

ART DIRECTION

Erika Balsom on Omer Fast's *Remainder*

"THERE'S ALSO A BOY I keep seeing. When everything's right, he'll appear." The nameless, amnesiac protagonist of Omer Fast's new film, *Remainder*—which premiered this past October at the BFI London Film Festival—



orchestrates a meticulous reenactment of a barely remembered scene to precipitate the appearance of this child, seemingly a younger self clad in a red and blue windbreaker. After being severely injured by a piece of falling debris, the protagonist finds his physical debilitation matched by the psychic trauma of living without memory, with every action feeling labored and artificial. Mental flashes of the boy holding out his hand begin to appear like a promise of recovered authenticity. At first his face is blurry, but gradually it sharpens and he is enveloped into a larger mise-en-scène that includes a man fixing a motorcycle, an elderly woman frying liver, a pianist practicing, and the boy himself receiving a fifty-pence coin. The protagonist uses his £8.5 million settlement from the accident to buy a tenement building in London—drolly named Madyln Mansions, perhaps a nod to Proust via Hitchcock—decorate it according to precise specifications, and fill it with CCTV-surveilled performers who reenact this scene. They turn on, off, pause, and even rewind at his command, like recorded images. This height of artifice produces a fetishized impression of reality that covers over the wound of his rent subjectivity, allowing him to court mastery through repetition so that he might draw an unbroken line from childhood to adulthood. As *Remainder* develops, the protagonist expands his repertoire of reenactments to include a moment of romantic betrayal, a neighborhood shooting, and, climactically, a bank robbery. Revisiting and recovering his forgotten life, he will ultimately come to relive it: His reenactments succeed too well and eventually merge with reality, returning him to the moment of his accident. The film ends where it began, with "technology, parts, bits," falling from the sky, presumably to knock him to the ground once again. He is trapped in a looped nightmare of eternal return.

Remainder is an adaptation of the 2005 Tom McCarthy book of the same name, but readers of that remarkable novel of ideas will immediately recognize from even this brief summary that Fast's screenplay differs significantly from its source material. Fast reshapes the novel's overall arc, introducing heist-genre plot drivers such as gangster cops, adultery, prostitutes, a criminal past, and a classic MacGuffin in the form of a suitcase filled with never-revealed contents. The film's slick

visuals match its Hollywood story, steering far away from any formal experimentation, preferring instead to adopt a continuity style optimized for legibility and swift narrative advancement.

Fast also proposes a rather different, more traditional understanding of reenactment than McCarthy before him. The film's protagonist is the exemplary subject of trauma theory: Wounded by a past event, he is plagued by a psychosexual history unknown to himself, condemned to a cyclical temporality from which he tries to break free. Reenactment is therapeutic. By contrast, McCarthy concentrates much less on his unnamed narrator's past. The child-self is entirely absent in the book, as is much of the backstory revealed throughout the film. The reenactments of the novel are less firmly tied to personal experience, less about producing a sense of subjective authenticity through reconnecting with past memories (mastering the self) than they are about instituting perfection within a system of programmed relations (mastering others, mastering the world). Marked by recurrent network imagery (mentions of wires, links, and grids abound) and discussions of financial speculation absent from the film, McCarthy's *Remainder* is about, among other things, quantification, abstraction, and the violence of applying computational models to a world marked by contingencies that will always exceed systematization. It is in relation to such themes that the book's title resonates: The machinic assemblages of twenty-first-century control societies will always be haunted by a "remainder" that returns, whether that which resists their rationalizing force (chance, accident) or those by-products of their brutal marshaling of intractable life (environmental catastrophe, economic precariousness).

