Conversely, *The Lighthouse* (set in the 1890s) enacts a different treatment of the past, exchanging an illusory reality for camp theatricality. Both films share an interest in remote locations as unique surroundings for interpersonal conflict, and both use their respective temporal settings to make action feel remote for the audience as well. Beyond this, however, *The Lighthouse*'s engagement with the past is vague and, again, aesthetically motivated. Thomas is constantly babbling seafaring folklore, rhymes, and legends. These expressively declaimed bits of dialogue, however, don't amount to interesting commentary on oral traditions. When Thomas's folktales do propel the narrative, the conceit is obviously to set up the consequences of defying superstition. Ephraim kills a seagull shortly after Thomas divulges the belief that these birds contain the souls of dead sailors. Ephraim stays sober for the four-week tenure—refusing to agree with Thomas that booze keeps a seafaring man sane—but accepts a drink of "Wickie's" home brew on his last night. These actions are immediately interpreted as bad omens. Sure enough, the storm becomes deadly with no end in sight and Ephraim and Thomas are stranded with little food and water. Soon, they become mad and violent.

In interviews Eggers has been elusive about naming *The Lighthouse* as horror. This refusal to categorize his film suggests a compelling openness but also implies his desire to distance himself from a genre on whose conventions he relies. Still, *The Lighthouse* isn't conventionally scary. Its aforementioned silliness eats into any convincing expressions of terror, and editor Louise Ford uses fewer jump cuts and startling sounds than in *The Witch*. It would also be difficult to call *The Lighthouse* a horror-comedy: the film is different from parodies like *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) or *The Cabin in the Woods* (2012), both of which function as annotations on an existing horror canon. *The Lighthouse* also rejects the trend in recent horror movies to express social or political commentary, such as *Midsommar* (2019) or *Us* (2019). Eggers aims to evoke the sublime, but *The Lighthouse* is more aligned with the grotesque, revealing the body as an abject, sloppy shell. Its childish physical comedy, all flatulence and lumbering bodies, finds its most convincing articulations in mattresses stuffed with hair, mouths dribbling booze, faces tangled in slimy seaweed, and corpses spilling blood.

The Lighthouse's deliberately uncomfortable tonal dissonance finds an unsurprising framework in H. P. Lovecraft's notion of cosmic horror. Lovecraft and the literary category of Weird fiction (the Weird or the New Weird) have recently been in vogue within multiple areas of cultural theory and production. Many find the shifting narrative coordinates of the Weird as suitable for a world that is often irrational or incomprehensible. Optimistic readings suggest that making things strange can prompt new, more open ways of perception that challenge the limitations of an anthropocentric worldview. Nevertheless, *The Lighthouse* doesn't take this route nor does it do anything else with its Lovecraftian citations. Instead of mobilizing strangeness to articulate ideas about, say, the natural world that cradles the film's action, *The Lighthouse* channels an introspective approach to its two-person show.

One of A24's promotional taglines borrows a piece of Dafoe's dialogue—"Keeping secrets are ye?" Indeed, secrecy forms the crux of Thomas and Ephraim's relationship. Early in the film, Ephraim is presented as a person with a secret and is accused of being "on the run." Thomas—recalling Bluebeard—locks the grate to the beacon and forbids Ephraim from tending the lighthouse lamp. Their situation is doomed from an early dinner the men share, when Thomas mentions that the previous worker who held Ephraim's post died after going mad. When Ephraim drunkenly reveals the secret that motivated him to accept work on the lighthouse, Thomas taunts him for "spilling his beans." The visceral nature of this expression is no mistake, prefiguring the bodily spillage that pours out of the film's increasingly depraved denouement. *The Lighthouse* construes secrets not only as emotionally tucked away truths to be mined by the narrative but also as secretion in a literal sense: that oozing corporeal matter that permeates the film and perpetually redraws our attention to the body.

