

Blackboards (Takhté siah)

Dir: Samira Makhmalbaf, Iran/Italy/Japan, 2000

A review by Brian Gibson, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada

Recent Iranian films have each boasted a singular, breathtaking image: in Abbas Kiarostami's *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999), a bone floating down a river in the climactic scene crystallizes the life-and-death dichotomy of the film; in Rakhshan Bani Etemad's *Under The Skin of the City* (2001), a son's future is blown away with the loss of drugs that drift into the wind like snowflakes; in Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Kandahar* (2001), the sky is punctured by artificial limbs parachuting down to expectant amputees hopping towards them.

Blackboards, Samira Makhmalbaf's Cannes Special Jury Prize-winning film, begins with a handheld camera shot of a mountain road. Then, around the corner of a cliff face, a group of men appears, trudging up the path, their heads and legs peeking out above and below large ebony rectangles. Looking like large black birds, their wings outstretched, they trudge towards the lens. The rectangles are large blackboards strapped to these itinerant teachers' backs, and even as they look for pupils in remote Iranian Kurdistan, they discuss why they became teachers and left shepherding, or exchange coffee and tea. Then the camera captures the austere beautiful image of the men standing at a cliff edge, looking out at the valley below, the wind billowing through the pants of these crucified pedagogues. Suddenly they run, stopping to huddle beneath their boards by the roadside as a helicopter passes overhead. Far above, a flock of black birds circle and soar over mountain precipices.

And so, against the seemingly blank slate of a harsh and barren landscape, the structure of *Blackboards* is outlined. In this world of constant, unseen threats, caught between Iranian and Iraqi forces, Kurds have no time for education because they are simply trying to survive, their only salvation lying not in literacy or basic mathematics, but in their adaptation to and use of their environment. People merge with the land: boys carrying black market goods look like moving rocks on a boulder-strewn mountain side, a man who can't pee is drenched with river water by his fellows in the hope of curing his anuria, and Kurds returning to Iraq kneel down on the dusty border ground, kissing the earth as they thank God for returning them safely to their homeland.

The landscape is majestically stark, from shearing mountain peaks to houses built into cliff sides; the handheld camerawork, by Ebrahim Ghafouri, is remarkably fluid. The slightly wavering lens is constantly amongst crowds of fleeing smugglers or plodding refugees, immersing the viewer in the throng, wending and weaving its way through the tapestry of struggling lives until it comes to settle on an out-of-place teacher, his burdensome blackboard still slung around his shoulders.

Makhmalbaf's opening scene is followed by dozens of awe-inspiring images, images not of lyrical beauty but of surreal power. After the helicopter flits away, the educators daub their boards with camouflaging mud. Two of the teachers, Estragon- and Vladimir-like, split off

from the rest of the pack and quickly become swallowed up in slightly offbeat, picaresque experiences that unravel in this *Waiting For Godot* limbo-landscape. In *The Apple* (1998), Samira Makhmalbaf questioned the accepted reality of protecting Iranian women in a patriarchal society, taken to the extreme by parents who locked up their daughters in a cage during the day. In *Blackboards*, the surreal, absurd situations in which Said and Reeboir find themselves with the Kurds they meet only heighten the horrifyingly real tragedies of these people's day-to-day lives.

One teacher, Said (Saeed Mohamadi), runs into a farmer lifting and tossing wheat, who asks him to read a letter from his son who is in an Iraqi jail. But the teacher can't read the language, and utters soothing generalities to the yearning father. After trying to call people to their windows for his services by reciting multiplication tables as he wanders through a village, Said meets up with a group of men and women straggling back towards the Iraqi border who don't want a teacher, but a guide. Hoping for compensation and the hand of the beautiful Halaleh (Behnaz Jafari), he agrees.

The other teacher, Reeboir (Bahman Ghobadi, director of *A Time For Drunken Horses* [2000]), encounters a young boy looking through binoculars, who rejects the importance of learning -- "It's useless" -- insolently dismisses his questions about where the village is -- "Here, there, this way, that way" -- and ignites a disturbingly antagonistic relationship between helpless teacher and cocksure child. Then Reeboir comes across a whole group of boys, packs of contraband on their back, who scoff at his desire to teach them how to "do your accounts without being swindled," telling him that the boss does the accounts; they are just the "mules." Why, too, should they learn to read books when they have plenty of stories to tell about their own lives, as one boy demonstrates in recounting a horrific tale about his friends torturing a rabbit.

Desperate themselves for food or the smallest monetary recompense for their lessons, the teachers face a Catch-22: the people they meet have no time for educational improvement of their lives, because they are simply trying to get by all the time, trudging the next step on their smuggling or refugee route. The migrants, beset by doubt and insecurity, ask Said, a stranger, to guide them home, and then think he's lying when he shows them the border, altered by bombs. Helicopters hunt people off-camera, unseen border guards fire at the refugees, shots from nowhere strike many of the boy smugglers, and the recent horror of chemical weapons, used on Kurds in Halabcheh, Iraq (near where the film was shot, in a landmine-strewn area), hangs over the desperate refugees like a pall.

Of what possible use can education be in this world? The blackboards are quickly turned from symbols to practical props, from methods of education to screens, shields, and stretchers: Reeboir chops his into a splint for a wounded boy; Said uses his as a modest veil between, and quasi-altar for, him and Halaleh during their impromptu, roadside marriage ceremony, and then as a dowry for his new bride. In the land of *Blackboards*, people are wedded to the land, to family, and to eking out a living; education is non-essential, a curiosity. Unable to converse with his bride without pedagogy, Said tries to teach her to say "I love you" to him, but she focuses only on her son as he anxiously gives her zeroes on the board for non-participation: "What sort of student are you?" When he confronts her about their loveless, short-lived marriage, she tells him that her son is the only constant male figure in her life: "My heart is like a train. At every station, there is someone who gets on or off."

Samira Makhmalbaf's haunting, melancholy story (co-written with her father Mohsen) viscerally depicts, even better than Ghobadi's film, the Kurdish world as a fractured, dislocated society. In the final scene, a gas-like mist of uncertainty descends, shroud-like, over a dislocated people crossing unclear borders and evading unseen threats. The lines between old and young, man and woman, and between the ideals of naive teachers and the lessons of harsh life blur and fade as Makhmalbaf crystallizes, with a closing image even more startling than the opening frames, the themes -- motherhood, homeland, adaptation, and constant insecurity -- of her gravely beautiful, masterfully allusive film.

Catch Me If You Can

Dir: Steven Spielberg, USA, 2002

A review by Ross Thompson, University of Dundee, UK

Steven Spielberg is on a roll. This may seem like an unusual observation for a director who has consistently broken box office records and won more than his fair share of Academy awards, but Spielberg's recent films are the most interesting of his long and varied career. The director was previously known for a mixture of summer blockbusters and worthy historical dramas, but now he is taking on offbeat, much darker projects in which he is slowly eradicating the cloying sentimentality that hampers his work. *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* (2001) is a flawed but fascinating continuation of an unfinished Stanley Kubrick project that fuses the traditional Pinocchio fairy-tale with science-fiction imagery and existential angst. The futuristic fable *Minority Report* (2002) is a riveting update of the *film noir* genre. Like Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982, and also adapted from a Philip K. Dick text), the film meditates on predestination and the pains of human existence, but ultimately is most concerned with thrilling the audience. *Minority Report* is the stronger of these movies, but they each suffer from the same flaw that troubles the rest of Spielberg's canon. Both *A.I.* and *Minority Report* are for the most part unrelentingly bleak, but are rounded by a contrived happy ending that feels out of synch with the nihilistic tone of the rest of the picture. Spielberg's entire oeuvre is balanced precariously between his ingenious creativity and his penchant for schmaltz. *Schindler's List* (1993) and *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), for example, are intense in their depiction of the destruction wreaked by World War Two on both a large and a small scale, but even these films patronise the audience with an overly romantic denouement in which the protagonist explicitly explains the themes to which Spielberg has already alluded.

Catch Me If You Can, however, rectifies this problem, as Spielberg has not only produced one of the most charming films of recent months, but has also created a work that does not veer into the dangerous territory of syrupy nostalgia. On the surface, *Catch Me If You Can* is the finest example of feel-good entertainment, as bright and warm as Spielberg's trademark 'Magic Light' photography. The movie has a distinctly retro feel, enhanced by the animated *Spy versus Spy* title sequence and John Williams' cool jazz score. However, beneath its glossy sheen and the witty script, *Catch Me If You Can* is a poignant character study of a very troubled young man. During the swinging sixties, Frank Abagnale Jr. managed to scam \$2.5 million in forged cheques before his twenty-first birthday by posing as a high school teacher, an airline pilot, a doctor and a barrister. Abagnale collated his hi-jinx in the biography from which Spielberg takes the name and main content for this film. Abagnale claims that he outwitted the FBI at every turn as they pursued him through American and across the water to France. To this day, Abagnale maintains that every word of his life story is true, even though his misadventures will seem outlandish to those who spent their teenage years being bored in stuffy classrooms.

Spielberg treats every aspect of Abagnale's shaggy dog tale as if it were fact. Like *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind* (2002), George Clooney's sparkling adaptation of the

memoirs of television producer/CIA hitman Chuck Barris, *Catch Me If You Can* never suggests that anything the viewer sees or hears is a fabrication. In one sense it does not matter if Abagnale is telling the truth, for his version of events makes for an electrifying story. The young Frank allegedly did the things that other boys his age only dreamed out, bedding air stewardesses and hustling bank managers as he grifted his way across the United States. Frank is played by a rejuvenated Leonardo DiCaprio, whose life off-screen mirrors the excesses of his character. After overhearing that his parents are filing for divorce, sixteen-year old Frank runs away from home, whereupon he is forced to carve a life for himself as a conman. Once Spielberg has set the scene and introduced the main characters, he really breaks into his stride by deftly alternating moments of great pathos with sequences whose comedy stems from Frank's natural talent for breaking the rules. The scene in which Frank sneaks past the FBI by surrounding himself with a shoal of wannabe air hostesses is one of the movie's highlights, and should rank as one of Spielberg's most memorable images.

It is easy to root for anti-hero Frank. His scams are so clever and those he hoodwinks so foolish that one is tempted to believe that he deserves every dollar that he scams. However, Spielberg steadies this one-man act by developing other well-rounded characters that deserve equal screen presence, and equal discussion here. Special Agent Carl Hanratty, played with great subtlety by a subdued Tom Hanks, develops an oddly affectionate relationship with Frank through their marathon game of cat and mouse. At first, Frank phones Carl to taunt him, but it gradually transpires that these men are as lonely as each other, and depend on their annual conversations as a strange form of comfort. Frank has suitcases full of money and a stream of willing, nubile young women at his behest, but a life on the run has worn him down. Carl is also a solitary individual, who devotes all of his time and effort to his job.

By exploring these characters, Spielberg, DiCaprio and Hanks cleverly toy with cinematic stereotypes of masculinity and male-to-male relationships. In this respect, Christopher Walken delivers the most emotionally engaging performance in *Catch Me If You Can*. Walken plays Frank Abagnale Snr., who struggles when weighing his failures against his son's successes. Walken's portrayal of a broken man is heartrending, more so because Spielberg avoids the pitfall of overplaying these scenes. The young Frank imagines that accumulating great wealth will help to bring his family back together, but in the end he realises that it has pushed them further apart. It would undoubtedly be tempting for a director to concentrate solely on the salacious details of Frank's life, but Spielberg underpins the work with a genuinely touching subplot.

Ultimately, *Catch Me If You Can* is one of Spielberg's most satisfying films to date. The movie has a two hour plus running time, but there is always something pleasing happening onscreen -- a wry 'knock knock' joke from Carl, a tearjerker soliloquy from Walken or one of Spielberg's majestic visual shots -- so there is rarely a dull moment. Aside from the plot's tragic elements, *Catch Me If You Can* is reminiscent of Steven Soderbergh's crime caper *Ocean's Eleven* (2001), as both films take an unbelievable premise and make it believable. Secondly, both films are thrilling, funny and uplifting in a business that rarely delivers on all of those points. Just as Frank Abagnale Jr. has a chameleon ability to disguise himself in different outfits, so Spielberg is now immersing himself in projects that may not be a radical departure, but do steer the director in an intriguing direction. Spielberg has made enough money for Hollywood to be able to take risks. Hopefully, he will continue to do so for the remainder of his groundbreaking career.

