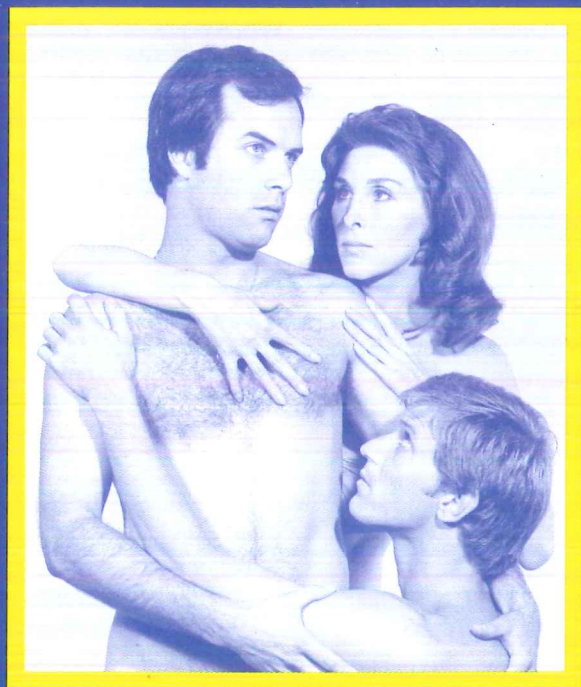




Free to Love: the Cinema of the Sexual Revolution

International House Philadelphia

Elena Gorfinkel



Radley Metzger, *Score*, 1972
Images courtesy Audubon Films

Seduction Time: Radley Metzgers' "Score" and the Utopian Gesture

"I'd jump in the sack with a porcupine
if it struck my fancy."

—Elvira in *Score*

"Making a film is a form of seduction
between director and cast."

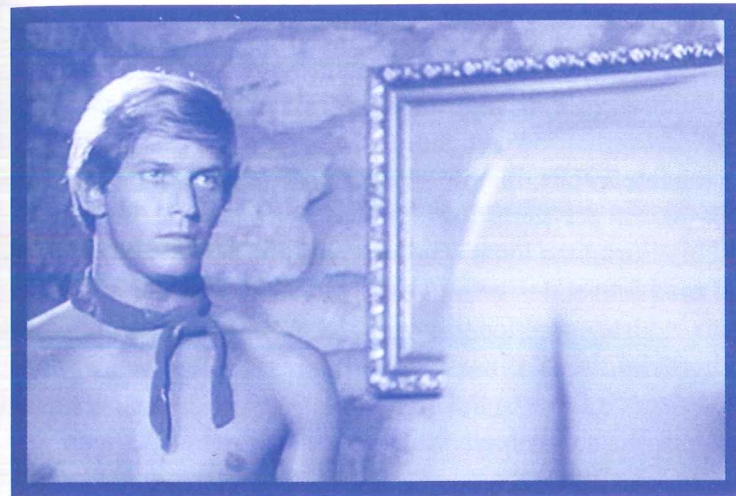
—Radley Metzger

Radley Metzger's *Score* (1972) is perhaps one of the most utopian sex films of its era, a self-professed adult fairytale that occurs "once upon a future time." The film presents the story of two married couples—libertine swingers Elvira and Jack and young innocents Betsy and Eddie—who embark on an evening of same-sex seduction. Taking place over the course of a single day, charmingly buoyant in its dialogue, and scored to the refrain of an infectious unknown rock song, "Where is the Girl," Metzger based the film on the off-Broadway play of the same name by Jerry Douglas. The free-loving Elvira (Claire Wilbur) makes a wager with her husband Jack (Gerald Grant) that she can seduce the naive Betsy (Lynn Lowry). The bet is part of an ongoing, playful agon between the couple, measured by their successful seductions and sexual conquests over the last six months. Thus the titular keeping of a score, and the "score" itself, is timed to a deadline, an inbuilt apparatus of suspense: the virtuous Betsy must be "achieved" by the stroke of midnight. Timing is everything in this compressed romp, particularly in the anticipation of the pleasure yet to come. Innuendo, double entendre, barely veiled implications, seemingly innocent suggestions, all point to the slowly developing telos of erotic release and the grander design of Elvira and Jack's game, one that is as contingent on the frisson of limitation and restriction, on the challenge of the chase, as it is on an idea

of untrammelled freedom. By the end of the evening, a night replete with the playtime of dressing-up in costumes (sailor, cowboy, harlot, nun), dancing, smoking pot, and sniffing poppers, Betsy has succumbed to the ministrations of Elvira, while the closeted Eddie (Cal Culver) has fallen into the firm embrace of the bemused Jack.

