial. On the one hand, the very fact that they are playing characters sticks out like a sore thumb in a film that, despite its various formal subversions, is still a portrait documentary. On the other, their highly conventionalized, acted exchange is the polar opposite of the twins' spontaneous language, even more so than the aforementioned discourse of therapists and journalists, because it is a *dialogue*, and it is through dialogue that their daughters developed their own language.

Tom, a struggling real-estate agent, asks Chris to play a potential buyer while he plays the salesman, in an effort to showcase what he has learned in a workshop he attended. What is immediately striking about the scene, acted out while sitting on a bed in a small room (with the bedpost mirror only underlining the scene's artificiality, much like the pale background during therapy sessions) is that Chris is playing a very rich woman, buying a house with four bedrooms, multiple bathrooms and a swimming-pool. "The gap between Tom and Chris Kennedy's vision [...] and the gruesome reality is terrifyingly wide, a real-life version of early movie comedy's fixation on the gulf between aspiration and achievement." (Jones) The gap Jones points to can indeed be felt on the formal level, too, because of the strangeness of what Gilles Deleuze calls the audio-visual image.

What constitutes the audio-visual image is a disjunction, a dissociation of the visual and the sound, each heautonomous, but at the same time an incommensurable or 'irrational' relation which connects them to the other, without forming a whole, without offering the least whole. (Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image* 256)

Their dialogue, the roles they are playing *only through their speech*, as opposed to embodying them, while remaining perfectly still (the stillness is crucial in this case, the visual image is not as stressed), dissociates them from the image, becoming its own parallel audio image entirely incompatible with what we are seeing, even if Gorin's use of this technique is not as imposing as it is in Marguerite Duras' *India Song* (1975), Deleuze's primary example. By the end of the scene, the gap between vision and reality, sound and image starts caving in on itself as the appetites of Chris' character (by this point we already know she desperately wants to

leave Linda Vista) grow entirely out of proportion, cornering Tom into a close-up. The scene ends with a freeze-frame of Tom's face, not ecstatic like his daughters' faces but exasperated and frightened, gagged by his own tongue. The frame draws out the exact moment where he, unbeknownst to himself, breaks character during a scene he initiated, realizing how wide the gap really is.

Finally, if we return to Jones' apt comparison of the Kennedys' predicament with (not so) early movie comedy, we arrive at the first instance in the whole trilogy where Gorin explicitly draws on the history of American cinema. Immediately after the bedroom scene, there follows an intertitle – CHRISTMAS IN JULY – referencing Preston Sturges' 1940 film. Sturges' film is, essentially, about a working-class man trying to find success by winning a slogan contest (organised by a coffee company) with his incredibly dumb slogan ("If you can't sleep at night, it's not the coffee, it's the bunk.") which is, for comedic effect, repeated ad nauseam throughout the film, to the point that it "eventually becomes a kind of crazed tribal incantation" (Rosenbaum, *Christmas in July*). What makes the tribal incantation truly stunning, however, is that it drives people mad regardless of what class they belong to, regardless of whether they think the slogan is brilliant or realize that it is dim-witted. It challenges (discursive) authority just like the twin's speech, and its effects are even more readily apparent as the film explicitly depicts a very (economically) stratified society still reeling from the consequences of The Great Depression.

Thus, *Christmas in July*, much like *Poto and Cabengo*, is a film that foregrounds language, in this case the maddening language of *advertising*, and it is this aspect of it that makes Gorin's intertextual link with Sturges so profound, as it deepens his exploration of language in America, its uses and effects. Not only that, Sobchack stresses Gorin's debt to the linguistic gymnastics of American comedies when she incisively compares Gorin's decision to have *Katzenjammer* speech-bubbles be read aloud (render their Germanized English audible) to „the oral and aural mayhem wrought upon the English language by the Marx Brothers“ (Sobchack 23).

In this chapter we see Tom flipping through a scrapbook filled with cutouts of article headlines (some of which have been shown previously) speaking about how all the publicity the girls have received as of late will surely benefit both his failing real-estate enterprise as well as Grace and Virginia's future, once they become adults and join the business world. They did, after all, appear on national television! Even when his business crashes, after media

attention subsides, he remains hopeful for the future, in part because of said publicity. It would seem that the language itself, as it is used in advertising, causes mayhem in the minds of people, and its power in this context is, perhaps, the power of an audio image which is not synchronized with the visual.

Adverts, or the public exposure they provide, seem to be the only way anyone can get ahead in America, and American cinema dealt with this sobering truth already in Classical Hollywood. It would seem that what has been said of Sturges' entire oeuvre applies just as much to Gorin's first solo effort: "The *image* of success stalks every Sturges movie like an unlaid ghost [...]" (Farber and Poster 461; emphasis added). Speaking of ghosts, it should come as no surprise that once the credits (another kind of text) begin to roll, all we hear are the ghastly reverberations of the twins' language which was supposed to secure the success of the journalists, the therapists and the kids' own parents.

Gorin seems to be fully aware of this thematic connection with Sturges, because the film's final scene sees Tom sitting on the couch, depressed, after which the camera pans left, revealing Chris and her elderly mother standing behind the kitchen counter like smiling dolls in a dollhouse. Yet, the camera does not stop here, but continues moving left until the *television set* comes into full view – and then the frame freezes, the screen fades to black and the photo of the twins appears.

