

Jason

There is a boat.

There is a spiteful red-eyed sun.

The vessel bobs atop cascading blue waves.

Gulls frame it in cries and dives. Our widescreen canvass grows as we leisurely zoom backwards, filling the scene with rising bright beach and descending, loosely-linked clouds.

In a rather amateurish filmmaking move, the camera is tilted down until we see just...sand. It is this same sand that is cooked at three thousand degrees into lava stream, cooling now into floating sheets of glass along a conveying river of tin. The cooled glass is chopped into marketable segments, and then coated with highly-reflective silver. Its integrity is tested, and the ubiquitous mirror is born.

So ubiquitous that many no longer reflect on it. It is *the* shapeshifting invention of the modern era. Describing variously reality, potential, imagination, fantasy, dream, mystery, future, past, it communicates, warns, advises, traps; it presents risks, dangers, opens portals, protects, focuses, duplicates, multiplies...

Straight cut—the filmmaker can't go wrong with that—back to the rocking ship, a band strikes up a tune, kicking into a just-offshore party. Carnival lights are switched on in luring strings. The dance hall is decked with mirrors, giving the customary illusion of greater—greater space, vision, greater vanity, connection, communication. The seabound partiers seem to have been swallowed whole by the practically two-dimensional mirrors, or reflexively, the flat mirrors have added new dimensions, contributing to a sort of artisan super-kaleidoscope. It's simple, but

profoundly beautiful; one need only add various dried flowers and stones—or alternately, in this case, wrapped flashing sequined gowns, top hats, sunhats, dark shades, hand-twirled bowlers. Throw in an eggshell panama hat or two; the bassist fits right in wearing his fitted pork-pie hat, and a grin that's just singin'. This is all reflected here in this kaleidoscopic tube by mirror after mirror, not to mention that flaming disco ball—crawling with mirrors—perpetually screwing the ceiling.

The dancers abandon themselves to this rollicking imitative hall. There are shouts that immediately become refracted and distorted—“Yo! Banana boy.” At least that what it sounds like. It doesn't matter, really. They have all stepped in to out-perform the dull slapping tides that ruled the day. Below deck sits a lady, alone with her makeup. Or rather, alone with...herself. She enjoys the company of her reflected twin. As she applies her coral red lipstick and puckers her freshly-bitten lips, she's struck by the notion of life on the other side. What's it like to live over there, only peeking out into the real world when it's time to “get more beautiful?” What a grand life. Mirror mirror, on the wall...

This entire pleasure island, or one similar, can all be contained in a single mirror, a mirror that is peered into daily, as long as the mirror is not too clean of course. We next cut to Jason's jowly prickly mug. Handsome, sure. When he observes himself he sees something just as fantastic. It must be all smoke and mirrors with that guy. He might as well be examining tinfoil. But it works, no?

“Would you consider a shoe store weird?”

“Ha, ha. Uh, yeah. What the...are you serious?! Please. Details.” casually begs Will.

“The juicy details, you've got it...I've been there a couple times. But it just wasn't a good vibe. All the ladies were really focused on the shoes—you know, imagine that—and they were in groups too. They were like chatty and...I don't know how to explain it; it's like they wanted to flirt with the shoes instead of me.”

“Well, shoes *can* be attractive.”

“As I said they were in groups—in twos, threes. I got some eye contact. It was just different. I think the group social pressure blocked any chances. A one-on-one sitch and I'm good. None of this group stuff. It's like they don't wanna break rank with their friends, be embarrassed or something. Or maybe they don't want their girlfriends to feel bad. I dunno. It's just weird. There are other meet-up spots I prefer—”

“I'm well aware of your other meet-up spots. Say no more. *Really*, say no more.”

Will can't help admiring Jason's perfect shamelessness. In Jason's presence Will becomes a museum or science-center visitor, observing a glassed-in model of a gaseous planet or some assembly conducting cobalt electricity—awe-inspiring, something right out of Tesla's lab. He's witnessing a truly unique historical event, a beautiful untouchableness. But there is something else here; it's hard for Will to put a finger on. Right! He's not witnessing a completed project at all, but rather, he has the best seats in the house...to a grand experiment, one still in motion, in action, yet undetermined...a spinning top, Jason.

