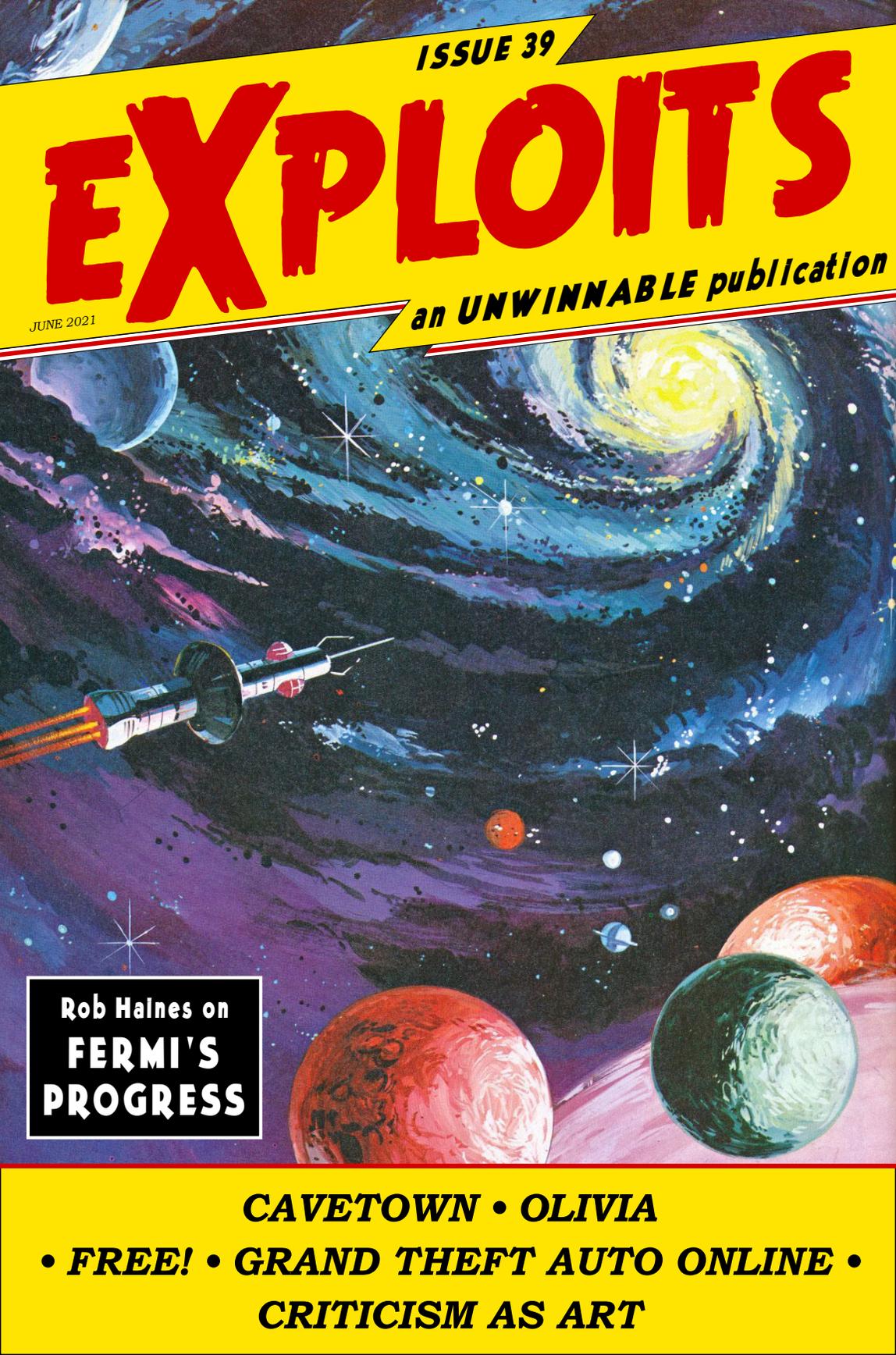


ISSUE 39

EXPLOITS

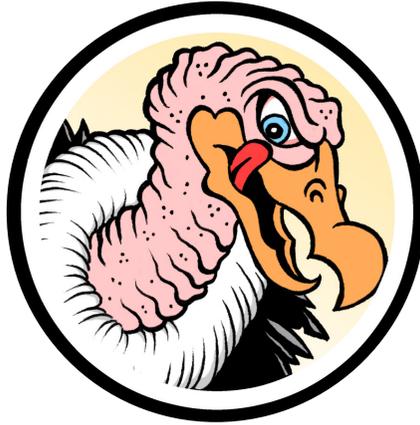
JUNE 2021

an UNWINNABLE publication



Rob Haines on
**FERMI'S
PROGRESS**

**CAVETOWN • OLIVIA
• FREE! • GRAND THEFT AUTO ONLINE •
CRITICISM AS ART**



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EXPLOITS

A MAGAZINE DEDICATED TO THE REASONS WE LOVE THINGS

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This machine kills fascists.

The JOY of READING CRITICISM as a CREATIVE WORK

by William Dowell

This essay was going to be a narrative or at the very least a dialogue, with multiple personas going back and forth on the merits of criticism. It could have been an argument amongst peers, or even a lesson between a master and pupil. Simply, it would have been an imitation of Robert Schumann's early writings on music. His criticism, while marked with the issues ever present in the Romantic era, re-sparked the idea of criticism as an artform. Articles were exciting and interesting, regardless of whether it was a no-name piece or a musical giant. Some articles barely even talked about the music it was reviewing, yet still left the reader with an understanding of Schumann's judgements. It was criticism that could stand on its own.

Even with rare cases such as Schumann, art criticism – like fanfiction and arrangements – is derivative. While the depth of analysis, creativity in prose or synthesis of disparate ideas can create phenomenal works of writing, they are still tied to the art that remains. Yet, sometimes these works can expand beyond the art itself. Fanfiction can use familiar contexts to tell new, personal stories. Musical arrangements can expand and shift the entire meaning of a composer's work. Even music covers, like Johnny Cash's "Hurt," can separate itself from the source material and stand on its own. Good criticism should do the same – create a new experience through the context of the original work.

That kind of criticism, while present, is relegated to the outskirts of critical writing. It breaks away from the formality of academia and the veneer of objectivity in product reviews, focusing on creative freedom and intense subjectivity. Even the punchy blog posts and magazine columns often stray into the safety of the standard argumentative practices that influence both student essays and journalistic