La Place Du Coeur

Dir: Robert Guediguian, 1998

A review by Luca Prono, The University of Nottingham, UK

The title of a 1971 Italian movie (devoid of its ironic and grotesque overtones) may serve as a fitting description for Robert Guediguian's latest film: *The Working Class Goes to Heaven*. The protagonists of *À La Place du Cœur* are firmly divided along class lines. Proletarians are good, they mean well whatever they do, they still believe in class solidarity and they do not even know how to be racist. On the contrary, the authorities, the bourgeoisie and the police are the villains, the source of all evil. This excess of idealisation is the main flaw of the movie and what prevents it from attaining the successful blend of humour, drama and politics which were at the base of Gueduguian's previous movie, *Marius et Jeannette*.

Based on James Baldwin's novel *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), *À La Place du Cœur* transfers the action from the Harlem of Aretha Franklin and Ray Charles to the present day working-class districts surrounding Marseilles's harbour (the location of all Guediguian's movies). Through flashbacks and a very intrusive voice over, the movie chronicles the interracial love-story (all black in James Baldwin's novel) between the white Clim and the black Bebé, who was adopted by a white family together with his sister. The two have known and loved each other all their lives and they are about to marry. At the beginning of the movie we are even told that Clim is pregnant. Yet things are not as rosy as they seem since her lover Bebé is in prison, wrongly accused of raping a Bosnian refugee (Puerto Rican in the novel), who, manipulated by a racist white policeman, has disappeared after denouncing him. Clim's family hires a lawyer to find the woman, but they are constantly short of money to pay him. Bebé's father tries to help them as best as he can (while his wife is a bigoted aspiring bourgeois who does nothing else but pray), but he is caught while stealing at work and is fired. Clim's mother decides that the best thing to do is to go to Sarajevo (in Baldwin's novel, in an equally improbable move, she goes to Puerto Rico) to face the raped woman and make her realise her mistake. Needless to say, she is successful.

In *À La Place du Cœur*, Robert Guediguian progressively broadens the scope of the action from the Estaque working-class district to Marseilles more generally and onto Sarajevo. Solidarity among the disinherited is invoked as a trans-national value and, at the same time, the movie suggests that Europe as a whole is the scene of racial and cultural mixing. The interracial couple Clim/Bebé represents the successful paradigm of this mixing. To be happy, they will need the help of people who have experienced how difficult and painful such racial and cultural mixing can be. This plea for solidarity across national borders is emphasised also by the strikingly similar portraits of Marseilles and Sarajevo, shown as cities in ruins, degraded and hostile. For example, in an early scene, Clim is shown walking through Marseilles after having visited Bebé in prison and her voiceover comments that the city hates her and that in turns she hates the city so much that she feels sorry even when she gives it the dirty water from her bath

Against such an exploitative environment, the working class sticks together (in a flashback Bebé and Clim are shown walking hand in hand near a demolished building), every proletarian is willing to help his or her fellow comrade. The poor are good wherever they are. In this respect the movie is extremely faithful to the philosophy behind Baldwin's novel. When Clim's mother returns from Puerto Rico, Baldwin makes her say: "I don't speak no Spanish and they don't speak no English. But we on the same garbage dump. For the same reason". Those who do not feel this working class bond, such as Bebé's bigoted mother or her sister (whom the mother has re-named, rather inappropriately, Blondine), are made fun of and are portrayed in caricature, as aspiring bourgeois who cannot even aspire to be human in the first place.

The actors (almost the same cast of *Marius et Jeannette*) are very well-chosen and they interact perfectly with each other, managing (at least at the beginning) to make the movie believable and watchable. Yet, too much goodness is tedious in the long run, at least at the cinema. Baldwin's novel already abounds in sweet and sugary situations but the movie is even richer, and it transforms the open ending of the novel into a definite acquittal for Bebé. And they happily lived ever after… As the movie progresses, this willingness to be good at all costs makes it sound absurd and out of tune. Just an example: when Clim's mother arrives in Sarajevo, she immediately finds a good-hearted taxi driver who can get by in French and to whom she tells the story of her life, and of how she once wanted a career as a singer. While she is talking in a nightclub to the brother of the woman who has charged Bebé with rape, the good-hearted taxi driver goes to the band and asks them to sing her favourite songs.