Even if *Poto and Cabengo* doesn't feature any television footage, this ominous conclusion speaks volumes of its incantatory effect, by way of television being *the* American medium for advertising at the time. One could also see the scene as an incisive reference to the films of German filmmaker Reiner-Werner Fassbinder because of its jarring contrast of moods in a suffocating dollhouse where every single antagonism seems to be related to a TV set or some other kind of middle-class commodity; the allusion becoming even more apparent when one considers the fact that these women are, in fact, German immigrants.² More importantly, however, the TV set seems to have simply replaced the cardboard fireplace we saw in their previous house, a prop symbolizing a vision of (and desire for) domestic bliss entirely out of step with reality – one which is in many ways redolent of the "conservative

² Fassbinder's *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1974), itself a remake of Douglas Sirk's *All that Heaven Allows* (1955) is a shining example. Sirk himself being a German immigrant to Hollywood.

longing” (Jones) that informs the imaginary all-American landscapes built by the Train-Men who are the primary subject of *Routine Pleasures*.

III. *Routine Pleasures* (1986)

As it has not one but two key subjects, *Routine Pleasures* is in many ways a film of opposites. Focusing on both the routine activities of the so-called Train-Men (running model trains) and those of Manny Farber (painting), Gorin brings to the fore two vastly different visions of America, and two distinctly male imaginaries. On the one hand, there are the pedantically assembled, snug miniature landscapes through which trains idly pass, and on the other, the angular, cluttered canvasses that force the eye to dart around from one hermetic detail to the other. Ideologically, these two visions are worlds apart – “the present of the model railroaders [...], much like Ronald Reagan’s contemporaneous vision of ‘morning in America’, is also a nostalgic mirror image of the past” (Holte 105), and this nostalgia is truly shown for what it is once it is “placed in contrast with Farber’s barbed and resolutely antinostalgic boards” (Jones).

The contrast pointed out by Jones is also, though subtly, emphasized by the fact that we both see and hear the Train-Men (a collective) going about their work on their three-dimensional model, while Farber (an individual) is himself present only as a photo (more on that later), with his thoughts and ideas about film and painting, as well as the way in which he goes about painting being related by Gorin. In other words, everything relating to Farber is left at the edges of the film to gnaw away at the Train-Men who receive more overt attention, serving as the film’s engine.

Nevertheless, Farber’s messy boards share a fascination with a by-gone America that is so characteristic of the model train set. Speaking of the similarities between the two, Gorin has said that:

Routine is very much a filmic meditation on an American male imagination anchored in the Thirties and Forties, its high art—Farber—and low art—the train people—manifestations, and my relationship to it. [...] What fascinated me, both about the train people and Farber, is how much their childhoods articulated themselves within the rituals of their working life as adults [...] (Tillman and Gorin 37)

This becomes readily apparent when we consider the titles of the two Farber paintings used in the film – *Birthplace: Douglas, Ariz.* (1978) and *Have a Chew on Me* (1982). The first alludes to the town in which Farber was born in 1917, while the second is a slightly oblique reference to William A. Wellman’s *Other Men’s Women* (1931), with its title quoting an off-hand line of dialogue from the film’s first half. Moreover, trains and train-tracks feature prominently in the former painting, and remain significant (albeit less apparent) in the latter (Wellman’s film is itself about railroaders); it is just that these motifs are rendered strange, appearing within smaller frames, blocked by notebooks or topped by naked female forms. Later on in the film, the two opposites will actually develop a dialogue precisely through Gorin’s use of an excerpt from Wellman’s film.

Although the film relies much more on the visual side of things (simply due to the dominantly visual nature of its subjects), Gorin will at times employ sound to similar effect. For example, Gorin tells a story about how he walked in on Farber as he was painting while listening to Thelonious Monk, whom he allegedly praised for his ability to always “hit the wrong note”.³ The film then juxtaposes Monk’s playing, with the sound effects the Train-Men use while running trains to provide a degree of verisimilitude to the whole affair; the wrong note vs the right sound effect. Of course, when heard in the film’s very first shots, which feature the model landscape, the last thing they add is verisimilitude. Instead, they sound just as artificial as the figures they are supposed to enliven, in spite of being easily recognizable as the quite ordinary sounds of a busy street.

Furthermore, we hear those same sounds halfway through the film when two men are simply pulling handles and twisting control knobs that cause the sound system to produce them. As fitting and natural as they may sound, when paired with either images of the model they are supposed to breathe life into or an image of the control panel producing them, they are as off-key as Monk’s notes! Also, when Gorin uses a train horn sound to accompany a right-to-left text crawl (with its motion imitating the train) which spells out what it is that we are hearing (Side B – “A barking dog is silenced as a rushing merchandise freight speeds north through Vesuvius, Virginia with good for New York and New England.”), it actually

3 There is no mention of any particular song or album, but Monk’s *Round Lights* from *Thelonious Alone in San Francisco* is featured on the film’s soundtrack.

appears more true to life than the other effects paired with still images or machines, even if the text obviously supplies more details than would the sound itself.

Apart from offering a slightly comedic interlude that further strengthens the ties between his subjects, while simultaneously destabilizing the Train-Men's attempts at recreation, Gorin here offers a brilliant treatise on what it means to pair an image with sound and the effects the same sorts of sounds can produce when paired with various kinds of images, images which they need not be synchronized with. In other words, it is a shining example of the kind of self-involvement or wastefulness that Farber often championed as a painter, but also as a film critic.

