A World Like This Deserves Contempt: Adapting Harlan Ellison's A Boy and His Dog

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August 21, 2020

A Boy and His Dog's promotional advertisements also reveal how the novella was adapted and modified to suit the tastes of the American popular film-going public. The movie's promo posters are particularly worth noting. These posters, which are still available for purchase and are virtually unchanged from the 1975 originals, have become icons that themselves use the iconography of post-apocalyptic films and soft-core pornography to attract attention. Three-quarters of the advertisement is taken up by the classic image of an ever-expanding phallic mushroom cloud, while immediately beneath it lies an attractive young woman in a state of deshabille. The tagline for the film suggestively identifies the movie as "A Rather Kinky Tale of Survival." While all of these elements combined certainly place the film in the center of the somewhat campy mid-1970s independent film milieu, it is the iconic "have a nice day" happy face on the mushroom cloud that definitively situates the movie historically and culturally.

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In 1965, film producer/director Fred Freed interviewed Robert Oppenheimer, the former director of the Manhattan Project, for his NBC television documentary The Decision to Drop the Bomb. When asked about his and other atomic scientists' reactions to the first successful detonation of an atomic weapon, the July 16, 1945 Trinity explosion, Oppenheimer explains softly, with tears in his eyes,

We knew the world would not be the same. A few people laughed, a few people cried. Most people were silent. I remembered the line from the Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad-Gita; Vishnu is trying to persuade the Prince that he should do his duty, and to impress him, takes on his multi-armed form and says, "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds." I suppose we all thought that, one way or another.1

On August 6 and 9 of 1945, Oppenheimer's bomb destroyed the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, respectively. The Japanese surrendered six days later, on August 15. "The Bomb" had successfully ended World War II.

Robert Oppenheimer interviewed by Fred Freed, 1965. YouTube

The Cold War, however, had just begun.

From the ashes of Hiroshima and Nagasaki arose an angry phoenix that promised indiscriminate death to the world into which it had hatched and, paradoxically, that Sit had created. In August 1949, the USSR detonated an atomic bomb, thus ending the American monopoly on the device. For the next forty years, nuclear annihilation would threaten the lives of

every human on the planet. The reality of nuclear weapons would, absurdly, guarantee the irreality of everyday existence, as politicians and military strategists from both the US and USSR argued that an instantly deployable nuclear arsenal would prevent the opponent from attacking with its own atomic or hydrogen warheads. This doctrine, which hyperbolized the old sports cliché “the best defense is a good offense,” was appropriately given the acronym “MAD”: Mutually Assured Destruction.

The ideological conflict between socialism and capitalism would manifest itself in proxy battles throughout the rest of the 20th century, and a nuclear Sword of Damocles hung above the head of each player in the theater of war. As early as 1953, for example, Admiral William Blandy urged the US to use “the whole works” against Korea, including a “sufficient quantity” of tactical atomic bombs.2 In 1962, the New York Times published a brief article that highlighted how real – and illogical – nuclear war had become. Entitled “Ample Food Seen in Atomic Attack,” the article sardonically states, “There may be a surplus of food and plenty of livable housing left after a massive nuclear attack – because so many people would have been killed during the attack.”3 This apocalyptic optimism would turn into cataclysmic pessimism by the late 1960s, when America found itself stuck in Vietnam, embroiled in an “unwinnable war,” as Cronkite famously called it, and caught in the currents of massive cultural upheaval.

On January 11 1967, two Buddhist monks immolated themselves in protest of “the war in Vietnam and the possibility of a nuclear war.”4 Less than two months later, on March 7, the International Commission of Jurists announced that the world might soon be submerged “in a cataclysm of horror,” citing “a steady escalation of brutality in Vietnam” as the main danger.5 In his New York Times article “Teen-Agers Protesting Too,” journalist Michael Stern quotes angry youths who declare, “General Motors wants crewcuts, punctuality, and respectful conformity. Uncle Sam wants patriotic cannon fodder. A world like this deserves contempt.”6

As Oppenheimer predicted, the world was not the same as it had been before the explosions at the Trinity site in Alamogordo, New Mexico, turned sand into glass and sound into silence. The nuclear bomb brought with it a new mythology of apocalypse, and, for that matter, post-apocalypse. Never before had the prospect of total annihilation been more likely or more absurd. But apocalypse was not just nuclear: American political leaders and civil rights activists were assassinated; riots erupted in inner cities; hallucinogens allowed individuals to explore inner space while the US and USSR fought for control of outer space; and over 350 unarmed South Vietnamese citizens were brutally tortured, raped, and killed by American soldiers in the My Lai Massacre of 1968.

In 1969, Harlan Ellison’s science fiction novella A Boy and His Dog was published. The story, set in an anomic, post-holocaust wasteland and a subterranean simulacrum of “America” (known as Topeka), is violent, brutal, and satiric, simultaneously hopeful by virtue of its presentation of a world that survives apocalypse, and hopeless in that world’s lack of human virtues. On the Earth’s bombed surface, teenage males wander aimlessly, surviving as best they can and committing random atrocities. Below, in Topeka, shadows of the Silent Majority cling to their belief in decency and the American Way, ignoring the aboveground Hell that is the real

world, which their forefathers helped create by launching nuclear weapons. As such, the novella is a literary microcosm of America in the late 1960s, an ugly extrapolation of the times in which it was written and which it reflected. The ruined backdrop of Ellison's novella is undoubtedly the result of Mutually Assured Destruction, and like the nuclear strategy it is absurd, violent, anarchic, deadly, insane – in a word, MAD. In this story, Ellison echoes the words of his anonymous teenage contemporary: "A world like this deserves contempt." A Boy and His Dog was originally a pessimistic fable of human folly and the chaos of the 1960s, but it has become much more than that: A Boy and His Dog has become a post-apocalyptic institution and a generic signifier.

