Edge of Seventeen

Dir: David Moreton, USA, 1998

A review by Matthew Nelson, University of Wisconsin-Madison

The "coming of age" film has long been used by studios in order to bring in a much-needed teen audience, while at the same time appealing to older generations as a nostalgia piece. But for gay and lesbian audiences the coming of age film as a deeper meaning. The characters not only come of age as adults, but also come out into their sexuality. Until recently, however, gays coming of age/coming out films were few and far between. The wonderful British gay coming of age film, *Beautiful Thing*, gave birth to a new era of films featuring the lives and struggles of young gay men. The recent theatrical release in the United States of two new films about young gay life adds to this growing genre with extraordinary depth and meaning. *Edge of Seventeen*, an American film, and *Get Real*, a British picture, both capture the excitement and pain of the coming out process, without sacrificing the character's integrity or selling them out as sexual "eye candy."

Seventeen tells the story of a teenager's coming out into the gay world of mid-1980's Ohio. They semi-autobiographical script by Todd Stephens gives a wonderfully candid view of the main character, Eric, and his struggle with his sexuality. It portrays his relationships with friends, lovers, and family, with such genuine emotion and appeal that viewers of all ages see a bit of themselves in the Eric. The cast delivers powerfully true performances, and the retro 80's music and fashion, all the rage these days, keep the film easy to watch, even during its most intensely emotional moments.

The story opens with the seventeen-year-old Eric, powerfully played by newcomer Chris Stafford, beginning a new summer job at a fast food restaurant. There he encounters a loud-mouth manager, portrayed by lesbian comic Lea DeLaria in a delicious role, and a dreamy college boy named Rod, played by Anderson Gabrych. After a summer of flirtation, Eric finds himself in Rod's room where he nervously experiences sexual desire for the first time. The truthfulness of the scene is somewhat surprising, considering the controversial material. Director David Moreton could have used the scene as a cheaply done erotic showcase of the beautiful young actors and their bodies, but instead he stuck true to the nervousness of the scene. Eric's conflicting fear and desire become the major focus of the scene, rather than the sexual acts. The audience shares Eric's excitement and terror through the realness of the action. Their actions are not forced or overly done. The sexual scenes throughout the film all follow this same awkwardness. The graphic action and situations Eric encounters never lapse into soft-core erotica in order to sell the scene. For example, when Eric experiences anal sex for the first time, his facial expressions are amazingly realistic, yet the scene does not become gay porn. The actions are presented as a realistic account, helping maintaining the truthfulness of the film.

As Eric's coming out progresses, his internal changes start to manifest themselves on the outside as well. He dyes his hair blond, and takes to dressing like Madonna and putting on

Boy George inspired make-up. His introduction into the gay bar scene is accompanied by Angie (DeLaria), who serves as Eric's Virgil through rural Ohio's gay underworld. DeLaria shines as the brash but loveable lesbian mentor. After conquering the stand up stage for years, and recently making a splash on Broadway, DeLaria's energy and talent help to strengthen the film, while at the same time adding comic relief. She shows her range, going from tough talking restaurant manager, to zany cabaret MC, to a tender queer mother figure for Eric as he struggles with realities of gay life outside of the bar scene.

As the film's major strength, the complex interplay between the characters comes out naturally, without phony sentimentality. Eric soon realizes that his coming out effects not just himself, but his relationship with his loved ones as well. Tina Holmes, a stunning Audrey Hepburn look-alike, plays Eric's female best friend who wants more than just his friendship. Her conflicting desires between love and friendship for Eric are summed up with one pained expression as he comes out to her. Her love for him and his confusion cause further trouble after Eric tries to convince her, and him, that they were meant to be together. The painful morning after confession, and Holmes's heartbreak, hits too close to home for many that have had to come out to the women they loved. As Eric's loving and patient mother, Stephanie McVay gives the wonderfully truthful performance of a parent dealing with a troubled teenager. She struggles to hide her concern and love for Eric and therefore silently denies what she knows to be true. Her sweet Mid-Western charm and white bread wholesomeness give way to confusion when she finds Eric in bed with his best girl friend, in one of the films unexpected twists. The emotional climax of the film arrives with Eric admitting his sexuality to his mother, who has been trying to prepare herself for what she fears he will say. The scene, which could have been lifted from any middle class living room, was devoid of any Hollywood style sentiment or explosion of emotion. His mother does not rush to accept or reject Eric. She simple states her love for him and walks from the room, leaving Eric, and the audience with a profound sense of relief.