What Farber's taste as a film critic brings to *Routine Pleasures* is a kind of framing. Gorin explains how he tried to persuade Farber that there is something of interest in this nonevent of a subject he planned to tackle by comparing the Train-Men to a group of characters, work colleagues straight out of 30s Hollywood, settling on Howard Hawks' *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939), a favorite of Farber's, as his key example. The Train-Men do, indeed, resemble Geoff Carter's (Cary Grant) band of pilots in their brand of camaraderie and their obsession with work is reminiscent of Hawks' oeuvre in general, but Gorin's reference to Hawks' film via Farber plays a much more important role in *Routine Pleasures* as it forces one to take stock of the strictly formal similarities between the two films, the most crucial of which is how they deal with physical space. As Jacques Rivette has incisively said of Hawks: "Hawksian drama is always expressed in spatial terms, and variations in setting are parallel with temporal variations: [...] the fliers in *Only Angels Have Wings*, trapped in their station by the fog and managing to escape to the mountains from time to time [...]" (Rivette 129)

Although Rivette is primarily emphasizing the dramatic impact of the film's later parts where planes are seen flying over sharp mountain peaks far from the radio tower from which they are receiving instructions, Hawks' spatial drama is at its most powerful at the film's very beginning, during the famous plane-crash scene. Its set-up may be inherently dramatic (men on the ground navigating the pilot, trying to prevent him from dying), but what gives the scene weight are the spatial relations between the two parties – ground vs sky, and more importantly screen space (ground) vs off-screen space (sky). Moreover, both dyads are made palpable by the plane's proximity to the men on the ground; the plane is just above their heads, and they keep nervously looking up at the sky while the rumbling sound of the engine, coming from outside the frame, is ever-present.

This kind of spatial intelligence, although entirely de-dramatized, makes the obsessive nature of the Train-Men's hobby be felt. First and foremost, the whole of *Routine Pleasures*, (the whole not made up of close-ups of Farber's canvases or inserts of photos and films; in short, appropriated images), takes place *inside* of their club. The viewer is trapped in their little den, and is more often than not simply staring at the tiny figures and landscapes they have constructed, something which he might not even be aware of after a certain period has passed. The plethora of details on display (only increased when the film switches over to Farber's clutter) creates a dizzying effect, causing one to forget what an image that offers some breathing room even looks like.

Of course, this confinement only becomes apparent once it is set against the outside world which we but glimpse in two night-time scenes (their entrance and exit from the club) both of them somewhat ghastly and incongruent against the club's brightly lit interior and the earthy tones of the models. The latter scene in particular brings to mind the above episode from *Only Angels Have Wings*, only that it is entirely romantic instead of dramatic. The Train-Men walk out of the club after hearing what Gorin calls "the love call of the South-bound" (Gorin, *Routine Pleasures*; 01:09:36) so that they can observe the train passing in the distance. The train, of course, remains off-screen, calling with its coo the men assembled in front of the club. Just as Hawks brought out the heroic romanticism of the machine by placing its life-or-death struggle out of view and having the engine's rumbling create tension, so Gorin allows us to see the mythological status the train holds in the minds of model railroaders by only allowing us to hear its siren-like song.

One might describe the overall effect created by the film's spatiality by using Farber's own article about Hawks where he dedicates a good deal of space to writing about Hawks' boxed-in worlds wrapped "in a patina of period-mannerism and attitude" that aren't as dated as they are "removed from reality, like the land of Tolkien's Hobbits" (Farber, Howard Hawks 655). Funnily enough, however, the Train-Men tower over their landscape like giants and even pop out of mountains, enter screen space from unexpected off-screen places, when trying to tidy up or fix their creations. Thus, they echo the fable-like qualities of *Poto and Cabengo* – "they had been acting for 25 years as the Gullivers of their own Lilliputian world" (Tillman and Gorin 36)! In both films, this implicit fantasy element accentuates just how apart Gorin's subjects are from the world at large.

For all the explicit nods to the films of Howard Hawks, Wellman's *Other Men's Women* plays an even more integral role in Gorin's dense tapestry of cross-references.⁴ Ironically, this reference, too, ends up playing into the film's Hawksian repetitions. After Gorin has familiarized himself with the Train-Men to the point that Corky Thomson, their leader, brings in a miniature replica of Gorin's own car so that they can add it to the landscape and move it around, he claims to have become dizzy from immersion in his subject; much like the viewer might lose track of the fact that he has been staring into a fake landscape the whole time. He decides to go back to the beginning, to a time prior to his becoming fascinated with the model railroaders; back to Farber and his concrete, detail-driven writing.

"Manny, with three words, could pin down the way Cagney sliced through the space of a ballroom in Wellman's *Other Men's Women*." Following this quote, we see the scene from Wellman's film where James Cagney walks in from the rainy street, takes a woman by the hand and moves toward the dance-floor. Once we see the action unfold, the three-word description promptly appears on screen – "sinewy, life-marred exactness". Again, Gorin is quick to collide words with images to see how they function when put up against one another, the question being if Farber's description truly pinned down Cagney's foot-work? It may seem exactly right, but as soon as one reads the description there appears another three-word line – "taut, life-worn fluidity"⁵ (Gorin, *Routine Pleasures*; 00:54:17 – 00:55:35)

The change in meaning is slight yet significant. The form, on the other hand, has been completely altered and, all of a sudden, there are six words instead of three; three extra words are piled on just like details that appear in the model landscape or a Farber painting. In sustaining its dialogue with Farber the writer, the film illustrates the fundamental conundrum of writing about any kind of image. As Michel Foucault has plainly put it, "the relation of language to painting is an infinite relation. It is not that words are imperfect, or that, when confronted by the visible, they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other's terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say." (Foucault 9)

4 According to Gorin, Babette Mangolte (the film's cinematographer) was honed in on replicating Hawks' framing and lighting to the point that „in the film there's a shot of two guys inside the machine which turned out as a perfect duplicate of a shot in Hawks's *Ceiling Zero*, a film neither of us had seen at the time of the shooting of *Routine*!" (Tillman and Gorin 37)

5 It is uncertain whether or not one or both of these descriptions are actually attributable to Farber. The film's credits don't credit any texts, and the film isn't mentioned once in over 700 pages of his *Collected Writings*, although Robert Polito (the book's editor) mentions in his introduction that the film was one of Farber's favorites.