I.

[A Boy and His Dog] just assumed a life of its own. It's one of those stories, and I suppose that this is a pretty good quote: sometimes, a story will be like a survivor of Flight 514 . . . from the TV show Lost, and the story is sort of just sitting there on the beach, watching the tide go in and out, without realizing that, right behind it, an entire continent is growing up.7

VHS edition. Editor's collection

In his afterword to Vic and Blood: The Chronicles of a Boy and His Dog, Ellison writes that his novella has been reprinted in a hundred anthologies; translated into nineteen languages; produced as a film that has "gained cult status as an all-time bestselling videocassette"; optioned by NBC for a television series that was never produced; analyzed "endlessly" in scholarly papers and treatises; adapted for radio; and adapted as a graphic novel in 2003.8 Ellison famously remarked that the novella was never meant to stand alone, and that it is but a section of a soon-to-be-published novel of 150,000 words, and that he wrote his own screenplay adaptation that received bids from major studios from 1969 into the 2000s, though none came to fruition; regardless of these remarks, his novella stands as one of the author's defining achievements. Critically and popularly well received upon its publication in 1969, A Boy and His Dog is one of Ellison's "four or five contenders" that approaches the status of being his "universal hit," and for good reason.9 Alternately humorous, disturbing, satiric, violent, tender, vicious, somber, fantastic, and familiar, A Boy and His Dog and its adaptations have become the most referenced and influential landmarks of a sub-genre that has often been disregarded as escapist, clichéd, and one-dimensional. In order to understand how the text became so important, the history of Ellison's original story and its film adaptation must be traced and explicated. In this article, I will compare and contrast Ellison's definitive novella, L. Q. Jones's early screenplay draft, and his final film adaptation and its promotional campaign to show how content is transformed, often radically, once it leaves the hands of its creator, and how certain differences in these texts come to exist. Before examining A Boy and His Dog and its adaptations, however, a brief synopsis of the post-apocalyptic sub-genre is necessary.

In his postmodern/post-apocalyptic short story "The End of the World as We Know It," Dale Bailey breaks away from his post-apocalyptic narrative to explain some of the generic constructs that typify 20th-century cataclysmic texts.10 He notes, for example, that characters in

end-of-the-world stories typically come in one of three varieties. The first is the rugged individualist, who is usually on his way to Re-Establishing Western Civilization by the end of the story. The second variety is the post-apocalyptic bandit, who, unlike the rugged survivors, embraces the “Bad Old Ways” but is not displeased by the expanded opportunities to rape and pillage. The third type of character is the alcoholic, ennui-suffering, world-weary sophisticate.11 In terms of narrative structures, Gary K. Wolfe has identified five features that mark post-catastrophe texts: “(1) the experience or discovery of a cataclysm, (2) a journey through a wasteland created by the cataclysm, (3) the settlement or reestablishment of a new community, (4) the reemergence of the wilderness as antagonist, and (5) a final or decisive battle to determine which values will prevail in the new world.”12 Significantly, A Boy and His Dog perverts all of these generic characteristics: the novella features no character that is wholly good, bad, or “world-weary” (although Blood, the titular Dog, comes close), The cataclysm is not experienced or discovered, the primary journey takes place in the inverted “wasteland” of an artificial American town, no communities are reestablished (Topeka will die off without Vic, the titular Boy), the wilderness is no more antagonistic than the Topekan “civilization,” and the final, decisive battle of ideologies is effectively a stalemate. Although Ellison’s novella is most assuredly a post-holocaust narrative, it is almost too apocalyptic, too angry and satiric, to fit easily within the generic confines outlined by Bailey and Wolfe.

Harlan Ellison, 1969 in interview. YouTube screenshot

According to scholar Paul Brians, cultural anxieties, hopes, and fears regarding nuclear war are reflected in and molded by contemporary fiction, and, he argues, the concreteness, vivid characters, and alternately realistic and unrealistic settings of literature can make the devastating effects of nuclear holocaust more immediate and disturbing – thus, post-apocalyptic science fiction can have an admonitory effect and possibly raise the consciousness of its readers.13 Brians explains that, aside from a few exceptions, the science fiction of the late 1940s and 1950s depicted nuclear war and its aftermath in ways that were neither scientifically nor literarily sophisticated, which reflects the popular perception of the subject. In the late 1950s, the subject of nuclear war made a comeback as novels and films like On the Beach and Level 7 received popular and critical attention. In the 1960s, “new wave” science fiction raised nuclear war fiction to new literary heights, and these often-nihilistic novels and short stories reflected Americans’ preoccupation with “Black Power, psychedelia, student protest and – above all – Vietnam.”14 This new breed of post-apocalyptic fiction often critiqued the power structures that had made the Bomb an everyday reality. A Boy and His Dog remains one of the best examples of “protest” science fiction, and although it is not overtly concerned with the progressive movements that were taking place during the time Ellison wrote the novella, its break with traditional post-holocaust narratives (and new wave sf’s break with traditional science fiction) reflects the counterculture’s break with 1960s mainstream society.