Of course, it is unfair to judge a film adaptation solely in relation to its literary source. Fidelity is in itself no guarantor of value. However, the extent to which *Remainder* is a conventional film made from an unconventional novel merits special consideration given that it is the first feature written and directed by Fast, a visual artist with an established reputation for moving-image installations situated on the blurred line between fiction and documentary. In multiprojection works such as *Spielberg's List*, 2003, *The Casting*, 2007, and *Nostalgia*, 2009, Fast turned to reenactment as a means of exploring the representational challenges posed by traumatic events. In something of a rehearsal for *Remainder*, the forty-minute *Continuity*, 2012, exhibited in Kassel's Karlsaue Park at Documenta 13, takes the practice of reenactment inside the diegetic world, as a couple hire male escorts to play the role of their son, a soldier killed in Afghanistan. *Remainder* is, then, not simply a debut feature but an "artist's feature film" with a close conceptual tie to an existing practice.

Fast's stature as an artist has been central to the funding and marketing of *Remainder* and was surely what motivated its inclusion in the Experimenta section of the London Film Festival, typically devoted to films and videos made by artists working outside the industry. Fast is hardly the only artist to receive such treatment. In the wake of Steve McQueen's popular success and echoing the 1980s wave of artists turned directors, there has been a significant push in recent years to endorse and support the artists' feature film in Europe, with the appearance of initiatives such as Feature Expanded, a collaboration between Manchester's HOME and Florence's Lo Schermo dell'Arte to provide professional development for artists making first features, and Art:Film, a pitching

workshop for artists at the International Film Festival Rotterdam. In 2012, the London-based distributor Soda Pictures created an agency called Soda Film + Art that handles all stages of the development, production, and distribution of films by artists; *Remainder* is one of its projects. At a time when many experimental filmmakers are venturing into the art context in hopes of greater financial support, this trend not only moves in the opposite direction but also often marks a retreat from the critical relationship to popular cinema that has defined much of the history of artists' engagements with the moving image. This is perhaps just a logical outgrowth of a tendency that started in the '90s: As artists such as Doug Aitken, Matthew Barney, and Eija-Liisa Ahtila began to work with large-scale crews, bigger budgets, and tropes drawn from narrative cinema, it should have been no surprise that a migration to the supposedly greener pastures of the film industry would occur in due course.

But what do artists offer the world of cinema? The promise of the artist's feature film is one of innovation, experimentation, and creativity—but as *Remainder* attests, this is a promise not always fulfilled when artists become directors. Fast's film is strikingly more conventional in story, theme, and form than its source material. The artist has taken a complex novel with a deep engagement with cultural theory and processed it through the individualist narrative structures and well-worn formal language of dominant cinema. What began, in the artist's earlier practice, as a reflexive engagement with Hollywood tropes here becomes an attempt at their simple reproduction, albeit a flawed one. The closest comparisons to *Remainder* are found not in artists' moving-image works or in art-house cinema but in Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000) and the films of Charlie Kaufman, though these possess a more refined sense of craft and are more adventurous in their departures from linear narrative. The aptitudes needed to produce a successful mind-bending movie are not the same as those needed to create successful video installations. In particular, the writing of dialogue and directing of actors—relative nonissues in the early works that brought Fast to prominence—emerge as major stumbling blocks in *Remainder*, problems already foreshadowed in *Continuity*.

The “artist's feature film” label has been used to refer to a diverse group of films, from Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* (2013) to Gillian Wearing's *Self Made* (2010) to Mark Lewis's *Invention* (2015). It thus covers a wide spectrum, from major industry productions with no tie to the art context, save for the (former) identity of the director, to long-form works intended to circulate in both cinemas and galleries. Artists have made feature-length works for decades, but the contemporary notion of the “artist's feature film” implies something other than running time alone: At stake is an increased involvement in the film industry and a crossover aspiration to reach new and larger audiences. One way of accomplishing this is to forgo experimentation and complexity while nonetheless emphasizing the director's status as visual artist, finding in it a value-added repository of authenticity that may be called on to differentiate and elevate an otherwise unremarkable product. In addition to standing as yet another instance of the incessant commodification of creativity, this maneuver risks perpetrating a double devaluation: Artists' moving-image practice is reduced to little more than an immature rehearsal for mainstream filmmaking, while truly adventurous filmmaking by

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filmmakers is seen as “merely” cinema and thus deemed less worthy of attention, untouched as it is by the aura of art. Neither of which, of course, could be further from the truth.

Remainder *will open in the UK this spring.*