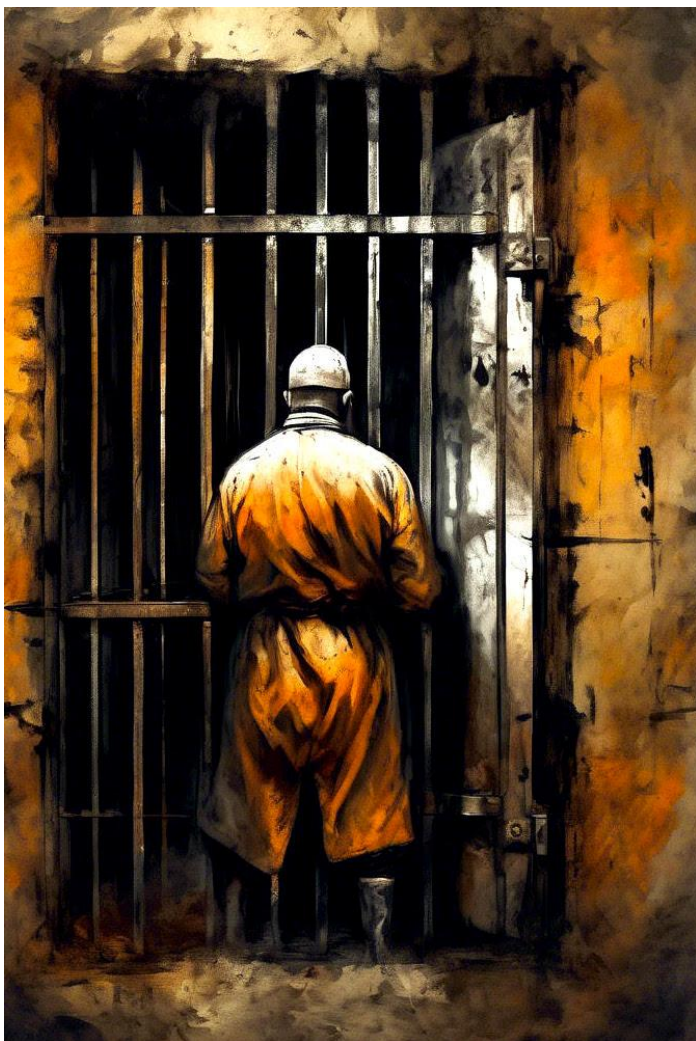

THE 2025 O:JA&L PAMPHLET SERIES

THE FUTURE IS MAO!



Mick McGrath

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THE FUTURE IS MAO!

Everyone had been talking about *The Future Is Mao!*, the highly publicized fashion show right here in L.A. This was the debut of the new ready-to-wear collection from the brilliant young designer, Astyages.

Paul and I were there. At *The Future Is Mao!* Paul Brand, the famous actor. He and I were dating at the time. We were living together. This is where we first encountered the Mao Fit.

Paul said he loved the Mao Fit. Meanwhile, I thought it was fugly. But of course, I'm in the minority on this one. The Mao Fit is everywhere now, all over Los Angeles. The Mao Fit is *de rigueur*. The Mao Fit is *comme il faut*.

We were sitting together in the front row, watching as the first model charged down the runway with total sangfroid.

"Brilliant," Paul wooed, practically drooling. "C'est fantastique!"

Paul doesn't speak French. He knows a few words and phrases, but that's it. And the words he does know are cognates.

The first model arrived at the top of the runway. Everyone took pictures as the model posed briefly and U-turned. She wore the standard Mao Fit – grey jacket, grey trousers.

"Gee," I said, "you don't think it's a little...I don't know...austere, Paul?"

"C'est depouille, Dorian."

The second model wore the standard Mao Fit, too – grey jacket, grey trousers. The trousers were baggy, the kind of thing Katherine Hepburn used to wear.

The third model wore the standard Mao Fit, too. So did the fourth. And the fifth. And the sixth. Paul and I just sat there, watching. So far, all the models were identical, like products on a conveyer belt, like cans of tomato soup.

The seventh model wore the Mao Fit, too, except her jacket was cropped short like a matador's bolero and everyone could see her tight stomach, her cute belly button. The bolero was darker than the other jackets, more charcoal than grey.