In a post-nuclear wasteland sometime after World War IV, the titular protagonists of “A Boy and His Dog,” Vic (the boy and narrator) and Blood (his telepathic dog), roam a blasted desert and metropolitan ruins in search of food, ammunition, and females. Blood, who “represents culture and knowledge and memory and civilization and loyalty and bravery and ethical behavior,”

teaches Vic about reading, writing, mathematics, and history; he is, in essence, Vic's "master" and teacher.15 Blood has the ability to "sniff out" the location of humans and radiation as a result of experiments performed on his ancestors; however, he has lost the ability to effectively find his own food. For that he depends on Vic, a horny teenage boy who is, according to Ellison, "one step up from a nose-picking, gun-toting, simplistic, thoughtless and vengeful, primordial foraging creature."16 Together, the duo try to survive in a bleak, dangerous, anomic anti-society that strongly resembles that of prison, with violent gangs ("roverpaks") and brutal loners ("solos") wandering no-man's-land in search of goods to barter, women or powerless males to rape, and power to take.

The narrative begins, more or less, when Vic and Blood sit in the scorched Metropole Theater, watching pre-war porno and war films. As the audience in the theater masturbate in the darkness, Blood picks up the scent of a female three rows ahead of them. They leave the theater and follow the disguised girl to a blasted YMCA and into its gymnasium, where Vic plans to rape her. However, "Vic watches her undress and experiences a kind of Actaeon-like epiphany," and before he can commit the act he finds himself talking to her like a crude, yet bashful, boy on a first date.17 Before he can make his move, Blood rushes in to tell him that the building is surrounded by a roverpak that also wants the girl, Quilla June Holmes. Vic, Blood, and Quilla June manage to defeat the roverpak in a firefight before setting the building ablaze, thereby tricking any remaining gang members into believing that they are dead. They hide in a boiler room as the YMCA burns around them, and Vic has sex with Quilla June. Afterwards, she taunts him by saying, "Do you know what love is? [ . . . ] You don't know what love is, I bet."18 Calling him outside to discuss their situation, Blood explains to Vic that they have a responsibility to each other that Quilla June would complicate, and Vic, furious, responds by returning to the boiler room to rape the girl again, at which point she coldcocks him with a pistol and he falls unconscious.

Vic, ignoring Blood's advice, follows Quilla June's trail to a dropshaft, where he uses a keycard she dropped to open a porthole that leads to the "downunder" in which she lives, "Topeka." Located twenty miles beneath the surface, Topeka is "the original pastoral vision of America become a sentimental cliché, a small-town culture modeled on picture postcard images of the American Dream,"19 with "[n]eat little houses, and curvy little streets, and trimmed lawns, and a business section and everything else that a Topeka would have [ . . . ] except freedom."20 Vic is horrified by what he sees, but before he can escape he is captured by a robot, paraded through town, and deposited at "a shopfront with the words BETTER BUSINESS BUREAU on the window."21 Vic learns that he has been lured to Topeka by Quilla June so that he may perform stud service, as the birth rate has dropped, and of the few babies being born, most are female. Vic likes the idea at first, but within a week he is "ready to scream" due to the artificiality and hypocrisy of the town and its citizens.22 He finds out that Quilla June, too, wants to escape Topeka, and with her help the two manage to kill their captors and ascend an air intake duct leading to the surface. Once above ground, they walk to the dropshaft they used to enter Topeka, where they find a starving Blood waiting for them. Quilla June demands that they leave the dog so that they might escape the wrath of the Topekans. Realizing that he cannot survive without Blood, Vic makes a crucial decision: he kills Quilla June to feed his dog. The next

morning, as Vic and Blood begin walking across the wasteland, Vic repeats to himself Quilla June's taunting question: "Do you know what love is?" He answers somberly: "Sure I know. A boy loves his dog."23

Ostensibly written as both a paean to his dog, Ahbhu,24 and as a protest against the escalation of the Vietnam War,25 Ellison's A Boy and His Dog first appeared in the Michael Moorcock-edited new wave science fiction magazine New Worlds, in April 1969 at a length of 15,600 words. Ellison expanded the story to 18,000 words and published it in his short story collection The Beast That Shouted Love at the Heart of the World, later that same year. Critical response to A Boy and His Dog was swift and enthusiastic: Ellison's story won the Nebula Award for Best Novella from the Science Fiction Writers of America in 1969 and was nominated for the prestigious Hugo Award for Best Novella the following year.26 Novelist Brian W. Aldiss has declared the novella Ellison's "masterpiece," and it has remained one of his most consistently reprinted and popular stories, and his most frequently adapted. Still, it has its share of critics who object to its ostensibly misogynistic content. In her survey of Nebula award-winning stories spanning 1965-1973, for example, Carolyn Wendell calls A Boy and His Dog "the worst offender" in terms of sexist portrayals of women.27 However, Ellison maintained that "[n]othing laudable or positive about the mistreatment of women appears in MY WORK of 'A Boy and His Dog,'" and that his novella clearly shows "that misogyny (if it can even be called that) is reviled and negatively used as a thematic plot-element in the context of the history of all wars, from the Huns' raids on the Holy City to the Talibans' scourging of Afghanistan."28 Ellison is especially irked by accusations of misogyny because his most vehement detractors have confused the film adaptation of his work, which he did not write, with his original novella.