The members of the working class in *À La Place du Cœur* experience racism only as the victims, never as the perpetrators. The movie's message seems to be: "Your white daughter is pregnant and the father is a black man who is in prison for rape? So what? Let's take the champagne out of the fridge and drink to their health." All this, of course, in the Marseilles of the 1990s where Le Pen's xenophobic Front National is one of the leading parties … Naturally, one would like to subscribe fully to Guediguian's secularised gospel of international love and solidarity. Yet, the movie could have been less simplistic and flat if it had tried to address the question of why so many members of the working class are turning to Le Pen's neo-fascist movement. Pretending, as the movie does, that the phenomenon does not even exist does not help much the cause of the Left, or, for that matter, the movie itself.

The Brutal Politics of Desire: Derek Jarman's *Edward II*

Dir: Derek Jarman, 1991

A review by Joonna S. Trapp, Northwestern College, USA

Although Derek Jarman has been criticized for claiming to improve Marlowe's play (Horger, 1993), most of his critics recognize his film adaptation of *Edward II* as a "strangely respectful, as well as a predictably weird" use of the play (Spufford, 1991). Much discussion has centered on the rather obvious political message of the film, but that message is only a small part of Jarman's larger aesthetic achievement. Even though *Edward II* is his most "commercial production" (Stratton, 1991), Jarman's still evident experimental style reaches into the very thematic heart of Marlowe's play, offering his viewers a contemporary re-interpretation of the clash between the public and private lives of powerful individuals. He also brings a fresh and sometimes shocking re-imagining of the relationship between sex and power. Brian McFarlane says that "it is the intense politicization of the sexual drama that makes Jarman's film a genuine adaptation of Marlowe" (1992: 35). But Jarman's film is not for the queasy. The violence, whether implied or explicit, is brutal and swift, culminating in the horrific rape/murder of the deposed Edward. In addition, the sexual content is often bizarre and unexpected, ranging from a sadomasochistic menage a trois to a rugby scrum in the nude. The sex and violence found in the film become the dual, vicious arms of autocratic power.

In *Edward II*, Jarman's budget limited him to one set and only few furnishings, but for Jarman, this resulted in aesthetic innovation: *Edward II* creates a world of the mind. Seen through the fractured memories of a weary, beaten, disposed monarch, the world is not coherent, not sane, and not linear and exists as a reflection of Edward's society, which has been undergoing rapid upheavals. A king is jailed, battles are fought, and representatives of church and state are slaughtered - the world has lost its center and exists only in episodic chaos.

Even in the one outdoor scene in which Gaveston is thrust into the wilds of a storm, the set is the same small enclosed place. In this shot, the exterior world feels tight; the viewer feels boxed-in as the howling Gaveston squats on his toes while the sky presses down upon him with the force of the driving rain. In addition, the confinement of the "castle" where most of the action occurs appears to be a sort of labyrinth of halls, throne rooms, dungeons, war rooms, entertainment arenas, bed chambers, and torture chambers. The look of all the shots happens on screen through the innovative use of camera angle, specially designed ramps, lighting, and well-executed acting. The shafts of light that penetrate the darkness contribute to the cutting nature of this alienated world. The viewer has no sense of the outside world beyond the castle. A dark, hopeless world of mud floors and cold stone walls, Edward's realm is neither protected nor adorned, and is frequently populated by thugs. The interior landscape is rigid, static, and claustrophobic, representing the inside world of the political realm with its stiff, unfeeling rules about class and behavior. As Jarman explains, "The set became a

metaphor of the trapped country, the prison of our lives, 'the closet of our heart,' in Edward's words" (Qtd. O'Pray, 1991: 11).

The static mise en scene produces a heightened sense of theatricality. The characters of the film become mere actors playing a part in service of their own petty needs. Within this political theater, Jarman, respected as a painter as well as a filmmaker, frames each shot carefully, as if each were a painting. A particularly impressive example is the scene of Isabella as chairman of the board. She sits regally as the nobles applaud Mortimer's suggestion to recall Gaveston and end his life. The table is dark, as is the room; we are not sure of her presence until a noble asks why the death of Gaveston had not already been ordered. Mortimer replies that it had not been thought of before. At that point he looks to the other end of the table. The scene is cut to a perfectly composed Isabella sitting quietly with hands folded on the table and her chin high. To the viewer, she appears to be object of Mortimer's glance, suggesting that the plan to kill Gaveston was her idea. Jarman wanted her to look like Joan Crawford playing the powerful chairman of a large company like Pepsi Cola (O'Pray, 1991: 10). In this instance, as in many others, Jarman's well-framed mise en scene manages to propel the story forward while avoiding the appearance of photographic realism. The bizarre world resulting from these devices invites the viewer into a near experience with alienation and discrimination. Like his extreme screen world, discrimination twists and alters reality into a bizarre existence for those who are the victims.