More importantly, the Cagney scene sheds light on the film's fascination with male movement or lack-there-of. It follows right after the film presents us with a photo of a young Farber (shown at several other points, including the first time we see an image of him) running on a football field with a ball under his arm. "Twin brains? Me the twin of a guy born in Arizona who had grown up to be called 'Snake Hips' on the football field", asks Gorin, once again showing the same photo (Gorin, *Routine Pleasures*; 01:11:33). But in the photo Farber, rushing towards the camera, remains frozen mid-step. In spite of his nickname, his renown for serpentine movement, we only see him motionless.

The Train-Men, on the contrary, are filmed – they are captured in moving images, but they don't move much. Instead, they are defined by their stillness; for the most part, they are sitting, standing or crouching, always paying attention to the task at hand, to the movement of trains regardless of whether those trains are of their own making or trains filmed and projected by their leader Corky. In short, the only moving man is Cagney, whose performance is inserted into the film precisely so that his wiry foot-work be emphasized, so that it re-frames the viewer's understanding of male posture elsewhere in the film, only for it to immediately be re-worked through Farber's three-word descriptions. "Inversion, exchange, repetition: these are the keys to Howard Hawks" (Hasumi 84) and, indeed, these are the keys to Jean-Pierre Gorin as well, at least when he is consciously drawing on Hawksian formal and thematic obsessions in order to engage with men and their fantasies rooted in Thirties and Forties Americana.

It should then come as no surprise that the most maddening of Gorin's inversions relates to cinema itself. We have already mentioned the fact that the title of Farber's *Have a Chew on Me* is a reference to Wellman's film. In its top left corner, Farber painted a freeze-frame of a man and a woman walking together along the train-tracks in a rail yard – the frame is lifted directly from the film, except that the positions of the two people have been inverted. What fascinates, however, is that near the very end of *Routine Pleasures*, after we have already seen the Cagney scene, there appears a shot of a street where there is a cinema currently playing *Other Men's Women*. But it is not real. Instead, it is part of the model landscape built by the Train-Men! The imaginary landscape seems to have swallowed the real world.

The shot lasts for only about five seconds and is not emphasized in any way; it remains unclear whether or not this is an intervention into the landscape akin to the one when

Corky brought in a replica of Gorin's car (it is very explicitly stressed that that was an intervention) or simply an impossible coincidence. Whatever the case, through this micro detail whose origin we are not privy to, cinema suddenly appears as perhaps the core connection between two private, obscure Americas that Gorin has chosen to expose. Both the landscape and the paintings are, after all, littered with trains and train tracks – and is there anything more inherently cinematic than a train?

In the words of Erwin Panofsky, “the primordial basis of the enjoyment of moving pictures was not an objective interest in a specific subject matter, much less an aesthetic interest in the formal presentation of subject matter, but the sheer delight in the fact that *things seemed to move*, no matter what things they were” (Panofsky 15-16; emphasis added). The idea that all a film really needs to do is capture exhilarating movement seems to be the bedrock of all the films made by Corky and shown in *Routine Pleasures*. Each and every one of them is, predictably, preoccupied with the epic movement of trains across large plains and thus offers a stark contrast not only to the movement of model trains across tiny artificial landscapes, but also to the whole of *Routine Pleasures* which is almost exclusively set indoors. Corky's films are, however, confined to the rectangle of a small silver screen inside of another larger one belonging to *Routine Pleasures*. Unlike the Wellman insert, these films' images are contextualized by the fact that they are being projected in the club for an audience. Watching the quiet, mesmerized faces of the Train-Men one comes to realize just how powerful of an effect moving images can have just because they show movement. Gorin himself then quips: “Could I ever have such a hold on an audience?” (Gorin, *Routine Pleasures*; 00:17:24) The answer probably being – no!

The reason for this obviously being that Gorin makes a completely different kind of cinema; one which very often doesn't even rely on images, much less on images capturing motion, and when it does, it is constantly trying to undermine and recontextualize any given image with another one, even if that has already been done through sound. His project is, essentially, to make cinema move differently. As Gorin himself has said: „What makes a movie 'move' is not the sheer accumulation of physical motion on the screen, it's the intelligence behind it“ (Tillman and Gorin 35). While this is certainly the ethos behind every technique employed in each of these films, I am quoting it at this point because it is here that Gorin explicitly draws attention away from the purity of movement the train films stand for even as he is showing them in his own film.

After we have seen shots from one of them, right before another one starts, there appears a title-card announcing a wholly different film – *Friendly Party in the Garden of Lumière* (1895/6).⁶ Thus, Gorin foregrounds the film’s French connection; on the one hand, this is a film of a Frenchman up to his neck in Americana but on the other, its core motif (the train) is the epitome of cinema, a mechanical form of art that hails from France yet has become quintessentially American. It’s no coincidence that the film ends on a shot from another one of Corky’s films while on the soundtrack two men talk about apple pie, the film’s final words being: “The real Grand Zephyr, I think they... they had apple pie in there...” (Gorin, *Routine Pleasures*; 01:17:41) Even as it ends, the film is poking fun at its own foreigner’s obsession with America(n cinema) through oversaturation, multiplying ad nauseam the possible entry points. While central, cinema is only one of those entry points, and it has already been complicated via its relation to language, painting, miniatures – it does not exist in a vacuum. The point of departure is no longer simply Ellis Island as it quite literally was in *Poto and Cabengo* and the destination is certainly not the American Dream, as these Dreams of America (the Train Men’s, Farber’s, even Gorin’s) are what makes up the fabric of the film throughout.