It is the inexorable bond that Will now sees, that same connection that all subjects have with their father-experimenters. That's it! Will's got it; it's clear now, the only explanation. Jason must have been coerced and inducted—without of course the modern protection of signed consent forms, without even the reassurance of a clickable button-metaphor on a website—as

sole subject in a psychology experiment, 1920s-style.

Most-likely called affectionately something like “Little Jaybee” by those molding beefy-fingered figures of authority above him, but in place of food pellets there are convenience store treats, and of course girls in tight baby blue sweatpants, flipflops, ponytails, hooded sweatshirts and hastily-flung-on sweaters, themselves all salivating for some sugary or salty snack—all of this has been reinforcing Little Jaybee's urges, opaque vials of his soul's saliva collected by unseen hands.

Highly scientific—it must be. How else could his behavior come to exist? The Behaviorists, those old-school detectives and fiddlers of all things observable, must have pocketed Jason as their hidden ace, their untrumpeted trump. Is Jason the first human to be successfully trained and released into the wild, after a lonely classically-conditioned childhood? Surely, the angle-eyebrowed triumvirate behavioral ghosts of Pavlov, Watson and Skinner have been right there with him all along, from the beginning as he peered out in wonder from behind his tall glass window, awkwardly sprawled in his white cushioned room, video recording his every natural and then unnatural movement. What other reasonable explanation was there? Jason's behavior was just not normal—no one was born like that. You don't learn this sort of behavior without some, uh...assistance.

There always is stimuli and response...But, what was Jason before all of this? With what unconditioned responses—those natural, unlearned reactions—did Jason begin life with? Watson theorized only three—fear, rage and love. OK fine for the twenties, but what other unconditioned responses have we, as a post-industrial bloc, acquired since then? What kind of unconditioned response is it when one is impulsively drawn to a smorgasbord of convenience store products, one-ounce baggies of chips, gummy spiders, Sugar Noodles, Hot Fries and

Doctor Shockems? Has this become another innate response of modern man—a desire—not love, but a desperate hungering, for that salty-sweet, sour, episodic bitter taste hidden inside all those jubilant bright yellow-, red- and green-packaged products, the ones, sitting patiently in their aisles that not call, but scream out to your taste buds like miniature undead suicidal lovers? Will has come to the conclusion that this is Jason's world, that Jason has been left spinning, slavering, like one of Pavlov's lab dogs.

His experimenters have managed to squeeze his entirety, all 195 pounds of Jason, right smack into a very basic, yet iron-clad, logical model:

$$J + US \rightarrow UR; J + (US + CS) \rightarrow UR; J + CS \rightarrow CR$$

If Jason (J) and Unconditioned Stimulus (US) then Unconditioned Response (UR); if Jason (J) and (Unconditioned Stimulus [US] plus Conditioned Stimulus [CS]) then still Unconditioned Response (UR); finally if only Jason (J) and Conditioned Stimulus (CS) then we have our desired Conditioned Response (CR).

Where:

US = convenience store products (chips, candy bars, pork rinds, etc.)

UR = innate desire for convenience store product (something mouth-watering, excited by engineered tastes, smells, etc.)

CS = unsuspecting girl (not made-up, hastily dressed, often hungering for a snack of salty chips), initially our neutral stimulus, she will soon become our conditioned stimulus after being paired with US.

CR = This is where the magic happens. Now in just the presence of our sweet-toothed lady friend, Jason uncontrollably reacts; he hungers, not for ordinary flesh mind you, but when he

sees her, his belly aches, churning with digestive acids, burning for artificial spongy foodstuffs, filled with sugar and cream, anything chocolate-covered or spicy, anything that would encase his plump fingers in a filmy, thick, sweet and salty residue, which he can, in his own time, scrape off with his two front teeth. He dreams of Chilli Cheese Dipups, Belly Pellets, Billy Blasters Bumps (BBBs), Cheesy Beef Sticks and Crispy Nibs. He doesn't want the girl at all; his conditioning would never permit it. He can only follow this magnet, this warping of his libido, straight to...an onion-flavored corn snack. He sees her as one elegant giant bar-b-q potato chip. He'd eat her whole if he could, but he'll settle for a series of scrumptious licks. He may even connivingly wait for her to finish exercising, whereupon he licks away the salt from her heaving body, an original feat which the sensuous Napoleon may well have heartily and publicly endorsed.

