

YOU ARE
CORDIALLY INVITED TO PARTICIPATE IN
... A TRIBUTE TO CINEMATOGRAPHER
HARRIS SAVIDES (1957-2012)



INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART

THE BADLANDS COLLECTIVE
PRESENTS

THE
GAME

DIRECTED BY DAVID FINCHER

Birth

DIRECTED BY JONATHAN GLAZER

A 35MM DOUBLE BILL
6 OCTOBER, 2013
WITH SPECIAL GUEST JONATHAN GLAZER



A TRIBUTE TO HARRIS SAVIDES

In October 2012, when Harris Savides passed away due to complications following a brain tumour at only 55 years of age, the movie world was uniformly shocked at his untimely death and salutatory of his astonishing body of work. The New York Times called him a “visual poet,” and no less an icon than Madonna had already declared, “I adore him. He’s the best.”

Savides began as a fashion photographer, and in the early 1990s moved on to the flashy world of music videos, where he shot such seminal promos as *Closer* for Nine Inch Nails and *Scream* for Michael Jackson. Over the years he toned down his style to the point where one couldn’t so much see it as hear its narrative voice. “When you start in the business, you’re very excited about camera movement and about lighting,” he said in 2009. “You often try to make things overly beautiful, or shall I say overly photographic, by doing dramatic lighting or maybe dramatic camera angles, or dramatic camera movement. And as I’ve learned more, I’ve discovered that I shouldn’t impose anything on the information.”

From his most sensational work to his most subtle, Savides displayed technical mastery and brave experimentation. His preference was often for the darkest of light levels and for earthy, unsettling colours, but whether showing us a blinding blue bathe in Madonna’s *Rain* video, ominous shadows in thrillers like *The Game* (1997) and *The Yards* (2000), or finding loneliness in open spaces for character dramas like *Greenberg* (2010) and *Somewhere* (2010), Savides gave us painterly compositions in which landscapes bled into people, creating the curious effect of simultaneously subsuming and highlighting the lost, lonely characters in the stories of trapped lives to which he was drawn. “I light a room and let the people inhabit it, as opposed to lighting the people. It’s more organic,” he famously said to the *Village Voice* in 2004.

Savides hit his authorial stride in collaborations with director Gus Van Sant, most notably their ‘death trilogy’ of *Gerry* (2002), *Elephant* (2003) and *Last Days* (2005), featuring cold, elusive, haunting framings of doomed young wanderers battling their demons. Then in 2007

came Savides’ landmark achievement, working with director David Fincher on the serial-killer procedural *Zodiac*. Despite being an aficionado of celluloid, Savides shot *Zodiac* on the HD Viper FilmStream camera, the result being a palpably defining and unique mid-point in the industry’s transition from film to digital. The critic Vadim Rizov called it “a rare period film that successfully splits the difference between current technological capabilities and getting the intangible look of an era remembered.”

At this tribute screening, we’ll be showing two of Savides’ most beautiful films in their native 35mm format. Yet Harris Savides vocally eschewed simple beauty and was a groundbreaker at technology past 35mm, and in this programme, we’ll be trying to get to the bottom of how Savides’ career evolved and why we feel the need to celebrate his exceptional work.

The Badlands Collective

“Harris Savides was a great artist and a wonderful person who I admired. The most meaningful times I’ve had on set were at his side. I’ve never known anyone who loved films as much as he did and was so pure about it. He would get so excited about a beautiful shot and about trying to make art. He was so helpful to me, and inspiring to me and everyone who worked with him. His shots weren’t just beautiful, they had some indescribable magic to them. He was kind, sophisticated and elegant. We will always have Harris’ work to continue to learn from and be inspired by.”

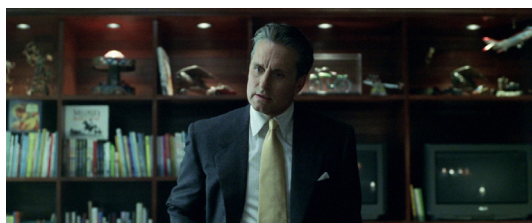
Sofia Coppola, director, *Somewhere* (2010) & *The Bling Ring* (2013)





A 35MM DOUBLE BILL

4PM INTRODUCTION / 4.10 THE GAME / 6.20 INTERMISSION / 6.30 BIRTH / 8.10 FINISH

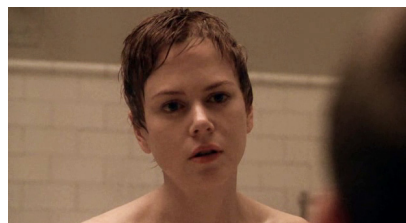


THE GAME

A labyrinth of mystery and menace, starring Michael Douglas as a Scrooge-like billionaire caught in a dangerous urban assault course that's either an adventure or a trap, *The Game* (1997) has a visual mood described by one of its writers as "cold, isolated and very rich." Its characters are illuminated in a gold-green shimmer, and they move among deep black shadows – director David Fincher said he wanted viewers to feel like they'd lost their car in a bad part of town in the middle of the night.