In fact, A Boy and His Dog is anything but misogynistic. Far from being a one-dimensional "bitch," Quilla June is a victim of both the rigid Topekan patriarchy and the pragmatic survivalist mentality of the aboveground wasteland. However, she is no "damsel in distress," either, as she manages to shoot and kill a rover during the YMCA firefight, and she attempts to murder her mother, who allowed her to be used as bait so that the patriarchal Topekan society might survive. The novella is, implicitly, a critique of the objectification, commoditization, and "consumption" of women. Similarly, as Peter Wright notes, A Boy and His Dog sheds light on the ways media, and film in particular, constructs reality, as Vic and other solos and roverpaks's attitudes toward women and reality are shaped and molded through the gangster, war, and porno films they watch in the Metropole Theater.29

In the autobiographical essay "Ellison on Ellison," published in 1973, the author writes that he "is currently at work scripting a film version of [A Boy and His Dog] for independent production in 1973-74."30 He also mentions that "'A Boy and His Dog' will appear as an underground comic in 1973-74, illustrated by Richard Corben."31 While it would take around fifteen years for the graphic novel adaptation to appear in print, the film version of Ellison's novella was, in fact, completed by 1974 and released in 1975. However, Ellison did not write the screenplay; character actor L. Q. Jones did.

II.

Following the success of his novella, Ellison began receiving bids for a film version. His first offer came from producers at Universal Studios, who offered Ellison a sum of money “in the very, very high six figures.”32 However, they also wanted to animate Blood’s mouth to indicate when he was “speaking,” a la Mr. Ed, so Ellison refused the offer, as he did with two or three other studios. L. Q. Jones, who up to that point had been most famous as one of Sam Peckinpah’s character actors, convinced Ellison that he could direct and produce the film, and so the rights were sold, inexpensively, and Ellison began working on the screenplay. However, after writing the first nine pages or so, Ellison hit a writer’s block and handed the script to Jones for completion.33 Jones wrote the script in a year, and in 1974 the film went into production on a shoestring budget; Ellison had no hand in Jones’s script and was never present during production, although he did participate in post-production to eliminate scenes that annoyed him. Before we examine a certain scene in the final cut and the reactions it provoked, a little-known early draft of A Boy and His Dog, entitled Rover Blood, warrants attention, as it demonstrates how radically different Ellison’s novella could have become after it left his hands.

Aside from Script City, a screenplay retailer located in Hollywood, Rover Blood is available only from the University of California, Riverside Library, and, fittingly, the Wichita Public Library in Kansas. This draft, which seems to confuse the grimly ironic title of Ellison’s novella for the sweet-natured Albert Payson Terhune dog books it mocks, is notable because of its unchallenging characters and its “feel-good” climax and denouement, which were apparently written in to make the film palatable to a large audience that might have been put off by Ellison’s original novella. As mentioned earlier, the surface world of the novella is populated with scavenging hordes of teenagers and boys who have been forced by circumstances to adopt a kind of prison sexuality, that is, a sexual code in which some males, usually the weakest or most feminine, are “turned out” and owned by the more dominant, masculine males. This aberrant sexuality, peripherally present in the novella and almost nonexistent in the final cut of the film, is given graphic treatment in Jones’s draft, although it is only a narrative vehicle meant to develop Vic’s character. In a scene that lasts for seven shots, Vic hides in the reeds near a stream bank while searching for food. As he pokes his head through the reeds he finds himself staring, startled, at a “YOUNG BOY, 7, naked as a jaybird, knee deep in water, bathing.”34 Neither Vic nor the boy moves until, off-screen, an unnamed rover exclaims, “Look at the ass on that one.”35 Vic turns to leave as two fourteen-year-old rovers pounce on the naked child and subdue him. The boy’s screams are too horrific to ignore, however, and Vic turns back to help, but he is frozen in place by the sight of four more rovers crowding the lip of the bank. Jones’s direction explains, “Everyone agrees that [the boy] is worth keeping. The BOY is handed up to the larger group who paw and fondle him like an unwilling girl.”36 Vic runs off in the opposite direction.

L. Q. Jones. YouTube screenshot

Interestingly, Ellison claims that Jones was reluctant to touch upon the homosexual “jockey-and-boxer” aspect of his novella due to some sort of latent homophobia, and the written scene does not appear in the final film.37 It seems that the only reason Jones wrote this scene

was to establish Vic as a character with at least a modicum of compassion in his heart. Despite the brutality of this scene, Jones clearly wants his audience to notice Vic's capacity for kindness. Later in the script, during the sequence in which Vic and Quilla June have sex in the boiler room, Jones describes the scenario thusly: "Slowly, she guides his hand o.s. Though we can't see, it is obvious that she has placed his hand on her breast, holds it there. . . . She raises [sic] softly to kiss him. His curiosity is replaced by love . . . excitement. . . ."38 Jones makes sure to mention that Quilla June's breast is never seen on camera, and that Vic's "curiosity" and, one supposes, his desire to rape, are replaced by love. These two scenes foreshadow the rest of the script in that the violence, frank depictions of rape and sex, and misanthropic undertones of Ellison's novella are radically altered (or erased) and made more palatable for Jones's prospective mainstream audiences.

Of Jones's many modifications, his screenplay's climax and denouement are the most incredible. In the novella and graphic novel, the climax occurs when Vic visits the home of Quilla June and her parents so that he may perform his stud service with her. Instead of performing his "civic duty," Vic kills her father (an act that both pleases and upsets Quilla June), and the two run toward an air-intake duct to escape. As they run, Vic hears shots and turns to see Quilla June shooting wildly at the vengeful Topekan mob. He slams the back of her head to get her to run, causing her to miss her target, which happened to be her mother. In Jones's screenplay, however, Quilla June rescues Vic from a "semen-extracting" machine and laments the fact that her parents were killed by "The Committee," an Orwellian council that terminates disobedient Topekans and explains away their deaths as accidents. Thus, in Jones's draft, Quilla June's character is nothing more than a victim who wants love and freedom, unlike the character in Ellison's novella and the final film, who is portrayed as callous, manipulative, and parricidal.