The film's most striking aspect is the stark reality of the character's emotions and actions. Rarely does a film so candidly capture the wonder and pain of growing up with so much dignity and truth. All too often, films about younger people rely too much on the actor's looks and contrived situations in order to sell a story. The recent influx of teen-themes movies have given only flimsy paper cut outs of characters, and have rarely dealt with weighty topics like sexuality and identity to any real depth. *Edge of Seventeen* gives a fantastic look at a young man's coming out and coming to terms with his sexuality. The truth of the characters and script not only makes the film interesting to everyone who has been through the same situation, but it has meaning for all those who are going through it now. The importance of prominent and positive portrayals of younger gays and lesbians becomes greater and greater as more queer teens come out earlier. All to often, gay and lesbian media images exploit younger queers as little more than "eye candy," devoid of intellect or usefulness other than as sexual objects. Seventeen presents an honest story about young queer life. The film's truthful message of pain, pleasure, and survival in the queer world serves as a badly needed guidebook for today's younger queer generation, desperate for real images of themselves and their lives.

La Balia

Dir: Marco Bellocchio, Italy, 1999

A review by Luca Prono, University of Nottingham

Marco Bellocchio's *La Balia* (the wet-nurse) is one of those movies that is not afraid of being unfaithful to the literary work on which it is based - even if this work is by an author who is considered a "classic", as indeed is the case with Luigi Pirandello. While Bellocchio has retained the initial scenario from Pirandello's novella - a bourgeois wife's inability to breast feed her baby - the director has made a number of crucial changes that allow him to explore the themes in which he has always been interested. In this way, *La Balia* is a synthesis of Bellocchio's life-long concerns which have characterised his oeuvre ever since his stunning debut movie *Fists in the pocket* (1965) - the observation of the Italian bourgeoisie and of its repressed and most unacceptable behaviour, the influence of class difference on human relationships, and the interconnections between reason, science and folly. The result is a highly original and intense movie.

Set in Rome at the beginning of the century, the movie focuses on the relationships between Ennio Mori, a psychiatrist who no longer believes in psychiatry (in Pirandello's novella he is simply an ambitious socialist politician), his wife Vittoria who has just given birth to their first son but is unable to breast feed him, and Annetta, a wet nurse from the country whom Mori selects to obviate his wife's problem. Vittoria is unable to communicate to her husband her unhappiness caused by her inability to fit in that very social role for which she had married Mori in the first place. In turn, he is unwilling to analyse his wife's mind and fears. He prefers to adapt himself to her long silences and keep up a faint impression of quiet. This balance based on a deep lack of communication is unsettled when the wet nurse arrives at the Mori's palace. Vittoria's inability to feel for her very own son that love which the wet nurse feels from the very first moment and her consequent jealousy prompts her to depart for their seaside mansion. The close relationship that Mori establishes with Annetta after Vittoria's departure offers to the wet nurse physical protection and intellectual growth, yet it is Mori himself who will benefit the most. Annetta teaches him a positive approach to life and a more open and understanding attitude towards others. Through Annetta, Mori learns to understand his wife and, in the end, (and in contrast with Pirandello's pessimistic ending where Annetta's own son dies and she becomes a prostitute) the couple are reconciled.

The concerns of the movie with the category of class are apparent; it has already been mentioned that Vittoria married Mori to have a social role only to find out that it was a role into which she could not fit. Her unhappiness with the claustrophobic rules of the haute bourgeoisie is made very clear from the beginning: Vittoria is sitting in an armchair surrounded by Mori's female relatives, but she does not entertain them, her mind is clearly elsewhere. She is afraid of motherhood and tells her husband she would be glad if everything was already over. After giving birth to her son, she feels oppressed by the visits that Mori relatives pay to her and would like to be left alone. She does not even want to take her child in her arms. To these claustrophobic scenes, Bellocchio skilfully alternates shots of Annetta's life and of the women who help her while she gives birth to her child. Two opposing social

worlds are presented: Vittoria belongs to a safe and well-to-do environment, but is weaker and more anguished than Annetta who has to work in the fields even while she is pregnant. Yet, the movie is careful not to oppose country virtue to city corruption. The bond that Annetta creates with Vittoria's child (effectively conveyed by the image of Annetta's shadows that enlarged by the light coming from a window while she is keeping the child in her arms covers an entire wall) crosses class boundaries and shows the paradox of a class struggle informed by the most intimate of relationships.