Instead, *Routine Pleasures* does what its opening dedication to Looney Toons animator Chuck Jones and writer Gustave Flaubert implies it will do – it enacts a dizzyingly directionless dance with a myriad of American myths refracted through both high and low culture operating on the margins. “It’s ‘Americanization, Part II,’ a time when your heart and your throat have grown accustomed to the idiom and you can start looking, a time when you are bound to be hooked by people like Farber or the train people whose exclusive business is looking and composing.” (Tillman and Gorin 37) It is because of this outsider’s hyper-fixation on two uniquely American imaginations that the most shocking aside in the whole film, all the more so because it is just brought up and then left there to fester, is a brief nod to the fact that the Train-Men did not model their train station on anything even remotely American, but on the Frankfurt (Main) Hauptbahnhof! Suddenly, it turns out that this new culture Gorin puts under a microscope because it seems so unlike anything else is, actually, much closer to home than he initially thought. The frame is much wider.

⁶ The film is better known under its original title *Parite d’ecarte* and shows three men playing cards and drinking a beverage brought to them by a waiter. The English title, however, underscores friendship and here refers also to the friendly party the railroaders are having while watching Corky’s films.

What does this tell us about that all-American landscape? Not much really, but it does serve to establish yet another transatlantic connection. The nostalgic mirror image is, it turns out, modeled on the Old Continent and it is this relationship with a place far away that Gorin thoroughly explores in *My Crazy Life*. Finally, upon learning about the origin of the model train station's design, Gorin quickly sends a letter to the *German* producer who is financing *Routine Pleasures*, asking him to send photos of Frankfurt (Main) Hauptbahnhof and adding a short post-scriptum: "More deutch marks, s'il vous plait." (Gorin, *Routine Pleasures*; 01:03:42). Gorin's film, cinema itself, depends upon these international connections so succinctly elaborated in this jocular sentence.

IV. *My Crazy Life* (1992)

The biggest difference between the final film in Jean-Pierre Gorin's Transatlantic Trilogy and its previous two installments is that Gorin's narration is entirely absent from it. Furthermore, there is not nearly as much emphasis on America's ties with Europe, its transatlantic connections. Instead, the film is concerned with the lives of men who belong to a Samoan Crip gang from Long Beach better known as The Sons of Samoa and their ties to both Long Beach and Samoa, the relationship between these two places. However, Jones argues that their double affiliation echoes Gorin's own: "Throughout, American Samoa itself appears as an apparition, beckoning its Sons. When one of them returns to his birthplace and stands on its shores, he is in turn beckoned by the memory of his crew back in Long Beach—like the filmmaker, a man caught between two worlds" (Jones).

These two worlds, much like those of Farber and the Train-Men, contrast one another. Samoa, indeed, appears as an enchanting apparition, while Long Beach is rugged and earthy even during its ghastly night scenes. Jones neatly summarizes the contrast between the two worlds when he describes the body language of the gangster who visits Samoa, "a proud OG on 32nd Street, a compliant child in the land of his birth" (Jones). Nevertheless, a visual rhyme Gorin employs further deepens our understanding of the two worlds – the headlights of a patrol car illuminating the grimy streets of Long Beach are later echoed by the moon glowing among thick clouds, first seen after a discussion about spirits in Samoan culture and thus associated with its mystical beckoning. The grim, earth-bound reality of one contrasts the celestial myth of the other.

Gorin, however, doesn't emphasize the violent side of the gangster's lives, even if he does include two brief montages of crime scene photos (accompanied by ear-piercing sounds) that show splattered brains and the like. These photos quickly reveal what is at stake and are all the more powerful because of their brevity, while the childhood photo contrasting from the background the talking-head style interviews with younger gangsters (conducted by their elder, and not Gorin or any of the film crew) concerning death, murder and revenge, brings forth the tragic loss of childlike innocence. Violent imagery is rare, but the men intimately *discuss* violence; the longer the interview lasts, the more the photo's innocence sticks out against their grim tales.

Finally, after the last interview, when the gangster wipes away his tears, even Samoa itself seems to cry for him as Gorin cuts to a small waterfall on the island. But this show of tears was, in fact, anticipated in the very scene where we first see the patrol car when the well-meaning officer Kaono stops two teenagers and tells them to spill their beer cans on the ground. Policemen aren't shown to be violent in the film and Kaono shows genuine concern for Samoans during the film, yet the presence of a patrol car seems to foreshadow the film's most sobering moments.

The film offers no answers to any of the questions one might have in regards to what makes these men join a gang, why so many of them die so young, who oppresses them and how. *My Crasy Life* is concerned with showing the lives of these men because they wanted to be portrayed in a certain way, hence the title and its departure from Standard English. "The boyz adamantly refused to be depicted as victims or as a symptom of social disease. They were most concerned with a fidelity to the details of their lives and with portraying some of the joy and empowerment of gangbanging" (Osborn).⁷ According to Osborn, this approach resulted in a film that went against every possible convention of the time in its depiction of gangs:

While challenging cinematic forms, *My Crasy Life* tries simultaneously to challenge public discourse surrounding gangs. In Southern California, gangs are a subject of daily, almost obsessive, discussion in the press. Some 375 gang-related homicides took place in Los Angeles last year. Despite the endless coverage, the gangs virtually never