think-pieces. Mediocre criticism regularly copies these structures verbatim, often reading like a five-paragraph essay stretched to hit the proper word count. The standard admittedly functions well as a communicative tool, but criticism can be much more. While it should not replace the art it is criticizing, at the very least it should stand apart from it.

Of course, art criticism cannot function without the critic. It is the critic's job not only to analyze and judge, but to frame those judgements in an evocative manner. The critic must take their opinions and experiences and meld them into its own work of art. Art often functions as criticism, so why not expect criticism to function as art? When critics throw themselves into their art, their work takes on a life of its own.

While this essay is idealistic and a little elitist, this type of criticism is present throughout the arts. Many writers push beyond the boundaries of standard criticism and create something that inspires the reader to connect with the world surrounding the art criticized. Oluwatayo Adewole turns criticism into a **world tour**. **Waverly Wilson** melds videogames with poetry. **Jamil Jan Kochai** criticizes through personal narratives. This style of criticism becomes a window into the critic and the world surrounding them. It is both enthralling and frustrating, but like all art, it leaves an impact. 🇺🇸





VARIATIONS – “This being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival.” – Rumi

Glenn Gould’s “Goldberg Variations.” Yo-Yo Ma’s “Cello Suite no. 1 in G Major.” Regina Spektor’s “Samson.” Among these prolific artists, individual songs have come to define their discographies. Gould popularized the 18th century composition with his 1955 recording of Bach’s work. He was 22. Then, in 1981, he recorded the variations again, creating a record nearly 20 minutes longer than before. 26 years apart, the variations bookmarked Gould’s career and have defined the legacy of the pianist. He died the following year at 50.

Yo-Yo Ma learned to play the cello with the Bach composition “Cello Suite no. 1 in G Major” and recorded it for the first time in 1983. On the eve of 2018’s *Six Evolutions*, the cellist claimed that the album would feature his final performance of the piece, **speaking of the original** recording with a similar retrospection to Gould.