Down With Love

Dir: Peyton Reed, USA, 2003
Far From Heaven

Far From Heaven

Dir. Todd Haynes. USA/France, 2002

A review by Sunny Stalter, Rutgers University, New Jersey, USA

Nostalgia is a funny feeling - it celebrates the past and buries it. When nostalgia for an era becomes possible, a bridge from that time to ours has been crossed. Consider the 1960s stewardess: in the past year, we've seen permutations of this pastel-uniformed, sexually available, interchangeable woman in *CQ* (2001), *Catch Me If You Can* (2002), and *Down with Love*, Peyton Reed's take on Doris Day-Rock Hudson sex comedies. There is an easy explanation for this return of the repressed Playboy bunny of the skies: women are too career-oriented, too unfeminine, the "coffee, tea, or me" clarity of a stewardess is a welcome antidote to today's sexual game-playing. But there's one important factor that is missing from this equation: in the age of AIDS and sexual harassment laws, this image of woman is literally unthinkable. Her allure is directly inverse to the possibility (or even desirability) of her existence in the present. *Down with Love* and *Far from Heaven*, Todd Haynes' tribute to the Douglas Sirk melodramas of the 1950s, made me ask the same kind of questions about genre films: does culture only become interesting to remake and remodel when its style and subject matter are no longer culturally relevant? Frederic Jameson says that pastiche is mimicry of dead styles and tropes, "but...a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satirical impulse" (1990:74). While both films simulate instead of parodying the styles of their sources, their nostalgia does not entirely cut off the concerns of the film from those of the present day. What they are trying to imitate is not an entirely dead style of filmmaking, but neither is it an innovative form of social commentary. Rather, both films move dialectically between comfortably smug distance and embarrassing relevance. The comfort level pastiche creates in the postmodern viewer - the comfortable irrelevance of the sexy stewardess - gets punctured throughout the films. And through this shuffle between near and far, both films try to articulate a kind of middle ground of social, sexual, and historical understanding of differences between people, and of difference in general.

One of the reasons both films are so odd and hard to ignore is because of how total their simulation of the women's picture and the early 1960s sex comedy is. There is something disarming about seeing a seemingly dead genre recreated so authentically, or, more correctly, at seeing its inauthenticity recreated so authentically. *Far from Heaven* and *Down with Love* are both imitations of imitations of life, faithful not to the eras they're recreating as they

actually occurred, but as they appeared in movies -- what Frederic Jameson calls "the history of aesthetic styles displac[ing] 'real' history" (1990:76). Both films begin with a signal to the audience that we're entering movie reality: the painted flowers in *Far from Heaven's* opening credits fade into their "real" equivalent; *Down with Love* lets us know that it is a "Cinemascope picture" and shows stock footage of New York City. Even the female leads and their trials and tribulations are so conventional as to be almost parodic. Kathy Whitaker (Julianne Moore) in *Far from Heaven* is a June Cleaver-variety 1950s housewife whose suburban Connecticut life is turned upside down by her husband's (Dennis Quaid) homosexuality and her friendship with an African-American gardener (Dennis Haysbert). *Down with Love's* Barbara Novak (Renee Zellweger) is a spunky, sexually liberated career woman in early 1960s New York City whose proto-feminist book -- which tells women to separate sex from love in order to focus on their careers -- leads journalist Catcher Block (Ewan McGregor) to pose as someone else in order to woo and take revenge on her. The plots do have a few details and twists that would have been unthinkable at the time of the originals -- Quaid kisses two different men on-screen -- but on the whole they try to stick close to their source material. The plot seems to be a necessary evil, an excuse to precisely fabricate beautiful anachronisms. And the primary pleasure in watching these films is the nostalgic appreciation of just how anachronistic the beauty is. Women can relish the rich autumnal tones of Julianne Moore's dresses or the mod wittiness of Renee Zellweger's hats and gloves while breathing a sigh of relief that *they* don't have to wear gloves or dress for dinner.

However, there is a radical historicism at work beneath the escapist window-dressing: both directors specifically imitate not only the style of the era's costumes and sets, but also its editing techniques, creating a kind of unconscious understanding of how watching movies was different then. *Far from Heaven's* long takes and slow close-ups, for example, force a kind of rapt attention to the plot machinations that both gracefully and inevitably trap Kathy Whitaker. Fate has a lighter and more frivolous quality in *Down with Love*: it's a return to the early days of the society of the spectacle, the dawn of self-aware, fun fakeness. The split-screens are pleasantly Pop, as are the graceful and goofy ways Reed's characters move in the film -- Barbara Novak's eyelash bats are often punctuated by music, as are her entrances to a series of glamorous restaurants in which she is stood up by Catcher Block. If there's one way that *Far from Heaven* and *Down with Love* are both "filmed film criticism" (Hoberman, 2002), it is in their historicization of film techniques, their rendering visible of the fact that filmmaking and film viewing are subject to codes that change with history, technology, and taste. It is in this distancing that the directors turn the superiority of historical distance on its head: if these techniques look so old-fashioned, so *visible* now, they suggest, then the techniques of contemporary filmmakers will look just as camp forty years hence.

But the films do not simply comment on other films -- their style manages to penetrate deeper than most content would in giving the viewer an impression of what it must have been like to live during those eras. By making films with such stereotypical characters and what Todd Haynes calls "stock dialogue" ('Anatomy of a Scene', *Far from Heaven* DVD), the directors render utterly visible the problem with most historical filmmaking: its reliance on a fixed set of shared cultural symbols, types, and conventions by which the past is easily understood. Haynes and Reed use their films to undercut the assumed familiarity with earlier eras that period piece shorthand depends on. While the plot of each of the films deals with one of the central social issues of its day (racism in *Far from Heaven*, women's liberation in *Down with Love*), it's through the surface details that striking defamiliarizations of our understanding of the past come into clearer focus. For example, it is easy to dismiss the people who are casual racists in the film: the gossiping gaggle of housewives fits precisely within received

understanding of what 1950s racism was and, consequently, allows the viewer to maintain smug distance from the sentiment. But it's harder to ignore the unexpected menace of a lunch counter sign that states "We reserve the right to refuse service to any patron" when Kathy and Raymond try to have lunch. Something about the bland cruelty of the sign typifies an environment of unconscious racism in a fresher and more effective way than the rest of the film's race-based melodrama -- Raymond's little girl attacked by leering white boys, a black child jumping into a pool results in all the white parents making their children get out. Recreating a historical genre whole hog means that some details will come through that present-day audiences just don't have the cultural background to process in appropriate ways, to comfortably pigeonhole as having a singular cultural meaning. History becomes a subject that can be closely read, and its meanings are stubbornly multiple. The carefully articulated speech of the NAACP member who visits Kathy, for example, could mean a number of things: that this character is trying to not sound 'black' for the white woman; that members of the NAACP were mostly middle- and upper-class; that socially conscious melodrama worked against the assumption that 'black speech' would be recognizably different from 'white speech'. The same is true of the office inequities in *Down with Love*: when Vicki Hiller (Sarah Paulson), a successful Manhattan editor, is asked by the male executives to make coffee, we can laugh at how far women have come; when all those executives introduce themselves only by their initials (Barbara Novak responds to all the J.B.s and J.R.s and R.J.s with a cheerfully bewildered "OK!") it seems like a joke, but on what? Organization-man conformity? Women's exclusion from the old-boy network? Or is it just a gag for a gag's sake? These fragments of an uninterpretable past allow for a sort of outside-in materialist approach to history; both films are effective at mobilizing easily overlooked details in order to create a world that the viewer can appreciate as slightly askew from their understanding of the past.

Walter Benjamin wrote that "every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably" (Benjamin, 1969: 255). I read the excesses of pastness in these films as a kind of overcompensation, a repressed recognition that these images of the past are actually concerns of the present. Period pieces are often panaceas, making us feel better about social issues in the present by showing us just how bad they used to be. But racism and sexism still do exist, albeit in slightly different permutations: Kathy and Raymond's love may not now be as completely *unimaginable* as it is in *Far from Heaven*, but in some places it would still be quite scandalous; Frank Whitaker's attempt at 'curing' his homosexuality through aversion therapy is still a distinct possibility. *Down with Love* is also strikingly contemporary throughout, also proving that we have not really come that far, baby. The female 'self-pleasuring technique' that Barbara Novak offers as a quick fix for achieving equality in the workplace sounds like it is straight out of this month's *Cosmopolitan* (it's chocolate). Her aspirations are more Helen Gurley Brown than Betty Friedan, so she's right at home in the era of *Sex and the City* and *Charlie's Angels* (2000), where empowerment is directly related to how expensive your shoes are. Perhaps more importantly, the film shows just how timid romantic comedies always have been and still are: "while the movie pretends to update the sexual primness of the Day-Hudson movies, it really just embroiders them endlessly" (Zacharek, 2003). In fact, all the conventions articulated in the films that Reed riffs on are still in place today: the sexual repression, the need to pretend to be someone you are not in order to win the object of your desire, the celebration of couplehood over community. It is only after Barbara Novak's refusal of this last convention -- she finds that she likes sisterhood more than she expected, and even finds a women's magazine to give women a workplace they deserve -- that the film qualifies as a rethinking of the sex comedy rather than just a recreation.

The struggle between maintaining an identity and finding a community is at the heart of both films, and neither offers an easy answer. In fact, much of the political force in the films' depictions of finding a community comes from their era-resonant focus on segregation and integration. Only Haynes deals directly with these ideas in terms of race relations, but both stories focus on the formation of communities based on similarity and belonging and how they compare with those based on difference and understanding. The insular suburban community in *Far from Heaven* is the model of both literal and metaphoric segregation: at the Whitakers' dinner party, one of the guests says Hartford doesn't need to deal with the race problem because there aren't any Negroes -- while a wincing African-American servant stands by silently. The segregation enacted in *Down with Love* seems to be a more positive one. Barbara Novak's book creates a world-wide imagined female community to rival that of the last episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, with women buying her book publicly in the civilized world and trading it surreptitiously in Russia and Red China. The over-sexed stewardess (Geri Ryan) and the under-sexed secretary (Rachel Dratch) thrive, but both of the normal heterosexual couples are alienated from their own desires, and even from their own identities. Zip Martin is an alter ego Catcher Block comes up with to win over Barbara Novak, but Novak too is an alter ego, invented by Nancy Brown (one of Block's former secretaries) as a way to snare him. Even the relationship between Peter MacManus (David Hyde Pierce) and Vicki Hiller goes through multiple misunderstandings and reversals simply from being caught in the wake of their game-playing buddies. All of this posing and pretending is based on the belief in the absolute difference between the sexes, the absolute incomprehensibility of men to women and vice versa. It is only when the female leads are trying to understand their opposites that the film tries to find a space beyond absolute identification and absolute difference, a space of understanding and community.

Barbara and Catcher find their spaces of understanding and appreciating gender difference when they're exploring the nightlife of New York City. For them, finding this middle ground means escaping the spaces where sexual difference is an enforced norm -- the office and the bedroom. In the same way, Kathy and Raymond have to escape the homogeneity of upper-middle-class Hartford by fleeing first to the countryside and then to a black-owned honky-tonk where an uncomfortable but clearly exhilarated Kathy can join in a toast to being "the only one [of your race] in the room." Both directors are trying to find thematic and stylistic ways of creating parallels that do not eliminate difference. Reed's a big fan of cuts that make clear just how similar the plot lines are on either side of the gender gap ("Don't close your eyes," Catcher says to Peter, cut to Vicki saying "open your eyes" to Barbara). Those split-screens that he carried over from the Day-Hudson era are also searching for a kind of equality that doesn't collapse into equivalence; Reed isn't saying that men and women should be the same, only that their considerations get similar weight. Similarly, *Far from Heaven* isn't asking for a world that's color blind, only one that's empathetic.