⁷ The article quoted here was originally published in *The Independent*, November 1992, Vol. 15, No. 9. I am quoting the repost found on the KINO SLANG blog.

have a chance to speak for themselves. (It took three days of rioting in Los Angeles before it occurred to any news operation, in this case, *Nightline*, that they might actually talk to gang members.) (Osborn)

It is obvious that Gorin is still, perhaps even more so than in *Poto and Cabengo*, actively confronting mainstream media practices or professional opinions, this time refusing to even expose them for their sensationalism and completely evading them instead, removing “from the film any interpretation by ‘experts’ from the justice system, the welfare system, and so on” (Osborn). What little backlash there is at the opinions of experts remains confined to a significant scene early on when one of the gangsters walks out of the forest and onto a Samoan beach where he finds a bunch of stranded filmmaking equipment. He promptly exclaims “Fuck Margaret Mead!”⁸ (Gorin, *My Crasy Life*; 00:09:24) and tells the camera that there is nothing to see there, that the real action (real cinema) is to be found in Long Beach, California; not far from where Hollywood is, but far enough.

Osborn claims that “its relation to its subject” is what truly makes Gorin’s film radical, and not its combination of these documentary elements with staged, fictional ones.⁹ However, hers is a faintly pointless remark considering that this relation to its subject also implies its fictional, or rather fictionalized side, as has already been demonstrated.

Gorin’s primary editorial strategy is alternating between the “haunting lyrical refrains with rhapsodic stretches of the purest behavioral and verbal bravado” (Jones), but there is plenty of crosscutting involved in the establishing of the gangster characters itself. In quick succession, we see a handful of gangsters participating in a cypher, expressing themselves by rapping. Thus, even though body language plays a part in this expression, stress is placed on words and their aggressive musicality, on the sonic qualities of each shot, a fact that one might overlook (especially in the context of Gorin’s own filmography) due to the soundtrack’s synchronicity with the image.

However, Gorin emphasizes the sound by interrupting the cypher, cutting to shots where we see the gangsters playing street craps, drinking on the curb or getting tattoos – shots where words are hardly discernible, where all the emphasis is on the image. Social rituals are,

⁸ Margaret Mead (1901 – 1978); an American cultural anthropologist and author of a book on teenage sexuality in Samoa.

⁹ It is worth noting that this combination isn’t supposed to „dupe the audience into mistaking one for the other“ (Osborn).

with all their unruly energy, immediately established through both sound and vision, before Gorin contrasts them with a simple sign that reads “Criminal Courts”. Words-as-images signifying official institutions counter images of social outcasts as well as their words-as-sounds, only to be countered themselves later on in the film.

A brief parole hearing is followed by an interview with Sergeant Kaono, who says he does not expect the man to endure even a month of the parole he was just granted – he is bound to be sucked back into his pre-incarceration lifestyle in no-time. Of course, Gorin will then immediately cut from the interview to the gangsters’ crib full of guns. Their rowdy den, or rather the living-room table where one of them is doing some ironing immediately contrasts the orderly, imposing image of the judge’s bench. Yet, the contrast Gorin relies on the most is the one mentioned in the previous quote from Jones, except that, while the film is still taking place in Long Beach, the only haunting lyrical refrains come from the night scenes involving Kaono and his talking computer.

The sarcastic asides emanating from the dashboard computer [...], a HAL knockoff with a sense of humor, have a jarring effect that offsets the rhythm (as in *Poto and Cabengo*, where the flattened speech of the specialists offsets the musicality of everyone else, the voice of authority is tone-deaf) (Jones).

Although he does not expand upon it, Jones’ penetrating comparison perfectly describes the extreme tonal shift between the computer’s uncanny singing and the “Dadaist poem’ where slang is used to define slang” (Osborn). The Dadaist poem, as Gorin himself describes it, is recited by the SOS Gang in front of a black background, with members taking turns at defining those words whose meaning the man behind the camera (Bullet, the same OG conducting the aforementioned interviews) asks them to elucidate for the audience. “*Golddigger*: A bitch who tries to come into the `hood and juice you for your duckets” is a representative and succinct definition, but the scene goes on for around four minutes and its effectiveness lies in its protracted barrage of slang. It is also the most blatant example of Gorin’s insistence on letting the gang represent themselves in whatever way they please, and they know it themselves – or at least Bullet does, as he steps in front of the camera not to answer someone else’s question but to confront the audience. As Osborn says, concluding her article: “Anticipating our bewilderment, one of the boyz directly addresses the viewer: ‘For all you mother-fuckers who don’t understand what they saying, as far as you IBM motherfuckers,

this is straight from the gangster 'hood. Trey love and we outta here.'" (Osborn) Following the Dadaist poetry, this concluding remark turns the scene into more of an outright manifesto.

Not a minute goes by before the "HAL knock-off" sings a tune in order to mock Sargent Kaono and his patrolling. This is neither the first nor the last time that the computer is heard speaking and its input changes drastically over the course of the film.