This is all to say that during his conditioning they must have repeatedly dangled chips in front of Jason's babyface; he naturally drools. They introduce girl without makeup, in sweatpants, perhaps even smoking a mentholated cigarette, to, you know, give her that authentic slip of accoutrement. At first Jason stares—not interested...too blah; well she's done nothing to make herself beautiful and Jason yawns the yawn of eternal and everlasting boredom. But, this is exactly when it gets exciting, you know—they start to introduce the girl just as Jason slavers over that bag of chips. Oh boy, he's excited, day after day. Soon they remove the sanctified chips from equation, but she still comes round, still scratching her buttocks, cigarette-fanged, stuffing cream-filled pastry-resemblances into her mouth, and now his mouth waters in her mere presence. That's it! Conditioning complete. A-plus.

They, his father-experimenters, give him a convenience store treat—refresher, they call it—once in a while so that the conditioning isn't extinguished. They send him out into the world and record the results. Brilliant! These scientists are fundamentally altering the most basic core of

human nature—they've beat evolution. No more survival of the fittest here. It's whoever is most homely, most unmade, who stuffs the most chocolate cream pie into her mouth at once, that's the survivor, that's the victor here, that's who Jason drools over. The Behaviorists are now having a big party, sloshing beer and finally belting out an original titled “Fuck You Nature” to the tune of “Happy Birthday.”

But wait, Will now thinks of something rather disturbing. Maybe he's got it all wrong. Maybe he got the sequence wrong. Would that...?! Well, hell yeah, that makes sense too, maybe even more sense for a guy like Jason—the conditioned stimulus is not the girl, but the convenience-store products. It all starts the other way around. Even today Watson is right. This deep hunger for salty-sweet tongue-bursting snacks is not innate at all. But, love is. They haven't really warped his libido at all, they've simply redirected it, pointed it to artificial onion rings...

It must have started when a baby, first with mother and her breast, later replaced with other resemblances. Little Jaybee feels...love; it's natural. His urges, often substitutes for his initial time with mother, grow and become more potent urges, which they encourage. When the time is right, they pair his female companion with the snack food. Day after day, the love connection between the feminine and chocolate-covered pretzels is reinforced. When they remove the girl completely, he still feels it, the love—not lust mind you—but now true primal, motherly love for these mass-produced, artificially-flavored well-preserved foodstuffs.

Will wonders—when he gets a hard-on in a convenience store, who is it really for? Now he's convinced it's for the goddamn baggie of chips. Oh boy. He sees it now—Jason carting these shiny baggie and wrappers filled with sugary-salty, occasionally sour, goodness back to the privacy and opaqueness of his apartment, turns on the Marvin Gaye—Let's Get It On. *Let's get*

it on, sugar...giving yourself to me can never be wrong—spreads them on the carpeted floor and makes love to them—*if the love is true, oh baby*—one after another, very slow, deliberate, patient—like makeup sex or something. They've really fucked him up! Could it get any worse for Jason? When he gets a girl's number in one of his meet-up spots, he's only intensifying and reinforcing his real love for smoked trout sheets, peanut pretzels and green chuchus. Will now cannot drive this image from his mind. It hurts; he feels sick.

But, there is always an extinction to conditioning, even a naturally occurring one, sometime. I mean he would know if they were still conditioning him at this time, right? It should be gone by now. They could of course stop all of this nonsense, just by letting him be. Or they could have stopped it faster, reverting him back to his natural state, by simply instilling a small dose of fear. But again, shouldn't this fear, this logical negative reinforcement, have come naturally?

Well, it's clear—he must be so cared for, smack in the palm of a prestigious and prodigious experimenter, whose other hand surely still hovers just above the gong, the electric shock, the fear-distribution system—the real threat of pain, to be presented just as coldly, just as logically, just as pseudo-objectively as the discriminative stimulus had been. Who knows from what height this new reverse conditioning, like Damocles' sword, will fall and if it will succeed in severing Little Jaybee in two?

And what form will this snapping of the last gossamer thread—the last refuge of conditioned innocence before the unforgiving scimitar's fall—take? Will he be exiled from all corner stores? Will he become a sexual outcast, wandering unending desert slopes, nightly waterless? An emotional cripple? Or will he, in a heroic and tragic effort to save himself, turn and bolt from the female sex completely, banishing himself? One thing Will is sure of—a single thread cannot win against the unflagging force of gravity.