Perhaps the most successful articulation of this empathy across a space of difference is in the 'Fly Me to the Moon' sequence in *Down with Love*. As Catcher Block and Barbara Novak are getting ready for a date, we see their preparations and excitement building to a constantly cross-cutting soundtrack: "Novak sails around her flat in skimpy underthings, with Astrid Gilberto's breathy, dreamy *Fly Me to the Moon* as her soundtrack. Block trots around his place...to Frank Sinatra's manlier but no less hopeful version of the song" (Zacharek, 2003). Men and women, this scene tells us, both want the same kinds of things -- just in a different style. And it is this constellation of similarity and difference in a space of understanding that both films want to enact, between blacks and whites, women and men, and between the present and the past. Watching these films, I was never entirely absorbed in or alienated from

the past. There was more of a dialectic shuttling, a mambo between here and there. In other words, neither genre seems "blasted out of the continuum of history" (Benjamin, 1969: 261) as much as gently lifted out of history and set in the present for our interested examination, a brooch set in a thrift shop window, for the passer-by to notice and think about the dress that it would set off nicely.

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Drôle de Félix

Dir: Olivier Ducastel and Jacques Martineau, France, 2000

A review by Florian Grandena, Nottingham Trent University, UK

Drôle de Félix, the second feature film of the Ducastel-Martineau tandem, is an up-lifting road-movie that takes the audience on the journey of self-discovery taken by the eponymous central character. Félix (interpreted by the subtle and magnetic Sami Bouajila) is a thirty-something gay man of North-African descent who lives happily in Dieppe with partner Daniel (Pierre-Loup Rajot). One day, while clearing out his late mother's house, Félix finds a box containing letters from his father, whom he has never seen. Having recently been made redundant by the ferry boat company that employed him, he decides to take some time for himself and hitchhikes from Dieppe to Marseille, where his father lives, to finally meet him.

This journey through provincial France is punctuated with several encounters, each announced by intertitles: in Chartres, Félix meets 'his little brother', teenager Jules (Charly Segue); 'his grand-mother' Mathilde Firmin (interpreted by former music-hall star Patachou) in rural Auvergne; 'his cousin' (Philippe Garziano) in the Ardèche area; 'his sister' Isabelle (Ariane Ascaride) in Provence; and, finally, in Martigues, 'his father' (Maurice Bénichou), an unhappy and contemplative fisherman, who bears no resemblance to Félix's biological father. Each vignette redefines Félix's relationship with the person that he is about to meet. Jules is in awe of Félix, who steals a car to impress the teenager. Mathilde and the fisherman are keen on giving Félix all sorts of advice. He flies a kite with 'his cousin' and, despite almost continuous squabbles with Isabelle and her three children, Félix and 'his sister' establish a friendship stamped with complicity and tenderness. At the end of his journey, Félix is happily reunited with his partner Daniel and embarks on a cruise with him.

The physical journey that characters undertake in the road-movie genre is usually a metaphor for self-exploration and revelation. *Drôle de Félix* is no exception. Indeed, the film is about Félix's journey towards self-acceptance and provides a reflection of how an individual can accept his own identity when others perceive it negatively and indeed repeatedly use it as an insult. *Drôle de Félix* provides us with a subtle and original portrayal of a character of North African origin. In recent years, part of French film production has focused on the harsh life of individuals of Maghrebi descent living in urban areas (*beur* and *banlieue* films are examples of this trend). However, this is something from which Ducastel and Martineau consciously step away: Félix leads a slightly bourgeois life in a small Northern provincial town. The directors construct their protagonist's identity mainly in terms of sexuality as well as ethnicity. In the film, some characters use Félix's ethnicity against him. Whereas Félix accepts, for example, his homosexuality, he is not at ease with his own ethnicity. Indeed, his behaviour seems to be tinged with shame.

In Rouen, Félix witnesses a violent altercation between two men and another North African (who eventually dies). First assuming that the latter is not feeling well, Félix offers his help. One of the assailants (Clément Révérent) hits him. Félix runs away from the scene, followed

by the man, and takes refuge in a bar. The bartender (Daniel Lesur) knows the aggressor (his name is Laurent) and tells him "cut this shit, not in my bar", suggesting that Laurent is already known for his violence towards people of North African descent. When the assailant finally leaves, Félix decides to go to the police but is beaten up by Laurent on the way: "you haven't seen anything. No one will believe an Arab anyway." Félix still heads for the police station but, from a distance, he sees a handcuffed man of Maghrebi origin being led away by a police officer. Félix himself then walks away, unconsciously accepting the murderer's remark as correct.

In the 'sister' vignette, Ducastel and Martineau place the racism issue in the specific context of the late 1990s: following the success of the National Front at local elections in Southern France, a debate raged as to whether artists should boycott or perform in towns with extreme right wing mayors. Isabelle and Félix represent the two different stances: Isabelle wants them to go through Orange, have a drink and make themselves at home. "Scared of getting lynched, like in Rouen?" she asks. Félix, on the other hand, threatens to jump from the car: "they elected the extreme right. We're boycotting." Isabelle is forced to change her itinerary and ends up crashing her car into another. The driver starts insulting Isabelle, and calls Félix "faggot" when he tries to intervene. The driver's violent reaction is motivated by no other reason but the anger caused by the car crash. However, because Félix is conditioned by the perceptions that other people supposedly have of him, he calls upon the insult that racists would use against people of North African descent and which he himself rejects so vehemently: "why not call me a dirty Arab?" The driver hits Félix.

The resolution of the racist murder comes by surprise: as Félix pretends not to know anything about the Rouen racist murder, Isabelle explains that the bartender denounced the two murderers to the police. One of them has been arrested, but the other (Laurent) is still on the run. Félix and his 'sister' arrive at their hotel at the same time as police officers arrest Laurent, the second murderer. Félix's fear, but also his shame of not having come forward as a witness, crawls in and finally catches up with him. He has nightmares. Isabelle (who shares the same bed, as siblings do) tries to console him. Félix then admits to being the missing witness and acknowledges his self-hatred for the first time. He sobs out: "I was scared of everyone... I couldn't imagine myself explaining to them that some guy hit me because I look like an Arab. I was ashamed."

In contrast, Félix's sexual orientation is not used as a narrative force. It is simply given to us as an integral part of his life. It is purposely presented in an unproblematic and even idyllic manner: Félix and Daniel kiss at the restaurant in front of staff and customers alike. Félix and 'his cousin' spontaneously embrace each other in a small rural village. The love and kissing scenes, as well as the one of male frontal nudity, are all shot in daylight and contain saturated colours: the *mise en scène* expresses a willingness to stay away from a seedy depiction of homosexuality. Moreover, the intimate scenes between Daniel and Félix show a desire to depict same-sex relationships as not dissimilar to heterosexual ones and fundamentally unproblematic.

One of the strengths of *Drôle de Félix* is its portrayal of a character with HIV without any maudlin or melodramatic effects. On the contrary, AIDS is not used as a dramatic narrative drive: it is naturally (that is, un-problematically) integrated in the film. It is as a healthy and dynamic individual that Ducastel and Martineau have chosen to show Félix. The disease never seems to slow Félix down during his journey. Nor does it seem to affect his sexual life with his partner or prevent him from having casual (protected) sex with 'his cousin'. Indeed,

Félix has successfully learned to live with AIDS. It marks the beginning of his daily routine: in at least six scenes, Félix is seen taking his medication. At the very second that he wakes up, it often seems, and while watching his favourite soap *Luxure et Volupté* (translated as *Lap of Luxury*): the banality and the repetition of these scenes successfully demystify the presence of AIDS in Félix's life.

The de-dramatisation of AIDS in *Drôle de Félix* does not mean that the disease is relegated to the margin of the narrative. Nor is the gravity of the disease ignored altogether. One early scene shows Félix in the waiting room of a hospital. While waiting for his turn, a woman (Christiane Millet) addresses Félix and asks him about his treatment for the disease. Visibly worried about her own condition, she is quickly relieved to learn that after her bitherapy, like Félix, she will be able to turn to a tritherapy. Another patient (Arno Feffer) suggests a pentatherapy: he stresses his very low rate of T4 cells that has not increased despite his treatment, but also insists on the fact that he is still alive, and in good shape: "Do I look like a dying man?" AIDS is no longer antonymous with hope. Indeed, the woman asks: "I'm still doing a bitherapy... It gives me considerable leeway... After a pentatherapy, what would there be?"

Drôle de Félix starts with a strike held by the staff of the ferry company that used to employ Félix. It ends on a boat setting off for a cruise on the Mediterranean Sea, suggesting that Félix has completed his introspective journey and is now ready for a new beginning. Félix finally understands that all that he has been searching for lies in his relationship with Daniel, and that he has to learn to see the best in people. Hence the last (humorous) scene: Daniel has shaved off his beard and Félix realises that he had never before seen his partner's chin: "I had never seen it before. It is really nice."

They kiss passionately.

From Hell

Dir: Albert and Allen Hughes, USA/UK/Czech Republic, 2001

A review by Diane R. Wiener, University of Arizona, USA

This gruesome, troubling, and latest engagement with Jack the Ripper as a cultural anti-hero is presented for a contemporary Hollywood audience that is both savvy about horror-thriller, crime mystery tropes and preoccupied with the meanings and very real threats of serial killing in late capitalism. Temporal and spatial distance are once again instructive for helping the disgusted, but admittedly fascinated viewer to contemplate the significance of The Ripper and his successors in our time. The Western European colonial climate and the specifics of British imperialism at the turn of the previous century are framed by interrelated themes of sexology, psychiatry, and eugenics via Social Darwinism. These facets inform a cultural hygiene conspiracy that motivates the Ripper's infamous murders.

According to royal physician Sir William Gull (Ian Holm), secondary character Prince Edward (Mark Dexter) has a longstanding "taste" for prostitutes. This "taste" is a part of his aesthetic life of leisure, a familiar one to those who are privileged within the Empire. Locally known as Albert Sickert, the Prince is perceived to be a wealthy painter who regularly travels abroad, and ladies of the evening are favored among his exploited artistic subjects. As prostitute protagonist Mary Kelly (Heather Graham) facetiously says to leading man psychic detective Fred Abberline (Johnny Depp), "England doesn't have whores -- just a great mass of very unlucky women."

Albert becomes lovers with and has the nerve to marry an "unfortunate" woman (Ann Crook, played by Joanna Page). They wed in a Catholic church in the presence of Ann's friends who share her vocation, and the next heir to the crown is not a desirable one from the Queen's (Liz Moscrop) or her affluent followers' points-of-view. In unmistakably sexist terms that perhaps extend transhistorically, Ann's life violates the tripartite feminine archetypes of virgin, mother, and whore. Because she is seen to simultaneously exist within two of these categories, she transgresses their separation and this is not allowable. Ann Crook tells her friends that she loves the baby "to bits," an idiom that is rendered ironic when her life is shattered and her friends literally wind up in pieces.

Crook and her Prince are carted off in the middle of sex, baby Alice and her maternal grandparents vanish, and the women who bore witness to the unholy union are ghoulishly picked off one by one, with the exception of Mary Kelly. We are told more than once that they are being "punished," and this punishment is not just an act of revenge but also an act of censorship. With each murder, the audience is likewise visually punished by being expected to endure increasingly graphic and intimate imagery. This torturous viewing is complicated by a popular cultural obsession with serial killers and the sadistic and masochistic voyeurism that is allegedly intrinsic to watching horror movies. Film scholar Carol Clover asserts that "slasher" and other horror films centering on women's suffering are not merely about reifying victimization, but paradoxically empower spectators to reconsider their relationship to societal violence (Clover, 1992). While the film may be interestingly assessed by using this

type of critical lens, merely reading *From Hell* for its feminist potential would probably be analytically imprudent.

Although his ailing condition from syphilis is reported to the audience, we do not see Albert again once he is dragged away in a coach and brought to an undisclosed location. The coach's activities, including the transportation of doctor-turned-murderer Gull, are financially underwritten by Free Masons who are represented in the film as rich and racist. Unsurprisingly, they want the blame for the murders to be pinned on London's outsiders, especially its Jewry. Jewish butchers are targeted by some members of the police force who are clearly guilty of racial profiling.

In contrast to the backgrounding of Albert's illness, Ann's pains are visually enunciated in an extended and grotesque display. After being kidnapped, she is locked up in an asylum where she is silenced by a lobotomy, a vivid spectacle that is described by Gull to his medical colleagues and the audience as "a simple procedure...[to] permanently alleviate the poor girl's suffering." By the film's end, Sir William is also silenced by a lobotomy after his participation in the cultural hygiene project has gone too far.