Score's timing and timeliness is as much formal as it is historical. It occupies a unique place in the history of adult cinema and sexual representation of the late 1960s and early 1970s. It is a distillation of the complex transformations of the sexual revolution and a fundamentally queer text that imbibes, with breezy finesse, the idealist spirit of the era's aspirations to sexual egalitarianism. The film is at once a sexploitation film made on the cusp of the arrival of hardcore feature-length pornography and an art film that presents an intensely modulated sexual parlor game. *Score* thus embodies the hybridity of its director's oeuvre, his location between art house, sexploitation, and pornographic filmmaking modes.

Metzger's status in the emerging adult cinema of the 1960s as the most prominent maker and distributor of erotic films in this period is well documented but often under examined in film histories of the industry and screen sex. A lifelong cinephile, Metzger began his film career in the 1950s as a freelance editor, notably editing the late neorealist film *Bitter Rice* (1949, Giuseppe DiSantis) for its US release at RKO, and later cutting trailers for Bergman, Antonioni, and Truffaut films in the late 1950s and early 1960s at Janus Films.¹ Metzger left Janus to start the production and distribution house Audubon Films with his business partner, Ava Leighton, as they bought and distributed many racy imports (sometimes with inserted, newly shot footage) for the burgeoning US art-house market—films such as *Mademoiselle Striptease* (1959/63), *Sweet Ecstasy*, with Elke Sommer (1962), *Sexus* (1965), and *The Libertine* (1969).



Their distribution of the Swedish import *I, A Woman* (US 1966, Mac Ahlberg), starring the fulsome Essy Persson, was an erotic film landmark which made over \$3 million in its US release; it did a considerable amount to expand the sex film market toward more “upscale” venues beyond those of the grindhouse.² Audubon widened sexploitation’s predominantly male audience base to include women, couples, and hipper, younger audiences, elevating the status of and imparting a certain seriousness to the lowly category of the sex film.

Dubbed an “aristocrat of the erotic” by critics and industry observers in the 1960s, Metzger made contributions to American film culture with his hybridization of two distinct modes of production: the imported art film with its complex, ambivalent characters and frank, adult themes, and the sexploitation film, produced by a proliferating cottage industry in the US that parlayed low-budget erotic potboilers leavened with female nudity and a leering, illicit address towards sexual subjects. In his own films, Metzger’s aesthetic approach and moral stance on sexuality remained decidedly permissive and Continental. By the late 1960s, his film budgets also far exceeded the \$20–40,000 per-picture average of sexploitation films, and his European locations, international name actors, and modern set design and extravagant costumes attested to an industry practice that was clearly aligned with the pedigree of the art cinema. One can readily see the affinity of Metzger’s films to the contemplative, conceptual tone of Alain Resnais mixed with the pop lustiness of Roger Vadim—far more than a resemblance to his bawdy, brash sexploitation contemporaries Russ Meyer or David Friedman. Metzger’s comparably opulent films, in their attention to the travails and subjectivities of the upper classes, often deployed the adaptation and erotic modernization of literary

sources—Prosper Merimee’s *Carmen von Carmen*, *Baby* (1967), Alexandre Dumas II’s *The Lady of the Camellias* in *Camille 2000* (1969) and Violette Leduc’s novel of the same name in *Therese and Isabelle* (1969). These films honed their focus on the erotics of the existential over the economic, and prioritized the charmingly disaffected rather than the sensational desperation of the down-and-out. The tropes of female desire, subjectivity, and longing, as well as the drama of non-normative object choices, particularly lesbianism, were a central component of Metzger’s oeuvre, presaging his foray into bisexuality and same-sex experimentation in *Score*.