The patrol car voice taunts the officer's efforts to help the gangsters [...], coos seductively [...], and ruminates on the incomprehensibility of gangster life [...] .As Gorin explained to an audience at Sundance, the computer's authority degenerates: 'It's the voice of God with a PhD in Sociology. Then it's Hal. Then it's not Big Brother, but Little Brother, like a faithful dog.'" (Osborn)

However, the singing does stand apart from its other interjections due to its intertextuality, the song it sings being *Gee, Officer Krupke* from *West Side Story*. The surface intention behind Gorin's use of the song is easy to grasp – the robot sings to a police officer a stanza that is originally sung by a street gang aiming to (combatively) explain to a cop that they are not actually bad people. Far more interesting, of course, is the scene's form. To begin with, its generic mash-up is startling, as Gorin is drawing from American musicals and science-fiction cinema in one breath, having a robot sing in its tone-deaf voice a stanza of a song famous for its joviality. On the one hand, the scene clearly figures as a continuation of his previous exploration of sound(s) of American cinema as it combines two completely different vocal, as well as emotional tones; on the other, as the scene is set during a night patrol and the singing is accompanied by haunting music, it is redolent of film noir, thus adding yet another layer to Gorin's already dense generic combination. This means that Gorin packs three separate film genres (and we must remember how crucial the notion of genre was to Classical Hollywood) into a scene which is explicitly meant to contrast the documentary as well as overtly performative "Dadaist poetry" of the slang-definitions scene (whose theatricality is brought out by its abstract black background) featuring a group of people absent from American cinema because of their race and social status!

Furthermore, their freestyle definitions of slang, exclaimed in intimate portrait shots, can be seen as an extension of the "16 ways to pronounce potato" sequence from *Poto and Cabengo*. That sequence can be considered what Turković has termed the "film list", a particular kind of film discourse that operates according to the logic of enumeration and is

most often found in experimental cinema. Turković's points to films like *Zorn's Lemma* (Hollis Frampton, 1970) or *Tomislav Gotovac* (Tomislav Gotovac, 1996) as his key examples, the former being a more useful reference point in this case as it lists letters and words, much like Gorin's film does (Turković 195-227).¹⁰

Turković is primarily concerned with the visual side of lists (each shot serving as a separate entry) and the alternating phonetic transcriptions of the sixteen different ways of pronouncing potato fit this mold perfectly. Yet, the enumerating logic applies to the Dada scene as well, and one could argue that individual portraits of gang members can themselves be considered separate entries. All of this is worth noting precisely because the enumeration of slang definitions is juxtaposed with an earlier scene where the computer (the voice of God with a PhD in sociology, as Gorin would say) produces a long *list* (presented in a single shot of its *black screen*) of scientific books and articles about Samoans, presumably so that we can consult them and learn all there is to learn about the subject without its say.

Furthermore, Kaono's patrol is itself interrupted at the film's half-way point by a gangster jumping onto the car's windshield, demanding to be paid; or rather, demanding the promised recording session. According to Osborn, the gangsters refused to be paid directly and instead asked Gorin to pay for a recording session – the transaction which basically enabled the film to exist is given its due by being the film's very center. It follows that the most overtly fictional, genre-coded part of *My Crasy Life* is interrupted by the film's documentary subject demanding what it was promised for agreeing to be filmed and projected. If we take into account the fact that it, or he, is speaking through a glass screen and addressing the director himself, the shot's meta-cinematic thrust becomes all the more apparent. Echoing *Routine Pleasures*, the film addresses the monetary transactions of cinema itself, while simultaneously challenging its own construction.

The artificiality (implicit or explicit) of any scene in Long Beach, be it the genre-tinged references to Hollywood or any of the many performances the SOS gang puts on for the camera, finds its double in the dances and rituals that take place in Samoa. Moreover, the images the visiting gangster finds there echo those we have seen back in Long Beach –

¹⁰ Turković drew on research regarding the list as a literary or rhetorical device and found that it could, indeed, be considered a separate kind of film discourse as it is both distinct and widely applicable.

portrait photos of various family members or the tattoos covering the whole body of a Samoan native who enthusiastically shows them to the humbled OG.

Even more important are the sounds and images that migrate from Long Beach to Hawaii, where two members of the SOS gang are now working. The music recorded during the recording session paid for by Gorin (or, more precisely, the film's production) is then immediately heard playing on the stereo of a car belonging to two members of the SOS gang who work in a warehouse – in Honolulu. Thus, Gorin bridges this transpacific gap between friends through the sounds whose recording was, in fact, payment for participating in the making of the film, for being shown. *My Crasy Life* then shows the Honolulu duo utilizing the fact that they are working in a warehouse, storing various goods into large containers that are supposed to be shipped overseas, as an opportunity to, in a way, send a message back.

As they are working, the pair looks about them and sees that no one else seems to be around at the moment – this is their opportunity to tag the inner side of the container's doors, mark it with their stylized writing, word-images. Although the message's recipient will, in reality, be anyone who happens to open the container, Gorin edits the film so that the recipients are, implicitly, the Long Beach Sons of Samoa; moments after the tagging, in a Long Beach garage where the other gangsters are playing cards, we see that the garage door behind them is itself completely covered in tags. It is as if the two factions are in conversation with each other, representing the SOS gang be they home or away; one set of tags is meant to mark their lair (design its interior) while the other is being sent on a journey to nowhere as a kind of message in a bottle, echoing Bullet's speech aimed at the audience.

Despite the fact that *My Crasy Life*, unlike the previous two films, doesn't feature any intertitles, Gorin manages to offer his own take on the gangsters' use of tagging by coloring the title-card as well as the end credits (accompanied by their beatboxing and rapping, respectively) blue. As blue is the official color of the Crips, coloring the credits blue turns them into a sort of tag and it is quite significant that all the "original gangsters" are credited by their street names, doubling down on the credits-as-tag angle. More importantly, however, during the Long Beach garage scene, Gorin keeps cutting back to the duo sitting in front of a big blue wall during a smoke break. Even if it is a brief scene, Gorin's use of blue is utterly absorbing, partly due to the bold color choice being incongruent with the markedly natural, comparatively muted colors that define the film – greenery, brown skin, the pale glow of the moon, etc. This color image may not be as loud as the postures, sounds or word-images

produced by the gangsters, but it does seem to provide comfort as it envelops the duo. To once again draw on Deleuze