Perhaps this shot of fear will come soon, but still how is he still conditioned at all after all this time? Jason would be aware. Will gets a thought. Maybe they don't have to. Maybe they've found away to continue conditioning without his knowledge, succeeding long ago—they've never stopped working on, and have materialized, the Behaviorist Utopian social experiment. Walden 3.0, is it? (are we living it?) Except...somehow it went askew. Where is the promised paradise of social conditioning? And, who is doing the conditioning now? Scientists? Or...is this conditioning being carried out by grinning sharp-toothed and -suited businessmen, who, in the privacy of their own bedrooms, kneel and pray to their own supreme conditioner—the God of personal profit?

Maybe that's it, the ones in power are equally conditioned. There's no one left setting the experiments and recording the results; there's no longer a social aim. Capitalism now has its own conditioning, reenforced from within—a constant redirection of love, a salivating for expensive things, for money, a fear of sharing. We are living it. We are all Jason in varying degrees.

The conflict is especially great for the younger, poorer ones. Which path to choose? Is there a choice? The implications just stare them in the face. The possibilities and risks weigh them down—they could be anything; they could save the world—like a thousand burying beanbags, in their beds, benighted.

There is a wasteland.

There is a thin gray tapering tower;

its spire pierces the cloud-deck and punctures the ozone.

Bombers and drones frame it in screams and dives. Our widescreen canvass grows as we

leisurely zoom backwards, filling the scene with rising dusky silhouettes of things and descending, airborne pools of visible pollutants.

In a rather amateurish filmmaking move, the camera is tilted down until we see just...oil-drizzled sand. It is this same sand that is cooked at three thousand degrees into lava stream, cooling now into floating opaque sheets of glass along a conveying river of tin. The cooled glass is chopped into marketable segments, and then coated with a silverish dull sheen. Its integrity is tested, and the ubiquitous black mirror is born.

Straight cut—the filmmaker can't go wrong with that—back to the fortified and windowless tower, from which music has been banished. It is a great mechanical contraption of pulleys and levers, elevators and stairs running upstairs and down. Puny strings of carnival lights have been switched on in luring strings hidden in unimaginative cubicle farms and individual Internet-tethered workstations, which mirror each other from wall to wall. The workers seem to have been swallowed whole by the practically two-dimensional mirrored cubes—this all contributes to a sort of artisan super-kaleidoscope. It's simple; one needs only add various dried flowers and stones—or alternately, in this case, a single employee doing his or her duty, pulling chains, pushing buttons, stepping on pedals, and a whole army of newcomers standing behind ready to take his place.

Outside, huddled in the lower, poorer, hotter places, men and women stew in meager sauce, flavored with humor, religion, frustration, anger, hopelessness, and love. Like an air-blown lottery glass box, which number will pop tonight? Everyone's glued to the screen, waiting...it's a nightly, highly-promoted reality show. The results roll in predictably—no more experimentation—on the evening news or in the morning paper. Humans as ordinary fuel, as vibrating molecules, needing space as heat is applied, as with anything living in tight spaces under

desperate conditions. See what happens when the temperature is raised? Souls? No, there's nothing measurable there. But just look, if you would, at how the molecules react...

Back inside, the workers contain themselves, sharply edging their soul's borders. Their whispers and huddled conversations immediately become refracted and distorted—"A war at Tarawa!" At least that what it sounds like. It doesn't matter, really. They have all stepped in to out-perform the dull slap of yesterday's feverish work. A good number of floors below sits Will.

He feels a pang. This is not new. He believes there are those who don't feel this guilt for the state of society. Maybe they're right. If the whole thing is conditioned anyway, then what can he do about it? It's not my problem. But, still...the pang. It never really goes away. He welcomes the opportunity to reckon his own thoughts against the thoughts of one who truly feels guiltless. Perhaps Will is missing something, adding something or subtracting something where he shouldn't be. It could be a simple mathematical mistake...

What would it be like, life on the other side. What's it like to live over there, only driven out into the real world when a particular crisis hits. What a grand life. Mirror mirror, on the wall...