Jarman also uses the physical work of the actors as a part of the mise en scene. An admirer of Carl Theodore Dreyer's use of many simply framed close ups of the face, Jarman uses the "geography of the face" (Dreyer, 1955-56:129) to illuminate the inner world of the film. As the camera moves in for a close up of Edward's face, the viewer becomes privileged to the confidential world of the King's innermost thoughts. We see his very earnest joy at the sight of Gaveston, his disgust with Isabella, and the psychic torture he endures in prison. Gaveston's curled lips betray his scorn for those around him. The thugs assisting in the beating of the bishop show their delight through their evil smiles. Mortimer's stone face cracks when the Queen kisses him. Later, his usually taunt mouth betrays the slightest twinge of horror at the violent death of Kent. But it is Isabella's face, smooth and unmoving, which, oddly enough, most displays her inner self - the "smoldering prison of the mind" (Buchman, 1991: 70). No matter what she suffers or how poorly she is used by the King, her face masks the seething emotions raging beneath the surface. When Gaveston corners her during a concert and pretends to kiss her, she almost lets go. But as he laughs derisively at her folly, the stone face returns - her shame reflected in her eyes. Especially in Isabella's case, the close up functions in the film as the soliloquy does onstage - to give voice to the internal dynamics of thought and emotion.

Another vital component of the physical work of the actors is in positioning and gesturing. The sign of position or of gesture can "resonate with the dynamic of social relations that inform it" (Buchman, 1991: 80). When Gaveston enters the court, he walks up a ramp to the throne where the anxious Edward awaits. The King motions for Gaveston to sit on the throne in his place. The King then kisses Gaveston's hand in the position of servitude. The whole matter of who is sitting on the throne and who is in power is put into question by this positioning and re-positioning. After a gala regal event, Mortimer and Isabella both fall onto the throne, laughing, while Isabella waves her arm around in a mock queenly acknowledgement of the cheers of the crowd. Their positioning suggests a joint ownership and rule of the kingdom.

All of these devices demonstrate the interplay of sex and power, private and public. When Gaveston receives his recall letter from Edward near the beginning of the film, he rejects the two naked "hustlers," as Jarman calls them in the film book, who are making love "without a blush," by paying them off with a wad of money. The love of the King of England means more to Gaveston than simple sexual gratification - it means a farewell to "base stooping to the lordly peers" (1991: 10). For Gaveston, the desire for power and sex are ultimately tied together. In fact, Jarman has said that he liked the character of Gaveston because he was "sexuality and class merged" (Qtd. O'Pray, 1991). The bonding of political aspiration and sexuality is further reinforced in an imagined scene of "such things" to "best please his majesty" (1991: 14). Gaveston imagines a massive young man crowned with golden leaves and with golden fig leaves attached to his jock strap - very Roman looking. The young man, exuding both power and sexuality, handles a huge python. While the snake engages in his deadly-looking caresses of the man, the man kisses the snake. The intertwining bodies of the snake and handler become a stunning metaphor for the relationship of power and sexuality that will advance Gaveston and please Edward.

The torture scenes in the film further intertwine the ideas of sexuality and the assertion of power. In the scene of the torture of the bishop by the four thugs and Gaveston, the bishop appears battered and beaten by permission of Edward (authorized during Gaveston's bedroom tantrum). What complicates the scene is the way it combines the childish taunts and horrific battering with the mock rape of the bishop. Stripping him of his robes of power and pummelling him until bloody are not enough. The mock sodomizing completes the degradation and affirms visually that the church has no control over either of Gaveston's aspirations.

Both kinds of torture also appear in the execution of the captive policeman guilty of killing Gaveston. The policeman, a representative of the state, was originally supposed to have been "crucified on sides of beef" while naked (Jarman, 1991: 128). In the film, however, the man is clothed in his uniform, but Edward undoes the man's belt and loosens his pants in order to get a clear striking path for the butcher's knife. The executioners, dressed in butcher's aprons, and the man hanging on a side of beef, represent the value the man has at the moment. He is stripped of parts of his uniform, symbols of his power authorized by the state, and made of no more importance than a piece of meat, an image which carries implicit sexual innuendo in modern vernacular.