"The color of rat fur," I moaned, watching the show.

Paul turned in his seat and looked at me.

"Excuse me?" he said.

"That bolero," I said. "It's the color of rat fur, darker than the other jackets."

"Don't you like it, Dorian?"

I sighed tiredly and said, "If I want to see ratty wool jackets, I'll go to Skid Row, Paul."

Paul looked back at the runway. He sighed.

"Yes, these models do look like ragamuffins," he conceded. "Tatterdemalions."

"Yeah," I said. "And the women are all au naturale. No Max Factor for them, Paul."

Paul looked at me again.

"Max Factor?" he said. "You know, a lot of beauty products have asbestos in them, Dorian. You can get mesothelioma."

“No tanning beds for them, either” I said.

“They have a natural beauty to them, Dorian. Like Carmen Kass.”

“They look like Puritans, Paul. All covered up. Except for the one with the bolero, of course. They leave everything to the imagination. And they look like the goddamn Manson family with their shaved heads.”

Paul looked at me again.

“But surely you see what Astyages is going for. Don’t you, Dorian? You do see what he’s trying to do. Right?”

“Put us all to sleep?” I said.

Paul looked back at the catwalk.

“Oh, that jacket,” he moaned, squinting, shaking his head in total astonishment. “Oh, that grey jacket. Those grey trousers. Chef’s kiss, Dorian. C’est formidable.”

“You gonna jack it to that jacket, Paul?”

“The Mao Fit is cheap, Dorian. Made of cheap rag wool. Grey and sort of dreary. Indeed, ugly.”

“Like brutalist architecture,” I said.

“Not colorful or vibrant or dazzling, Dorian. None of that.” Paul looked at me yet again. “You do recognize what Astyages is trying to do, then. Don’t you, Dorian? Surely you see what he’s up to.”

I started playing Tetris on my phone. Paul gasped in mind-bending horror and told me I was being disrespectful and to put away my phone immediately lest someone see me. I huffed and put away my phone.

I looked around. Who would see me, anyway?

Giles Bensimon was in attendance. So was Brandon Maxwell. And Philip Treacy, the famous milliner. He was here, too. And another

milliner, Eric Javits, famous for designing the hat Melania wore at the inauguration.

They were all here for the Mao Fit.

paul et moi

Paul and I had been dating for a year or so. We'd been living together in his L.A. condo for about nine months.

I should have seen it coming: About three months after *The Future Is Mao!*, Paul would excommunicate me, kicking me out of his condo.

But for a while there, we got along great. Paul and I would run lines together. We'd talk about craft. We would discuss my upcoming auditions.

I'd only been in a few small movies: an action movie called Force Multiplier, a romantic comedy called Girl, You're Too Good for Him, a horror film called Stabathon 2.

Stabathon 2 is porn adjacent, an erotic thriller. It's not exactly The Iceman Cometh.

My parents, whom I haven't seen in years, are disappointed in me. For God's sake, what is Dorian doing out there in California? they likely ask each other, sitting in their rocking chairs, in their Northern Michigan cottage.

I had, to be fair, scored an audition for the prestige film, Jamal Had Nothing to Do with It, but I'd argued with the director, the great Maximilien Shaw, about the overall message of the movie. I couldn't bite my tongue – people say I'm self-destructive.

"Listen," I'd told Mr. Shaw, during my audition. "You've written a script here called Jamal Had Nothing to Do with It. Interesting choice for the character's name, by the way. Anyway, the script is about a black man falsely accused of murder, and while the falsely

accused black man isn't unheard of here in America, anyone who knows the statistics knows that just isn't the typical story when a black male appears before a judge. I mean, come on. When are we going to stop lathering the black man's ass and start...like...holding young black males accountable? We're artists, Mr. Shaw. And, as artists, we should be asking uncomfortable questions, should we not? If cinema isn't exploring multiple perspectives, uncomfortable questions, I'm afraid it isn't art at all, Mr. Shaw. It may be fine art, but it isn't art at all. In other words, it has no utilitarian value, Mr. Shaw. No function. Therefore, it is fine art – not art at all, if you know what I mean. Or am I getting the two mixed up? Art and fine art? Anyway, in my opinion, this script needs a complete rewrite, Mr. Shaw. At the very least, it should be more nuanced, complicated."