Annetta does not miss her little country village and she does not feel lost in the maze of the city. On the contrary, she proves to be a skilful urban reader when, despite the riots caused by a general strike, she manages to go out to feed her own baby whom she has secretly brought to Rome with her. The city functions as the arena where the class confrontation that has been presented as private inside the Mori's palace becomes public. Although this dimension is kept in the background (suggesting perhaps that the close relationship developed by Mori and Annetta is far more subversive), Rome is shown as shaken by red flags, socialist movements and proletarian demonstrations and is taken as a representative example of the tensions which ran through the kingdoms of Umberto I and Vittorio Emanuele III. These tensions make the habit of well-to-do women like Vittoria to stroll leisurely through the gardens of the city look anachronistic.

Through these private and public confrontations, the film conveys the disintegration of a bourgeois order. Functional to this representation is also the focus on the elusiveness of mental illness despite the positivistic claims of the times. Mori is becoming increasingly sceptical about his profession and his colleague Nardi will choose socialism as an escape from the traps of positivism. Furthermore, Mori does not have to face mental illness only at the psychiatric hospital where he works: though he does not want to admit it, his wife Vittoria too is affected by mental neurosis. When, as a result of her confused state, she leaves for their seaside mansion, she goes to her husband's hospital to tell him. Yet, significantly, she does not enter in the hospital building to communicate her decision to Ennio (once again the lack of communication between the two is underlined), but remains outside, in the garden, and just makes a farewell gesture towards her husband who is observing her from a window. Nothing in this scene distinguishes Vittoria from the rest of Ennio's patients. Soon the desk where Ennio works and on which there are books whose illustrations may recall Lombroso's doctrines becomes the place where science is replaced by feeling. Ennio puts away his books and starts to teach Annetta how to read and write, while, in turn, she gives him the strength to try and save his relationship with Vittoria.

All actors sustain extremely well the stylish interplay of glances, silences and half-uttered words orchestrated with subtlety by Bellocchio: Maya Sansa makes an exceptional debut in the role of the wet nurse thanks to her spontaneity, while Valeria Bruni Tedeschi and Fabrizio Bentivoglio strengthen their reputation as two of the best Italian actors of the moment. The only truly disappointing thing about *La Balia* is that its rare quality of combining historical accuracy with an investigation of issues extremely pertinent to contemporary society has gone unnoticed at the 1999 Cannes International Film Festival, where the film was presented and where the jury (wrongly) did not consider it worthy of any award.

Life During Wartime: The Phantom Menace

Dir: George Lucas, USA, 1999

A review by Will Brooker, University of Wales, Cardiff

Nineteen ninety-nine has already witnessed the world war which wasn't a war: now we have the movie you've seen before its release. *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* has become the always-already-experienced, here and gone before it arrives. By June the British fan could have known every line off by heart from the published script, memorised the novelisation, collected every variant of the comic and amassed a full set of mini-action figures. The plot had been given away on internet bulletin boards; the film itself was available from market stalls. Why bother trekking to the cinema to watch the early adventures of Anakin Skywalker when you've become him countless times in the *Racer* videogame? While the trailers have barely started to run on British TV and the poster campaign has reached only scattered hoardings, there's a sense of fatigue about the whole deal. Between the May opening in the States and the belated import to the UK for mid-July, the *Menace* phenomenon has almost become old news, yesterday's story. Even *Sight and Sound* opened its review with a resigned "You know the drill" - and this some three weeks before the movie premiered.

The entire mediasphere around *The Phantom Menace* is saturated with over-familiar images and citations. Just as the movie's striking icons have been reduced to visual cliché - the once-shocking visage of Darth Maul loses its impact when you see it repeated across plastic mugs, pencil cases and posters in every high street window display - so the journalistic discourse surrounding the film has to struggle to avoid repeating earlier reviews. *New York Post* reporter Thelma Adams must have patted herself on the back for opening with Obi-Wan Kenobi's "I have a bad feeling about this": and so must Susan Wloszczyna, quoting the same line at the start of her review in *USA Today*. It's all been said and done before. You know you're going to be vaguely disappointed. You know you're going to hate Jar-Jar Binks. You know the drill. You know what to think, what to feel about The Phantom Menace before you even walk into the cinema.