Shot in 1972 in Yugoslavia, and released in late 1973, *Score* had to find its niche in the trailing wake of “porno chic,” heralded most notoriously with the widespread exhibition of Gerard Damiano’s *Deep Throat* (1972). Despite legal rulings and public consternation, the hardcore feature was becoming a permanent fixture in the cultural landscape. This sea change in movies’ sexual explicitness was altering conceptions of public and private spheres, proper and improper film tastes, permissible and impermissible desires. Located at this historical juncture between softcore and hardcore filmmaking, *Score* signals the end of an era for Metzger, as one of his last softcore films. He would subsequently transition into pseudonymous hardcore film production as Henry Paris, directing now-esteemed porn classics such as *The Private Afternoons of Pamela Mann* (1974), *The Opening of Misty Beethoven* (1976), and *Barbara Broadcast* (1977).

One of the first films to generously present bisexuality right at the cusp of the arrival of “bisexual chic,” as announced by *Newsweek* in 1974, and in an era of gay liberation, *Score* was also perched between straight and gay adult cinemas. *Score* was released in softcore and hardcore versions, the latter geared to appeal to gay audiences and

YOU'VE BEEN READING ABOUT THE BI-SEXUAL CHIC PHENOMENON

"Metzger's major sex scenes, which describe the initiation into bisexuality of a naive young couple by an experienced older one, have a flow, and erotic rhythm and an intensity greater than most sex you see on film. The sex, instead of being presented as something remarkable in itself (which, in 1974, is hardly the case) has been given imaginative, compelling cinematic form. It makes voyeurism seem artistic."

Howard Kissel/WOMEN'S WEAR DAILY

"Radley Metzger has outdone himself with 'SCORE'. It has performers of chic and muscle, and a plot securely tied to the long suspense of seduction. Lest you think that all this has diluted the essential porn, be comforted. It's all there; male and female, female and female, male and male. The 'X' rating is richly deserved."

Archer Winsten/N.Y. POST

"It's titillating! You could go see 'Score' with a friend, have lots of laughs and draw some interesting conclusions!"

Liz Smith/COSMOPOLITAN

"'SCORE' gives you more!"

Frances Taylor/L.I. PRESS

"Something for everybody."

Arthur Knight/
PLAYGIRL MAGAZINE

"Swinging both ways is the new wrinkle explored by Metzger."

Bruce Williamson/PLAYBOY

"Will appeal to just about any sexual appetite."

—ADVOCATE

"Metzger explores a world of textures, sounds and colors, each complementing the other, all part of the visual, aural, sexual experience...leaves everyone sexually charged."

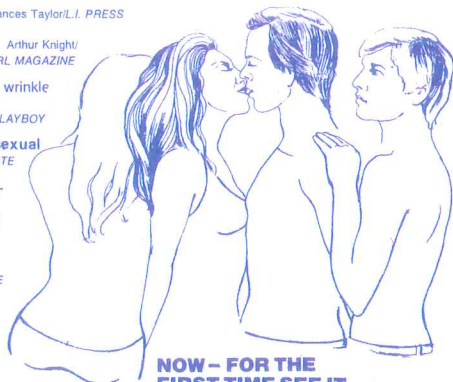
GALLERY MAGAZINE

"Radley Metzger has pulled a neat trick in making this well written, well photographed film a triple A — adult, amusing and artistic."

Norma McIn Stoop/AFTER DARK

"Radley Metzger hilariously hits the bulls eye of Bi-sexual chic — a guaranteed turn on for any audience."

Robert Weiner/
INTERVIEW/
ZOO WORLD



NOW — FOR THE
FIRST TIME SEE IT
AT WORK AND PLAY IN
RADLEY METZGER'S

“score”

With Claire Wilbur/Calvin Culver/Lynn Lowry/Gerald Grant/Carl Parker
Screenplay by Jerry Douglas/Eastmancolor/Directed by Radley Metzger
an Audubon Films Release/In Color

included an extra seven minutes of male frontal nudity and explicit sex performed by the openly gay Grant and Culver. Culver had just appeared, as Casey Donovan, in Wakefield Poole's hallmark gay hardcore film *Boys in the Sand* (1971), and he would go on to star in Jerry Douglas' *The Back Row* (1973), among many others that decade. *Score* may have suffered at the box office due to its risky and progressive paralleling of male and female bisexuality; the predominantly straight male sexploitation public was a tough sell, whereas "women respond[ed] to that footage," as reported in an account of Audubon's different campaigns for the film.³ Both swinging and bisexuality were certainly afoot in other mid-range films of the time: in Paul Mazursky's *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice* (1969) and John Schlesinger's *Sunday Bloody Sunday* (1971), films undoubtedly more realist, equivocating, and far less explicitly sexual than *Score*.