Needless to say, I didn't get the part. The great Maximilien Shaw even called me a racist – a story for my grandchildren, no doubt, not that I intend to have grandchildren, or even children for that matter.

I didn't dare tell Paul what had happened at the audition – suffice it to say Paul would not approve. When he heard I didn't get the part, Paul just assumed one of the classic reasons – I wasn't right for it, or perhaps I'd blown my audition, stammering my way through my lines. Maximilien Shaw is a perfectionist, after all – it isn't easy to land a role in one of his movies, even if the role is a tertiary character.

"Ah, come on," Paul said, when I got back to his condo that day, after the audition. "Rejection is a part of it, Dorian." He threw his arm around me as soon as I stepped across the threshold into his foyer. "Hell, I've been rejected a million times, porkchop. A million times, mon petit sausage. When I was in my twenties, I heard the word no every day. Rejection is a part of it, sweetie. Rejection is the road. It's heartbreaking to be rejected, certainly, but you have to learn that, my little porkchop, mon petite sausage."

Paul is forty years old, fifteen years my senior. I sometimes joked with Paul that I was his catamite. Paul didn't like that.

Paul had taken me under his wing. He was giving me "an education," showing me obscure Bunuel films. We talked endlessly about craft.

“Learn to do nothing,” Paul told me, one day.

“Nothing, Paul?”

“Bad actors think they have to do something. Learn to do nothing. Subtlety, Dorian. Subtlety’s the key. Less is more. You know?”

I looked at him, searchingly.

“Okay,” Paul started. “Let’s say you’re doing a scene, right? And your screen mate tells you your mother has just died. Bad actors think they have to fall to their knees and weep. Learn to do nothing, Dorian. A lot of actors think they have to earn their money. Learn to do nothing. Literally nothing.”

Paul was my docent, leading me through the history of cinema. We played a game of “Around the World,” watching Eisenstein, Truffaut, Ozu, Kurosawa, De Sica, Visconti, Bergman... Paul showed me bizarre Bunuel films like *l’Age d’Or* and *Exterminating Angel*.

One night, we watched Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin*. Paul was excited, even though he’d seen it a million times. He said *Battleship Potemkin* is considered the finest propaganda film ever made.

“Welp, it’s all propaganda these days, isn’t it, Paul?”

“Excuse me?”

I was sitting right next to him, on his beautiful chesterfield, in his L.A. condo. The truth is I’d had a bit too much Beaujolais.

“All propaganda, Dorian?”

“That’s right,” I said, doubling down. “It’s all propaganda these days.”

“Oh? Tell me more, darling. Do tell me more.”

I was eating popcorn. I was speaking with my mouth full. Paul is always telling not to speak with my mouth full.

“Well, darling, what happens to a society, darling, when the taboo is ubiquitously excised from art?” I said.

“Taboo?” Paul said. “Ah, but you see, it’s a business, porkchop. A business. To make more money, we gotta make films that’ll get past the Chinese censors. Sorry.”

“Fucking Francoism,” I muttered, shaking my head resentfully.

“Excuse me?” Paul said again.

“Nothing,” I said. “Let’s just watch the movie.”

“No really,” Paul insisted.

“Well, what about ESG?” I said. “A different kind of ESG? One where we’re all concerned about democracy? I mean, what happens to a democracy when there’s no concern for diversity?”

“No concern for diversity?” Paul scoffed. “Here in Hollywood? Surely you jest, Dorian. Surely you jest.”

“Ideological diversity,” I clarified. “What happens to a society when there’s no healthy opposition, Paul? When uncomfortable questions are excised from art because they might offend people?”

Paul thought for a moment.

“Uncomfortable questions?” he said. “Like what, my cuddly muffin? What’d you ever have in mind, Honey Bunches of Oats?”

“What about the search for truth?” I continued. “Humanity’s ongoing disinterested search for truth.”

Paul cleared his throat.

“Okay, but what are these uncomfortable questions?” he pressed.

“What’d you have in mind, Dorian? Give us a few examples.”