And to a fan, there's something awfully deadening and despondent about that feeling. To a fan, this isn't just a big movie or a marketing vehicle, or even a cultural phenomenon: it's history, personal history. *The Phantom Menace* may seem to take an unprecedented jump by flashing us back a generation, 32 years before *A New Hope*; but A New Hope itself was released 22 years ago. Twenty-two years. Jimmy Carter was in the White House, James Callaghan on Downing Street. We had an oil crisis, a Cold War, a summer drought. *Jaws* was the biggest movie of all time; John Travolta was Top of the Pops. It was as if punk had never happened: and it hadn't, barely. When my dad bought me my first action figure, a C-3PO, I was seven years old and having an appalling time at Charlton Manor Junior School. When I bought a new C-3PO figure in May - the *Phantom Menace* model Threepio, stripped down to the wires - it was to reward myself for landing a lectureship in Communication. Twenty-two years is a long time.

In 1977 Carrie Fisher was a petite girl of twenty-one with famous parents; now she's a novelist and recovered junkie whose ex-husband sticks pins in a Princess Leia doll. In 1977 Harrison Ford was a carpenter with one major film role to his name; now he's an ageing Hollywood stalwart. Peter Cushing, who played Grand Moff Tarkin in *A New Hope*, died of cancer five years ago. Jake Lloyd, who now plays Anakin Skywalker, wasn't born when *Return of the Jedi* was released. Twenty-two years is a long time, for all of us. If you live with a movie that long, it becomes a myth, part of your life. Some of us have waited sixteen years for *The Phantom Menace*; first expecting it in 1986, after the usual three-year interlude, then resigning ourselves and making do with Star Wars comics, novels and computer games for over a decade, and finally, hardly daring to believe the rumours after so long, beginning the cycle of anticipation in the lead-up to the film's release. Never mind the marketing, the budget, and the first-weekend box-office take: there's more riding on this film, in terms of mass personal investment, than anything in the history of cinema.

Which explains why, at 5.15 on the 15th July, I was walking back from the Odeon in Cardiff trying desperately to rationalise my feelings about *The Phantom Menace*. I was trying to find a way of categorising the film as not-Star Wars, keeping it apart from the trilogy of my childhood. I was trying to work out what was wrong with it. I didn't feel as if I'd seen a *Star Wars* film for the first time - I'd got far more of a rush, been knocked back in my seat, from my first sight of the trailers on RealVideo which I'd downloaded off the internet onto a five-inch viewing window. Yes, when that yellow logo, unchanged since 1977, filled the black screen again, and the audience of teens managed a few whoops, it was just like coming home. But by the end, I hardly felt as if I'd seen a new film at all. Maybe not even a film, in the sense of a narrative with character-identification, emotional involvement, logical psychological progression and satisfying closure. If anything I felt like I'd seen a polished-up montage from the Special Edition trilogy of 1997. I really had seen it all before, and I think I would have felt that way if I'd managed to avoid all the publicity, all the toys, all the teasers.

Again, a paradox, because *Star Wars: A New Hope* was never anything new. Part of its power was the distillation of cinema's first seventy-five years into a single package, a non-stop collection of greatest hits from the samurai to the western and the war film; and beyond that, its drawing on myths, fairytale and folklore from every cultural tradition Lucas could lay his hands on. In that sense, *The Phantom Menace* succeeds. Like *A New Hope*, it presents the familiar as strange, and vice versa. Battledroids are elongated statuettes out of African art, a city covers an entire planet, fighter pilots wear long Italian coats: and all this is treated as everyday, casual background rather than something to stop and gape over. The urban vistas, from Naboo's Renaissance splendour to Coruscant's take on a 22nd-century New York - even the rows of mud dwellings on Tatooine, glowing from inside as we rise above them at night - are simply a series of wonders, and you lap up all the establishing shots you're given: there's surely room for a book on *City Architecture in Star Wars*, sourced to its various inspirations and lavishly illustrated. The film looks fabulous, and that's not ILM's special effects, it's Doug Chiang's design. Anyone can make a ship cruise over a forest and skim down to land; it takes a visionary to make that ship a shiny dart of silver, and then style the Queen's blaster to match.