As a film that looks inward, secrets are related to the shame and desire submerged by Thomas's and Ephraim's performance of hypermasculinity. While the film lacks coherent politics, it does have something to say about gender. The cramped interior of the lighthouse enforces an intimacy that threatens issues that have been constrained. Eggers's script runs its two men across a wild spectrum that covers antagonism, humiliation, cheery friendship, homoeroticism, and eventually, violence. The film's emotional core emerges during a night of binge drinking. Loud sea shanties and belligerent snippets of conversation devolve into drunken slow dancing. The men lean in as if to kiss before breaking apart and physically fighting. It's a surprising moment, one in which the audience imagines the narrative taking a different direction. As soon as this concept is conjured, it closes and all humanity is permanently shut off. The remainder of the film descends into live burials and axe murders. *The Lighthouse*, a Neptunian diorama in which every set piece and action are arranged and thus received as highly constructed, extends this to gender as well. Of course, while this makes for some great acting, these are not really innovative ideas about gender performativity.

It's a risk to create a film that hinges on communicating the Lovecraftian unknown because—of course—its terrors are unrepresentable. The final scene of *The Lighthouse* depicts Ephraim observing something terrible that the audience is not shown (think the enigmatic conclusion of Robert Aldrich's 1955 film *Kiss Me Deadly*). This maneuver has the potential to produce a lingering sense of terror: any awful idea we might imagine will not be "the thing" and we can infinitely stew over possibilities. This kind of ending, however, also risks alienating the audience. In this case, it's another stylish moment that avoids delivering a thought or view to hang onto. If the goal of *The Lighthouse* is solely for audiences to internalize the on-screen pandemonium, the film is more of a provocation than a meaningful piece of cinema.

In one truly cringe-worthy moment of dialogue, Thomas goads Ephraim by suggesting, "I'm probably a figment of your imagination." Is this supposed to be the takeaway: that it all might have been a hallucination? For a film that so forcefully believes in the expressive autonomy of the image, it's as good a guess as any. If audiences are willing to bracket the film's pushy auteurism, the visual risks taken by *The Lighthouse* will feel refreshing. I suppose sometimes a tentacle is just a tentacle, but it would be more interesting if all these images stood for something vital.—**Katherine Connell**

Once Upon a Time...in Hollywood

Produced by David Heyman, Shannon McIntosh, and Quentin Tarantino; written and directed by Quentin Tarantino; cinematography by Robert Richardson; edited by Fred Raskin; production design by Barbara Ling; starring Leonardo DiCaprio, Brad Pitt, Margot Robbie, Margaret Qualley, Julia Butters, Dakota Fanning, Al Pacino, and Bruce Dern. Color, 161 min. A Columbia Pictures release, www.sonypictures.com.

The premise of *Once Upon a Time...in Hollywood* is alive with tantalizing promise: El-Lay, 1969, the movies, and an ambitious director of just the right age famously in love with all three. Certainly the portentous advertising campaign—"the 9th film from Quentin Tarantino"—promised something special. Would it be the next coming of *Sunset Blvd.* (Wilder, 1950)—or, more likely, a thrilling movie about the movies by a cinephile turned filmmaker, along the lines of *Day for Night* (Truffaut, 1973) or *Irma Vep* (Assayas, 1996)?

Not quite. Predictably, reactions to *Once Upon a Time* have been polarized: it has garnered largely positive notices, including more than a few raves from leading critics (Stephanie Zacharek and Peter Bradshaw, among others), alongside some stinging dis-

sents (Richard Brody); subcultures on social media inevitably have been divided between ecstatic hero-worshiping fanboys and vituperative content-police apoplectic at the film's crimes against humanity. But surprisingly, the movie is neither a masterpiece nor an abomination—it's a mixed bag.