What perhaps defines *Score* the most strongly is its quality of a cinephilic time capsule, a carefree confection of the fantasy of erotic transformation, particularly that experienced by Betsy and Eddie. The narrative of transformation is also central to a liberatory discourse of sexuality of the era. *Score*, in its optimism and lightness, establishes a particular tone unique for adult cinema of the time. On the one hand, its intellectual seriousness allies it with a libertine pedagogy à la Sade's *Philosophy of the Bedroom*, yet its humor and comic styling recall the innuendo and repartee of Hollywood screwball comedy and the bourgeois farce of Ernst Lubitsch. The intellectual stakes of Metzger's erotics are here most readily unveiled: he is fundamentally a fantasist, something also made eminently clear by one of his prior films, *The Lickerish Quartet* (1970), a treatise on projection, fantasy, and the mutability of cinematic experience, filtered through Pirandello and Pasolini's *Teorema* (1968). It is precisely in the sphere of fantasy—whose apogee

one could claim is the cinema—that the utopian possibility of autonomous erotic expression can be achieved.

Consider the opening sexual triangulation that serves as the prelude to Betsy's later seduction. Elvira pretends the phone line is broken, and has Jack call the telephone company. The worried Betsy, who had been trying to call, comes over to chat with Elvira, inquiring about their taste for swinging. Jack and Elvira had put an ad in a paper and hooked up with a tourist couple the night before, and their house is still mussed with the traces of last night's sex party. The telephone man, Mike Nixon (the axiomatically masculine Carl Parker), arrives to fix the phone line, and Elvira mounts her offensive. While salaciously talking up the repairman, she trips Betsy as she passes him his coffee, and the unraveling begins. The repairman's soaked shirt comes off, cream must be procured to lubricate the burn on his chest, more clothes are removed as Elvira and Mike get horizontal on the shag rug, all while Betsy watches from the corner of the room, Jack's Polaroid camera in hand. We have thus moved with speed and ease, in Sadean fashion, from the explication to the demonstration of libertinage, all in the interest of staging a scene to pique Betsy—who had just an hour or two earlier been rebuffed by Eddie in their marital bed. Curious yet unschooled, not knowing how to look at what she sees, yet not wanting to look away, Betsy clicks the Polaroid and takes a picture just as Elvira and Mike vigorously roll on the shag rug and fuck, reaching orgasm. There is a sharp cut right at the moment of the click, to across town, as Jack's photo shoot (he is a professional photographer of "nudes") climaxes as his model high-dive splashes into the water. This architectonic yet incredibly buoyant series of actions provides a particular kind of delight—the pleasure taken in the rhythmic pacing of its design, a telos of erotic causality, as well as the ramification of the metatextual frame and of the "corrupted"