Another paradox - another problem for me to tussle with as I pick apart my own disappointment - lies in the fact that *The Phantom Menace* is explicitly, unashamedly built around repetition and parallel. It's an echo-chamber, foreshadowing Episode 4 in particular; and that's right and proper, as the symmetry of the Star Wars universe demands and as myth requires. There must always be a master and an apprentice. One must die and one must

graduate. This is the way of the Force, and the way of Vladamir Propp's scheme of folktale narrative which so clearly informed *A New Hope*: and so we have a young Queen, a Wizard, a Helper, a Villain. Some of these roles seem inadequately filled this time - Jar Jar Binks, the lamentable alien clown, is no Chewbacca, while Darth Maul is a taciturn mercenary played by a martial artist, and never approaches the complexity of Darth Vader. Nevertheless, if *Phantom Menace* prefigures *A New Hope* in its character types and setting, that was only to be expected.

At its best, then, *Phantom Menace* walks the difficult line deftly. Everything is the same, except for the fact that everything's completely different. A trooper yells "close the blast doors" and a Jedi murmurs "I sense a disturbance in the Force." Jar Jar owes Qui-Gon a life-debt, as Chewbacca did to Han. Anakin leaves his Tatooine home to join the resistance, as his son will decades later. There are, of course, moments which are played to the hilt for the resonance of an old friend returning - "thank you…Artoo Deetoo," says Amidala, pronouncing the unfamiliar name for the first time as the audience grins - and others which carry grimmer irony, such as Anakin watching the ceremonial Jedi funeral pyre, and Obi-Wan's cry of "No!" as his mentor is cut down. When Senator Palpatine, flanked by blue guards, tells Anakin "we will watch your career with great interest", his oily smile inevitably calls up the memory of *Return of the Jedi*'s Emperor Palpatine leering with Vader at his side. Lucas apparently wants viewers to feel sorry for Vader when they first see him throttle Captain Antilles at the start of *A New Hope*; it's a worthy, challenging ambition, and he's on his way to achieving it.

Yet challenge is exactly what *The Phantom Menace* lacks, for the most part. The four-way finale involves a Jedi duel, a space dogfight to knock out a central shield generator, a guerrilla struggle led by the female protagonist and a land war between militaristic cannon fodder and a comedy alien tribe. Qui-Gon approves the resistance plan as "well-conceived"; for anyone who's seen *Return of the Jedi*, it's ludicrously over-familiar. It's an identical copy in the structure, even in the detail - those of us who cringed at the sight of Ewoks hitting themselves with bolos will despair at Gungans doing exactly the same - but without characters to care about. Qui-Gon is a nice enough guy, solid and thoughtful, but he's more a prop, a Proppian function, than a person; he serves the role of wise mentor that Obi-Wan played in *A New Hope*, right down to his last scene. The young Obi-Wan is a follower with none of Luke Skywalker's naïveté or guts. Jar Jar is at best a distraction and cypher, at worst an annoying stereotype. So for a great chunk of the film there's no team here, no banter or sexual innuendo as there was in *A New Hope*. The two Jedi wander around peaceably like bored samurai, wiping out droids by the score with a flick of their fingers, and there's no conflict or interest around their scenes whatsoever. In *A New Hope* we had a pirate who didn't want to be there, and a farmboy in love with a hologram, and a princess who didn't want to be rescued, and they all bickered like the kids they were. It was fun and vibrant. For way too much of this movie we watch a master and servant calmly undertaking their duties; and for too much of the rest, we're watching computer graphics beat each other up on a big screen. Where are the humans, I scribbled in my notepad, yawning. Bring back the humans.

Thankfully, there are humans. When Jake Lloyd and Natalie Portman meet, he asks "are you an angel?" and you're reminded, after what feels like an hour of the movie, what it is to be surprised. She's been slammed for her performance here by critics who don't realise it's just that, a performance of being a Queen by a young girl. When she's inhabiting her gowns and headdresses, Amidala talks with the stilted American English of a 1940s starlet - inventive enough - but when she's in civvies, she's a completely different person. She has a genuine

spark with Anakin, and it's intriguing to watch this teenage girl flirting, despite her better judgement, with a boy four years younger and several feet shorter than her. He does have power, we realise that, and she's attracted to it. When the young actors are under the quasi-parental guidance of Liam Neeson and Pernilla August in the domestic Tatooine scenes, you finally get to see good ensemble performance; something quiet and promising, and far more interesting than watching ten thousand computer graphics march across a field.