This was Harris Savides' first big-budget feature film, and while its general design is more showy than his later works, it's instructive to witness his technical skill in creating dark, underexposed images, and to revel in the dual mood of anxiety and gusto he helped create. We're showing *The Game* to remember what Savides was capable of early in his Hollywood career, and also because it's plain fun – a mix of intrigue and tension that edges over into screwball, with persistent narrative questioning of whether what's happening is real or fake that serves as a tribute to the idea of cinema itself.

Savides' voice and hand appear in a curious cameo role in the film, as he plays a man reaching out to Michael Douglas from underneath a toilet-stall door.



Birth

Harris Savides' work on *Birth* (2004) is perhaps his most singular visual achievement, existing on a stirring yet ominous plane of naturalism heightened unto otherworldliness. Its cinematography reaches for detail in darkness, with an autumnal, low-contrast image that makes blacks look like shades of purple, green and brown, and sees characters in opulent Upper West Side mansion flats appear in a soft, creamy glow that blends into an oppressive darkness. The understated yet distinct manipulation of light achieves its most overpowering drama in a famously astonishing two-minute close-up of Nicole Kidman's face at the opera.

Birth is about a reckoning. It is a home invasion movie subversively stripped of any hint of genre tropes, a Freudian jumble in which the ghosts of the past intrude upon the present to reclaim a lost love. The film's mysterious visitor – a child who claims to be the Kidman character's reincarnated husband – chisels away at the foundations of her wealthy New York family, and Savides' photography itself makes the ostentatiousness of the apartments feel worn under his camera's gaze. What little light remains is found around the characters themselves, or in the vast snowy blanket shrouding Central Park. In the outdoor scenes, light is the oppressor, with the humans reduced to shadows amidst the infinite white.

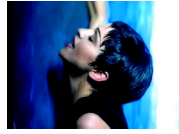
NOTE: We are pleased to be showing director Jonathan Glazer's personal show print of Birth, which was developed on silver nitrate and has rarely been exhibited since the film's Venice Film Festival premiere.

HARRIS SAVIDES CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

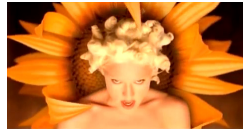
MUSIC VIDEO COLLABORATIONS WITH DIRECTOR MARK ROMANEK



TEENAGE FANCLUB -
WHAT YOU DO TO ME
(1991)



MADONNA -
RAIN
(1993)



MADONNA -
BEDTIME STORY
(1994)



NINE INCH NAILS -
CLOSER
(1994)



MICHAEL JACKSON -
SCREAM
(1995)



FIONA APPLE -
CRIMINAL
(1997)



SONIC YOUTH -
LITTLE TROUBLE GIRL
(1998)



MACY GRAY -
I TRY
(1999)



COLDPLAY -
SPEED OF SOUND
(2005)

Savides learned how to serve a specific and determined directorial vision working for the meticulously prepared Romanek, yet the director's careful planning was oriented around design rather than camera, so Savides also got to cut his teeth at a high level of responsibility. In Savides' longest-running collaboration with any director, the pair experimented with a range of visual techniques: for *Closer*, using modern colour film stock in vintage Bell & Howell hand-cranked cameras to capture an antique cellar of depravity against 90s industrial music; for *Rain*, overexposing Madonna's face and digitally colouring the space she inhabited; for *Scream*, capturing a spaceship in monochrome to make blinding use of white negative space. On the lo-fi end, *Criminal* was lit with a simple household lightbulb and *Little Trouble Girl* was shot on Hi-8 tape. Savides is working at an aggressive level of stylisation in these projects, but in sharing Romanek's fascination to find singular images that express the voices of key pop musicians, he starts perfecting the all-of-a-piece nature of imagery that would become his subliminal dramatic mainstay.

COLLABORATIONS WITH DIRECTOR GUS VAN SANT



LEVI'S 501: REASON NO 031
(1995, COMMERCIAL)



GERRY
(2002)



ELEPHANT
(2003)



LAST DAYS
(2005)



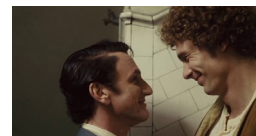
HANSON -
WEIRD
(1998, MUSIC VIDEO)



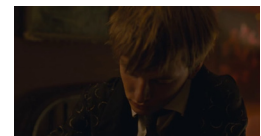
FINDING
FORRESTER
(2000)



RED HOT CHILI PEPPERS
- DESECRATION SMILE
(2007, MUSIC VIDEO)



MILK
(2008)



RESTLESS
(2011)