The most startling difference between Rover Blood and the novella and its film adaptation occurs at the draft's conclusion. Instead of having Vic kill Quilla June so that Blood may eat her, as in all other versions, Jones has Vic kill Lew, leader of "The Committee," to feed Blood. In the final shot of the draft, Vic, Quilla June, and Blood sit around a campfire, Lew's cane in Vic's hands. As the three walk off into the sunset together, Vic makes a comment that would become the basis for the most controversial aspect of the finished film: "Anyway, when Lew told me why they wanted me down there, I damn near busted a gut laughin'. Them dummies, out of all the horny bastards up here, he'd pick me!"39 Blood, speaking telepathically, replies, "Well . . . 'least he had good taste." In his direction, Jones writes, "The dog begins to snicker . . . is joined by VIC and QUILLA JUNE's low laughter, as we . . . BRING UP MUSIC, RUN END TITLES and FADE OUT."40 It is important to note that Quilla June was never able to understand Blood's telepathic thoughts until this moment. Perhaps Jones means to indicate that Blood has finally accepted Quilla June by allowing her to receive his thoughts; after all, if she cannot hear Blood or his laughter, she would only be laughing to follow Vic's lead, which makes little sense. In any case, the ending to Jones's draft is a saccharine, failed, forced attempt at turning a necessarily pessimistic text into a crowd-pleasing film. When he was told of the conclusion to Jones's draft, Ellison sighed and said, "That's terrible. That's really terrible."41

III.

Jones's final cut of A Boy and His Dog appeared in 1975 to "utterly bewildering" reviews, but it managed to win a Hugo Award for Best Dramatic Presentation in 1976.42 In his paper "The Future of History: Violence and the Feminine in Contemporary Science Fiction," Michael Clark explains that the film "quickly became a cult movie; just as quickly, it became the target of demonstrations and petitions aimed at banning the film because of its misogynistic portrayal of women as objects of male lust, as scheming manipulators, and dog food."43 Indeed, feminist science fiction author and friend of Ellison, Joanna Russ, wrote a scathing critique of A Boy and His Dog the year it was released in which she proposes pulling a "flip-flop" on Ellison and Jones by sending them to see "a marvelously entertaining, absolutely profound, great science-fiction film that's just come out" entitled The Triumph of the Will.44 Although Russ's pointed last line – "[Hitler] murdered you, boys" – is dulled by a single flaw in research (she correctly identifies Ellison as a Jew, but she mistakenly labels Jones as an African American when he is, in fact, a WASP from Texas), her anger at the film is justifiable.45 While Ellison's novella has received much more praise than criticism in both popular reviews and scholarly analyses, Jones's film adaptation has been alternately celebrated and vilified, due mainly to its extraordinarily misogynistic concluding lines.

It is important to note that, aside from the film's concluding lines, Ellison admired Jones's adaptation. However, it is the final cut that the author admired; when he was shown the rough cut, Ellison was "incredibly upset about all of the sexist lines," such as one in which Jones "has the dog calling Quilla June a 'cow."46 Ellison was "apoplectic" and demanded that Jones recut the film. Unfortunately, Jones needed around $1,500 for such an undertaking, money that he did not have. Ellison ended up selling three- and five-frame snippets culled from the film's outtakes to a pre-screening audience at the 1974 World Science Fiction Convention for $5 a snippet ("Own a piece of immortality," Ellison declared), and returned to Jones with $5,000.47 Jones cut the material that the author found offensive, except for the last scene, which test audiences enjoyed despite its glaring misogyny. Interestingly, the film was pre-screened primarily on college campuses in 1974, and the mostly male students found the offensive scene uproarious, which indicates the cultural and political shifts that had occurred between 1969 and 1974.

A Boy and His Dog's promotional advertisements also reveal how the novella was adapted and modified to suit the tastes of the American popular film-going public. The movie's promo posters are particularly worth noting. These posters, which are still available for purchase and are virtually unchanged from the 1975 originals, have become icons that themselves use the iconography of post-apocalyptic films and soft-core pornography to attract attention. Three-quarters of the advertisement is taken up by the classic image of an ever-expanding phallic mushroom cloud, while immediately beneath it lies an attractive young woman in a state of deshabille. The tagline for the film suggestively identifies the movie as "A Rather Kinky Tale of Survival." While all of these elements combined certainly place the film in the center of the somewhat campy mid-1970s independent film milieu, it is the iconic "have a nice day" happy face on the mushroom cloud that definitively situates the movie historically and culturally.

The film's original minute-long trailer also indicates the market and demographics to which Jones was appealing.48 John Philip Sousa's "Stars and Stripes Forever" plays throughout the trailer as shots of marching bands, made-up Topekans, and the smiling faces of Vic, Blood, Quilla June, and other characters are shown in rapid succession. The film does, indeed, look "wacky" and fairly inoffensive, in part because no plot can be discerned from the montage. In between many of these shots, brief flashes of text appear onscreen, usually in time with Sousa's uplifting music. These textual flashes always consist of one word, usually an adjective ostensibly describing the film: "Sensuous," "Happy," "Explosive," "Bizarre," "Kinky," "Tender," "Titillating," "Terrifying," "Irreverent," "Awesome," "Outrageous," and "Despotic" are all juxtaposed with relatively benign images from the film. The only two words that are not adjectives are "Sousa" and "Popcorn," the former referring to the trailer's background music and the Topekan marching band, and the latter referring to Blood's favorite food. No images of sex or brutal violence are shown on-screen (there is a humorous montage of the gang leader Fellini "bopping" the head of one of his minions, however), and one is left with the notion that Jones was marketing his film to as large a demographic as possible. The method worked a bit too well, as Ellison writes of a grandmother in Texas who took her toddler grandson to a drive-in to see the film, which she suspected would be "Disneylike," only to speed out of the parking lot "cursing far more eloquently than anything in the film itself, shrieking that she had been duped into corrupting her grandson with a film that was obviously demented and the devil's handiwork."49 Regardless of the grandmother's reaction, it is easy to see how far removed Jones's adaptation was from Ellison's original novella, in terms of both content and presentation.