August, as others have said, acts beyond the call of duty, and creates the film's only touching moments from her scenes with Jake Lloyd. In turn, he's more than subtle enough to hit lines like "I can't do it, mom" home to the heart; he's got a winningly straight delivery, telling Qui-Gon "I saw your laser sword…I had a dream I was a jedi" with the voice of the confident child-fan meeting a famous actor. Maybe I just found my own seven year-old self in him; but if Jar Jar is for the under-fives and Maul for the teens, perhaps it's fitting that we adults have a child to identify with.

So it's a bit of a mess; you think you've seen it all before even when you haven't, and when it diverges from the pattern of the first trilogy it's usually worse. The shield is destroyed by pure fluke rather than through Force skills; the battle droids collapse and afford the Gungans victory after they'd conclusively lost. The parade and party at the end not only conflates the ceremonies from *A New Hope* and *Return of the Jedi* but feels entirely undeserved. There's a flatness to it all despite the scope and detail of the worlds we're shown. You don't want to see another alien or another firefight. If this is *Star Wars*, you're sick of it.

To paraphrase Obi-Wan and Yoda, however, this was not the only hope: there is another. From the signs here, I'm personally optimistic about Episode Two. Portman, calm, small and strong, is an exciting character in a way that Boss Nass and Sebulba could never dream of being. Even if Jake Lloyd is too young for the sequel, his character is about to enter its most interesting phase, when the sweet young padawan turns to the Dark Side. Though we can only guess the reason - he promises he'll see his mother again, and it's hinted that his fear at her loss will destroy him - the fact that I even want to guess is testament to Lloyd's craft and the character's promise. Finally, Obi-Wan Kenobi only comes into his own at the climax, pacing like an animal and fighting like a demon; without Qui-Gon to guide him, this rash Jedi will himself become a more complex figure.

The wait of sixteen years is over, then, as it probably had to end; in an unhappy compromise. There are the seeds of something better here, though. The next wait, of three years, has begun.

Prometheus

Dir: Tony Harrison, UK, 1998

A review by Ian Haydn Smith, Westminster University, London

In a direct challenge to Adorno's statement, Tony Harrison's first feature sets out to prove that "after Auschwitz there is only poetry." *Prometheus* is an epic film-poem concerning our relationship with fire - an allegory of the constant rivalry that exists between the powers of institutionalised ideologies and the people whose lives are disrupted and dismantled by their constant interference.

Sent to the North of England during the last years of Tory rule, Hermes has been ordered by Zeus to retrieve the fire that the titan Prometheus stole from the gods and gave to mankind. He finds its essence in the last remaining coal miners of a closing pit and abducts them as they complete their final shift. Thrown into a furnace of molten iron, the miners are cast in a golden statue of Prometheus, which is transported around regions of Europe that have suffered from the destructive use of fire. They are accompanied by their wives, who have been transformed into statues of the Daughters of the Ocean.

Watching the action from the confines of a dilapidated cinema in the North of England, is a retired miner, whose respiratory problems are not aided by his refusal to stop smoking. He becomes the voice of Prometheus, defending the titan and mankind's right to free will, from Hermes' didactic voice-over. A boy, the future of the Promethian spirit, accompanies the statue in his imagination, driving a wrecked fire engine in a Doncaster scrap yard. His mother, a modern day Io, persecuted by Hera because of Zeus' infatuation with her, suffers at the hands of Hermes' henchmen, Bia (violence) and Kratos (force), whose appearance resembles that of nuclear power workers.

Using a densely layered narrative and mixing fact with myth, Harrison has produced a film of originality and daring. Although his main influence is Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, the film is not content to merely transpose the Greek myth on to a contemporary setting. Instead, the play is used as a loose structure within which Harrison can weave his main themes and concerns. Paramount is the dual role played by fire, at once provider and destroyer. This duality is everywhere; at the beginning of the film, as the boy lights a coal fire to warm his house and the old man lights his cigarette in the abandoned cinema, we see a desolate landscape dominated by huge cooling towers. This is the ugly face of the industry that provides our warmth and energy, whose smoke represents the destructive power of Zeus' breath and the onset of emphysema in the old man's lungs. In contrast to the unshakable, corporate-like views espoused by Zeus' messenger later in the film, Harrison refuses to offer any easy answer to this paradox, instead presenting situations and environments which have caused death, destruction and suffering, as well as freedom, comfort and safety.