“Forget it, Paul. I don’t dare.”

I took a sip of my Beaujolais.

Paul looked at me curiously, cocking his head like a dog. Then the Odessa Staircase sequence began, and Paul gasped, saying, “My favorite part, Dorian! Oh, you simply must watch this!”

He snatched the clicker from the coffee table and turned up the volume.

We got quite drunk that night, watching Battleship Potemkin, and the next day, Paul didn’t remember our conversation.

A couple of years ago, Paul played the brawny John Wayne type in a western called Appaloosas Over Yonder. His next film was Blue Wall of Silence.

I’m sure you’ve heard of Blue Wall of Silence. It got a lot of attention when it came out a couple of years ago. The New Yorker said Paul was “profoundly disturbing in Blue Wall of Silence.” A “Viking berserker,” they called him. His character, they said, is “a blood-soaked predator,” a “depraved killer,” a racist cop hellbent on killing as many black boys as possible under the pretense of maintaining law and order. Art Forum said Paul was “spellbinding.” Cahier du Cinema said, “You can’t take your eyes off Paul Brand in Blue Wall of Silence.”

Paul was rather sexy in the film. With his mustache. And his aviator sunglasses. And his blue uniform. Vile, to be sure. But sexy.

Still, I thought reviews of the film were wack. Blue Wall of Silence may be an important film, but it isn’t cinematically compelling. There’s nothing special about Blue Wall of Silence. Nothing special about the cinematography, for instance. Or the non-diegetic music. Or the production design. And for God’s sake, the film is absurd, with its depiction of cops killing black boys left and right, as if a genocide is happening right here in America – by the end of the film, Paul’s body count is on par with that of Genghis Khan, Timur Lenk.

I do not, I assure you, hate the film. I wouldn't use the word hate. I just don't think *Blue Wall of Silence* deserves the praise it got. Christ, a great film should have cinematography, mise-en-scene, the whole package. Not just an important political statement. Not just ideology. It should have aesthetics, too. It should have "gold lame," if you know what I mean.

At the premiere of the film, moviegoers gave *Blue Wall of Silence* a standing ovation – before the fucking thing even began.

Paul doesn't like to talk about it, but the truth is he's as rich as Croesus. About a year ago, he struck gold. He'd been hired to star in the new science-fiction film, *Space Catastrophe*, but during pre-production the director changed his mind about Paul, telling Paul he wasn't right for the part after all. This was a serious injustice. A serious injustice! Paul had already blocked off a chunk of time to do *Space Catastrophe*, and he'd even turned down other projects, projects he would have loved to star in.

Paul's agent demanded a million dollars from the director, and thanks to "Play or Pay" (a clause in Paul's contract), he got it. My beautiful Adonis, Paul Brand, received one-million dollars to do nothing. Meanwhile, *Space Catastrophe* failed miserably at the box office.

Paul received one-million dollars to do nothing. A million bucks! To do nothing! I couldn't get past it. A million bucks to do nothing! Hollywood can be a real bonanza.

Except it hasn't been a bonanza at all, actually. Au contraire, it's been a real slog for Paul. It really has. Never mind that he was born to industry parents. Never mind that he had every advantage growing up. It's been a real climb for Paul, a slow funicular ascent.

In his twenties and thirties, he did commercial after commercial, embarrassing music videos... He had a recurring role on the angsty teen drama, *Feeling Low* at Franklin High. He's appeared in politically correct sitcoms like *Doin' the Dozens*. And yes, he's gone on a billion auditions. In his early days, he heard the word no all the

time. Then, finally, along came Appaloosas, which got the attention of Blue Wall of Silence director Francois Lavigne. The brilliant Francois Lavigne, who at the time was best known for films like Strong Female Protagonist Clawing Her Way to the Top in a Male-Dominated Society. Finally, the ball started rolling for Paul. Now Paul is the Saturn V.

Paul Brand has achieved escape velocity.

the mao fit is in this year

I can't believe you don't like these Mao Fits," Paul said, almost resentfully, sitting next to me at *The Future Is Mao!*

"Oh, please," I said. "These Mao Fits are the color of cement, Paul. The color of mortar."