And unless you’re a devoted fan of the Russian-American singer, songwriter and pianist Regina Spektor, you may not have known that one of her most famous works, the haunting “Samson,” is her second recording of the song. The original, recorded in one take on Christmas Day five years earlier, is only distributed through CDs sold at her concerts (**and YouTube, of course**).

Revision is an inherent part of music, and each performance could be understood as a slight variation on the past. A slow transformation is

almost unavoidable over the course of a life as an artist develops their skill with their instruments, learns and interprets a composition in new ways and grows and changes as a person. What these recordings offer in their canonization of different variations is a juxtaposition that glimpses lives and careers.

When Cavetown released their debut single “This is Home” in 2015, they had already amassed a following from their covers and original songs uploaded to YouTube and Bandcamp. At 16, they were the tail end of a generation of musicians that found success performing on the platform from their bedroom. He released his first album, a self-titled LP, independently in 2015 and to this day the production of Cavetown’s music is mostly a solo endeavor.

I first discovered Cavetown’s discography some years after, probably around the release of *Lemon Boy* in 2018, when I was in college. Though the artist’s recurring themes of dysphoria, suicide, anxiety and boyhood have drawn trans listeners around world, it’s hard to call transness a defining trait of his music and I’ve purposely avoided speculating on the orientation of their relationship with masculinity because of that. They only “came out” as trans last year, confirming what seemed apparent to many listeners but leaving other questions open. Their discography is comprised of songs that have become unofficial trans anthems (notably “This is Home,” “Lemon Boy” and “Dysphoric”) and more specifically speak to trans masculine experiences

MUSIC

(cutting his hair and hiding his chest). Yet while I speak of them with some remove from the music they make so as to not speculate or impose an identity on the songwriter (I have yet to mention the artist's actual name for this reason), it's clear in songs like "Boys Will Be Bugs" that Cavetown is consciously constructing boyhood in a world that defines both transness and masculinity in terms of pain.

This made their music approachable – comforting even – when, in 2019, I resumed questioning my own relationship to masculinity and listened to Cavetown on repeat. I had been out and trying to embrace femininity for a couple of years and almost suddenly felt my expression change. It was while listening to "Juliet" on repeat that summer, thinking constantly of the lyrics "I wanna make a color that no one else has seen before," that I first thought of my gender as something more fluid and variable than I had ever considered before. That period of my life was about reclaiming masculinity, making it my own and having fun with it.

This brings us to "Home," the 2019 single based on "This is Home." Separated by only four years, the lyrics and structure remain the same, but the key is changed to accommodate their deeper voice. The opening ukulele is replaced by guitar and

the following instrumentation fits alongside the artist's contemporary tracks as the composition transforms the meaning that we are left with at the end of its longer four and half minutes. When the song swells, it's bigger, and when it diminishes, it's smaller, singing with a vigor lacking in the original's solipsistic interrogation of themselves. Our common paths through dysphoria, suicide and growing up aren't straightforward, and the struggles the artist originally sang of are not mere memories, but "Home" is sung knowing that he's made it through all these before.

At 22, Cavetown is the same age as Glenn Gould when he recorded Bach's "Goldberg Variations" for the first time. His career, like Spektor's after "Samson," carries on. Today I am 23 and beginning to recognize home as a place we encounter differently throughout our lives, but I feel like a guest in my own house sometimes. Returning as a variation of myself, each encounter is its own arrival. In Cavetown's discography I find someone who is grateful for whoever comes, who is able to welcome and entertain the crowd of sorrows that occupy a body like mine. I am reminded that it is no small thing to feel at home in this place.

– AUTUMN WRIGHT



MUSIC

PLAYLIST

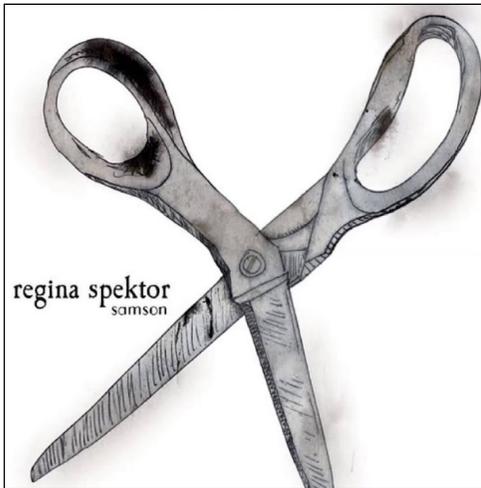


“Goldberg Variations, BWV 988: Aria,” (1956) by Glenn Gould, Johann Sebastian Bach