Before his acts of brutal excess become a concern, Queen Victoria appreciates Gull's dedication to Prince Edward's situation. During a friendly chat with Sir William in Buckingham Palace, she tells him, "In all ways you attend to the health of our Empire. We are grateful." Throughout, the film simultaneously reproaches and fetishizes imperial England. The Ripper uses grapes to lure his victims, "so they'll trust whatever he offers," we are informed. Grapes in London's Whitechapel District are a luxury of wealth, leading to the conclusion that the murderer is a man of means, a gentleman. The grapes have semiotic cache, and act in the *mise-en-scène* to comment upon a diverse array of metaphorized things. When considered alongside the pulsing rounded images of veins and bloodiness depicted elsewhere in the film, the grapes might be metonyms for fetal heartbeats. If "proper" women are still expected to be the embodied containers for reproducing nation-states, this instance of symbolic valence cannot be underestimated.

Grapes are exotic fruits, imported via the relations of colonialism in late nineteenth century England. Moreover, they are coded as having a kind of peculiar testicularity. By murdering prostitutes and ending the risky possibility of their having stigmatized children within an unwilling-to-be-shamed Great Britain, this film's Jack the Ripper participates in an inverted insemination program that sterilizes and destroys rather than fosters life.

Importantly, the women are not only killed but are carefully mutilated, a practice that Abberline refers to as "ritual." The inspector's assistant Sargent Godley (Robbie Coltrane) remarks of one of the victims, "Before he cut her throat he removed her livelihood as a keepsake." The mutilations are a cautionary sign to the still living "unfortunates," and to members of the public who are frightened yet excited by the murders, and complicit with those taking pictures of the corpses to sell newspapers. Yet, Jack the Ripper is quoted in the film as saying, "One day men will look back and say that I gave birth to the twentieth century," and if this is true then he, as his contemporaries today, can thank the mainstream media in part for his infamy.

Like the graphic novel *From Hell* by Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell upon which it is based, the film makes an attempt to foreground a critique of misogyny, racism, and socio-economic disenfranchisement, but women, those labeled socially undesirable, and the poor

are still trampled in its perverse frenzy. The graphic novel's creators indicate that "Jack mirrors our hysterias. Faceless, he is the receptacle for each new social panic" (Moore and Campbell, 2001: Appendix II, 22). He may be seen as a "corporation" of multiple individuals doing "serial murder as a team sport" (Appendix II, 19), or as a commentary on "the dance" of "pussy," "money," "need," and "poverty" in capitalism (Appendix II, 24). Moore and Campbell explicate and question the fixation on The Ripper, saying he is a "complex phantom we project. That alone, we know is real. The actual killer's gone, unglimped, might as well not have been there at all. There never was a Jack the Ripper" (Appendix II, 23).

Moore and Campbell may have intended their remarks to be theoretically provocative. However, like the film, they come across as problematic and as overtly anti-feminist. Asserting that Jack the Ripper cannot be understood as "real," that contemporary serial killers are products of a capitalist imaginary, and that our perpetual captivation with this variety of murderers is predicated upon intricate socio-cultural structures are compelling arguments. Unfortunately, these proclamations accomplish their cleverness by effacing the materiality of victims' already disrespected dead bodies.

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The Good Thief

Dir: Neil Jordan, UK/France/Canada/Ireland, 2002

A review by Carole Zucker, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada

With each successive outing, Neil Jordan -- without doubt the most interesting filmmaker to emerge thus far from Ireland -- astonishes the viewer with the eclectic, catholic range of his interests. This is evident when one examines his most recent ventures: *The Butcher Boy* (1997), a black tragi-comic tale of rural Irish dementia; *In Dreams* (1999), a psychological horror/thriller; *The End of the Affair* (1999), an understated melodrama; *Not I* (2000), a film of one of Samuel Beckett's most eccentric plays; and the recently released *The Good Thief*, a remake of Jean-Pierre Melville's 1955 gangster classic, *Bob le Flambeur*. (Melville's film, while cool and stylistically quirky is infinitely more concerned with the rules that govern the heist genre than *The Good Thief*.) Jordan's peregrinations through genre often loosen or immolate the boundaries between categories. Jordan is truly idiosyncratic, always experimenting with form, unafraid to change styles from film to film. He is a master at creating moods and situations which can be sensed, but which are too complex to be grasped immediately. Jordan is one of the rare filmmakers who loves both the image, and the use of language that expresses and transforms meaning. He has no trepidations about making bold, outré gestures in his work.

As much as Jordan experiments with form and generic convention, his work tends to circulate around repeated themes. Among them are: a fascination with storytelling; impossible love and erotic tension; the quest for identity; permutations of the family unit; violence, and its attendant psychic and physical damage; the dark and irrational aspects of the human impulse; and characters who are, in some way, haunted by loss. His films continually ask a question that is at once simple and magnificently complicated: What does it mean to be human?

Once more, with *The Good Thief*, Jordan revisits this material in skewed ways, and the film -- different from anything Jordan has done before -- experiments with vibrant configurations of form. As the film begins we are dropped into the chaotic world of drugs, prostitution, and, of course, gambling in the South of France. (Jordan himself is an avid gamesman.) There is a cacophony of accents -- from Eastern Europe, Russia, Italy, Algeria, France, and the US, mostly speaking in fractured, at times barely audible English. If one listens to Elliot Goldenthal's score, which partakes heavily of jazz and the music of North Africa, it melds brilliantly with Jordan's stylistic explorations. For the first time in a Jordan film, there is a multiplicity of visual effects. There are freeze frames, intercut red leader, strobe effects, and, scattered throughout the film, shots where the camera is slowed down or speeded up. While the director's prior film, *The End of the Affair*, was deeply influenced by the rigour of Bresson (Jordan watched *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* [1945] repeatedly while preparing to shoot *Affair*), in *The Good Thief*, Chris Menges' ceaselessly moving, agitated, at times hand-held camera lends the film a loose, improvised feel. Action scenes are often filmed in tight shots, denying the viewer a sense of how spaces in the film are connected. Similarly, a scene often begins *in medias res*, we move from labyrinthine dark alleys to the particularly

bright sunlight of the Riviera, to pulsating, flashing lights of a disco, all in the space of a few minutes.

The title of the film comes from the Gospel According to Luke. The good thief refers to a criminal crucified alongside Christ, who asks, "Are you not Christ? Save yourself and us!" The thief then says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And he (Jesus) said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." At one point, Nick Nolte as Bob, the alcoholic, junkie, thief, art connoisseur and father-figure to the denizens of the shadow world -- which Jordan depicts with unexpected savvy -- says to his nemesis and buddy, the cop, Roger (Tchéky Karyo), "It always makes me cry when I hear that story." Because Bob is an inveterate story teller and manipulator *par excellence*, it is often difficult to determine when he is sincere or playing the fabulist. Jordan, a lapsed Catholic, has addressed spirituality in a variety of forms throughout his career, and claims (in his commentary on the DVD of *The End of the Affair*) that his fall from religion has left "a hole in my life." The filmmaker invokes profound issues of faith and the miraculous in *The End of the Affair*. In *The Good Thief*, the film's narrative follows Bob from his state as a heroin-addicted loser to a miraculous transformation as he cleans up his act, and in what seems like an act of divine intervention, wins millions at a casino, and walks off triumphantly into the sunset with Anne (Nutsa Kukhianidze), the beautiful prostitute/heroin-smoker he has protected and cared for. The film's finale presents an unsettling vision of redemption conflated with a strongly Oedipal subtext. (The ending is particularly reminiscent of *The Crying Game* [1992], when Dil [Jaye Davidson] visits Fergus [Stephen Rea] in prison, where Fergus has "Two thousand three hundred and thirty-five days left of his sentence." It depicts yet another case of a fantastic, unattainable love.)

Bob is anything but a Dostoyevskian nihilist. As shabby and ruined as Nolte seems -- in yet another stunning, subtle performance -- his behaviour is never less than noble. His embrace of excess, "Always play to the limit," alongside his integrity and forbearance endows him with a sort of rough grace. Bob's iconic stature is further embellished by his off-handed comments on mathematics, theology, art history, and rock and roll. (In one of the film's great exchanges Bob says to Roger: "I mean, look at it. We gave you Elvis Presley, Frank Zappa, Jimi Hendrix, Bob Dylan. You give us Johnny Hallyday. Is that fair?")

The relationship with the French cop is interestingly ambiguous, and typical of many of the same-sex relationships in Jordan's films. While Roger seems to make a career out of following Bob, ostensibly to investigate Bob's shady schemes, their relationship is more like that of two brothers or friends who respect and protect one another. There is a sense that Roger may actually have more of an erotic attachment to Bob. It is another presentation of the highly ambiguous homosocial (or homoerotic) behaviour that pervades Jordan's work, from his first award-winning book of short stories "Night in Tunisia" to films like *Interview With The Vampire* (1994), *Michael Collins* (1996), and, of course, *The Crying Game*.

Finally, *The Good Thief's* status as a heist film is, at best, ambivalent. While most films in the genre focus on the details of the caper, Jordan thwarts our expectations by cutting away at the moment crucial information is about to be disclosed. It is clear that the heist takes a back seat to the human complexities which concern Jordan. The filmmaker is working on a more subtle and abstract level. This is perhaps best exemplified by a conversation between Anne and her sometimes paramour, and Bob's surrogate son, Paulo (Saïd Taghmaoui). Anne says of Bob, "He doesn't want money, he wants what money can't buy." Paulo responds: "What can't money buy?" Anne: "Beauty." Paulo: "You're being mysterious." Anne: "Beauty is

mysterious." This confers yet another layer of iconicity and complexity to Nick Nolte's character, and meshes with the mystical and religious underpinnings that subtend *The Good Thief*. Nolte is indeed "the good thief" of the gospel, a criminal who dwells in the underworld, but wishes to recuperate a lost spirituality and prelapsarian innocence. Jordan once again manifests his position as a postmodern Romantic, a poet of the dark soul of humanity.

The Grey Zone

Dir: Tim Blake Nelson, USA, 2001

A review by Jessica Lang, John Hopkins University, USA

The German philosopher Theodor Adorno famously argued that "writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric." His statement has since been expanded by others to include all forms of art, not just poetry, and it seems particularly relevant to Holocaust film. Perhaps this is because Holocaust film crosses multiple genres -- history, biography, fiction, documentary -- and must work to achieve a place in each of them. Perhaps it is because Holocaust films tend to center on a single protagonist who is divided between the roles of hero and victim. Whatever the reason, Holocaust film is controversial. Many survivors I have spoken with believe that any publicity of the Holocaust is worthwhile, simply because it makes forgetting even more difficult, and it might teach some ignorant soul something about the horrors of World War II. Others, however, are rarely satisfied with any Holocaust film, and they never will be. This is because the story of one Szpilman (*The Pianist* [2002]), Schindler (*Schindler's List* [1993]), or Guido (*Life Is Beautiful* [1997]) will always fail to represent the Holocaust accurately, even if they might represent it personally and affectingly. Filming the Holocaust from this perspective doesn't sit easily with viewers because its absence of representation -- the representation of the six million other hero/victims -- feels unjust.

This tenuous place that Holocaust film holds in the minds of critics finds something of a home in Tim Blake Nelson's 2001 film, *The Grey Zone*, as the title itself suggests. Indeed, 'the grey zone' is not only the physical area of Auschwitz, where the story takes place, and is not only the morally indefinite area of surviving in a place of death; 'the grey zone' becomes a metaphor for memory, language, and representation of the Holocaust -- precisely those aspects that are so difficult, if not impossible, to navigate. The story Nelson tells is based loosely on the autobiographical *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eyewitness Account*, by Miklos Nyiszli, a Jewish doctor who, in exchange for his life, assisted Josef Mengele in his infamous medical experiments on prisoners. It also borrows slightly from Primo Levi's essay *The Drowned and the Saved*, about Jews forced to participate in the Nazi death machine. The film centers on Auschwitz's Twelfth Sonderkommando. The Sonderkommando is a special squad of men responsible for managing the gas chambers and crematoria. To preserve order, the Sonderkommando tell arriving prisoners that they are on their way to shower and disinfect themselves when in fact, they are on their way to die. The Sonderkommando also clean out the gas chambers after their occupants have been murdered. They pull out bodies, load them into the ovens, paint over the blood-stained walls of the gas chambers, and strip corpses of any remaining valuables such as gold fillings. In exchange for their gruesome work, members of the Sonderkommando are allotted special privileges. For starters, they are not killed as quickly and work between nine and twelve weeks before they themselves are sent to the gas chambers by the succeeding Sonderkommando. They also receive better food, better clothes, and other privileges. Auschwitz had thirteen Sonderkommando groups over the course of its existence and *The Grey Zone* focuses on the actions of the twelfth group, which staged a half-successful attempt to blow up the crematoria.