When Mortimer brutally beats and kills Spencer, the scene cuts several times to Edward languishing in his dungeon, almost giving the impression that Edward can hear the noises of the torture. Contributing to the unpleasantness is the enjoyment Mortimer wears on his face as he brutalizes his victim. Mortimer stands erect in a close fitting T-shirt that exposes the definition of his muscles. Spencer, hunched and clothed in a loose, filthy shirt, looks totally helpless and weak. At the moment of Spencer's death, Mortimer spits out the improvised line, "Girlboy." He enjoys not only the destruction of a possible threat to his own status and aspirations in the kingdom by killing the king's favorite - he relishes the destruction of a sexual threat to his own "manhood" as well. Mortimer uses sex, with the Queen and with the two wild girls, only as a part of a power struggle. He cannot understand Edward, who completely separates his sexual partners from his position in the kingdom, finding his lovers in the socially inappropriate Gaveston and Spencer. Edward, Gaveston, and Spencer violate Mortimer's notions of manhood, sexual power, and political power.

Another torture scene actually occurs in flashes throughout the entire movie. The film opens with Edward suffering in a filthy dungeon, thinking about his recalling of Gaveston. In his hand is a postcard of London, which Lightborn takes away from him, symbolically removing his power over the realm. He suffers the indignities of jail, deep in the cesspool of the filth of the castle, alone except for the attentions of his jailer. There Edward is deprived of all the rights of being king and all the powers which come with that position. The filth of the dungeon reflects "the condition of the country overflowing with blood and gore" (Haber, 1994: 180). Edward weeps and looks haunted. The whole movie is set, as it were, in scenes of flashbacks as remembered or invented by the dethroned King. Toward the end of the film, Edward dreams of his execution, or at least the one planned for him. In a "hellish" red glow within the bowels of the dungeon, four jailers force Edward to lie on his stomach over a table. We can hear no sounds of struggle or anything at all except a lovely, upbeat, a cappella hymn sung by a boyschorus. The jailers are clearly enjoying the prospect of torturing the King, as is Lightborn as he picks up the white-hot poker. The choir stops singing as the King's screams burst upon the viewer. Although we do not see the actual sodomizing of Edward with the poker, we listen to the never-ending screams and watch the agonizing face of the King. As the screams continue, even the hard faces of the jailers show a realization of just how horrible their actions are. The happy ending Jarman contrives for the film, which is another alteration of Marlowe, does nothing to erase this scene of terror from the mind of the viewer. The killing of the King in such a terrifying manner laden with sexual overtones becomes a way of denying him power - both in the political realm and as a sexual being.

All of these scenes of torture and death link sexuality and power, but this symbiotic relationship has its fullest expression in the torture and murder of Kent. The scene is a bare room with Kent handcuffed to the arms of his chair. The chair is in a bright, overhead spotlight. Isabella and young Prince Edward stand to the right and watch as Mortimer, not dressed in a military uniform anymore but in a dress suit identifying himself with royalty, hits Kent in the stomach during questioning. Kent says to Mortimer, "Art thou King? Must I die at thy command? / Either my brother or his son is King. / And none of both them thirst for my blood" (156). At this point, Isabella moves behind Kent, gently and affectionately rubs his hair, makes eye contact with him, and bends down to his neck. The expectation of the viewer is that she is seducing Kent and about to use her mouth to arouse him in some way. What happens is totally unexpected and is lifted directly out of the horror genre. Instead of a kiss, Isabella bites Kent's jugular vein while he screams and writhes. When he stops moving, she raises up and spits his own blood back in his face. Jarman takes the words "thirst for my blood" literally and makes Isabella a vampire. Mortimer and Isabella leave the boy alone with Kent. He walks to his uncle, pushes him to make sure he is dead, rakes blood off Kent's neck with one finger, and placing the finger in his mouth, tastes the blood. The vampirism is generational.

O'Pray calls the scene "intensely erotic" (1991: 8). Jarman taps into the current popular interest in sexual and political vampirism to elevate his own depiction of the relationship between sex and power to a mythic level. The connection of vampirism to economics, power, and politics is as old as the early 1700s (Melton, 1994: 481), and Karl Marx even used the image of the vampire to describe the way capitalism sucks the life out of the laboring classes (X, 1906: 257). The point in depicting the death of Kent as vampirism seems clear. A government that maims and kills its subjects and nobles rather than protecting them is the metaphoric equivalent of a vampire preying on the weak and powerless and destroying the once powerful. In the last thirty years, an explosion of vampire novels has been published which repeatedly use and expand on the notion of the vampiric government and/or the

powerful sexual vampire. [See Kim Newman's *The Bloody Red Baron* (1995), and Dan Simmon's *The Children of the Night* (1992), as examples.] The vampire myth has become one of the most impressive archetypes in our culture for the misuse of power and sexual attraction - an archetype Derek Jarman completely understands (Trapp, 1999).