“Goldberg Variations, BWV 988: Aria,” (1981) by Glenn Gould, Johann Sebastian Bach

“Cello Suite No. 1 in G Major, BWV 1007: I. Prelude,” (1983) by Yo-Yo Ma, Johann Sebastian Bach

“Unaccompanied Cello Suite No. 1 in G Major, BWV 1007: I. Prelude,” (2018) by Yo-Yo Ma, Johann Sebastian Bach



“Samson,” by Regina Spektor

“This Is Home,” by Cavetown

“Home,” by Cavetown

“Love Will Tear Us Apart,” by Joy Division

“Love Will Tear Us Apart,” by New Order

“San Cristobal,” by Mal Blum

“San Cristobal - Full Band Version,” by Mal Blum

“Animal,” by Neon Trees

“Animal (10th Anniversary Edition) - Acoustic,” by Neon Trees

“Love Story,” by Taylor Swift

“Love Story (Taylor’s Version),” by Taylor Swift

“I Was an Island,” by John-Allison Weiss

“I Was an Island - Live,” by John-Allison Weiss



LISTEN ON SPOTIFY

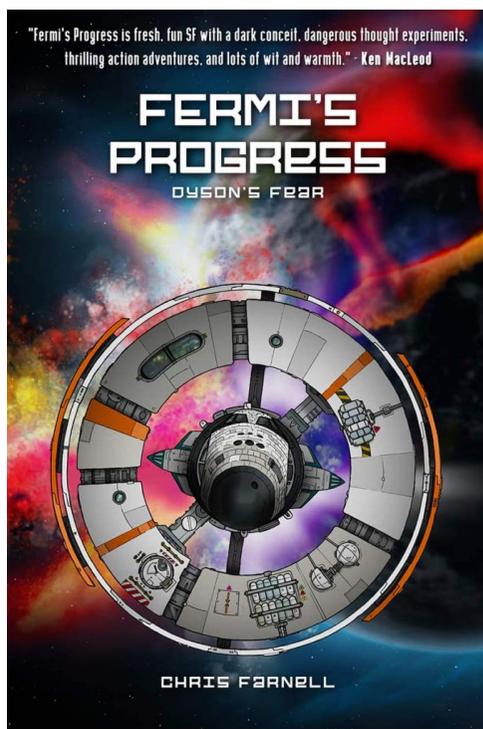
BOOKS

FERMI'S PROGRESS – In the mid-90's, the planet-of-the-week format ruled TV science fiction. In a production environment dominated by syndication and the need for self-contained episodes without a serialized narrative, the idea of dropping a known cadre of characters onto a planet with a problem and letting them solve it over the next forty-two minutes was a successful – if overused – template.

At its best, it allowed shows from *Star Trek: The Next Generation* to *Farscape* to delve into moral and ethical thought experiments or explore the friction between wildly-differing cultures attempting to coexist, knowing that the status quo would be restored among the recurring characters at the episode's end. As to the subsequent fate of each week's planet, no one much cared, since a planet rarely made a second appearance.

Chris Farnell's *Fermi's Progress* is a deconstruction – both literary and literal – of the planet-of-the-week. Each "episode" is a two-hour novella following the crew of the *Fermi*, Earth's first and last faster-than-light starship, as they explore a new world, get acquainted with the local populace and both cause and solve problems in equal measure. But there's a catch: the *Fermi*'s engines are self-charging, its launch and destination beyond the control of its crew and, once it's ready to jump, the shockwave it creates will obliterate the planet and everything on it as the crew are flung ever further from the ashes of our solar system.

Taking its cues from *Farscape*'s frantic, ridiculous space opera, *Fermi's Progress* strikes a fine balance between farce and tragedy. The crew of the *Fermi* are a straggling, mismatched band of tech entrepreneurs, call-center staff and genetically enhanced super-soldiers, faced again and



again with the total obliteration of all sentient life in their wake. Where TV sci-fi often relied on the lack of permanence of each planet as sleight of hand, Farnell uses the format as a lens to contemplate an alien civilization – in all its strangeness and wonder and potential – and then to cremate it.

