



When you know your movie's pretentious and you don't give a damn, because sometimes pretentiousness is the price of greatness, you're spitting on Pauline Kael's grave. Kael, twenty years deceased but still the most influential film critic in the world, hated pretentiousness as much as she loved "fun trash." That there are so few young filmmakers on the scene who are willing to be self-consciously arty and difficult is a mark of her legacy—it's as if they're terrified of the pans she's no longer around to pen. And even filmmakers who do flirt with the awful P-word acknowledge Kael. In Charlie Kaufman's *I'm Thinking of Ending Things*, one of the characters recites snippets from her 1974 *New Yorker* takedown of John Cassavetes's *A Woman Under the Influence*—"didactic," "entirely tendentious," "idiot symbolism," and so on. These are the obvious criticisms of Kaufman's movie, too—the implication being that Kaufman knows Kael would hate his movie and doesn't care, because he wears his pretensions with pride. Which is the only way they should be worn.

In his animated short, *Ed Terrestrial*, the Canadian artist Ryan Sluggett, doesn't just flirt with pretentiousness; he gets down on one knee and whips out a diamond ring. Small wonder his film kicks off with an old clip of Kael. "In verbal terms," she informs us, "it's inchoate, it's inarticulate. But visually it's quite ..."—it being the film Kael was reviewing but also, we can surmise, the one we're about to watch. Sluggett is right: Kael would have hated his film. But then, she also hated *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Blade Runner*, *8 ½*, *Badlands*, and *Vertigo*. Some graves are worth spitting on.

And some things are worth being pretentious about. Such as: the devolution of art into content, the corporatization of the art world, the fine lines between entertainment and control and between attention and distraction, the smug narratives of the Enlightenment and historical progress, the end of history. These are Sluggett's themes, bless him. I can't imagine taking them on one at a time, let alone all at once, but I'm glad he did. In an era when careful, nuanced, tasteful little trifles about apartment rooms or high school debate teams are greeted as pinnacles of human creativity, Sluggett had the rudeness to make an epic—a short epic, but an epic, all the same. It also has dick jokes.

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It took me a while to write the preceding section. 1.29 words a minute, if my calculations are correct—an embarrassing figure, since I'm supposed to be a writer and writers are supposed to be good at buckling down and ignoring all distractions and just writing. But I kept getting distracted. I kept checking my phone. I kept checking my email. I kept forgetting I'd just checked my phone and checking it again.

It's embarrassing, but it's far from unique. Which leads me to wonder: why isn't there more art that takes distraction as a subject? Art, or at least popular, well-selling art, is supposed to be relatable in some way or other, and what's more relatable to a 21st-century smartphone-owner than the experience of being ordered to give something your full attention and then continually tempted to point your attention elsewhere?

A culture in which distraction is rampant will reserve its highest praise for the art which is distraction-proof—"unputdownable," to use an adjective coined in 1947 by Raymond Chandler, author of a whole stack of unputdownable novels. In my lifetime, or at least so it often seems, the cult of the unputdownable has grown into a religion. You see it in the fast-tracked canonization of novelists like Ben Lerner and Sally Rooney, whose sentences go down like water, as well as in the still-ballooning reputation of James Turrell, whose light installations are invariably called "hypnotic" and "engrossing." You see it, too, in the special emphasis 21st-century art cinema places on the smooth, unbroken Steadicam shot, and in the ascendance of VR. To make great art, it would seem, is to give the audience no reason to get distracted for even one second—the rest is details.

Ed Terrestrial is fascinating and funny and has interesting things to say about the art of the unputdownable, but it's not unputdownable art itself. Instead, it has the rudeness to demand things of its viewers, and this turns out to be a strength. I've watched Sluggett's film all the way through at least half a dozen times (I've also started watching it and gotten distracted by my phone or my laptop). I could watch it another half-dozen times and still not entirely "get it," which is why I have a feeling I'll still be thinking about it a year from now.

What Sluggett has done—one of the many things he's done—is take the whole, tired, contemporary drama of absorption and temptation and distraction, and turn it into comedy, which is what it was all along. It's a movie about going to the movies, starring a squishy (absorbent?) green blob with glasses, who I came to think of as The Globe. The Globe is a simple fellow, easily wowed and just as easily distracted, who goes to the movies to have fun, not to think, and who you could interpret as the archetypal consumer—viewers and listeners and users and buyers all rolled into one.

Like the patrician partygoers in Luis Buñuel's *The Exterminating Angel*, The Globe keeps getting up mid-movie to use the bathroom (big soda, tiny bladder) and failing to leave—at first because the movie-within-the-movie begs for more attention ("WAIT! Sit down please" flashes across the screen), and later because the doors refuse to open. The theater is transformed from a place of entertainment into a prison, and by the same token The Globe goes from audience to captive audience, and onward to plain old captive.

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It sounds academic—"a meditation on voyeurism and spectatorship in the age of the Internet," or something—but it never really feels that way when you're watching. Sluggett is a brisk painter with a talent for rollicking, knockabout compositions. He's so good at animating single images, in other words, that actual animation seems to come effortlessly. In visual terms (if I, too, may borrow from Kael), Ed Terrestrial seems downright gleeful—skipping from one scene to another, dancing circles around heady ideas, refusing to give in to despair, happy to be here.

In visual terms, it's also gross, by which I mean over-the-top, but also blatant, but also stomach-turning—basically, gross in every way a film can be. There are gags (what a word!) about gastric distress and weird, squishy sound-effects that echoed in my ears longer than anyone could possibly enjoy. The film's 25 minutes are stuffed with audio clips of John Berger and Steven Pinker and discussions of the aesthetics of Gerhard Richter and "capitalist realism." There are scenes set on talk-show stages, where the rich beauty of conversation is squelched into flavorless pap, and in auction houses, where gross displays of wealth are as dull as dirt. The only good analogue for Ed Terrestrial's grossness I can think of is *Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!*, another satire of a society whose M.O. can be summed up in a single unmelodious word: "binge."

I.e., our society. It's never easy to make art that's deliberately, self-consciously "about" society; to fail is to invite ridicule, and sometimes to succeed is to invite even more. The difficulty of the problem has led too many artists and critics to conclude that it's pointless to try—a hedged, managerial sort of conclusion, the ironies of which we don't have time to dwell on. I can't say if Sluggett gets our zeitgeist just right (that's for a different zeit to decide), but I'll say this much: for Ed Terrestrial, he's developed a style of animation that exposes the malevolence lurking beneath cozy, infantilizing entertainment; the sludge lurking beneath "good taste"; and the queasy cocktail of interest and disinterest that we've all been drinking—and anyone who doesn't see the urgency of making art about these things has been living in a cave. He has a lot to feel pretentious about.