Among the scenes of power-mongering, brutality, torture, and death, Jarman sprinkles "love" scenes, which quite often feature brutality and torture as well. Very early in the film, Gaveston and Edward are shown dressed in white and seated on the throne. Although the original script, according to Jarman's notes, called for this to be a sex scene, in the end the two characters merely "had a cuddle" rather than "an act of buggery" (1991: 26). As the two men cuddle and kiss, dancers in black mimic the pair. Music plays, light shines, movement and laughter abounds. Immediately, the scene is cut to another, very different "love" scene, one that is static, cold, without much motion. The setting is the King and Queen's bed chamber with the white bed sitting directly in front of an open passageway. The implication is that what goes on in the private bed chamber is public knowledge and, in some way, impacts the listening, watching public. Isabella, with her cold face and blue negligee, is astride Edward in a superior position. As she bends down to kiss him, he turns his head. She reaches out to touch his face and he, with force, blocks her hand with a glancing blow. Shamed and rejected, Isabella rolls over and stares at the ceiling. The only emotion on her face is in her eyes. The King then beats his head on the stone wall until he bleeds. Anguish is clearly registered on his face. This scene was planned and executed without any dialog at all. Jarman believed the scene was as realistic as possible, considering that all "bed scenes are nearly always super-real" (O'Pray, 1991: 9). Edward is frustrated by a marriage that he does not want; Isabella simply is in the way, especially when she tries to be in control of the situation. The sexual miscues between the two re-play the problems in governance of the realm. Isabella is on the outside of both the bedroom and the court. The scene of her wringing her hands while the nobles whisper of her mistreatment is extremely degrading. In this world, sex and governing cannot be separated; national and sexual identity go hand in hand. Society will not allow a "divorce between public and private" (MacCabe, 1992: 16).

Isabella is slowly and methodically stripped of her sexuality and power to rule by the rejection of the King. In an amazingly powerful and surprising scene, Gaveston brutally teases her after a concert in order to assert his own power over her and the King. This further diminishes her sexuality. Later, the King, enraged at Gaveston's exile, interrupts a dress fitting to find the Queen. She looks particularly feminine and delicate in this scene, wrapped in a cocoon of sheer white cloth, shapely, glowing. Edward is oblivious to all this. He vents his anger at her, and grabbing her roughly by the nape of the neck, manhandles her like a puppet. He asserts his power over her sexually and physically. She pleads her powerlessness to help Gaveston. He shoves her away saying, "Away then. / Touch me not." Jarman notes about this scene, "The last line, 'Touch me not,' I find frightening" (Jarman, 1991: 72). The Queen slumps down to her knees. She is totally wasted, used up, unsexed.

When later Isabella is rejected yet again for Gaveston, she recreates her sexuality and her power by approaching Mortimer in a passageway. She catches Mortimer in the hall, covers him with her sheer veil and begins kissing him. Mortimer does not even recognize the Queen with this new aura of sexuality and strength. He asks, "Who's this, the Queen?" Jarman deliberately injects "element[s] of a real horror film" into this scene (O'Pray, 1991: 10), showing up in the plotting, spooky, secretive nature of the tryst, as well as in the viewer's growing awareness of what Isabella is becoming. The sexual, powerful creature Isabella is remaking herself into is a stag killer, a vampiric eater of men, a murderer of Kings - she is a

monster in the making. She does not sustain this energy throughout the film, however. In Isabella's bedroom scene with Mortimer, Jarman gives us a picture of a sexless couple. He lies on the bed reading, according to Jarman, *Unholy Babylon*, about the life of Saddam Hussein. Isabella, with her hair in a towel and her face smeared with an ugly blue facial mask, wriggles her fingers at Mortimer and says dispassionately, "Be thou persuaded that I love thee well." Neither of them shows any emotion now. Once they have wrested control of the kingdom and become tyrants, their sexual energy is drained. Only in the struggle for power did sexuality play an equal role.