Once Upon a Time is a classic buddy picture with a Tarantino twist. It concerns the fine friendship between Rick Dalton (Leonardo DiCaprio), a fading midtier actor, and his one-time stuntman—now mostly sidekick-valet—Cliff Booth (Brad Pitt). Their story is set against what we expect to be the looming horror of the brutal, blood-soaked Manson murders. Rick and Cliff are fictional characters; Margot Robbie portrays Sharon Tate, the young, beautiful actor (and pregnant spouse of Roman Polanski) who was among those massacred by the Manson gang. This certainly creates dramatic tension as the fateful date approaches, but it also sets the movie on an ethical tightrope—a journey made all the more perilous by a director whose cinema is anything but subtle, especially when it comes to the portrayal of on-screen violence. Despite (or because of) the radiance of Robbie's portrayal, it is discomforting—even fifty years after the fact—to behold a vision of Tate weeks before her due date, knowing the fate that awaited her.

The strengths of *Once Upon a Time* are impressive, and not to be underestimated. The two lead performances are outstanding; so good that they are easy to take for granted. DiCaprio has the busier role, and he effortlessly embodies Rick's slowness of wit, emotional sensitivity, and the range of Dalton's gifts and limitations as an actor. Pitt, confined to act within the boundaries of Cliff's laconic, preternatural unflappability, delivers perhaps an even more impressive performance. Beautifully shot by accomplished cinematographer Robert Richardson, the first hour of the film in particular offers an immersive, utterly irresistible magic carpet ride though Los Angeles, 1969, with color schemes and art design influenced by that year's *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice*. The celebrated music is well chosen and well placed, and numerous supporting turns (which include Al Pacino, Bruce Dern, and Dakota Fanning as future would-be Gerald Ford assassin Squeaky Fromme) are invariably buoyant.

Once Upon a Time is also often very funny (it's hard not to laugh at the appearance of the TV show *The FBI*, which comprised 241 episodes of J. Edgar Hoover-approved unwitting self-parody). And there are several long, highly effective sequences, highlighted by the triptych of experiences imagined on "Sunday, February 9, 1969"—Rick's long day of shooting on the *Lancer* show (Sam Wanamaker [Nicholas Hammond] actually did direct an episode of *Lancer* in 1968), Tate watching herself on screen at the Bruin Theater in Westwood, and Cliff's fraught-with-peril negotiation to get a look at rancher George Spahn (Dern) in person. Cliff had worked on Spahn's ranch as many real-life Western actors had and worried when he saw the Manson clan (before the fact of their notorious blood-spree) encamped there.

What this all adds up to is another question. Soaring though Tarantino's Los Angeles is a better ride than any that Disney ever has imagined (I would have happily spent even more time at the *Playboy* mansion with Steve McQueen [Damian Lewis, perfect as this icon] and other assorted glitterati). But at some point, unless there's more to it than that, many viewers eventually want to hop off—and this is a 161-minute movie. Pushing past the bravura performances, the film reveals thin and shallow characters.

Rick, ultimately, is just not all that interesting or much worth caring about. Given the chance to reinvent himself via Spaghetti Westerns, à la Clint Eastwood (whose early career experiences and trajectory were not dissimilar), Dalton instead comes home worse for wear—broke, bloated, and without much of a future in the business. Cliff's impossibly cool persona, jaw-dropping physique, admirable steely loyalties, and generally impressive derring-do are all things at which to marvel. But his "it don't worry me" nonchalance only goes so far. As the film (and his scarred body) make clear, Cliff has a troubling, dark, violent side—to the extent that he may have murdered his wife. (Tarantino again tests the limits of good taste—here successfully—with fragments of an ambiguous flashback to that fateful day with what amounts to a rather clever Robert Wagner reference.) As for Tate, she is stunning, wide-eyed, kind, but largely kept at arm's-length from the audience. (Detractors have eagerly seized upon this as evidence of the director's misogyny, but, in this particular fairy tale, Dalton and Booth are the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of the Manson murders, and holding Tate at a distance—in a gated castle on a hill, no less—has a sound narrative logic.)