In cleaning out the gas chambers one day, days before their revolt takes place, the twelfth Sonderkommando discovers a teenage girl who, in spite of the poisoned air, is still alive. The gas has rendered her mute. She is young, naked, silent, defenseless, and her survival becomes the unifying mission of both the Twelfth Sonderkommando and Dr. Nyiszli, who is among the first to be called regarding the child's survival. They manage to hide her at first, but finally she is discovered. Her discovery closely precedes the Sonderkommando's attempt to destroy the crematoria. She survives the explosion, as do many of the characters we encounter.

Most recent Holocaust films end with a sense that goodness prevails and survives, even against the most horrific odds. *The Grey Zone* undoes this reassurance. In the film's last moments, the Twelfth Sonderkommando is executed. Death is a source of relief, and the teenage girl somehow recognizes this. She stands watching the executions take place wearing a simple white shift. Then, without uttering a word, she runs -- floats even -- away from the group and is shot down moments after she starts. Her as yet unheard voice lingers on the screen, as she talks about the particles of grey dust settling on the lungs of the living. The sense is that ultimately, all that is left to survivors is a grey zone, a place of moral, linguistic and historic ambiguity, one that humanity will now and forever after be condemned to occupy.

The grey zone is both locate-able, referring to a place of physical horror, and unlocateable, a place which resides in the mind, and encompasses the unimaginable barbarity of the Holocaust. The problem with Holocaust film as a genre is that too often films commit themselves assiduously to the former and sacrifice the latter. Nelson's film is at its best when it illuminates the impossibility of representation, symbolism, and language to describe the events carried out in Auschwitz. Nelson does this through stuttering characters, broken off sentences, long uncomfortable pauses. At one point Dr. Nyiszli, in talking to a German officer about the experiments he is conducting is unable to finish his sentence and says, simply, "We both know what we are saying." At another point a German soldier responds to a Jewish Sonderkommando with equal ambiguity, remarking, "We know what we see." The challenge of articulation is simultaneously the challenge of imagination: we know what we see, but what can it mean? The uneven verbal exchanges are spoken with a kind of toughness; no emotion escapes from the speaker's lips. The implication is that the senses take in what the mind can no longer process or make meaning of. Cameras that jerkily shift from one point to another only reinforce the perception that we are viewing a subject that borders on the unviewable.

Certainly it would be difficult to sustain a film on this level; from a very practical perspective, it makes it hard to tell a coherent and cohesive story. Nelson starts off admirably, and sustains this aspect of the film throughout its entirety, but he also weaves in a physical, violent narrative against the unspoken (indeed, unspeakable) one. In other words, he tries to penetrate the grey zone and give it a sense of place, a sense of reality. This is done through scenes of truly unbearable shouting and screaming and bloodletting. One man refuses to hand over his watch to a Sonderkommando before entering the gas chambers and, out of anger and fear, accuses the Sonderkommando of lying. The Sonderkommando punches him over and over again, finally killing him, while the man's wife looks on in screaming disbelief. The wordlessness of her screams might align this particular moment with the other narrative strand, but the violence is so penetrating and presented with such a sense of immediacy, that any sense of ambiguity regarding its representation is emphatically lost. Other scenes only reiterate this loss through their direct representation of brutality. Scenes which show, in

overwhelming detail, innumerable bodies being shoved into ovens. Or the torture of a Jewish female prisoner suspected of smuggling weapons into the camp. After her own body is wasted, she is forced to watch the execution of other women, many of whom she counts as friends, before she commits suicide by throwing herself on an electric fence. These scenes not only eliminate any sense of thinking about the Holocaust -- we are far too busy reacting and trying to cope -- but also eliminate a corresponding sense of sophistication that the subject matter both demands and deserves.

Death in *The Grey Zone* is passively and actively resisted by many Auschwitz prisoners, but is presented as a merciful reprieve, particularly (and disturbingly) for audience members. The wrenching, horrible screams of the wife of the man beaten for not turning over his watch terminate only once she is murdered. And the female prisoner's pain, which has wracked her body so severely, and which we must also endure, is ended once she kills herself. The teenaged girl who survives the gas chamber but dies trying to escape seems to embody the audience's largely unspoken awareness that death is a relief, the only way out, an escape. But this depiction, as with the film's depiction of violence, is too basic and too literal. The grey zone as an idea should and could resist absolutes. Nelson comes close to uncovering a place of intersecting geographies between morality, memory, and representation, one that finds physical definition in the architecture of Auschwitz. But finally his film, while worth watching and thinking about, falls victim to the excesses of violence and over-literalization from which many Holocaust films suffer. Penetrating the grey zone, instead of continuing to draw us into it, lessens its impact, both as a place and as a film.

Hero (Ying xiong)

Dir: Zhang Yimou, Hong Kong/China, 2003

A review by Teo Kia Choong, National University of Singapore

Many among the East Asian audience of Zhang Yimou's films have echoed the sentiment that his representation of 'China' is the by-product of pressures exerted by the West and by communist China, public spaces which negate personal expression and authorial vision. However, in *Hero*, we see a flirtation with the whole idea of authoritative Chinese history, especially in Yimou's invention of an apocryphal tale of mythic proportions, tantalising the audience with its promises of romance, lush historical panoramas and beautiful cinematography. Financed with Hollywood money through Miramax Studio, and marketed heavily through Chinese and English-language trailers internationally, the film stands as Yimou's testimony to how Chinese culture can be thus re-interpreted and re-defined by the auteur for consumption by a Western and international audience.

Little is known from Chinese annals about the assassins who tried to kill Emperor Qin Shihuang whom they deem a despot. However, *Hero* inverts this paradigm by suggesting its own take on cinematic casuistry, found in the apocryphal tale itself. Hence the film toys with the question, "What if the assassin nearly succeeded in killing Emperor Qin, and yet relinquished the completion of this gritty task for humanitarian reasons looming over his own interests?" Would Chinese history really have been improved if this singular endeavour at assassination had been successful? As the film's sudden plot twist reveals, the nameless assassin, who could represent an everyman for any revolutionary challenging state hegemony, repeats the earlier reluctance and abortiveness of his predecessors. His reluctance is matched with his realization that letting Emperor Qin live to unify China could be China's last attempt at becoming a world power instead of a dystopia marred by wars amongst rival states, and poverty and hunger amidst the common people. The true hero of Chinese history, as Yimou seems to imply in *Hero*, is not the revolutionary per se, but the revolutionary who decides to relinquish his own ideological convictions and personal vengeance for the sake of the larger good of peace and unity.

The narrative structure warrants a comparison to earlier films like Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950). In this notable interplay of perspectives, a facet of self-reflexive narrative, the various strands of meaning emerge. Here, the film comments on the value of history itself as a narrative, which can be revised and rewritten. Telling of an assassin from the state of Zhao (simply known as Wuming) masquerading as a Qin who has destroyed Emperor Qin's nemesis -- three assassins from Zhao, Broken Sword (Canjian), Flying Snow (Feixue), and Sky (Changkong) -- and is thus granted a personal audience with him to finish his plan for revenge, complex structural levels of narrative storytelling overlay each other to disconcerting effect. Wuming first tells a story to Emperor Qin, explaining how he removed the threat to Qin from the assassins, which is then undermined by Emperor Qin as a fabrication, and Wuming becomes the audience of a new story told by Qin which he again edits as a partial narrative. The whole gamut of emotions and reactions that the audience is

made to experience in the various stories told by Wuming and Emperor Qin, as their roles reverse between storyteller and audience, highlights the problems of narrative reliability and structural changeability, where the audience readily align themselves with a new viewpoint whenever told a new story. Who is telling the truth at each juncture of these stories? What details in these various plots can be taken at face value? The film itself remains content to leave ambiguities for the audience to resolve and iron out.

This self-editing *oeuvre* in the narrative appears to be Yimou's inbuilt critique and appraisal of Chinese cultural imperialism, and its recent rise to power after historical events such as the Cultural Revolution and the Tiananmen Square massacre. In an emotionally charged moment, Emperor Qin weeps over the narrative which Wuming tells him to explain Broken Sword's reluctance to kill him, noting unexpectedly that the person who actually understands him best is ironically the assassin whom he loathes. Broken Sword's inscription of "tian xia" in the sand (literally 'under the sky', and meaning 'the people'), is his demonstration to Wuming of an understanding that Emperor Qin is the key figure in unifying the warring states into one empire, despite the people's claims of his tyrannical nature. This is Yimou's veiled reference to the cultural polity China represents for both revolutionaries and political conformists alike. The dominant authority of policing represented by the Qin government is defined paradoxically by what it stigmatizes, the revolutionary narrative which Wuming and his compatriots represent as a challenge to its hegemony. As implied by its disconcerting parallels, China, the rising world power marked by a proto-socialist government is simultaneously fuelled by the revolutionary narratives of rebellion and individual liberation, represented by both May the Fourteenth and the rebellion of university students against the mainline Chinese government.

The prevalence of the nostalgic element in *wuxia pian* films, the return to an ancient epoch of Chinese history and culture through re-constructing its costumes and its panoramic scenery, is an aspect that potentially garners much criticism from its audience as a Chinese artist selling his country as 'exotic' to the West. *Hero* conforms to the formula of the *wuxia pian* genre with stock figures of swashbuckling warriors seeking adventure and choosing exile from a permanent home. The mystique associated with orientalist modes of expression is clearer in the various details surrounding its characters. Broken Sword and Snow are refugees in a remote calligraphy school in the deserts of Zhao, while Wuming is a vagrant dispossessed of his home, his parents having been killed by Emperor Qin, who subsequently becomes governor of a prefecture at the periphery of Qin. The utterance of a feudal code of honour common to the genre of the *wuxia pian* (of *jiang hu dao yi*, martial valour and ethics), that characters abide by is a factor many are likely to register as a sign of a narrative that exoticizes 'China' for Western and international consumption.

However, the film does depart from a typical *wuxia pian* where it denotes the anomalies underlying the images of exoticism associated with the genre itself, often highlighting them as mere fictive constructs. The character of 'sword' (*jian*) Wuming requests of Broken Sword is such an example. The pinnacle of the calligrapher's art and also the swordsman's prowess, it becomes the enigmatic sign *par excellence* in the film, leaving the audience much to contend with in its true portent. The twentieth style that Broken Sword derives from nineteen possible styles of inscribing that character in the state of Zhao; it is simultaneously more than just an aesthetic achievement and also an enigma since it goes beyond the pluralistic modes of expressing the spirit of calligraphic art in Zhao.

The portrayal of Emperor Qin as a ruler capable of magnanimous vision, even if it borders on tyrannical, is no less problematic as a part of the orientalist plot. As the figure who arrives at the inspired meaning of the character of 'jian', his interpretation is however not authoritative, subject to questioning by those who beg to differ from his authority as 'ruler'. According to Qin, the swordsman first fuses his being with the sword (*ren jian he yi*); in the second stage, he wields a sword in the 'heart' (*xin zhong you jian*), hence being able to hurt a man even without a physical sword (*jian qi shang ren*); paradoxically, at the final stage, the swordsman no longer has a sword, in one's hands or heart, but opens his heart to embrace men (*chang kai xiong huai*), to be at peace with others. In his interpretation, Qin attempts to convince Wuming that his use of violence to unify China through the annihilation of Qin's rival states is justified. Wuming's response to Qin's interpretation however lends the cynical paradigm to the film's exotic images of self-enlightenment: "When you have achieved that, remember the blood of those people whom you have killed." His remark carries the dour awareness that before the reign of peace can be attained, more lives must be ended in an untimely fashion, including his own. While these exoticised tropes of 'Zen Buddhism' articulate the archaic theme of deriving truth through passive self-meditation (*wu tou*), recognisably recycled clichés of the *wuxia pian*, *Hero* uses these symbols to raise a more profound question of where the truth of interpretation really resides in light of the current Chinese government and its restrictions against certain political individuals such as the artist. Does truth reside in the authority who interprets the whole social system or the revolutionary who disturbs it through his subversive readings of Chinese social history?