In transporting the Promethian statue around Europe, Hermes hopes to destroy the titan's mythical status of provider and tarnish him with the label of humanity's nemesis. In Dresden,

a city synonymous with the destructive effect of fire, Promethean shrines have been erected in front of the civic buildings and across the city. His gift may once have been complicit in Dresden's destruction, but it has since proved invaluable in its resurrection, offering an alternative to an existence in a war-torn metropolis. Later, in the film's most moving and beautiful scene, a Jewish pilgrim places a candle at the entrance to one of Auschwitz's human furnaces. The statue is encircled by hundreds of these candles, their light of hope reflecting off its golden skin. Even the old man, between wheezing and coughing admits that the fennel which hid the Promethian flame and which now holds the fire between his fingers, will eventually cause his destruction. However, unlike Hermes' addresses to the audience, the man believes that smoking the 'fennel' is part of his right to act freely, and what makes him human and not the obedient slave that Zeus intended him to be.

Harrison's use of rhyming couplets may add to the challenge of presenting *Prometheus* to a mainstream audience, but its seamless integration into the narrative is little short of stunning. As with *V*, his televised poem concerning the desecration of his parents' graves, Harrison is adept at merging many different styles of language within his text. In *Prometheus*, the result proves to be surprisingly accessible. The contrast between Hermes' perfect enunciation, and the old man's use of rhyming slang, not only adds humour and warmth to the piece, but draws greater attention to the film's disdain for the inhibiting forces of dogmatic institutions. Most memorable, are the old man's nostalgic recollections of the days when he could smoke in the cinema:

When Bogey lit up so did I,

Smoke Curling past my one closed eye.

Bogey gets best smoker's prize,

Cig-smoke curling up his eyes.

Anti-smoking campaigners have referred to this section as an advert for cigarette companies, yet Harrison shows an old man dying from what he considers to be his only pleasure - suggesting once again that every freedom has a price.

As director, Tony Harrison veers away from any stylised signature, adopting a workman-like approach to shooting. What style there is appears within the mise en scene and not from camera movement or editing. Strongly reminiscent of the journey undertaken by 'A' in *Ulysses Gaze*, (particularly the scenes involving the 'deconstructed' body of Lenin, as it travels down the Danube) the statue's journey across Europe presents us with visual motifs that reinforce Harrison's preoccupation with the theme of duality. The bleak, monochrome anonymity of Central Europe's cities and landscapes (only Auschwitz is recognisable) are juxtaposed against the stunning, gold statue of Prometheus. We are challenged by these images; is there room within these industrialised landscapes and urban sprawl for such an icon? Only when workers from the polluted regions of Romania are paid by Hermes to smear the statue in dirt and grime, does it become clear that without the ideals embodied in the statue, humanity becomes a slave of the corporate, political and religious ideologies that 'Zeus' created.

Harrison's direction is ably supported by Alistair Cameron's precision camerawork. He captures the gritty reality of the industrial locations, whilst imbuing certain images with a

visual poetry that equals the text. The festering greys and browns which dominate the scenes in the abattoir are enough to convert the most ardent carnivore, whilst the images of Greece at the end of the film are the antithesis of the traditional tourist view of the country. Both scenes accentuate the squalid aspects of industrialised society, which Harrison feels we should confront, if we are to accept the advantages such a society offers. Even the scenes in Auschwitz, whilst avoiding the cloyingly sentimental images which have marred recent films concerning the Holocaust, manage to convey a profound sense of grief, presenting the humble face of humanity; an attempt to come to terms with the horror through hope and faith.

As Hermes and the Old Man, Michael Feast and Walter Sparrow are perfect sparring partners. Feast's supercilious demeanour works as a perfect foil to the sometimes naïve, uncompromisingly honest Sparrow. Their delivery of Harrison's verse is clear and accessible, with Sparrow excelling in his smoking monologue. In contrast, with very little dialogue and a role that demanded she run through nearly every scene, Fern Smith as the mother appears to have suffered at the hands of Harrison, let alone Kratos and Bia. As with the Daughters of the Ocean, the film could only have profited from their increased participation within the text.

Although the finale becomes protracted to the point of distraction and the imagery would have improved with the use of widescreen lensing, Harrison's first feature is both an inspiring intellectual exercise and remarkably watchable film. That he managed to make such a film within the conservative confines of the British film industry is a great achievement and one that should be shared with the widest possible audience. Unfortunately, as long as *Sliding Doors* or *Notting Hill* represent British cinema in the multiplexes, Harrison is unlikely to get that chance.