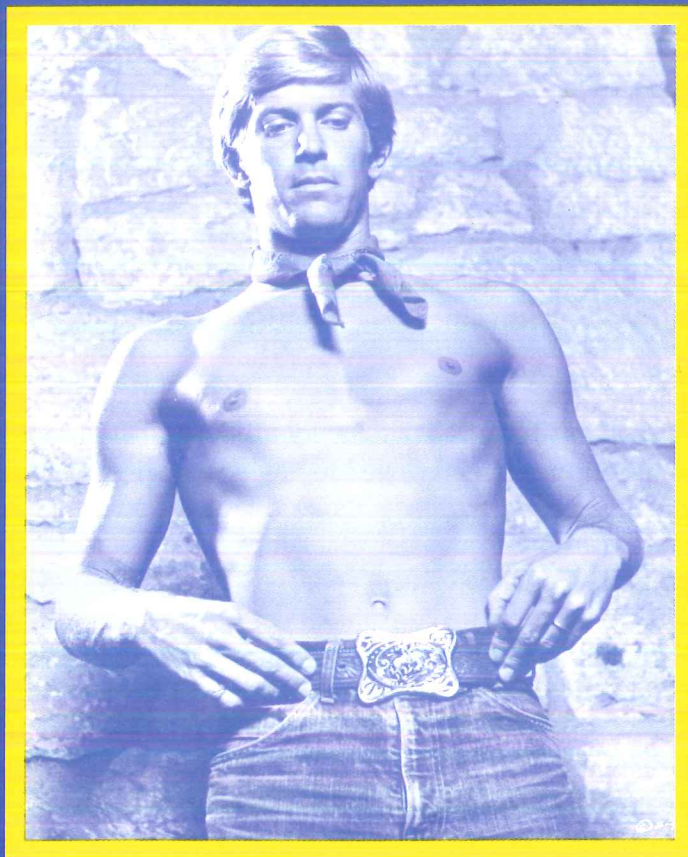


spectator, Betsy, who, by looking, “frames” the action. One sexual action sets off another and then another, until the momentum cannot be arrested or stalled, and Betsy, the erotic initiate of *Score*, must enter the sexual scene, the frame of the fantasy itself. *Score* thus enacts the timing—the suspense, the anticipation—of seduction, as well as its intimacy, fragility, and psychological and corporeal intensity. The will to seduce is also coextensive with a willingness to be seduced, and *Score* shrewdly recognizes this irony. The film’s essential modernity aligns with its fablelike and fabulated premise, creating out of erotic aspiration something unequivocally more abstract.

Metzger’s late-1960s films elaborated an aesthetic indebted to the hallowed *mise-en-scène* tradition of Max Ophüls and Josef von Sternberg; Richard Corliss vividly remarked that “Metzger’s intentions to become the Ophüls of orgasm, the concupiscent Cukor, are the most appealing aspects of the man and his gaudily proficient films.”⁴ The extravagances of a lush *mise-en-scène*, ornate set design, and striking compositions pulse throughout Metzger’s cinema, and he once noted that it was Jean Renoir who impressed upon him that “there’s just one moment that people remember in a film and that’s enough.”⁵ This credo becomes a hyperbolic axiom, as *Therese*, *Camille*, and *Carmen* are full of arresting shots, refracting images, and vibratory fragments, overflowing with the decorative surplus that incited disdain as well as admiration from his critics. For example, we can recall the way in which Metzger films bodies through glass bottles in *Carmen*, and, in *Camille 2000*, how he employs a minimalist, pneumatic, white mod set with clear plastic bed and refracting mirrors and dramatizes Camille’s orgasm through a rack focus between a close-up of Danielle Gaubert’s face and a vase of camellias.

In *Score*, this precedent of sumptuous production design is considerably scaled back, yet an aesthetic decadence is still at work. Shot on the Dalmatian coast of Yugoslavia to resemble a luxurious Riviera-ish resort town, the film’s modest budget and less lavish settings facilitated a closer focus on the actor’s performing bodies and a tighter shooting style and framing than the long shots prevalent in Metzger’s prior films. Metzger made liberal use of selective focus, using a shallow depth of field and alternating between characters in medium close-up as a means of accentuating the febrile nature of an as-yet-unconsummated sexual encounter. Faces and crotches, upper and lower extremities are often placed together in a post-*Graduate* framing *mélange* which manipulates the depth and spatial relations of an image. Metzger also served as the principal camera operator on this film, one of the only instances that he would take on the directing and cinematography, which yields a particular quality of intimacy between camera and subjects—particularly in the scenes between Culver and Grant, at one point in which the camera appears attached to Grant’s posterior in the softcore version of the film, both showing yet still withholding the spectacle of *fellatio*.

The sprightly and clever editorial organization develops a quickening pace as the film develops, and it never lets an image lag or expire. Metzger’s style shows itself most radically through its use of two staples of cinematic continuity, shot-reverse shot and cross-cutting, the latter in patterns that connect the sexual action happening upstairs and downstairs, as Elvira’s “Operation Musicbox” accelerates. Building an intensifying domino game out of finely wrought close-ups, which suggest the intoxicating flirtation of a boozy encounter in which bodies are rendered in their encroaching closeness to each other, the editing highlights Metzger’s capacity to carve cinematic space out of flesh, among other



material, profilmic elements. The archly regal Wilbur, the tanned and stolid Grant, the childishly petulant Lowry, and the homespun, all-American Culver offer up their features, their poised, expectant faces, and the agile extremities of their bodies, in concert with the plentiful decorative things, those cinematic objects and props which so often take a great part in the erotic congress mobilizing Metzger's filmic compositions. Numerous images resonate with an eroticization of that which exists just out of frame. The handover of the jeans for Eddie's cowboy costume, for example, rests on a visual pun in which the V shape of the denim's legs, held upside down by Jack, becomes a come-on gesture, signaling Jack's desire and Eddie's nakedness. The consummating sex scene between the two men contains a striking shot in which the empty frame is penetrated by a pointy red object, slow moving into the center of the image. We realize that it is the red bandana that has been tied by Jack around Eddie's neck, a sartorial appendage reflecting Eddie's desired self—the cowboy, his masculine ego ideal—and an erect signifier that precedes an oncoming open-mouthed kiss between the two as their faces slowly inhabit and take over the composition.