For the bubble gum-and-candy generation of youth who buy into advertising hype in their movie-going decisions, Zhang Yimou's *Hero* will inevitably bore with these ruminations on the processes of Chinese history, something to which advertisements for the film have not alerted them. Yet Yimou's films are capable of stimulating interest among die-hard lovers of art-house cinema, forcing us to question and re-think the vital processes of Chinese history. The marketing of *Hero* as a commercial film could be a deceptive move on Yimou's part, what the Chinese call 'crouching tiger, hidden dragon' in its hiding of true talent in seemingly ordinary places.

Russian Ark

Dir: Aleksandr Sokurov, Russia/Germany, 2002

A review by Elizabeth Rosen, University College London, UK

"We are destined to sail forever, to live forever."

These final words of Aleksandr Sokurov's fascinating film, *Russian Ark*, are the only reference in the entire movie which seems to try to connect with the title, but of course the biblical ark did not sail forever; it landed and discharged its passengers to repopulate a new world, so one has to wonder at the film maker's allusion. In some ways, *Russian Ark* is an apt name for this unusual guided tour through Russian history. The ninety-six minute long film, shot all in one astounding take, winds back and forth, around and through the famous Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg.

The 'plot' of the film is non-existent. The narrating point-of-view character is the film maker himself (in the guise of the camera), who awakens amnesiac after some kind of 'accident,' apparently having travelled back in time to find himself in eighteenth-century Russia. Bewildered, he follows a group of party-goers into the Hermitage where they are trying to sneak into a ball. Once inside, he comes across a stranger, also lost and wandering through the palace. This stranger, a curmudgeonly nineteenth-century French Marquis and former diplomat, played to eccentric perfection by Sergei Dreiden, provides the filmmaker with the opportunity to comment on what they are seeing. As the pair wander through the vast rooms of the Hermitage, they also seem to wander into scenes out of Russia's past: in one room the Romanovs sitting down to breakfast, alternately worried about haemophiliac Alex's health and the nearing sounds of gunshots; in another, Peter the Great cruelly and furiously humiliating a general; in a third, the former and present directors of the modern Hermitage museum whispering their anxieties about protecting the collection from a Soviet government with no eye for posterity. This meander through Russia's past is the crux of the film and allows for a debate on one of the crucial issues of Russian cultural history: whether Russia has a culture of her own, or has merely appropriated her culture from Europe.

The film's opening, a black screen with the narrator's voice, "I open my eyes and I see nothing," is remarkable not merely because it is patently untrue -- the black screen has faded to show an opulently dressed group exiting a carriage -- but also because, as it is so clearly untrue, the viewer must take the words figuratively, rather than literally, and the implications are that all we are about to see -- the tableaux of Russian history, the famous personalities who populate it, the Hermitage Palace, and even the art it contains -- are 'nothing.' Influenced by its tsars, philosophers, revolutionaries, and Soviet warriors, Russia is a country which has always had an ambivalent relationship to the idea of history, and the echo of that ambivalence rings in Sokurov's 'nothing.' However, it seems we are meant to read this pronouncement ironically, since *Russian Ark* is itself far from nothing, and ultimately Sokurov will argue that neither is Russia and her culture. If for no other reason then this is a film worth seeing simply for the entrance into one of the world's greatest art collections and most astonishing palaces.

The grandeur of the Hermitage is no place more apparent than in the closing minutes of the film when the camera, along with the guests of the last great royal ball given at the palace in 1913, departs the ballroom down one of the most splendid staircases and entrance halls conceivable.

But *Russian Ark* is not solely a record of decadent art collecting and luxurious architecture. It is about these things as they relate to Russian history, and perhaps this is Sokurov's point. As contradictory as it seems, the Hermitage is alive with its past. It is impossible to look at the opera being performed in the Mariinsky Theatre as the camera steals in without also thinking of Catherine the Great's love of, and St. Petersburg's tradition of, theatre. So when the camera continues through the theatre, past the orchestra and performers, to reveal Catherine II watching the rehearsal with obvious enjoyment, the effect is of being in a dream where everything is exactly as it should be. It can hardly be coincidental that this scene takes place so early in the movie since, as the narrator will muse shortly, "Russia is like a theatre," a theme that runs throughout the film. When the narrator first awakens, he marvels at the scene before him, asking, "Has all this been staged for me? Am I expected to play a role?" Moments later as he passes through a busy courtyard, he asks again, "What play is this? Let's hope it's not a tragedy." But the 'play' being referenced here is four centuries of Russian history, and so Sokurov's hope is a wryly comic one.

The preoccupation with theatre is an entrée into the largest point of debate in the film: Russia's cultural history. "Why do you find it necessary to borrow Europe's culture?" the Marquis grumbles as he paces one of the picture galleries, pointing out works derivative of the great masters and musing that "Russians are so talented at copying." But as the narrator goes to pains to point out, Russia *has* a culture of its own which is often undervalued. The orchestra is manned by Russians, not Europeans, as the Marquis insists; St. Petersburg is a city filled with theatres with their own companies; writers like Pushkin and Tolstoy can not easily be dismissed. The Marquis remains unconvinced, just as the historical figure upon which he is based, the Marquis de Custine, did.

Like everything else in this film, even the debate itself has a history, one that Tom Stoppard, with his recent trilogy of plays *The Coast of Utopia*, recreates in the heated conversations of Russian icons such as the critic Belinsky, philosopher Herzen, and anarchist Bakunin. Sokurov is also engaged in this debate. While simultaneously reacting against it, his film's innovative single shot reminds the audience that it was Russian filmmakers such as Sergei Eisenstein who invented and developed the idea of montage. Sokurov seems to want to make a point that the criticism of Russia for borrowing all of its culture is an old and invalid one. In fact, *Russian Ark* implies that Europe no longer has a place in Russia at all. As the ball ends, the contemporary narrator urges the Marquis to leave with him, "Let's go." "To where?" "Forward." "What will we find over there?" "I don't know." But the Marquis refuses to budge from his place, shaking his head sadly, his arms locked behind his back as the other guests mill around him and head for the exit. "Farewell Europe," the narrator says, leaving the cranky diplomat behind and following the others. His line on the way out of the ballroom, "It's over" serves multiple purposes in the narrative of the film: the dance is over; the Russian monarchy which hosted this final ball is over; and Europe's influence is also over. Europe can't go into the future, the film implies. The future belongs to Russia, "destined to sail forever, to live forever."

The dialogue of *Russian Ark* is at times nonsensical and there are scenes in the film that are difficult to interpret and seemingly Fellini-esque -- the interlude with the contemporary

woman dancing in front of her favourite painting, and the elliptical scene where chattering actresses accost the European and try to get him to have tea with them come to mind -- and yet what it *does* have to say is challenging and delivered in a equally challenging form. One senses that Sokurov's choice of title is not gratuitous finally, but a complex allusion not merely to the ark which safeguarded the treasures of a past world, as the Hermitage has, but perhaps also to another ark, the Ark of the Covenant, which is associated with God's judgment. For much of this film is about judgment - the judgment of a country, its history, its culture, and finally the validity of outsiders' views of it.

Secretary

Dir: Steven Shainberg, USA, 2002

A review by Natalie Wilson Clift, Birbeck College, University of London, UK

Luminous acting, evocative sets, fine camera work and a tale of longing, romance, familial dysfunction, and sado-masochism are all rolled into one beautifully haunting, erotic, and blackly comic film in Steven Shainberg's *Secretary*.

Significantly, there have been many rumblings about the message of this film from a feminist perspective: Is it anti-feminist? Post-feminist? Does it, as the lead actress proclaims, rework "old school feminist mantras"? Is it a movie that glamorizes female subservience, services macho dreams of sex slaves, or suggests the possibly transforming power of female desire?

If one focused on some of the more memorable images out of context -- of the female protagonist wearing a saddle and chomping on a carrot, or her crawling on all fours towards her boss's office -- it seems as if the film could rightly be accused of misogynistic tendencies. However, when the film as a whole is considered, a story emerges that examines the maw of conventionality as a vortex that attempts to twist quirky social misfits into staid normality. As the story of a troubled young woman's emergence into self-awareness and independence, the film functions as a sort of kinky feminist fairytale for the twenty-first century.

At the outset of the film, Lee Holloway, the female protagonist exquisitely played by Maggie Gyllenhaal, is released from an institution and relates: "Inside, life was simple. For that reason, I was reluctant to go." Outside, her life is far from simple as we soon find out when we are introduced to her mother, who waves expectantly with a palpable sense of need as she pulls up outside the hospital to take Lee home. Played by Lesley Ann Warren, Mrs. Holloway's large, fake and vacuous smile attempts to cover over her abusive existence with Lee's alcoholic father. These parents, a picture of middle class normality from the outside, represent the dark underbelly of Lee's 'normal' life.

On her first day back from the institution, Lee escapes from this supposed normality to her room and reveals her unique neurosis -- a 'self-help' kit hidden under her bed which consists of scalpels, razors, sharpened objects, and iodine. She resists self harm in this scene though, only to resort to placing a kettle of boiling water against her leg a day or so later after witnessing a violent altercation between her drunken father and distraught mother.

Determined to rise above her deadening surroundings and her own neurosis, Lee finds a job as a secretary for E. Edward Grey (played by James Spader). Initially, Grey seems to be an aloof and austere lawyer, prone to both anger (as when he reprimands Lee for the wrong amount of sugar in the coffee, for fidgeting with her hair, for misspelling the word gender in an office letter) and fear (as when he hides from his ex-lover in the closet and exhorts Lee to tell the woman he has gone out).

Soon, the seemingly normal office politics give way to a workplace infused with sado-masochistic activities and desires. After giving her a pep talk about how she will not need to bring her self-mutilation kit to work any longer, Grey angrily confronts Lee with a letter containing typos. Instructing her to bend over the desk, he tells her to read the letter. As she does so, he spansks her repeatedly, the strikes getting more forceful each time. This is the beginning of their 'relationship' -- a relationship Lee actively pursues and enjoys -- so much so, in fact, that when Grey shuns her, she performs a sit in to force him to realize that what he sees as his unacceptable sexual behavior is a behavior she desires. Her burgeoning acceptance of herself as a sado-masochist coincides with her growing independence and confidence -- it is her acceptance of this 'abnormal' part of her self that ultimately allows her to escape the dysfunctional 'normality' of her own nuclear family.

Thus, while critics have tiptoed around the film -- some making sure to proclaim they are feminists in their reviews -- I find this pussy footing around (no pun intended) wholly unnecessary as the film offers a message which aligns rather than refutes key tenets of feminism: that women should not have to fit into certain roles, that women are resourceful, independent, and powerful, that women should celebrate themselves as sexual beings, that women are not meant to 'serve' men but to be their equals. While many critics accuse the film of glorifying female sexual subservience in a reactionary, anti-feminist way, I read the film as attempting to move beyond the 'safer' ideas of equality and ability towards more risky considerations of sexuality. While Lee's sado-masochism is read by some as a symptom of dysfunction and dangerous aberrance, it can more fruitfully be read as a variation of sexual desire that can bring both women and men extreme pleasure and even deep love. As the film makes painstakingly (and humorously) clear, Lee seeks out sado-masochism -- she is shown reading a how to guide for dominant/submissive sexual play and is repeatedly depicted as revelling in and desiring such activities. She is not the 'victim' forced into submission -- she chooses to play the victim and, in so doing, makes a choice that releases her from her dangerous acts of self-mutilation.

While audiences may interpret her sado-masochistic relationship with Grey as merely another form of self-harm, this is not, I think, the message intended. Rather, the movie portrays Lee as escaping the very type of conventionality that drove her to mutilate herself. This is aptly rendered in the subplot involving her relationship with Peter, a former high school friend who reveals to her on their first date that he is the type of guy who wants a wife and kids. Representing the 'normal' suitor in opposition to Grey, Peter is shy and nerdy, an overly gentle and inexperienced lover, and has no desires beyond conventional sex and conventional marriage. He is the 'obvious' choice for Lee -- the 'normal' option.