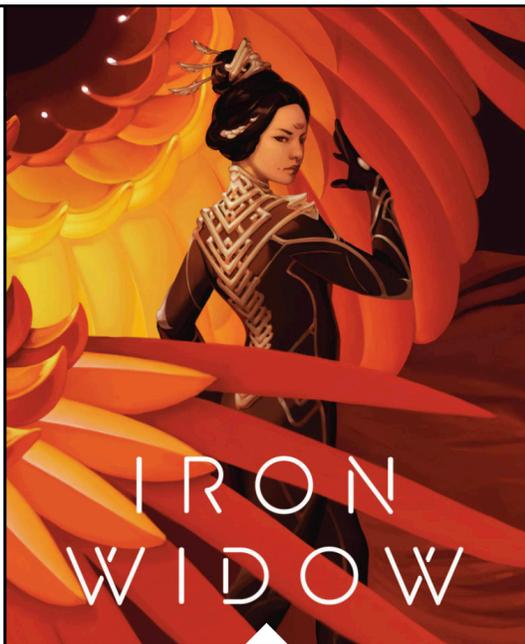
When syndication ruled, the emphasis was on the planets changing, not so much the characters who visited them. More often than not, the aliens were the ones who were changed, their laws broken, their edicts challenged, their understanding of the universe widened. But when the planets are no more, the only ones left to change are the visitors. There is no return to a status quo for the crew of the *Fermi*, and as the series progresses, that may end up being the most fascinating part of their journey.

– ROB HAINES

BOOKS

FLOW CHART – Scooped this book-length poem a few years ago, mid-grad school, thinking I knew shit but I didn't know shit and still don't know shit. Even then took too long to finally come around and read the damn thing, a long-ass poem that flows like a river, that never really reads the same way twice and defies any traditional notion of what a poem is while being unmistakably lyrical. This is essentially what John Ashbery is the master of, plucking poetry from the air and creating a kind of reflective condensation. Its construction, his intent, whatever natural sources propel its music aren't the point. *Flow Chart* is a poem of immense grace and seamless readability that carves mountains while refusing to get pinned down to a single slide.

– LEVI RUBECK



IRON WIDOW – This book is intense – from start to finish, you are given a complete picture of a world that is equal parts foreign and alien. The treatment of women, their devaluation for the safety and security of men, is such a recognizable element that it seats this book firmly into reality, even as giant living mech monsters battle a monstrous insect flood, even as people warp metal and magma with their qi. Xiran spins up a story that spans a continent, with the hopes of a civilization on the line, and still manages to bring it down to a personal level as well.

The characters in this are fascinating – from Zetian, who is on the road to vengeance, to Li Shimin, who harbors the secrets behind his dark past, to Zhinu and his porcelain skin (he has other traits, but that is the one that I remember the most). I'm sold on several aspects of this book from the get go – namely the fact that this is an actualized love triangle and also the giant flesh mechs fighting robots.

– AMANDA HUDGINS



MOVIES



OLIVIA – A few weekends ago, my friend and I sat down to watch the landmark French lesbian film, Jacqueline Audry’s *Olivia*, which arrived online just in time for its 70th anniversary this month. *Olivia* tells the story of the film’s eponymous English adolescent (Marie-Claire Olivia, who legally changed her last name to match the film) who is sent to a French all-girls finishing school and becomes enamored with the alluring headmistress, Mademoiselle Julie (Edwige Fenech). While she showers Olivia with attention. Julie lives with and is implied to be in a romantic relationship with the other headmistress, Mademoiselle Cara (Simone Simon), who is jealous of students’ obsession with Julie. The students, and even the school staff, openly express their infatuation with either Julie and Cara. However, the key to *Olivia* is that the romantic elements are subtextual – but oh, just barely.

Beyond the delight I had in sharing my name with this work, *Olivia* is, without a doubt, the most horny prudish film I have ever seen. There’s no explicitly romantic or sexual expression between women, but a tense

and palpable lesbian fog permeates the entire film. As we watched, I soon discovered how *Olivia* epitomizes what my queer friends and I always talk about as the “aesthetics of pining.” It’s that distinct seductiveness to its characters’ restraint. It’s the way female characters lean in to each other for luxurious kisses on the eyes, cheek and neck but never outright on the lips. It’s the lust that’s completely and absolutely pervasive but never fully acted upon.