Jones re-released A Boy and His Dog in 1982, and its revised trailer speaks volumes. Unlike the original trailer, brief camp images are eschewed in favor of long scenes taken the film and 45 seconds of glowing reviews voiced in a grim, serious tone. The words "Hugo Award – Best Science Fiction Film" creep slowly toward the viewer as the trailer's narrator reads review copy aloud: "'An offbeat delight . . . Gripping, horrific . . . A bitter vision of tomorrow . . . Brilliantly grotesque . . . Maybe the best science fiction film ever made.'" A deafening blast punctuates this last review as a mushroom cloud climbs into the stratosphere, and the narrator states, in an over-the-top growl: "A Boy and His Dog. A film that has become a cult legend." A brief sequence from the film follows this announcement, in which Vic tells Blood that he is hungry and wants to "get laid." Blood refuses to find women until after he is fed. An angry Vic snaps at Blood, "You ain't pullin' that crap on me again! And you can shove that part about how you lost the ability to hunt for food when ya learned how to talk!" Unlike the original trailer, then, the 1982 preview openly presents the basics of the film's plot, and also manages to explain away the fantastic element of a "talking" dog as trivia. Overall, the film is not depicted as a wacky buddy movie, but rather as a violent, sexy, dystopian science fiction film. The trailer contains frontal nudity and a disproportionately large number of shots involving guns discharging and scenes of melee violence. The trailer ends with the narrator stating flatly: "A Boy and His Dog: S film that has become a legend by word of mouth," which plays on both the film's cult status and its infamous conclusion.

The differences between the original trailer and the 1982 version are significant. By 1982, the post-apocalyptic science fiction film had enjoyed a resurgence in popularity, due in large part to

George Miller's Mad Max (1979) and The Road Warrior (1981), both of which were influenced by Jones's film.50 While the original trailer suggests that the movie is lighthearted and fun, the later version implies a darkly cynical post-apocalyptic narrative filled with sex and violence. One reason for this change in tone is the shift in audience interests: the mainstream popularity of slasher horror films, for example, attests to Americans' increasingly open fascination with sexual revenge fantasies. The later trailer's self-identification as a cult film also indicates how audiences were willing to overlook accusations of misogyny in favor of filmic and narrative eccentricities.

Jerome F. Shapiro explains that A Boy and His Dog became a cult film because it "combines elements of the buddy film, the troubled-adolescent film, the post-apocalyptic survival film, the hero's journey for self-knowledge, and other genres, in very unexpected ways."51 The film is, indeed, a pastiche of these genres, and Jones's combination of different generic constructs allows him to explode the confines of Ellison's original novella, which makes for an entertaining movie. The "independent movie" feel of the film also lends it charm. Jones's responses to budgetary constraints are inventive and visually arresting. Lacking funds to construct the set of a bombed-out cityscape, Jones films in the desert of Coyote Lake, California, and uses mud and sand to indicate a dead future world.52 The scenes in Topeka were filmed at night in Pacific Ocean Park, eliminating the need to construct an entire town or set up industrial lights.53 Jones managed to film Vic's descent to the Topekan downunder in a most interesting and illegal way, as he befriended military personnel at a missile base, who got him in touch with the base commander. Jones bought him a case of bourbon and in return was allowed to film Don Johnson, as he descended the innards of the missile silo.54 This is guerrilla filmmaking of a kind that can only add to its "cult" flavor.

Rather than recount every way in which A Boy and His Dog differs from its source material (and there are many), at this juncture the final scene of the film must be discussed.55 After Vic and Quilla June return to the surface (which is identified as Phoenix, Arizona, in the film, thereby permitting Jones's liberal use of western genre film motifs), they find Blood starving near the Topeka dropshaft. As in the novella and its graphic novel adaptation, Quilla June demands that Vic leave his starving friend: "If you love me, you'll go!" Fade out. As the light of dawn breaks through the clouds, we see the smoking remains of a spit. Vic and Blood walk off into the horizon, leaving a smoldering campfire behind them. Quilla June's wedding gown has been used to dress Blood's injuries. This visual is effective, and Jones could have ended at this point, but instead he resurrects the lines he wrote in his previous draft; this time, however, the effect is not saccharine, but rather horrific. As they walk further away into the sunset, we hear Vic ask Blood if he's had enough to eat. Blood replies that Vic might have to cook up more if they walk the whole day. Vic, rationalizing his actions, says, "Oh, Hell, it wasn't my fault she picked me to get all wet-brained over." Blood, trailing behind as the shot freezes, responds, "Well, I'd say she had marvelous judgment, Albert, if not [laughter] particularly good taste!" Both Blood and Vic begin giggling and laughing as Tim McIntire's upbeat guitar and piano music (which sounds similar to John Prine or Leon Redbone) fades in and the credits roll.