However, Lee chooses Grey, escaping the weight of conventionality that has threatened to drown out her 'abnormal' desires. This dilemma -- the key issue of the film -- is beautifully captured near the outset of the film when Lee floats in the family pool and spies her sister's wedding cake topper floating on the water. With numerous cumbersome arm and leg floats attached to her body that seem to threaten to sink her rather than make her float, this scene succinctly captures that for Lee, the 'normal' path of marriage is one that would cause her to figuratively drown. Grey, on the other hand, is the alternative option, and through her relationship with him, she is finally released from the shackles of conformity. Grey allows her, as her first typo of the word 'gender' suggests, to move beyond the normal expectations of femaleness. In this reading, her early typo of the word 'gender' as 'genderr' takes on a deeper significance. As an extension of the word, this typo suggests the breakdown of binary gender categories and sexual activities, indicating that there are not only two options -- not

only male and female, not only heterosexual or homosexual, not only married or single -- but an endless array of options, desires, and pleasures. In its deconstruction of dated categories, the film thus offers an artsy tale of the best kind -- one that makes audiences re-examine their comforting beliefs about 'normality' and 'the way things should be'.

S1m0ne

Dir: Andrew Niccol, USA, 2002

A review by Bob Rehak, Indiana University, USA

Andrew Niccol may be the only writer/director working in Hollywood today who treats the tenets of science fiction with calm intellectualism rather than high-tech bombastics. His screenplays for *The Truman Show* (1998) and *Gattaca* (1997), the latter of which, like *S1m0ne*, he directed, favored speculation over spectacle, painting cool portraits of cultures under the dominion of technologies -- social and otherwise -- of surveillance and genetic manipulation. Both of the earlier films placed their protagonists within uncanny, Kafkaesque blends of the blandly mundane and utterly alien. And both films spun drama from the Foucauldian friction between governmental control and individual subjectivity: Niccol's archetypal hero, embodied respectively by Jim Carrey and Ethan Hawke, traced out an arc of self-discovery indistinguishable from political consciousness-raising and societal critique. For Truman Burbank and for Vincent Freeman (note Niccol's fondness for giveaway names, an unfortunate tendency to which I shall return), the personal was the technological was the political.

The scrupulous avoidance of wire-fu, scaly monsters, and supersized pyrotechnics in Niccol's brand of storytelling reminds us what remains valuably *science-fictional* in cinematic SF: the genre's ability, buried nowadays under layers of CGI and punchline-direct dialogue, to comment on contemporary society through futuristic metaphor. *The Truman Show* blended Bentham's panopticon with MTV's *The Real World* to make ironic fun of mass media, conformity, and suburban utopia; *Gattaca*'s paranoid, competitive economy of DNA-based social engineering seems in retrospect to foreshadow the national character of post-9/11 America, split between anthems and air raids, white-bread patriotism and militant xenophobia. Unfortunately, like the tamer O'Henrying of Rod Serling's *Twilight Zone* -- or the old *Planet of the Apes* movies, for that matter -- the pleasurable shocks and insights of 'serious' SF are too often shot through with didactic moralizing, bringing down and enlightening audiences in the same gesture.

Niccol's latest film, a comedy about virtual actors (also called synthespians or, as the film prefers, vactors), shows what happens when metaphors get the best of story and character. The film is all concept -- all message -- and, unfortunately, a grueling experience to watch. Rejected by public and press alike, *S1m0ne* is an instance of SF failing to hit the target. If *The Truman Show* seemed to tell us something about ourselves, *S1m0ne* tells us about nothing but itself: a comedic sendup of its own point of origin -- Hollywood -- it suffers from a case of navel-gazing that verges on the autistic. Viktor Taransky (Al Pacino) is a fussy director of difficult and unpopular 'art' films. Apparently prestigious enough to attract talent like Nicola Anders (Winona Ryder) and Hal Sinclair (Jay Mohr), he is also so abrasive and demanding that Nicola walks off the set of his latest film, forcing him to recast and reshoot a mostly-completed work. Enter the computer programmer Hank Aleno (Elias Koteas), a mad-scientist-cum-fairy-godmother who gives Viktor a disk containing the code for a synthetic actor (Simulation One, or, cutely condensed, SimOne). Hank dies, leaving Viktor alone with

his secret: that Simone, properly coiffeured, animated, and edited, is a screen presence convincing enough to fool and bewitch the audience. Riding Simone's virtual coattails to literally global success, Viktor becomes a sensation even as his efforts to conceal Simone's true nature lead him to alcoholism, exhaustion, and estrangement from his already fragmentary family (ex-wife and studio executive Elaine Christian (Catherine Keener), and daughter Lainey Christian (Evan Rachel Wood)). After an interminable and increasingly implausible set of dramatic escalations, Viktor frees himself by faking Simone's death -- only to be charged with murder by a world that cannot bring itself to believe that Simone never existed.

The real ending, of course, is 'happy.' Elaine learns Viktor's secret and the family reconciles, agreeing to resurrect Simone and continue her synthetic career. The final image shows Simone and Viktor together, composited for a TV interview, announcing the birth of their son, 'Chip.' This inexplicable twist that fails to excite any interest, so thoroughly has the film dismantled any sense of fascination inherent in its premise. And the premise is interesting; that's the mystery here. *Simone* (the film) initially plays games with our expectations of Simone (the synthespian): while she never appears as anything but a mediated image -- on computer displays, movie and television screens, and a hologram-and-smoke-machine combo enabling her "live" performance before thousands of screaming fans -- she invites the kind of scrutiny that we accord to any digital illusion posing as the real thing, whether it be the plastic cartoons of *Toy Story* (1995), the furry creatures of *Ice Age* (2002), or, less anthropomorphically, the Roman Colosseum of *Gladiator* (2000). At this juncture in the development of representational technologies, we have a vested, perhaps evolutionary interest in telling the difference between simulation and reality, even if that split is largely a product of discourse. *Simone* could have served our own anxieties back to us magnified, as great screen comedies about gender and masquerade have always done: *Some Like It Hot* (1959) or *Tootsie* (1982).

Unforgivably, *Simone* chooses to work instead the bland terrain of *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993). The point of Niccol's film is not to lampoon the complex absurdities of our cultural constructions of difference. Rather, it reduces the creation of a virtual star to a gimmicky subtask in the larger mission of reuniting husband and wife, father and daughter. Simone's ultimate function is to help Viktor be a better man through subterfuge. (As Lainey puts it, the problem is not that he lies to the world; it's that he lies to his family.) Perhaps Niccol couldn't sell his screenplay unless he subordinated its more compelling elements to domestic pabulum, but I don't think that's the case. *Simone* was simply made too early. What it needed in order to work was a genuine synthespian.

As is now well known, Simone is played by the quite human Rachel Roberts. With her already rather plastic good looks smoothed by makeup and a dab of image processing, Roberts seems simultaneously too real and not real enough for the part. There is only one place where she finds our *unheimlich* G-spot, and that is in the DVD release's interface, which mimics Hank Aleno's computer program. A disembodied head that blinks and gazes back and forth in cyclical graphic loops beside the menu options, DVD-Simone leaves her human referent behind, something she never quite achieves in the film proper. As a special effect, Roberts is like a woman wearing a digital Halloween costume, as unconvincing in her way as Barney the dinosaur is in his. She never threatens the spectator with seduction as even cel animation regularly manages to do -- think of the vulgar voluptuary Jessica Rabbit in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988) -- or raises the mingled sense of pleasure and alarm brought on by Dr. Aki Ross in *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* (2001). The cinematic showcasing of

'fake' women, which literalizes Mulvey as well as Lacan (*la femme n'existe pas*), is usually good for a *frisson* of weirdness, giving ticket buyers a chance to reflect on the blind spots of industrially-reproduced signification. By using a real human performer to fake its own fakery, *SimOne* backs down from the challenge its story implicitly presents.

There are other problems: Simone's instant, worldwide popularity makes no sense, and the journalists who pursue her true identity -- the only real gear turning in the plot -- are presented so sketchily that they are almost incoherent. The film excuses this lazy, connect-the-dots storytelling through comedy, but good comedies have always concealed a knife-edge of truth. *SimOne* correlates to nothing in our experience except, perhaps, Hallmark cards and Dilbert comics, choosing to be clever where it could have been cutting. Name-play is only the most obvious failure of imagination: Hank Aleno, blinded in one eye from sitting too close to his screen, anagrams to "alone" -- and as we watch Viktor lose himself in Simone, the isolating potential of fantasy is hammered home again and again in similarly blunt manner.

Yet the film does, in spite of itself, yield some insights after the fact. Casting Al Pacino in a story about synthespians is smart, since he is already nearly algorithmic in performance. Like Jack Nicholson, Pacino will surely be among the first actors to have his mug and persona licensed by Microsoft. And Viktor's preferred manner of 'directing' Simone -- manipulating her speech and expressions by performing them himself, as though in a mirror -- is not far-fetched given that Ang Lee is said to perform many of the Incredible Hulk's moves while wearing a motion-capture suit. For all of its easy one-liners about auteurism, audience credulity, and the ultimate emptiness at the heart of Hollywood illusion, *SimOne* can't help but score some accidental points. But the true moment of revelation -- forcing a culture to confront its own mixed feelings about simulation -- may come only when we learn that Jim Carrey died years ago but is alive and well in the cyberspace of cinema.

Talk to Her (Hable con ella)

Dir: Pedro Almodóvar, Spain, 2002

A review by Reni Celeste, Yale University, USA

Talk to Her engages the usual suspects of a classic Almodóvar work -- desperate women, mothers, and Oedipal tensions -- but here they conspire to brilliantly describe the universal anguish of love and human relation. Loneliness is the basic affliction suffered by all the characters. It is a loneliness exacerbated by language and the failure of the word to arrive at its intended destination. Midway through the film Marco (Dario Grandinetti) describes the agony of the period following the loss of his last lover. He insists "there is nothing worse than to leave someone you still love." The entire film takes place within this ache of separation.

The film charts three love affairs: Marco and Lydia, Benigno and Alicia, and the strange bond that develops between the two men once they find themselves in the same unhappy condition. Each man awaits the nearly impossible revival of his comatose lover. The film begins with a shot of the two men when they are still strangers watching a ballet by Pina Bausch. Marco is older, sadder, and wiser. Benigno (Javiar Cámara) is young, half-witted, and kind. In the ballet two female sleepwalkers in gowns throw themselves about a room, crashing into walls, falling, and contorting their bodies. A sad aging man intervenes and tries to knock the chairs and obstructions out of their way. Marco begins to cry and Benigno notices.

Later we see Benigno recounting the ballet to Alicia (Leonor Watling) in complete detail as he does her nails. The camera tilts up to her comatose body. Benigno's entire love affair with Alicia has transpired from a distance. At first he watched her from his window across the street from her dance class, and now he nurses her as she lies in a deep coma. Benigno's advice to Marco once his lover is also rendered comatose is simple: "talk to her." Benigno's unwavering belief in the power of the word, despite the greatest obstacles, borders on madness. He believes that if one is persistent enough the voice will conquer the wound of separation, cure the basic human affliction of loneliness, and even revive the dead. But Marco cannot break through the wall of silence.

Talk to Her impeccably weaves reflection with reality. The film has a complex temporal structure, but it moves between various times and narrations with fluidity and ease. The clinic is the present through which all stories are told in either flashback or narration. Similarly, life is described through art or reflection. As in other Almodóvar films, the artwork is used by the characters as a form of expression and communication. The film opens and closes with an image of stage and spectators, and throughout there are ballets, bullfights, films, and song. In each performance the spectator's reactions share equal footing with the work, and in a few places it is only the retelling of the performance that we receive. A bond between stage and witness is forged that mirrors the structure of love.

The first flashback tells the story of Marco, a journalist whose eye is caught by the appearance of Lydia (Rosario Flores) on a television talk show. This striking woman will

fight six bulls, but refuses to discuss the failure of her recent celebrity tryst with fellow bullfighter El Niño (Aldolfo Fernández). Marco is driven to meet this passionate and desperate woman. Later he falls into her rebounding clutches and commences a brief and tragic love affair. Almodóvar's visual style -- warm minimalist colors and obsession with poetic detail -- is never more stunning. In the bullring Lydia shouts and casts her black eyes at the bull as it snakes along her body in slow motion -- red, black, gold, dust, and blood. Marco watches with awe, fear and admiration. But her performance is not for him. Marco and Lydia are both bound to the past. Marco has yet to recover from a passion ten years prior, and Lydia is still in love with El Niño, who watches her from the stands.