In fact, it’s the same sort of milieu that has become embedded in my own socially distanced life, that sort of “masks-up” sense of mystery and seduction. Sometimes, it’s both comforting and comfortable to dwell in this sense of longing and to linger and savor the feeling. Why love when I can simply yearn all day and all night? The frustrating yet unerring brilliance of *Olivia* is that it so unabashedly pushes and pulls at this impulse. The film is also known as *The Pit of Loneliness*, which illuminates a lot about this aesthetics of pining. So, from Olivia to *Olivia*, thank you for letting me yearn.

– OLIVIA POPP

MOVIES

COME and SEE – They really could have stopped making war movies after *Come and See* dropped in 1985. We are exposed to the atrocities of the Nazi's through the eyes of a conscripted Belarussian teenager. This gripping portrait of the terror of war is unlike any Western war film I've seen. I can't say I would recommend this for everyone, but if you are a fan of realism in film, this one's for you.

– NOAH SPRINGER



The YIN YANG MASTER – There are two *Yin Yang Master* movies available on Netflix right now, this is the 2021 release that does not have accusations of plagiarism attached to it.

The character of Qing Ming is a bit of an impish one, an incredibly powerful master who seems to function as a harbinger of chaos. Chen Kun embodies him so perfectly, he's almost impossible to look away from. The effects in this movie are also truly dynamic, just one look at the trailer and you'll understand what I mean. While it does drag a tiny bit, if just for those two things alone, *Yin Yang Master* is worth watching.

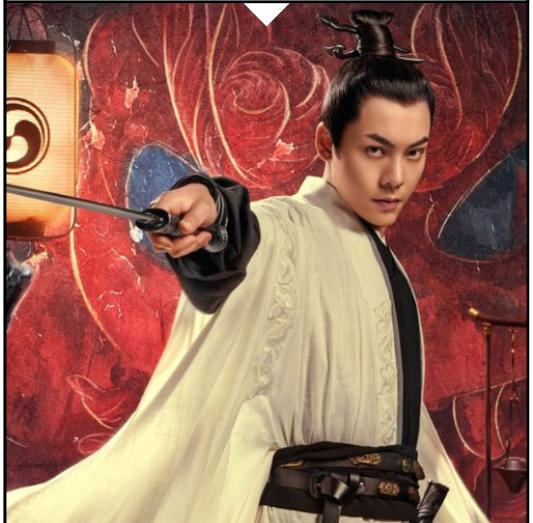
– AMANDA HUDGINS



ESCANABA in da MOONLIGHT – I can't say too much about this extremely surreal movie, written and directed (and starring) Jeff Daniels, without spoiling it, but it is A Thing. A heartfelt, goofy, bizarre, hilarious thing about deer hunting in the Midwest, family history, aliens, bears, alien bears and a general distaste for the DNR (Department of Natural Resources).

What I *can* say is if you enjoy silly humor, are even a little familiar with the upper peninsula of Michigan, or like Jeff Daniels you should definitely think about visiting the Soady deer camp.

– ROB RICH



TELEVISION



FREE! – In *Free!*, the world does not revolve around the records set at a regional swimming tournament. Rather, the series assumes the gravity its characters feel as the inter/personal is brought into sharp focus. And to the teenagers of the Iwatobi swim club, the world may as well stop its turn in the moments between the touch of a hand and a dive into the next stroke.

Across its three seasons and two original movies, characters grow, rivalries form, resentment festers, promises break and friendships mend. *Free!* starts as an unassuming sports anime, one that is noticeably playing up the homoeroticism inherent to the genre. A normal episode may move from interior monologue to a visual focus on a character's abs in a single jump cut. These sudden shifts are important to understanding the appeal of the series.

The male gaze typical to the medium and world is highlighted by what is essentially a bodily fancam but is framed as the perspective of the few young women in the cast. A running gag across the series is that the male swimmers have traditionally feminine names

(like Haruka) while the women have more masculine ones (like Gou). This jokey set-up seeks to turn the male gaze back onto men. In some ways it's commentary that highlights how ridiculous it is, since we as the audience know there is much more to these characters. But in other ways this attention is very sincere and it establishes that an important theme of the series is putting forward its own vision of healthy masculinity.