Mortimer is a central figure in an intricately cut sequence that crystallizes the symbiotic relationship of sexuality and autocratic power. In the darkened throne room, a naked Gaveston sits in much the same position as he sits during the storm scene howling like an animal. In this scene, he bounces around upon the seat of the throne on his toes while gesturing wildly with his arms and making maniacal noises. Jarman says that Gaveston here becomes a "frightful clucking demon" (1991: 30). The scene cuts to Mortimer suddenly awakened by the noises. He is in bed with two "wild girls" who are also awakened. They display only minimal annoyance at the interruption of their sleep, light cigarettes, and kiss each other. Mortimer, on the other hand, is outraged by the disruption. "This Edward is the ruin of the realm," he mutters as he slips on a leopard skin coat and storms into the throne room. When Gaveston sees Mortimer, he says, "Were I a king." Mortimer interrupts him, calling him a villain and upbraiding him about his lack of social status. This scene clearly demonstrates visually that Gaveston's sexuality is to him a tool to gain ascendancy. He sits naked on the spot he so desires. Mortimer is all too aware of Gaveston's aims, since he will also use his sexuality to rise to the throne. Edward at this point slips from behind the throne, where he has been standing unobserved. Mockingly, he offers his crown and throne to Mortimer. Although he seems oblivious to Gaveston's aims, he does understand Mortimer's thirst for power.

Then who really causes the ruin of the realm? Mortimer thinks it is the base Gaveston filled with ambition, corrupting the social fabric of the country as he has corrupted the King sexually. The King and Gaveston think it is the high born Mortimer, who is corrupted by a desire not to submit to rule by the King, ironically represented by Mortimer's use of the wild girls. These girls appear in another scene with Mortimer in which he is bound and sexually tortured. Dressed in black furs and leather with black leather stiletto heels, they tug, grind, pull, and humiliate Mortimer, a willing participant in the sadomasochistic struggle. Mortimer says, "The court is naked," reminding the audience of the scene with Gaveston naked on the throne. He and the other nobles of the court see Gaveston's social climbing as a violation or rape of the system. Their disgust at the homosexual relationship of the King and Gaveston becomes an expression of their political disgust. Mortimer's aspirations to the throne and forced subjugation to Edward is for him a politically sadomasochistic relationship.

Sadomasochists are caught up in "symbiotic enmeshments of power and powerlessness," and just as surely, culture can become politically sadomasochistic (Chancer, 1992: 1). Edward never appears performing as King in an act of proper governing; he allows Gaveston and the thugs to administer a form of justice. He even uses his own bloody hands to deliver his own version of "justice." He listens to poetry readings, plays cards with the boys, exercises in the gym, plays tennis with his brother, and dances with Gaveston. A king who refuses to govern places his kingdom in a political thraldom in which the whole realm suffers. Chancer notes that "social insecurities" occur when people become "disproportionately dependent on the opinions and judgments of others for economic and emotional survival. One may be virtually

enslaved through . . . socially symbiotic bonds" (1992: 216). In spite of the ineptitude of the King, the people cannot do without him. They are virtually slaves to his whim - the powerless to the powerful. Fears result from a sadomasochistic situation in which the rulers are not serving the people and great inequality exists. These fears, in turn, affect the lives of the people within the state in profound ways. One of the things this film does particularly well is show how a diseased government is tied symbiotically to diseased private lives. The distinction between the public and private is non-existent. "Analyzing an instance of sexual sadomasochism renders inseparable the personal and political dimensions of life" (Chancer, 1992: 44).

Jarman uses sexuality as a way to get at the political nature of every aspect of life. The homoeroticism seems to threaten the security and well being of the political system, but as the film progresses, we realize that the political system has no integrity to shake. Gregory W. Bredbeck says that "the articulation of order demands means of accounting for disorder, and these means frequently involve issues of sex, sexuality, and eroticism" (1991: 47). Jarman taps into this form of discourse using sadomasochistic relationships to describe the disorder of autocratic power. The body politic's misrule is then literally inflicted on the human body and emotionally on the spirit of the individual. As the young Prince watches the vampirism of Kent, he asks his mother, "What safety may I look for?" He recognizes that the signature of the government and its order has just been inscribed permanently into the flesh of his uncle. Isabella's reply of "fear not" offers little comfort and no security for him or for the people of the realm.