Another problem, here more fundamental, is that, yet again, Tarantino has dipped into history to craft a revisionist revenge fantasy—think *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) and *Django Unchained* (2012). In these

Fading film/TV star Rick Dalton (Leonardo DiCaprio) and his stuntman/assistant Cliff Booth (Brad Pitt) are best friends as well as co-workers in *Once Upon a Time...in Hollywood*.

Margot Robbie as rising young actress Sharon Tate in *Once Upon a Time...in Hollywood*.

reimaginations, the bad guys get their grisly, blood-soaked deserts, treating the audience to a guilt-free vicarious thrill. But the revenge-fantasy movie is not simply pandering and lazy—it is the most dangerous and irresponsible trope in the history of cinema. (A brilliantly crafted *Death Wish V* is still, ultimately, *Death Wish V*.) It was for this reason that Pauline Kael saw in Sam Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs* (1971) "the first American film that is a fascist work of art."

Kael had a point, though I would not reach for such rhetoric here, for a number of reasons, prominent among which is that it is hard to justify taking Tarantino that seriously. Still, some critics have had passionate reactions to what they argue are the implicit politics of *Once Upon a Time*. For Mary McNamara of the *Los Angeles Times*, "Quentin Tarantino's 'Make America Great Again' reflects a narrow, reductive and mythologized view of history that has made red MAGA hats the couture of conservative fashion." *The New Yorker*'s Richard Brody labeled the film "obscenely regressive." In *The New York Times*, A. O. Scott catches the same vibes (they are hard to miss) but uncharacteristically slips on the kid gloves, noting that those politics are "wound into [the film's] DNA," and as such will "stand as a source of debate—and delight."

In particular, *Once Upon a Time* has been castigated for its treatments of gender, race, and the counterculture more generally. On gender, in addition to the distancing of Tate (a criticism that really boils down to "you didn't make the movie I wanted you to make"), there is also the focus on the dumpster-diving coven of mostly female Manson cultists, which possibly implies that they, not Charlie, are the "real villains" in historical perspective. Some commentators further blanched at the gratuitous violence with which those followers are ultimately dispatched. These are thin stems upon which to build the case for misogyny. There is little mystery as to the bottomless evil that was Charles Manson, who in the film is only glimpsed, but shown just enough to make that chillingly clear. As for the climactic bloodbath, of the three disciples who bear the brunt of that impossibly over-the-top slaughter, the male in the group meets with a particularly gruesome fate that, if orchestrated by a different director, could be easily scrutinized for a very different kind of sexual politics. (There are critics who both abhor *Manhattan* [1979] and revere *The Phantom Thread* [2017], which is something that is impossible to do without peeking at the credits first; that anticipatory bias lurks here, as well.)

The question of race is trickier. Much has been made of the scene where Cliff goes toe to toe with Bruce Lee (Mike Moh), fighting the martial arts master (who is portrayed as something of a pretentious poser) to what is essentially a draw. The ridiculous implausibility of this outcome (put your money on Lee in real life) is offered as evidence that the film is little more than a white male fantasy, complete with the denigration/humiliation of an upstart minority (here's looking at you, Rocky). But the scene, which is very funny—even in its implausibility—serves the narrative purpose of establishing the extent to which Cliff is a major league badass, an attribute that will become essential later on.

What critics appear to have overlooked, however, is that there are indeed some highly charged racial politics in that scene, with the invocation, by Cliff (and especially by Lee) of the name Cassius Clay—in 1969. Clay had changed his name to Muhammad Ali several years earlier, and calling him "Clay" was plainly understood to be a purposeful, political statement in 1965—to say nothing of 1969, a time when Ali, stripped of his title, was unable to fight professionally due to his refusal to serve in Vietnam. Having Lee, who by all accounts revered Ali (and referred to him as Ali in interviews at the time), say "Cassius Clay" is the most regressive and racially charged moment in the film. (It is also unlikely accidental, as the film, despite its proclivity to rewrite history, was nevertheless meticulously researched. Sharon Tate apparently did like to go barefoot, for example, though it was of course an idiosyncratic creative choice to dwell so extensively on that particular proclivity.)

