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THE CINEMA OF THE SWIMMING POOL



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Foreword

There have been swimming pools in cinema for as long as there's been a cinema, of one kind or another, for them to be in. Like the boxing ring, the swimming pool is an arena at once brim-full of extravagant motion, of purposeful human endeavour (even when the purpose is play), and always already enframed, set apart, so that the energy on display pushes against or consciously exploits an evident limit. Both these arenas were tailor-made for one of early cinema's defining genres, the actuality: no need for the camera to move in order to capture all the relevant action. It's exhilarating, nonetheless, to discover from the essays in this collection just how various and how inventive are the uses to which a concrete basin full of water has been put ever since cinema reinvented itself as a narrative art in the second decade of the twentieth century: more uses, even, than those to which a roped-in canvas square has been put, although we are still more likely to speak of a 'boxing film' than we are of a 'swimming pool film', because the one tends to concern a process, the other a punctual event, or series of events.

It's remarkable what a good swimming pool will do for even the most single-mindedly generic of movies. Take *The Quiller Memorandum*, a routine thriller directed with considerable verve by Michael Anderson which first did the rounds in 1966. The film's theatrical trailer featured an explosion in a garage hyperbolic enough (it would have taken out the entire neighbourhood) to captivate susceptible teenagers like me. What we got for our money was suave George Segal outwitting neo-Nazis in cold-war West Berlin. Architecture matters, in this film, and so does the history of architecture. We first meet the laconic Quiller when his British controller, Pol (Alec Guinness), invites him to share a sandwich in the stadium built

by Werner March for the 1936 Olympics. Pol points to the platform where 'certain well-known personalities' used to stand. At least the old Nazis wore uniforms, he says: the new ones are more difficult to recognize, because they look like everyone else. The drift of Harold Pinter's screenplay, from the original novel by Adam Hall, is that appearances can be deceptive: or, rather, that they almost always are.

The film's narrative enacts (or looks as though it's going to enact) a moral and political excavation of the Berlin of the moment, with its skyscrapers, fly-overs and bowling-alleys, its ultra-hygienic plate-glass modernism. Just about the only lead Quiller has is a ticket-stub for a municipal swimming pool, the Stadtbad Neuköln. When he finds his way there, in the first of two scenes added by Pinter, the impression is of a purposeful, even regimented, exuberance entirely consonant with the Berlin of the moment. The pool absorbs relay after relay of young men from an apparently limitless supply at the far end. The screenplay prescribes 'Shining water and bodies'. What could be more blithely up-to-the-minute than that, more intent on a bright future? Four young men swimming competitively abreast complete a length of the pool and climb out past Quiller, conspicuous enough in his natty suit to arouse the attendant's curiosity. A tersely polite exchange follows, as shot-reverse-shot editing creates a pattern of mirrored suspicions. Quiller even buys into the future to the extent of claiming that he's a coach himself, back in Williamsburg, Virginia.

Later, as the action hots up, Quiller returns to the Stadtbad with his ambiguous accomplice, school-teacher Inge Lindt (Senta Berger). It's night-time, and the pool has been emptied. Without water, and the fervent activity water sustains, the place seems cavernous. We recognize it now for what it is, a bit of the old Berlin, an echoing, shell-like structure as ghost-ridden as the Olympic Stadium. Built in 1914, the Stadtbad, with its Corinthian columns and balustraded balconies, represents a Berlin older even than the Olympic Stadium. The narrative has moved forward in time in order to move backward in space, stripping off layer after layer of contemporaneity. Will Quiller, barking out the attendant's name, summon an appropriate ghost? Are we close now to Nazism's ultimate origin, its source in the national psyche? The film quickly lays such grandiose thoughts to rest. An empty pool does not constitute a lack, an exposure, a clarification.

It constitutes, rather, a magical counter-world, an unreality. Water makes it possible to do what cannot be done on dry land; lack of water where water ought to be does not so much restore dry land as make it possible to do what cannot be done on or in water. School-teacher and spy climb down into the pool and amble towards the deep end. He asks her to dance. 'We could do an underwater ballet,' he says. In the screenplay, though not in the film, he feints a few football moves. The emptiness is magical. Stripping away the surface, the film discovers not buried truth, but another surface, another way to appear. It wasn't the first to make such a discovery, and it won't be the last; but the device of the swimming pool allows it to do so to memorable enough effect. Its beautifully enigmatic final scene takes place at the ultra-modernist school where Inge teaches. Quiller, still not knowing where her loyalties lie, has gone to say goodbye. Her intentness on a bright future positively glows as she shepherds the children in her care. She is all shining water, all reflection. But then so is he. Pinter's protagonist, unlike Hall's, is himself a con-artist, a deceiver. It takes one to know one.

I don't remember much about that explosion in the garage. But the Stadtbad Neukölln – brim-full of life, then empty beyond emptiness – has stayed with me, as filmic experience does. Essay after essay in this timely collection reflects in one way or another, and from a wide variety of perspectives, on the business of shining water and bodies. The materiality or thickness at issue here is at once that of what can happen (sensuously, socially, morally, politically) in a liminal space and that of embodied spectatorship: of a response to the image on the screen. Maurice Merleau-Ponty found in the water in a swimming pool a productive focus for thoughts about the 'flesh of the world' reincarnated in visual art. Where film is concerned, we might perhaps regard such fleshliness as an encouragement to re-conceptualize the oblique relation between two of the primary meanings of the term 'medium'. A medium is the substance in which an organism lives, a milieu, or atmosphere; and it is a form of mass communication. These essays consistently invite us to relate the second meaning to the first. Their consistency is that not just of the dictates of the topic, but of a shared, collaborative approach to cinema in general.