In these myriad instants, *Score* constructs the visual pleasure of erotic synchronicity via a deftly manipulated mise-en-scene and the precision of montage. As with Metzger's earlier films, mirrors, plants, glass objects, sculptures, rugs, and other textural elements brush up against or partly obscure the bodies maneuvering around each other in the shot. Producing a thicket of textures within the frame itself, an unstripped image layered with seductive scrimms, screens, reflections, and chromatic filters, *Score* pulsates with the vibrant density of an extended aesthetic of forepleasure. Early in the film, a closeup shot of coffee cups being stirred at contrasting speeds, by Elvira and Betsy, acts as a prelude to other forms of possible sexual synchronicity. After their

dinner, the pulsing lights of a disco ball and spectrum light chromatically diffuse the two couples' faces in tints of red, blue, and green. A tent-shaped mirror over Elvira's bed creates a space of enclosure, mirroring Betsy's beseeching face, upending and refracting her plaintive curiosity and self-questioning. And one of the most visually emblematic scenes of *Score* features a wave machine that cuts across the frame and blocks off Elvira and Betsy's faces as they talk on either side of the sculptural object in shot-reverse shot. The distorted transparency between Elvira's and Betsy's faces, the rocking to and fro of the blue viscous fluid, becomes an allegory for the swaying play, the opacity of desire, the narrowing gulf of what is as yet unspoken between them. This fusion of bodily energy and thingly ineffability is Metzger's calling and his charge, an imperative to create abstract patterns out of the continuity script of bodies attempting to meet each other in time, to seize upon each other in the unexpectedly rhyming couplets of female-female and male-male.

Politically, the progressive aspirations and affects of *Score* signal a polymorphously perverse ideal of erotic play, embodied in the resonant line, uttered in different moments, with slightly different inflections, by both Jack and Elvira that "I'd climb aboard a porcupine if it struck my fancy." What better articulation of the erotic equanimity of the era? Marriage is conceived by the film as a structure that can be tolerated at best, a limiting architecture to be innovated through alternative intimacies. Dismantling the model of "two" and the hetero-centric couple form in the interest of more labile arrangements of kinship and pleasure, the film presumes that the modern couple so central to and so troubled in the art cinema is here divested of any aspiration towards social reproduction or productivity, and the desire of the married partners should only multiply and attract thirds and fourths. Each partner's sexual autonomy is preserved,

as Eddie and Betsy accept each other's divergences, while a modified kinship arrangement—sexuality as sociality itself—is perpetuated. No wonder then that by the end of the film, Betsy and Eddie leave Elvira and Jack in the morning-after lurch, apt pupils who run off, joyously absconding with Mike the repairman on a new "score" of their own. While Jack and Elvira make do by planning to see a Michael Powell film, a waiter at a café suddenly magnetizes their attentions, and the cycle of seduction time begins again. The sing-song voiceover tells us in conclusion that "in the meantime, for there is always a meantime, fantasy reigns supreme." This designation of an erstwhile, an expectant time between, encapsulates both the historicity and the suspended pleasures of the 1970s erotic imagination, as well as Metzger's.

1.

Richard Brown, "Radley Metzger: Auteur of the Erotic," *Today's Filmmaker*, August 1971, 27–28.

2.

Vincent Canby, "Essy the Spirit, Essy the Body," *New York Times*, 26 May 1968.

3.

Addison Verrill, "Test for Right Sell to Wrong Sex," *Variety*, 3 July 1974, 17.

4.

Richard Corliss, *Village Voice*, 11 December 1969. Quoted in Museum of Modern Art film notes, *Camille 2000*, "New Acquisitions" screening, 22 April 1976, MoMA Film Study Center, New York.

5.

Stephen Gallagher, "The Libertine: On *Score*'s Radley Metzger" (interview), *Filmmaker*, Summer 1997, <http://www.filmmakermagazine.com/archives/issues/summer1997/metzger.php> (accessed 1 August 2013).