On their first feature film collaboration, *Finding Forrester*, Savides and Van Sant awkwardly split the difference between stripped-down documentarianism and warm Hollywood polish. Thankfully they kept reaching for more, and their 'death trilogy' of *Gerry*, *Elephant* and *Last Days* framed emotive situations – friends lost in the desert; a high school shooting; a Cobain-like rock star's suicidal descent – in cold, haunting, intensely intent compositions. Slow, repetitive, ghostly shots, most notably the smooth, meandering tracking shots of *Elephant*, create tragic visions of doomed young men's bodies inhabiting space while their spirits slip, or have already slipped, away. It was in this period Savides evolved past stylish high-contrast work and found the ethereal 'creamy' quality he so cherished, in which blacks displayed haze and whites retained detail rather than becoming blown out. In their later Red Hot Chili Peppers video *Desecration Smile*, Savides and Van Sant adopted a palette of muted pastel colours, and for the historical drama *Milk*, the team jettisoned an early plan to shoot in vérité newsreel style but used 1970s Cooke Panchro lenses to suggest a slightly hazy vintage look. Savides learned to rely on understatement for dramatic effect. "In working so simply," he said, "I gained a confidence that I never had before."



THE YARDS
(2000)

Blackness. Then a sliver of light. Then the train emerges from the tunnel. Throughout this crime thriller revolving around a deadly incident at a train yard, the characters dip in and out of the shadows, the central sin of the story reverberating around the visual scheme. Savides 'ice-skates on the emulsion' like Gordon Willis did for the *Godfather* films, illuminating his subjects amid the falling-off edges of deep, oily blacks, bringing visual dimension to director James Gray's particular brand of portent.



THE KEY TO RESERVA
(2007, SHORT FILM)

An unreasonably satisfying advert-movie hybrid directed by and featuring Martin Scorsese, wine company Freixenet's *The Key to Reserva* takes the form of a fake documentary and a film-within-a-film, proposing that Scorsese is remaking a lost Hitchcock script. Savides' most bright and playful work, with saturated colours that recall classic three-strip Technicolor.



WHATEVER WORKS
(2009)

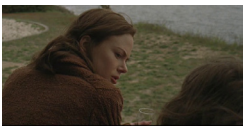
One of Savides' few comedies came late in his career, at a point when he had already developed his ultimate flat, understated approach. Written and directed by Woody Allen, starring Larry David in a particularly misanthropic version of the motormouth Woody persona, the colour scheme's unification of David with his surroundings makes a neat visual illustration of how so many Allen heroes fight their surroundings, but are actually at home in them.

ZODIAC (2007)



"The benchmark for me has always been film, and this was a more challenging way to make a movie. I feel like we're still experiencing digital cinematography in its infancy, and there are a lot of growing pains," said Savides about shooting *Zodiac* on HD. Yet the challenge was met, and this haunting contemporary film about the frustrated, obsessive quest to solve the Zodiac murders of 1970s San Francisco was instantly recognisable as a monumental moment in cinema's technological shifts. After shooting a Motorola commercial with director David Fincher on the Viper FilmStream camera, Savides put it through a rigorous series of tests to exhaust its capabilities, and in *Zodiac* pushed the dynamic range of digital to emulate a filmic illumination while embracing the greenish flatness of the new technology. A haze of authentic and synthetic, immediacy and memory, with a dark, gloomy naturalism influenced by the photography of William Eggleston, Steven Shore and Todd Hido.

COLLABORATIONS WITH DIRECTOR NOAH BAUMBACH



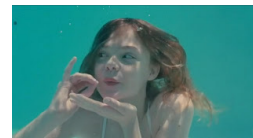
MARGOT AT THE WEDDING
(2007)



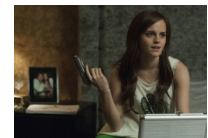
GREENBERG
(2010)

By the time Noah Baumbach enlisted Savides to help express his vision of interpersonal desperation, the cinematographer was accustomed to shooting troubled characters fading away into their surroundings, and able to do so more invisibly and insidiously than in his work with Gus Van Sant. The country-retreat family reunion of *Margot and the Wedding* is soft and dull, with characters evasively shunning true engagement with one another and camouflaging in muddy spaces. *Greenberg* finds a different kind of lonely anonymity, with Ben Stiller floating numbly through the open expanse of Los Angeles, just another passenger.

COLLABORATIONS WITH DIRECTOR SOFIA COPPOLA



SOMEWHERE
(2010)



THE BLING RING
(2013)

As with Baumbach, Coppola's interest tilts towards characters living lives of privileged emptiness, though she has more of a subtle sweetness and sense of adventure. *Somewhere* mixes the low hum of its jaded movie-star protagonist with grace notes involving his daughter, and Savides coolly observes both. *The Bling Ring* goes for fixed, numbed reportage of its high-schooler characters burgling celebrity homes, doing justice to both their sense of flashy adventure and the inescapable audience vantage point that their materialist point-scoring is vapid and all for nothing. Savides passed away during the making of *The Bling Ring* and his work was finished by his camera assistant Christopher Sautet, but Savides' sense of unintrusive ambience and fitting texture is all over the picture, which contains a title card dedicating it to his memory.



“He succeeded in suffusing entire films with luminous moods that were present but invisible, like perfume.”

American Cinematographer Magazine, 2012

“You shouldn’t be seeing me. You should be seeing the film.”

Harris Savides, 2008

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