As Joanna Russ notes, Jones's adaptation is essentially flawed because it is homosexist – the main point of the film is that "women are no damned good and men are better off without [them], even when it means killing [them]."56 No matter how many generic conventions Jones brings into his adaptation, no matter how many overt jabs at authority he makes, no matter how darkly humorous or satirical or "deep" or dignified he makes his characters and scenarios, his film sinks under the weight of its own misogynistic conclusion. As previously mentioned, Ellison managed to avoid the label of misogynist primarily because his novella was overwhelmingly misanthropic: male or female, none of his human characters were capable of rebuilding society in a positive way, or in any way at all. Put simply, Ellison is not optimistic about the future of the human race; unlike most post-apocalyptic texts, as George Slusser notes, "[t]he struggle to survive has been rendered futile here, so stripped of goal and meaning that it becomes a kind of hellish perpetual motion."57 In his DVD commentary, Jones says that whenever he watches A Boy and His Dog, he tends to observe only one character: Blood. Referring to his directorial vision, Jones says that he changes "an animal into a human being, and human beings into animals. That's what Quilla June is, that's what the Committee is. That's what Vic is. And the dog is trying to change that. He's trying to educate him. He's trying to make him think."58 Despite Jones's wishful thinking, in the conclusion of his adaptation Blood sinks even further below those humans he is trying to educate. Although the conclusion went over well in test audiences, it has never fared well with critics, scholars, or feminists – in this respect, Jones's adaptation is, in the end, a failure, regardless of how inventive and brilliant the rest of the film is.

In his chapter introduction to "A Boy and His Dog," Walter M. Miller Jr. offers a theatrical caveat to those about to read Ellison's novella: "Warning: parental guidance is suggested for children younger than forty. Ladies are admitted free, but whether they can get out again alive is a question"59 Miller's warning, like the mocking come-on of a carnival barker, challenges the reader to enter a disturbing future world, one in which brutally violent roverpacks and solos roam the blasted desert wasteland in search of food, ammunition, and females, while polite, hypocritical citizens mill about downunder in totalitarian, artificial, anachronous townships. If Miller's cautionary introduction seems unnecessary or heavy-handed, it is because the world of A Boy and His Dog is no longer alien or particularly disturbing, but rather iconic. Ellison's original story and its adaptations have directly and indirectly influenced popular culture, literature, and film, from the popular Fallout video game series to director George Miller's Mad Max trilogy to Cormac McCarthy's ultra-violent Pulitzer Prize-winning novel The Road. However, Ellison cannot, and did not, claim credit for reinventing the post-apocalyptic sub-genre. Jones's adaptation, as different as it was from the novella, and as painful as it may have been for Ellison (and us) to listen to that last repartee between Vic and Blood, has become part of a culture that defines a genre by both the novella and the film. In fact, it is probable that more people have seen Jones's film than have read Ellison's novella. There is great merit in L. Q. Jones's film adaptation, but that merit is overshadowed by the movie's final lines. Jones, age 92 at this writing, has spoken of directing a new film, about a girl named Spike and her dog.60 Ellison died in 2018 at the age of 84, leaving the future publication of the in-progress full-length novel doubtful (the same goes for his decades-long expected but continuously delayed anthology The Last Dangerous Visions). Similarly, Jones's film sequel sounds more like a pipe dream or perhaps a project stuck in one of the deepest circles of development hell than a feasible

production. And that's a shame. These forty-year-old, harshly satiric texts would appeal to our current culture's obsession with the Topeka-reminiscent MAGA dog whistling, chan-frequenting reactionaries, or, alternatively, new puritans and word police. I hope our culture is smarter than that. But not much hope. This world deserves contempt.

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Unless otherwise noted, all images are screenshots from the film.

The Decision to Drop the Bomb, television documentary, produced by Fred Freed (January 5, 1965, NBC-TV). [↩]

"'Whole Works' Urged to End War in Korea," New York Times, March 21, 1953, https://www.nytimes.com/1953/03/21/archives/whole-works-urged-to-end-war-in-korea.html. [↩]

January 7, 1962, https://www.nytimes.com/1962/01/07/archives/ample-food-seen-in-atomic-attack-high-death-toll-may-avert.html. [↩]

"2 Malaysian Buddhists Burn Selves to Death," New York Times, January 11, 1967, http://www.proquest.com. [↩]

"Jurists Say 'Brutality' Is Growing in Vietnam," New York Times, March 7, 1967, https://www.nytimes.com/1968/03/08/archives/jurists-say-brutality-is-growing-in-vietnam.html. [↩]

Michael Stern, "Teen-Agers Protesting Too," New York Times, January 9, 1969, https://www.nytimes.com/1969/01/09/archives/teenagers-protesting-too.html. [↩]

Harlan Ellison, telephone interview with author, July 10, 2009. [↩]

Ellison, "After Vic and Blood: Some Afterthoughts as Afterword," in Vic and Blood: The Chronicles of A Boy and His Dog (New York: St. Martin's, 1989), endpaper. [↩]

Ellison, "Latest Breaking News: The Kid and the Pooch," Vic and Blood: The Continuing Adventures of A Boy and His Dog (iBooks/Edgeworks Abbey, 2003), 5. [↩]

Dale Bailey, "The End of the World as We Know It," in Wastelands: Stories of the Apocalypse, ed. John Joseph Adams (San Francisco: Night Shade Books, 2008), 283-96. [↩]

Ibid., 287. [↩]

Gary K. Wolfe, "The Remaking of Zero," in The End of the World, ed. Eric S. Rabkin, Martin H. Greenberg, and Joseph D. Olander (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), 8.