The Thin Red Line

Dir: Terence Malick, USA 1998

A review by Eugene Doyen, Buckingshire Chilterns University College

Never in the history of cinematic endeavor has so much scenery been shown for so long.

As you probably know most large scale film productions employ a second unit who shoot sequences that don't require the participation of the stars. These can be sequences with extras, or scenery shots to link scenes and they save money on a production. *The Thin Red Line* appears to be a film that allowed the second unit to shoot as many walk-ons, landscapes, seascapes, plants, furry animals and pretty pink clouds as it wanted and then could only afford to pay its stars for one or two scenes, so the result is a lot of very attractive cinematography with something happening every now and then.

The thematic intention of all these odd little shots is made clear at the start. Nature seems kind, but nature is also cruel. Therefore what is man's relationship to nature? From this perspective all this wild life and nature photography takes on a clear purpose, but a shot of a bat, or an owl can only carry so much significance and since the story relies so much on this supposedly momentous idea the result is impossibly turgid. The narration which supports this theme is only fit for parody; 'I know that life has a darkness, but I believe there is a light at the end of the field, or is there? If it not a light what do I see, could it be more?'

Presumably this nature/nurture/cruelty script idea was conceived by somebody who'd taken a college module on the Enlightenment and thought that big themes needed a big treatment. For anyone who goes to the movies they know that theme of every war film is masculinity, meaning, pride, heroism, violence and buddy love. If the nature theme is dire then the films' attempt at a men in war saga is cliched. *The Thin Red Line* acknowledges a James Jones novel as a source and since James Jones wrote *From Here to Eternity* we can recognize the same characters played by other actors. Sean Penn takes on the Burt Lancaster role. He's a Sargent, not an officer. He's dependable and pragmatic, but cynical. James Caviezel takes the Montgomery Clift and plays a character called Whit. (Is this name symbolic, or what?) He's enigmatic, wise and without fear, a simple man, one with nature and the bravest and purest of us all. Nick Nolte is the blustering, bullying career officer, sacrificing his men to forward his rank. Elias Koteas is also Montgomery Clift: the man who has the integrity to stand up against the career officers' blood lust. He's the just officer who protects and loves his men. The result of all these men discussing and the debating the morality of war is just patronizing hogwash. And the Deborah Kerr role is sideline lined into a series of flashbacks, which makes this contemporary rubbish all the more risible. We even get the worn out poignancy of the 'Dear John' letter to add to the hamminess.

Every scriptwriting seminar tells writers the same thing. Bad drama is when characters carry signs saying, 'I carry an important message to you the dumb audience'. And good drama is when situations and circumstances are made engaging by the ability or failure of characters to

cope with them. Labeling any film - 'this is about big issues' can only make it fall on its face. *The Thin Red Line* proves this in spades.

Also, the film is so staggeringly condescending in terms of race it numbs the mind. One presumes that the appeal of a WWII drama is that it can offer a simple story of good guys versus bad guys and avoid any contemporary problems such as race or religion. Instead the film opts to show the black islanders as simple primitive people, living in harmony with nature, chanting merrily with the voices of a well-rehearsed choral society. The trite message is that if only white people could live like black people the world would be a much better place. Then there's "the Japs." Typically invincible and invisible at the start and then cringing curs. The idea of showing us the frightened Japanese could have been to show that they too are human and suffer, but they never appear as defined characters only as frightened and defeated bullies. The only thing positive to say about all this stereotyping is that is runs without fail throughout the entire film, which is a kind of an achievement.

What we see in the film are men being scared, men being brutish, men showing love, men dying and men blown apart. This is all familiar from so many sources, that the symbolism of the characters produces only disinterest. I'm proud to say I did stay awake for the whole 170 minutes. Now, do I get a medal for it?

So, if the film is pathetic in its depiction of race and gender and can't deliver on the big themes of nature and war, and then doesn't even work as a character-led drama, what is left? Nice images from the second unit and attractive shots of men looking rugged and sweaty. In fact the only thing that could enrapture any viewer is the erotic contemplation of men. The film should not have been advertised as an intelligent drama about war, but as a series of pin ups and the only influence the film will ever have is on the fashion industry. Somebody will pastiche these glamorous images to sell jeans, or perfume, because that's all the film has to offer.

This review may seem a little negative, but after twenty years I expected something a little better from Terence Malick and I'm somewhat bitter over wasting three hours of my time watching such tripe. I want my money back!