There are no antagonists in *Free!*, just hurt boys that feel alone. Rivalries formed out of resentment only hold personal and physical growth back and the pool exposes these insecurities. It is when competition for sheer dominance is abandoned that characters can do their best. To succeed then takes vulnerability – and others. With its focus on interiority, the struggles each boy faces take shape. Asking for help from someone that once broke their promise to stay with you, admitting that you still need them but can't trust yourself for your own failings is harder than setting any record.

– AUTUMN WRIGHT

TELEVISION

CREEPSHOW – Even its highest highs never come close to its 1982 namesake, but what Shudder’s new *Creepshow* does very well is channel what a modern version of an EC horror comic from the ‘50s would probably feel like. Like those comics, episodes are rarely particularly inventive and often rely on a fairly stock “gag” of one sort or another but, like those comics, inventiveness and variety was never the point. It’s the look and feel that matter, and *Creepshow* gets those right more often than not. Whenever the background drops away to be replaced by comic book jolts and swirls of lurid color, every complaint I had generally drops away, too.

– ORRIN GREY



A WORLD that DEFINITELY BECOMES BL vs. A MAN WHO DEFINITELY DOESN'T WANT to BE in BL

– Based on the manga of the same name, *A World that Definitely Becomes BL vs. A Man Who Definitely Doesn't Want to Be in BL* is about exactly what it says on the tin. A meta commentary on Boys' Love works, wherein every character is somehow gay and gorgeous, Mob exists as a character who is always in the background and has no intention of getting in on the action. Even someone who may not be 100% familiar with the tropes that are highlighted in this short run series is bound to enjoy the comedy of watching Mob carefully rearrange his life so that he can avoid being alone with cute boys, or helping cute boys up from the sidewalk drunk, or helping someone to fall in love with him. In his attempts to avoid all of the BL tropes Mob forgets that he is, in fact, a BL trope.

– AMANDA HUDGINS



ANGEL – Those who thwart evil have graduated high school, and the narrative prison that is Buffy and Angel’s love has led to its only logical conclusion – a spin-off! I’m not really sure how *Angel* sits in the minds of *Buffy* fans who’ve staked it out from the beginning. It feels necessary, at least in this early season, and possibly the final ones for *Buffy*, but I haven’t quite hit that far yet. Instead I’m halfway through, where they’ve hit reset and replaced Doyle with Wesley in what seems to me a dizzying, lateral move. Cordelia is still the stepped-on heart here, but she gets more play at least. Nice to see Angel carry around a sword on the reg. If anything, all this shows is that building a universe has always been a desire both impossible to successfully realize and impossible to avoid, for some folks.

– LEVI RUBECK



GAMES



GRAND THEFT AUTO ONLINE – From an office on the 35th floor of a high-rise, the citizens of Los Santos look like ants. Their accidents, their petty squabbles, their high-speed collisions and their gun fights all feel remote. Perhaps even small. Explosions whump in the distance, shaking the building, and the responding sirens bounce off the buildings.

Somewhere in this office a criminal sits on an office chair, reading meaningless text messages on their phone and idly browsing a car dealership website in search of something they'll never find.

Crime is a lucrative business. A few minutes' effort can yield a few thousand dollars, and a few hours can yield millions. Sometime after acquiring two apartments, a house in the hills, a motorcycle club, a night club, a bunker, an underground military facility and an aircraft hangar – and the constant flow of money to employees and taxes – individual dollars lose their importance. A few hundred is a passing breeze; thousands a drop in a bucket; a hundred thousand an errant thought; a million a briefly-considered decision. Every individual dollar, and the work that once went into its acquisition, is abstracted into negligence.

I don't own this office, a character I control does. But it can be hard when I'm making all of their financial decisions not to feel myself

slip into that decadent indifference. To a new player, \$200,000 could make a world of difference – a better car to run missions faster, or a few weapon upgrades to make each gunfight a little less terminal. To me \$200,000 is a nostalgia trip, buying a mediocre car just to remember what it felt like. Purchases of several million are the only ones I ever save up for. Newer players understand the value of each dollar better than I do.