Race is also caught up in the larger question of the film's relationship with the counterculture. Rick is our hero, and as he makes clear, again and again (and again)—he really hates hippies. Add to that the observation that, even though Manson was a fascistic white supremacist hoping to inspire a race war, the bad guys with agency in the movie—women and men—are a bunch of straggly hippies. You don't have to squint to see that the movie's protagonists are extremely white manly men with cultural sensibilities rooted in the late Eisenhower Fifties, and that they likely feel uncomfortable—eclipsed even—by the changes coming to Hollywood (and to America) in the late Sixties.

All that is on the screen, and there is no reason to pretend it isn't there. And filmmakers are responsible for the inescapable political subtexts of their movies (not to mention their texts). But the politics of *Once Upon a Time...in Hollywood*—a movie that announces itself as a fairy tale—are muddled, highly qualified, and invariably subordinate to style. Tarantino doesn't even bother to drop the N-word (Nixon), which any story set in 1969 that had half an eye on politics would find obligatory. Certainly the movie offers a reedy thin and ridiculously skewed vision of the counterculture (more Altamont than Woodstock), but these things happen (the real villain in *Ghostbusters* [1984] wasn't the malevolent, time-traveling Gozer, but that guy from the Environmental Protection Agency).

More to the point, Rick might hate hippies, but the film also makes patently clear that they are not the source of his problems, and certainly not the cause of his undoing. To paraphrase agent Dave Foley in *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* (1973), "the only person screwing Rick Dalton is Rick Dalton." He's the one who walked away from a lucrative TV show, drank himself down the Hollywood food chain, and failed to rebuild his career in Italy. (Similarly, Cliff, offered a second chance to be a stuntman, chose to pick a fight with the star of the show, with nary a hippie in sight.)

Ultimately, then, *Once Upon a Time...in Hollywood* need not be taken so seriously. (Forget it, Jake, it's Tarantino-land.) Sure, it's morally dubious, in the way that all revenge fantasies are, and like a gregarious friend who's had a few too many drinks, it hangs around longer than it should. But it is a sublime invocation of a special time and a storied place, with excellent performances and a good share of laughs. The ninth film of Quentin Tarantino is neither a masterpiece nor a major statement. Most movies aren't.—**Jonathan Kirshner**

Loro

Produced by Nicola Giuliano, Francesca Cima, Carlotta Calori, and Viola Prestieri; directed by Paolo Sorrentino; screenplay by Paolo Sorrentino and Umberto Contarello, based on a story by Sorrentino; cinematography by Luca Bigazzi; art direction by Stefania Cella; costume design by Carlo Poggioli; edited by Cristiano Travaglioli; music by Lele Marchitelli; starring Toni Servillo, Elena Sofia Ricci, Riccardo Scamarcio, Kasia Smutniak, and Euridice Axen. Color, 151 min, Italian dialogue with English subtitles. An IFC Films release, www.ifcfilms.com.

It is 2006. "Loro," in Paolo Sorrentino's latest rewrite of contemporary Italian history, has been translated as "them," and refers to the toadies and would-be hangers-on who compete for the attention of media mogul and recently deposed prime minister of Italy Silvio Berlusconi, himself designated "lui" or "him," rather than by name. Berlusconi, who does not physically appear until forty-five minutes into this two-and-a half-hour international cut of *Loro*, is first seen by small-time pimp, businessman, and fixer Sergio (Riccardo Scamarcio) during sex with a prostitute who has the mogul's grinning face tattooed above her arse. This leads to a sexually charged Damascene moment—Sergio decides to leave Southern backwater Taranto for Rome in the hope of entering the service of notoriously corrupt Berlusconi, a model for Trump and other future demagogues in the way he manipulated Italian democracy and the law for his own personal benefit. Part of this sexual charge is Oedipal, as Sergio exchanges one father figure for another, his stern, fiercely moral,