The only innocent character in the film is the young Prince. He is placed in a position of uncertainty and continually identifies with differing factions in the government. At times he dresses in pajamas like his father and Gaveston, sometimes in suits like Kent, sometimes in a uniform like Mortimer, and sometimes in his mother's hats and earrings. Often, he is a shocked observer. At other times he comments or protests. In yet others he actively participates. In Jarman's words, the boy is both a "witness and a survivor." The next to last scene shows the young boy in his mother's earrings and shoes listening and directing the mechanical sounding music from *The Nutcracker* coming over his walkman. The boy stands on a large cage in which sit Mortimer and Isabella - white, decaying, the living dead. "Everyone is turned into a mannequin as if they'd been drained of life," Jarman notes. The boy has created his own identity out of parts of those around him. He is all that is left. Is the young Prince a hope for a better future by means of his androgynous nature, his lack of sexual orientation, or is he the confused, impotent result of a total breakdown in society?

Although that question may not be easily answered by the film, the boy's happiness and applause over the decaying plight of Isabella and Mortimer continues the upwards emotional ending of the film. The change in mood begins earlier with Lightborn tossing the poker, the instrument of death in the King's dream, into the pool. The final scene continues the growing exultation as we are presented with gay activists and representatives of the church together, mingling and touching one another in peace and harmony. Although this seems to be a happy ending for a very dark play, the voice over by Edward still lends a tinge of hopelessness. "But if I live, let me forget myself." He cannot have happiness and remember who he is - the ruler of a diseased realm. His body, though marked with the brutalities of power, finds liberation in death, in separation from the state that forces a certain role upon him. The people of the state, the film says, can also be liberated by divorcing themselves from the misrule and conventions forced upon them by the same government.

Jarman examines what it means to be a part of a political/sexual system that is sadomasochistic in autocratic control over the helpless. By making violence and sex the focus of his film, Jarman both horrifies and entices the viewer. While the film is a condemnation of violence in both the public and private spheres, it also revels in it. The viewer, because of the intertwining of sex and violence, drawn into the seduction of power. His viewers are enticed by it while at the same time feeling repulsion and brutalization. Living up to his controversial reputation, Jarman transgresses the boundaries of proprietary feeling. His film has a sadomasochistic effect on his unsuspecting audience, reflecting the subject matter of the film. Form, content, and purpose merge in artistic vision.

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Fight Club

Dir: David Fincher, 1999

A review by Domenico Del Gaudio, Sheffield Hallam University, UK

"The first rule of Fight Club is: You do not talk about Fight Club. The second rule of Fight Club is: You do not talk about Fight Club". Well, I am going to break these rules and, talking about *Fight Club*, some of the twists in the plot might be revealed. You have been warned: read at your own risk!

After the vapid, insipid and unapologetically boring *The Game*, David Fincher is back with a film full of adrenaline, entertaining and quite clever. And guess what: it is nearly as good as *Se7en*.

Based on the novel by Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club* is the story of Jack (Edward Norton), an Everyman, with a stable job, a nice flat in one of those ultra-chic condos and all the commodities you can ask for. Everything seems fine, except for one thing: he cannot sleep. In order to solve the problem he starts to attend support group meetings of people with terminal diseases. It works, but he becomes addicted to it. When Marla, another misfit (superbly played by Helena Bonham-Carter, probably for the first time without a corset), joins the groups, she spoils everything. She is as fake as Jack: she is a "tourist". Her pain is not sincere, and she goes to the meetings because food and drinks are for free. This situation puts Jack back in hell. He is losing sleep again and he must find another solution. On a plane, he meets Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt), who makes and sells soap for a living. For a fortuitous series of events, the two become friends, only at one condition: they have to fight. Jack seems to have found his lost self. He is whole again. At first, the fights start as something private between Jack and Tyler, something fun. With time they become an event, Fight Club, where men gather and fight to relieve their stress.

In the meantime, Marla manages to intrude this idyllic realm Jack is living in. She seduces Tyler, and this is as much as Jack can take. Fight Club crawls all over the country and Tyler is ready to plan a series of terrorist acts against big corporations, filed under the name of Project Mayhem. When Tyler disappears, leaving a legacy of soldiers (former members of the Fight Club) ready to complete the mission, Jack goes in search of him only to face the terrible truth: *he* is Tyler. Jack, confronting his wild self, kills him, and in an apocalyptic grand finale, he watches the buildings explode, holding hands with Marla, who in the meantime has been brought back to him by some of the soldiers.