Marco's reflections from the hospital revisit their final hours. She had insisted that they talk after the fight. He had been reluctant to listen, and once she is gored by the bull her words remained unsaid. One day he overhears El Niño speaking passionately to Lydia at her bedside and realizes what she had intended to say to him. He bids farewell to Benigno and Alicia and leaves the hospital forever.

For four years Benigno has nursed Alicia, done her nails, washed her hair, cleaned her vagina, and massaged her muscles. He has been entrusted to her care by her father who believes Benigno to be gay. Benigno was willing to perform any act of deceit to be nearer to his love. For Benigno love is a kind of madness, a crime of passion. His love began as an act of voyeurism and has transpired across a distance ever since. The difference is that now he talks to her. He tells her everything, and that she cannot receive or reply seems of minor significance. As he observes, they are happier than most married couples.

The night that Benigno consummates his love with Alicia is told through performance. Benigno recounts a silent film, *The Shrinking Man*, and the images emerge alongside his narration. In this film a scientist devises a weight loss drug. Her lover drinks the potion and begins to shrink. She tries to find the antidote but fails. The tiny man flees to his mother, but the scientist hunts him down, steals him from the mother, and in a final love scene the two lay in bed together like a giantess and her doll. When she falls asleep he straddles her breast and slides down between her legs. He climbs into her vagina, where he lives happily ever after. Only later do we learn what transpired that night behind this narrative. *The Shrinking Man* not only serves as stand in for the event that is occurring, it also provides a microcosm of the psyche of the film. The male is powerless before the lover, who is only a small step removed from the mother. Re-entry into her body is the coveted return to the mother and plenitude. The prostrate position of the comatose woman who is being raped mirrors the sleeping lover in the film, who can only be possessed by the tiny man in the absence of her power (will and consciousness). Love is wielded as a power that pursues its own absence. Its ultimate aim is the dissolution of the self in the other.

As the months pass Alicia's period does not arrive and the authorities gradually uncover the crime and deception that has taken place in their ignorance. Benigno was considered harmless, retarded, and a homosexual. Marco returns to the aid of his friend and finds him in prison awaiting trial. He promises to find out what happened to Alicia and the baby. Marco stays in Benigno's house and finds himself taking up the same position of voyeurism, gazing out at the ballet studio across the street. It is here that to his deep surprise one day he sees Alicia in the dance studio. She has awakened.

The awakening of the sleeping beauty is a magical fairytale of requited love. But in this drama the baby dies as Alicia revives, and rather than the lover's kiss opening the possibility

of satisfaction and narrative closure, it becomes merely another missed encounter. Marco has been asked by Benigno's lawyer not to tell him that she has awakened. Marco's decision not to tell his friend the news has fatal consequences. Just as in *Romeo and Juliet*, Benigno dies in order to join his beloved, and unbeknownst to him she has already awakened. But in this case even Alicia is unaware of the exchange. This film unfolds as a series of missed communications, but the verdict on love and communication is not simply failure. Miscommunication is described as the condition itself of understanding.

In a significant scene Alicia's ballet mistress Katerina (Geraldine Chaplin) pays a visit and speaks enthusiastically to Alicia about a performance she is choreographing. She describes how in her ballet woman comes forth from man, man from woman, and the ethereal from the earth. This relation between opposing forces defines the metaphysic of the entire film. From speech comes silence, from silence speech. From sleep comes waking, from waking sleep and death. The question of gender and homosexuality that runs through the film is best understood as well within this regenerative, malleable relation of opposites. Lydia is a bullfighter dressing in men's attire for her performances and Benigno a male nurse who cared relentlessly for his beautiful mother before her death. Everyone partakes of both the feminine and the masculine. From one force emerges the other.

The final two performances exemplify this dialectic. The first is a dance of loss and death in which a woman's levitating body is carried above the heads of the other dancers. She rises, falls, breaths, all to one thought that is articulated through the vocals, "my baby is gone." Marco begins to cry once again and wiping his tears at intermission catches the eye of Alicia. When the ballet resumes the two have become aware of one another. The final performance is one of levity and renewal. A chain of embracing couples enters one by one repeating the same playful dance. A boy takes interest in a young girl and begins to approach. The final shot is of the spectators and includes in the frame both Marco and Alicia who sit several rows apart. He turns to look at her illuminated face in the crowd and then returns his eyes to the stage. A slight grin emerges on both of their faces. The next segment is titled Marco and Alicia, but there is no need to tell it. Desire is described as the perpetual pursuit of understanding. That the word never fully arrives or achieves finality is its very meaning.

Almodóvar has woven a painfully beautiful tale of desire, language and art. It is as much an homage to the power of art as it is a contemplation on language and relation. Art is described as the arbitrator between two points -- as great a vehicle of love as the voice that talks.

The Wicker Man

Dir: Robin Hardy, UK, 1973

A review by Paul Binnion, University of Nottingham, UK

The Wicker Man along with Nicolas Roeg's *Don't Look Now* (1973) represented a turning point in British horror. Between the late 1950s and early 1970s, British horror was dominated by the output of the Hammer studio, in particular their endless reworkings of the Dracula and Frankenstein narratives. Gothic, melodramatic, camp and firmly tongue-in-cheek are epithets most commonly used to describe these films; considering their alleged status as horror films, it is surprising to find that they are rarely described as frightening or horrific. In contrast, *The Wicker Man* is a deeply unsettling film which plays on fears which are just beyond the viewer's immediate grasp. The film follows Sergeant Howie (Edward Woodward) as he searches for a missing girl on the isolated Scottish island of Summerisle. During his search he begins to realise that he is being manipulated and that everything is not as it would first seem; the islanders are Pagans who enact fertility rites and practice human slaughter as an offering to help their ailing crops. Believing that the islanders are going to sacrifice the missing girl to their gods, Howie endeavours to find and rescue her. Not realising that his actions are being manipulated, he allows himself to be led to the girl, and it is only then that it is revealed that it is he who is to be sacrificed.

As befits a cult film of *The Wicker Man's* stature, the DVD presentation is thorough and excellent. Over two discs, there are two edits of the film, archival interview footage, commentaries and a documentary on the history of the film. The extra material is unfailingly informative, and the documentary *The Wicker Man Enigma* is especially of interest to long-standing fans of the film. However, the biggest draw is the unseen 'director's cut' which runs fifteen minutes longer than the original theatrical version. The film was re-edited against Robin Hardy's wishes before release, and all extra footage was destroyed during the seventies. The retrieved footage comes courtesy of Roger Corman who had what is possibly the only existing full length version of the film. The extra material is of inferior quality visually, and the jump between the original theatrical version and the extra footage is quite plain. It is the reintegration of this material which makes the film such interesting viewing on DVD -- but maybe not for the reasons Robin Hardy would have expected.

The director's cut phenomenon is now widely established. George Lucas, Ridley Scott and James Cameron, to name a few, are directors who continually return to their earlier work in the hope of perfecting it. Peter Jackson possibly took this idea to an extreme when he released two different cuts of *The Lord Of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001) onto DVD within several months of each other. The name itself -- *director's cut* -- would suggest an auterist viewpoint in that this is the director's vision without the necessity of compromising with meddlesome studio executives; furthermore, it implies that this is the most authentic text. In *The Wicker Man Enigma*, Robin Hardy is clearly delighted to be able to present the film in what he considers a superior form. However, this re-authorship of an old text brings into question notions of cult fandom and legitimacy. For example, the film was drastically re-edited because the studio heads felt it had moments of artistic pretension

and that some 'talky' scenes ran far too long. It could be argued that the inclusion of these scenes now adds to a deeper understanding of the text; Robin Hardy suggest that the introduction of Lord Summerisle (Christopher Lee) earlier in the film give the viewer some warning that there is a controlling force behind events. The most significant re-integrated scenes form a prologue to Sergeant Howie's arrival on Summerisle. These scenes are used to introduce him to the audience, thus we learn that he is a fervent churchgoer and that he is intent on remaining a virgin until he is married. Given this information, it is immediately clear why he is so contemptuous of the earthy and non-Christian lifestyle of the islanders and finds their religion so personally abhorrent. Furthermore, it becomes clear that his virginity is important plot-wise. However, although this information privileges the viewer, there is a certain loss of ambiguity which -- in the theatrical edit -- contributed to the atmosphere of Summerisle. Similarly the re-integrated introduction to Lord Summerisle lurking in the bushes below Willow's (Britt Ekland) window is shot with Christopher Lee's face in half-shadow which is reminiscent of the Hammer films Hardy and Lee were so keen to move away from. In particular, it is suggestive of a scene in *Dracula* (1958) in which Dracula (Lee) is seen lurking outside Lucy's bedroom window. To an audience familiar with the Hammer canon, the similarity in scenes will immediately identify Lord Summerisle as a villain. This also shifts the balance of identification somewhat. In the original version, the audience were as confused as Sergeant Howie, and therefore more likely to identify with him. In the newly restored version, the extra scenes give the viewer an omniscient viewpoint, thus reducing their identification with Howie.

The film's cult status must also be questioned. The omission of scenes may admittedly have made the film less easy to follow, but in the realm of cult viewing, that is quite often one of the qualities which mark a film out for repeated viewings. It is possible that a transparent narrative and a wider commercial release would have resulted in the film's currency as a cult item being significantly reduced. Furthermore, as years have gone by, fans have heard the stories about the lost footage being buried beneath the M3 motorway, and inevitably -- for a fan -- this leads to questions of what they -- as fans -- have been deprived of. In cult cinema, a flawed classic is always preferable to perfection. The stories around the production and distribution of films can often have a long-lasting effect on the perception of the film by fans. Most notably real life events around *The Exorcist* (1973) and *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) contribute to the films notoriety, as did the banning of the 'video nasties' in the early 1908s. Cults also build around films which fans feel they have discovered themselves; therefore films such as *Withnail & I* (1987) and *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984) missed out at the box office but became sleeper hits on video. Much the same happened with *The Wicker Man*. Both Hardy and Lee are critical of the way the film was released theatrically. However, it can be argued that its lack of success contributed to its desirability as an obscure item for fans of cult texts. Similarly, deliberate ambiguity can often lead to repeated viewings and conflicting readings of a text, thus enhancing their cult currency. TV series such as *The Prisoner* or *Twin Peaks* and films such as *Blade Runner* (1982) or most of David Lynch's canon are open to multiple interpretations. Their longevity as a cult item is ensured as there is no definitive answer to the questions posed in the film. Discussing *The Prisoner*, Patrick McGoohan admitted to deliberately misleading viewers in order to leave the series open to interpretation. With this in mind, it can be argued that the longer cut of *The Wicker Man* is in some ways inferior to the 'butchered' edit. The extra scenes of Howie in church and of Lord Summerisle lurking in the bushes make the plot and their characters less ambiguous, thereby depriving the viewer of one of the text's pleasures -- that of making the connections themselves. As a result it can be argued that the longer edit is in some ways easier to follow and consequently more commercial.

In the DVD extras, Hardy condemns the studio for its lack of support in forcing him to film in November when the narrative is meant to be taking place in the springtime. He goes on to say that this made any exterior filming all the more difficult as they were at the mercies of the Scottish weather. However, again this unfortunate situation actually works in favour of the film. In particular, the lighting in the exterior shots is over-bright, almost as if the film has been slightly over-exposed. The harshness of the sunshine undercuts the pastoral imagery of *Summerisle*, thus further enhancing the atmosphere and creating a sense of everything being slightly out of kilter. Again, circumstances beyond the director's control improve the film.

In an ideal world, Robin Hardy would have made a very different film to the one which was first issued theatrically. In the director's cut he attempts to get a little closer to his vision of the film, but, as is so often the case in director's cuts, less is more. The integration of lost footage into a familiar narrative rarely, if ever works. The extended version of *Aliens* (1986) is a prime example of unnecessary tinkering with an already classic film. Although critics and fans would argue that the subplot around Ripley's daughter adds to her characterisation, the early scenes which set up the alien attack are superfluous and slow the pacing of the narrative. Arguably Robin Hardy's ideal version of *The Wicker Man* would have suffered from much the same problem; if the extended cut is any indication, Hardy's ideal cut would overtly explain much that is left unspoken in the shorter edit, thus reducing much of the film's impact and cult appeal. It is maybe this problem which prompted the producers of the DVD to provide both versions, thus giving the viewer the ability to make up their own minds. As a result, this double disk not only presents a classic film beautifully, but also throws up many questions regarding authorship and authenticity.