Dolemite Is My Name—Eddie Murphy as Cult Film Icon Rudy Ray Moore

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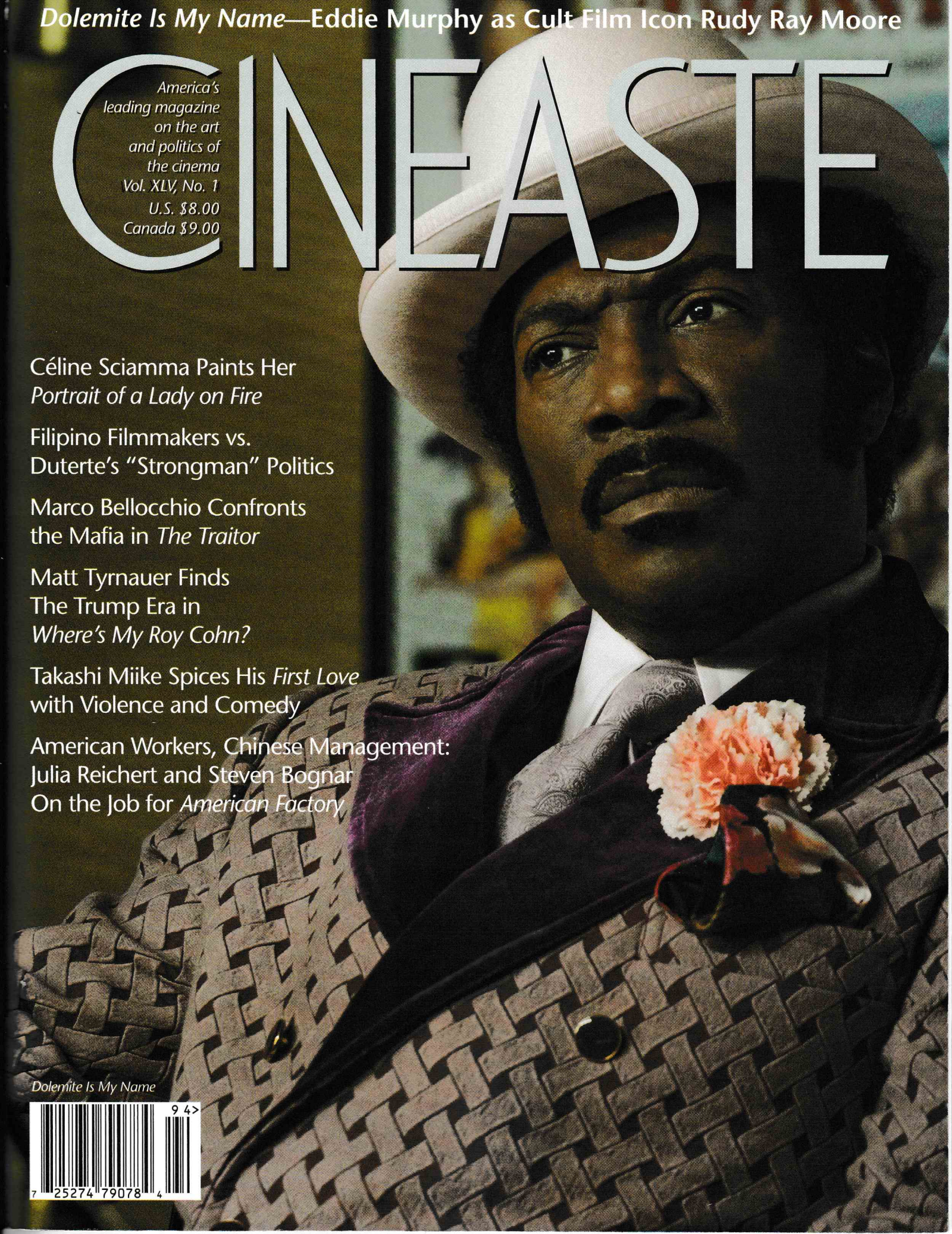

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