Paul looked at me disgustedly, as if I'd just clubbed a baby seal.

"And they're not exactly 'King of Cling,'" I went on, looking at the runway. "These Mao Fits are so big and boxy. They're not exactly Alaia, Paul."

"Maybe you just don't have any taste, Dorian. Maybe that's the problem."

"The color of cigar ash," I continued, gum cracking.

Paul looked at me like he wanted to slit my throat.

"Could you be persuaded to stop chewing gum, Dorian?" he said, grinding his teeth. "This is only the most highly anticipated fashion show of the year."

Paul was always doing this to me. He was always telling me to stop chewing with my mouth open, to stop wiping my nose with the back of my hand...

For a few minutes, Paul and I just sat there. We did not speak.

The models kept coming, one after the other – a bunch of Zen monks with their shaved heads.

Presumably, Astyages was backstage, hurriedly dressing his models, perfecting their look, then throwing them down the runway as though they were bowling balls. All the models were nearly identical.

There were, to be clear, a few male models, too. Men in Mao Fits – grey jacket, grey trousers. With shaved heads. Indistinguishable from the women, except for their lantern jaws.

It was then that Paul leaned into me, as if to share a secret, and said, “Say, Dorian, d’you hear about that guy? Ozymandias Lee or whatever? Hear what he did?”

Like Paul, Ozymandias Lee had been a struggling actor. He’d worked his whole life and was just now beginning to make some noise at forty-five, co-starring in the hit sitcom Boners.

“Hear what happened to him, Dorian?”

I sighed.

“Another public beheading, Paul?”

“Ozymandias said Blue Wall of Silence is shit.”

“The gall, Paul.”

“The audacity, Dorian. Ozymandias Lee said police brutality’s been blown out of proportion. He said the real problem’s black-on-black crime. He said studios would make films about black-on-black crime if they really cared about ‘black lives.’”

Amen, I felt like saying, but of course I didn’t dare.

“You believe that, Dorian? You fuckin’ believe that?”

I thought about all the black children, some as young as two months old, who were being killed in drive-by shootings.

“This Ozymandias character. He’s got some nerve,” Paul continued, shaking his head, grinding his teeth again. “Some fucking nerve, Dorian.”

“The balls, Paul.”

“Really, Dorian. Ozymandias said the biggest threat to young black men is other black men. You believe that, Dorian? You fuckin’ believe that?”

Paul was still grinding his teeth.

“You know, Dorian, it’s one thing for black citizens to kill other black citizens, but when a cop kills a black citizen, that’s like getting bullied by the teacher, if you know what I mean. Anyway, Ozymandias Lee has been fired, not surprisingly. His character on Boners! will be played by another actor.”

“Shame,” I said, looking at the catwalk.

“In fact, ABC issued a press release just this morning, saying Mr. Lee’s Tweet was insensitive and he is no longer employed by the company.”

“I couldn’t agree more, Paul. Couldn’t agree more. That’s as it should be.”

I continued to look at the catwalk – grey jacket and trousers, grey jacket and trousers.

“Mr. Lee was fired toute de suite, and I say good riddance,” Paul said, grinding his teeth again. “Fucking racist. Fucking racist piece of shit. I mean, that is so insensitive, Dorian. Like, so insensitive to the black community.”

“Agreed, Paul.”

“Piece of shit,” Paul said. “I hope he gets fucked in the ass with a machete.”

“Excuse me, Paul?”

“I’d like to fuck him in the ass and stab him to death,” Paul said. “Stab him ‘til my hand cramps up. You know?”

“Gee, Paul.”

And then I saw something quite unusual. Yes, yes, something quite unusual indeed. One of the models... She wore army fatigues, a red beret, combat boots.

“OMG!” Paul gasped, at once forgetting the crimes of Ozymandias Lee.

The model carried the GE Mini Gun, a fearsome anti-personnel weapon from the Vietnam era, six barrels bound together in a tight cylinder.

“Holy shit!” Paul exclaimed, staring at the woman. “OMG, that is so fucking brilliant, Dorian. OMG, that is so fucking brilliant.”