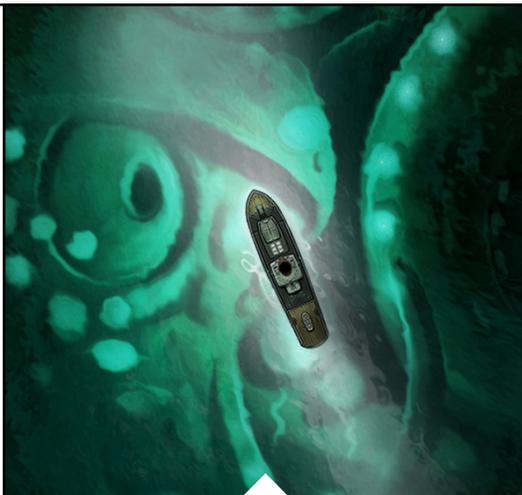
I wonder if this is what obscene wealth is like: to live in a world where money flows so freely that the struggles most toil over are little more than whimsical purchases by a harried assistant. Just another car in an enormous, disused garage. Each dollar becomes so meaningless. The scale makes the wealthy's maintenance fees everyone else's life-changing values, yet the wealthy fatter it.

While they sit at the windows of 35th floor hotel rooms, sipping drinks made by someone whose entire net worth is less than the cost of one of their cars, are they aware of what struggles go on below? Or would they be abstracted? Remote.

Or would it have to be like Los Santos – full of sirens, explosions, bullets and blood – for them to notice? If I were to sit in such a hotel room, would it take the same for me to realize?

– TAYLOR HIDALGO

GAMES



SUNLESS SEA – What pushes people to venture out into the unknown? *Sunless Sea* provides a couple of different answers to this question in the form of character motivations like adventure, greed and the quest for knowledge. These are all good motivations, or at least understandable. You could probably use this framework to think about a lot of historical figures. Marco Polo. Francisco Pizarro. Neil Armstrong. The problem is that we remember these people for what they accomplished while forgetting about the risks they ran and the damage they did. *Sunless Sea* brings this to the forefront of your attention. You play as the captains of ships. You end up dying a lot. Lives are lost. Ships are sunk. Money gets wasted. You should contemplate this beyond the confines of the game world, though. The fact of the matter is that we have a whole universe to explore, but plenty of problems in the world around us. The game seems to suggest that we should work on solving these instead of risking resources on stuff like space races. I guess that some things are better off being left in the unknown.

– JUSTIN REEVE

RESIDENT EVIL: VILLAGE (RESIDENT EVIL 8)

– It's an obvious pick, sure, but I'm seriously smitten with this game. Which is doubly surprising since this was the only main-series title I've ever felt "meh" about leading up to its release. But I've been following the franchise for so long I felt like I had to check it out, you know?

And, wow, am I glad I did! It's a pretty clever refinement of *Resident Evil 7's* story and mechanics, homages and references way more of the series that I expected, is actually fun to play and even manages to be legit scary at times. Definitely worth a look if you like the *Resident Evil* series.

– ROB RICH



NIER: AUTOMATA – It is the year 11945. In a triumph for LGBTQs everywhere, Emil has become the first gay to learn how to drive. An optimistic, hopeful look at the Earth's future.

– MELISSA KING

HOROSCOPE

CAPRICORN: You are a poached egg. You are too classy to admit that you are just a hardboiled egg with delusions of grandeur.

AQUARIUS: Scrambled. A hint of parsley.

PISCES: You own an egg cup that you actually use.

ARIES: Eggs in a basket.

TAURUS: This is a month for changes, the way that you might change between states of being. You might ask yourself a series of philosophical questions about being, but at the end of the day you are, in fact, just a fried egg.

GEMINI: You are a chicken.

CANCER: 16 raw eggs in a blender, drunk every morning.

LEO: You have considered the relative merits of ovoposition.

VIRGO: Boiled for ten minutes. Served cold.

LIBRA: Have you turned the eggs in the incubator? Have you forgotten about them? They won't forget you, even if they don't make it. They will remember you.

SCORPIO: Adam and Eve on a raft, and wreck 'em

OPHIUCHUS: Over-easy.

SAGITTARIUS: The way mom used to make 'em. 🍳