[...] the colour image of the cinema seems to be defined by another characteristic, one which it shares with painting, but gives it a different range and function. This is the *absorbent* characteristic. Godard's formula "it's not blood, it's red" is *the* formula of colourism. In opposition to a simply coloured image, the colour-image does not refer to a particular object but absorbs all that it can [...] (Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image* 118)

While the background photo present during interviews contrasts with its innocence the grim tales of street life being told, reminding us simultaneously of its presence and its loss, the blue background here supports the gangsters while they reminisce and yearn after Long Beach. The blue they are so proud of (willing to spill blood for it) is shown for the somber color that it is – blue for the blues. Nevertheless, gang violence is inescapable even in Honolulu. There is a brief moment, reminiscent of those instances in *Routine Pleasures* where in the model landscape there appear things from either the real world (Gorin's car) or the film itself (the cinema playing the Wellman film); we suddenly see the writing on a wall next to the road which reads "100% BLOOD KILLAS", reminding us that this seeming paradise strikingly akin to Samoa in the film is, in fact, still the US of A.

At the very end of *My Crasy Life*, the Honolulu duo finally steps into contact with their friends as their tag correspondence develops into an exchange of *moving* images when we see the Honolulu duo watching tapes of the intimate interviews concerning violence and death on a blurry TV, which makes them reminisce about their days back in Long Beach and expressing love for the friends who looked out for them when they were younger. The film is being screened for its subjects and the screening, the making of the film seems to be beneficial for them, this time emotionally, and we see how the duo reacts to the kind of depiction their friends insisted upon. After he established a connection (or emphasized the gap?) between the factions through tags and further emphasized it by cross-cutting between the blue wall and the garage, the film goes a step further – the duo, having seen a part of the film they are themselves part of, sit down to film a message for their friends across the ocean.

It would seem that the communion established both between geographically separated members of the SOS gang, between their Samoan heritage and their lives in Long Beach, is what makes this film so different from the other two. Despite the father's efforts, which

ultimately lead to the twins' separation and the subsequent disappearance of their unique language, the family in *Poto and Cabengo* was unable to integrate into America as projected by the American dream. Their titular nicknames, as well as the 'and' fusing them, went up in smoke by the film's end. On the other hand, the American dreams of Farber and the Train-Men, impossible to synthesize despite their similarities, remain inaccessible. As the routines required for practicing those dreams are too absorbing, Gorin's filming proved to be a nuisance after a while. Both films, in a sense, end with its subjects remaining isolated from the filmmaker and the world at large. The gangsters, however, don't just enjoy performing for the camera and showing it their world, they end up using it to show respect and admiration for each other as well. Like the previous two films, *My Crasy Life* emphasizes a myriad of gaps, distances between things; unlike them, it is able to bridge some of these gaps, knowing it can't erase them. "There is some merit to the position of a perennial in-betweener." (Tillman and Gorin 37)

V. Conclusion

Jean-Pierre Gorin's place in film history will likely remain uncertain; in the words of Kent Jones, he is a filmmaker stuck between two worlds – America and Europe, his solo work and his collaboration with Jean-Luc Godard, the pleasures of narrative film and the confounding effects of obsessive (over)examination of images, etc. My analysis has been primarily concerned with exploring how and why this position of Gorin's leads to each of the films he made in America being, at its core, concerned with the dynamics of remaining in/between. This, of course, is not limited to Gorin's trilogy; one might argue that it is, in fact, the central mechanism of cinema itself. As Pavle Levi, drawing on Deleuze, shows in his brief, but brilliant analysis of Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville's *Here and Elsewhere* (1975)¹¹, and of Godard's *Notre musique* (2004), the power of cinema lies "between 'here' and 'elsewhere', in the interstice" (Levi 148). Cinema, fundamentally, deals with the relationship of one shot and another (one thing and another), with what happens when one decides to place two images next to one another, or a sound over an image – with that which,

¹¹ Godard shot the film with Gorin in 1970, but it was finished later with Miéville's help. *Here* refers to the West, *elsewhere* to the Middle East (Levi 145).

like transatlanticism, remains unseen. “The self and the other, here and elsewhere . . . time and again” (Levi 158).

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Abstract

This paper offers a thorough analysis of *Poto and Cabengo*, *Routine Pleasures* and *My Crasy Life* – the three films Jean-Pierre Gorin directed in the USA, where he immigrated following the dissolution of his creative partnership with Jean-Luc Godard. As Gorin, at the time, only half-assimilated to America and its culture, the subjects of this Transatlantic Trilogy echo his own outsider status.

The idiosyncratic language of *Poto and Cabengo*, the twin girls stuck between the media trying to turn them into a news-worthy spectacle and their parents trying to use the media attention to quickly move towards achieving the American dream, allows Gorin to explore the relationship between the twins' odd utterances and the images, including his own, being constructed around this media event. From this, he moves to the exploration of two vastly different imaginary Americas crafted by a group of model railroaders and his own mentor, painter and film critic Manny Farber, while cross-referencing their creations with classical Hollywood cinema, principally the films of Howard Hawks and William A. Wellman. Finally, Gorin films members of a Samoan street gang from Long Beach who are trying to (spiritually) reconnect with their heritage while both reveling in the empowerment gang culture brings them and mourning those who died because of it. Gorin consciously avoids portraying their lives as they tend to be seen in the media, letting the gangsters be seen and heard however they want.

Through his relentless interrogation of sounds and images coming from America at its most (in)visible and (in)audible, Jean-Pierre Gorin interrogates what cinema itself can do, and how.