The gun looked like something you’d mount to the side of a helicopter, like something you’d set up in the back of an ‘84 Isuzu. And yet, somehow the model was able to carry it in her right hand. In the other hand, she held a canister of chain-ammo against her waist.

Everyone was clapping.

“C’est fantastique,” Paul said, getting teary eyed, grabbing his chest. “Ugh, c’est formidable.”

The model arrived at the top of the catwalk, posed briefly, and U-turned.

The lights came on, and all the models quickly returned to the runway to be recognized. The fash-pack clapped loudly.

After the models had all gone backstage again, the mysterious Astyages emerged. Everyone stood up and started clapping. They clapped much harder this time. They clapped passionately, with

some even moved to tears.

Astyages was very young, even younger than me, about twenty-one or twenty-two if I had to guess. With a shaved head. And tattoos all over his metacarpals, all over his arms and neck.

Astyages looked like an urchin. He had acne. And destroyed denim. And an ill-fitting grey t-shirt. Believe it or not, he looked kind of slovenly.

To look at Astyages, you wouldn't think he had any sartorial sense. Yet here we were, giving him a standing ovation. For his sartorial sense.

"Yes!" Paul exclaimed, jumping to his feet. "Right on, Astyages! Right on!"

Astyages stood on the catwalk. Paul was standing there, looking up at the catwalk worshipfully. They all were. Giles Bensimon was. Brandon Maxwell was. Philip Treacy was. Astyages was the new Wagner – incidentally, when Richard Wagner died in 1883, devotees like Gustav Mahler ran through the streets of Vienna crying, "The master has died! The master has died!"

Everyone continued clapping. Then I gasped, because I noticed then that the brilliant young rap artist, Lil' IQ, was in attendance. I was a huge fan of Lil' IQ. I hadn't noticed him until now.

I saw Lil' IQ standing there, on the other side of the catwalk. He too was standing up, clapping hard. So was I, of course. I assure you I was.

The fash pack were all whistling and hooting. "Bravo!" they shouted. "Bravissimo!" Meanwhile, Astyages stood there, on the catwalk, bowing. "Bravo!" the people continued. "Bravo!"

Astyages bowed repeatedly. He smiled. He got a little teary-eyed. I wondered if Pavarotti, with all his curtain calls, had ever been so lovingly ovated.

The young designer enjoyed a fifteen-minute standing ovation. It felt longer than that, but the newspapers would later say it was a fifteen-minute standing ovation. People have since dubbed this “The Ever Applause.” I’m sure you’re familiar.

In the days after the fashion show, social media sleuths combed videos of “The Ever Applause,” scouring for people who did not clap. A few “non-clappers” were identified and promptly fired – as, of course, they should be.

And yet, the truth is the Mao Fit is hideous. Objectively hideous. You don’t dare say it at a cocktail party – not unless you want to see all your dreams, everything you’ve worked so hard for, come crashing down all around you – and you certainly don’t say it at an audition, but the Mao Fit is hideous, to be sure. No one will say it out loud, of course, but everyone knows the Mao Fit is hideous. I’m convinced of it – everyone thinks the Mao Fit is hideous. They won’t say it out loud, of course, but everyone knows the Mao Fit is hideous.

The Mao Fit is grey, and austere, and frightening. The Mao Fit is terrifying. The Mao Fit is fugly. Strange to see it making a comeback.

And it is, I assure you, making a comeback. The Mao Fit is everywhere now. It’s all over Los Angeles.

The Mao Fit is dernier cri. Everyone is rocking the Mao Fit these days. All the Angelenos. The angels.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MICK MCGRATH has an MFA from the University of Tennessee. His writing has appeared in *Terror House Magazine*, *The Thieving Magpie*, and elsewhere. His novel *The Deplorable* was serialized in 2023. McGrath is the cofounder of the journal *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* debuting in 2023 as one of the few online resources that welcomes anti-woke content.

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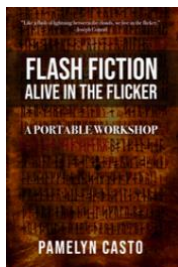
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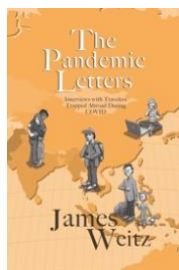
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