Wolfe explains that “[t]he formula may be varied in many ways, with some elements expanded . . . others deleted, and new ones added” (8). He also mentions that the bleak ending of A Boy and His Dog suggests that values, although trivial and sentimental, will survive in the post-holocaust world, but it seems to me that Wolfe is misreading these “values” in a positive light, when in fact they are essentially pragmatic and ultimately destined to decay. [↩]

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Ibid. [↩]

Ellison, “JON from BOSTON,” Unca Harlan’s Art Deco Pavilion, December 2, 2001, http://harlanellison.com/heboard/archive/bull0111.htm (accessed July 14, 2020). [↩]

Ibid. [↩]

Ellen Weil and Gary K. Wolfe, Harlan Ellison: The Edge of Forever (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002), 152. [↩]

Ellison, “A Boy and His Dog,” in Beyond Armageddon, ed. Walter M. Miller Jr. and Martin H. Greenberg (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 356. Unless otherwise stated, all references to the novella will be to this text. [↩]

David Mogen, Wilderness Visions: The Western Theme in Science Fiction Literature, 2nd ed. (San Bernardino, CA: Borgo Press, 1993), 104. [↩]

Ellison, “A Boy and His Dog,” 362. [↩]

Ibid., 363. [↩]

Ibid., 365. [↩]

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Ellison, “Ahbhu,” in The Harlan Ellison Hornbook (New York: Penzler, 1990), 186. [↩]

Martha A. Bartter, The Way to Ground Zero: The Atomic Bomb in American Science Fiction (New York: Greewnwood Press, 1988), 234. [↩]

For examples of the scholarly discourse surrounding “A Boy and His Dog,” see Joseph Francavilla, “Mythic Hells in Harlan Ellison’s Science Fiction,” in Phoenix from the Ashes: The Literature of the Remade World, ed. Carl B. Yoke (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 157-64;

David Mogen, “Regressive Frontiers: Pastoralism and Other Survivors,” in Wilderness Visions: The Western Theme in Science Fiction Literature 2nd ed. (San Bernardino, CA: Borgo Press, 1993), 93-107; John Crow and Richard Erlich, “Mythic Patterns in Ellison’s A Boy and His Dog,” Extrapolation 18.2 (1977): 162-66; and Albert E. Stone, “Fictions and America’s Reawakening, 1979-1992,” in Literary Aftershocks: American Writers, Readers, and the Bomb (New York: Twayne, 1994), 74-75. [↩]

Carolyn Wendell, “The Alien Species: A Study of Women Characters in the Nebula Award Winners, 1965-1973,” Extrapolation 20 (1979): 343-54. Quoted in Weil and Wolfe, Harlan Ellison, 151. [↩]

Ellison, “To MICHELLE and ERIC MARTIN,” Unca Harlan’s Art Deco Pavilion, June 4, 2002, http://harlanellison.com/heboard/archive/bull20020709.htm (accessed July 14, 2020). [↩]

Peter Wright, review of A Boy and His Dog, directed by L. Q. Jones, Science Fiction Film and Television 1.2 (2008): 341-46. [↩]

Ellison, “Ellison on Ellison,” The Book of Ellison, ed. Andrew Porter (New York: Algol Press, 1978), 74. [↩]

Ibid., 77. [↩]

Ellison, telephone interview with author, July 10, 2009. [↩]

Ibid. [↩]

L. Q. Jones, Rover Blood (Hollywood: Script City, 1974), 21. [↩]

Ibid. [↩]

Ibid. [↩]

Ellison, telephone interview with author, July 10, 2009. [↩]

Jones, Rover Blood, 55-56. [↩]

Ibid., 102. [↩]

Ibid. [↩]

Ellison, telephone interview with author, July 10, 2009. [↩]

Ellison, “After Vic and Blood,” endpaper. [↩]

Michael Clark, “The Future of History: Violence and the Feminine in Contemporary Science Fiction,” in American Studies in Transition, ed. David E. Nye and Christian Kold Thomsen (collection of papers presented at the Faborg Conference on American Studies in Transition, Odense, Denmark, June 11-15, 1984: Odense University Press, 1985), 243. [↩]

Joanna Russ, “‘A Boy and His Dog’: The Final Solution,” Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies 1.1 (1975): 161. [↩]

Ibid. Russ finds Ellison’s novella “somewhat different from the film; no one in the story is totally sympathetic or totally evil and in particular the events surrounding the two main characters’ escape from the story’s underground society – he’s an intruder and she’s a native, but both are misfits – are such as to preclude choosing one character as morally better than another. Furthermore, the story is told from the male character’s point of view, a technique that admits both his relative ignorance of other people in the tale and his natural bias in favor of himself” (161). [↩]

Ellison, telephone interview with author, July 10, 2009. Ellison believes that this line, besides its sexism, is offensive because it is illogical: “The dog would not call a woman a cow; he knows the difference between them.” [↩]

Ibid. [↩]

Both the original trailer and the revised 1982 trailer are available on the First Run Features DVD of A Boy and His Dog. [↩]

Ellison, “After Vic and Blood,” endpaper. [↩]

Jen Yamato, “L. Q. Jones on A Boy and His Dog: The RT Interview,” Rotten Tomatoes, February 6, 2008, https://editorial.rottentomatoes.com/article/lq-jones-on-a-boy-and-his-dog-the-rt-interview/ (accessed July 14, 2020). [↩]

Jerome F. Shapiro, “Losing Faith in Social Institutions,” in Atomic Bomb Cinema: The Apocalyptic Imagination on Film (New York: Routledge, 2002), 162. [↩]

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Jen Yamato, "L.Q. Jones." [↩]

Originally published in Bright Lights Film Journal, August 21, 2020.
Source:
https://brightlightsfilm.com/a-world-like-this-deserves-contempt-adapting-harlan-ellisons-a-boy-and-his-dog/