Fight Club, like some illustrious predecessors (*A Clockwork Orange*, *Reservoir Dogs*, *Scream*, or *Natural Born Killers*, only to name a few) brings back the theme of ultra-violence on the screen. The film has been accused of being unnecessarily violent, and of instigating violent acts. The British censor, therefore, felt obliged to cut two scenes where, apparently, Brad Pitt seems to take too much pleasure out of some fights. The point is that the fights in the film are, if not irrelevant, incidental to say the least. They do not take much of the screen

time (probably about fifteen minutes) compared to other events in the film. What is important is what is behind the fights themselves: Jack's imagination. Jack, with his psychotic, schizophrenic personality is the mirror of our anxiety. He is entrapped in a fictitious world created out of the latest ultra-posh catalogues. The scene where he is buying the furniture over the phone from the catalogue is very effective. We see Jack pacing his empty flat while all the items he is buying and their prices fill up the screen, wrapping him up. He lives in a state-of-the-art world as far as fashion and technology are concerned, but is empty all the same. He escapes from this situation by turning into a "tourist" of other people's pain.

Marla, a "tourist" herself, disrupts Jack's tranquillity, revealing its flaws. Jack needs to regain his balance, and to do so he creates another "self" in the persona of Tyler. When we see Tyler for the first time, it is on an escalator. Jack and Tyler pass each other, going in opposite directions, and Jack's tormented voice-over talks about how great it would be if we could choose to be someone else. Tyler is everything Jack has always dreamt of being. He is an anarchist and a debaser of all social conventions. He has no boss; he squats in a derelict place. He makes and sells soap made with human fat stolen from liposuction clinics. In his spare time Tyler works as a film editor: he intercuts obscene stills in family films. His philosophy is as bare as his chest and knuckles when he fights. No infrastructures, no embellishments: we do not need anything of what the materialistic world imposes upon us, only ourselves. Tyler also becomes the medium through which Jack fulfils his sexual desire for Marla. It is Tyler, not Jack, who has a sexual relationship with Marla. Marla dwells in Jack's sexual fantasies (she appears as the animal-guide in one of Jack's meditations), but Jack is unable to act, perhaps because he perceives her as a menace in the real world. However, in the end Marla is reunited to him because she is the one who will tie some loose ends. All we see happens in Jack's fantasies.

As a projection of Jack's, and to a certain extent our, most remote desires, *Fight Club* is a fantasy world fuelled by our frustrations, a place where our dreams ache, but where at least we can feel whole again. With its fast-paced editing, brilliantly highlighted by the pounding soundtrack performed by the Dust Brothers, *Fight Club* is an injection of adrenaline. It goes beyond the trite Dr. Jeckyll and Mr Hyde theme, blurring the line between reality and fantasy, using cinema in a very clever way, dragging the spectator within the mind of the protagonist. Fincher's movie is an interesting analysis of our contemporary way of living.

In addition, both Edward Norton and Brat Pitt deliver extraordinary performances. On one hand we have Norton who, with his shy, distant look and his drone-like voice over seems to convey all the vacuity of existence. On the other hand, Bratt Pitt's acting seems a little bit too clichéd in portraying the wild Jack's alter ego, but effective nevertheless.

Unfortunately, *Fight Club* fails to be a masterpiece because of its length, and some little flaws in the narration. Some of its moments drag a little, and as soon as we realize what the twist is, it takes too long to get to the point. Twenty-five minutes shorter and it would have been a real knock-out. Nonetheless, it still remains an enjoyable film, probably one of the most exciting recently released.

Silent Shakespeare

Dir: Luke McKernan, UK, 1999

A review by David Mayer, University of Manchester, UK

British Film Institute (BFIV046), Black & white and tinted, silent (but with score), 88 minutes. PAL distributed by Connoisseur Video, £15.99; NTSC version from Milestone Film & Video $29.95. DVD (later this year) also $29.95.

When, in the summer of 1843, William Cooke advertised his "Royal Circus" to the people of Greenock, Scotland, one of the featured performers was his son Alfred. Standing on a horse's back and circling the ring at a slow canter, Alfred entered costumed as Shakespeare's Falstaff leading his ragged recruits to slaughter at the Battle of Shrewsbury. From this position Alfred recited Falstaff's soliloquy about the follies and limitations of honour and then, still standing on his horse's back, shed the Falstaff costume to reveal a second dress, that of Shakespeare's Shylock, complete with prop knife and scales with which to extract his pound of flesh from Antonio's bosom. In the character of Shylock and declaiming a mixture of lines from several scenes of *The Merchant of Venice*, Cooke continued his circling canter. For a second time he shed his costume, revealing beneath the Shylock robe the battle attire of Richard III, and in his final equestrian circles of the ring Alfred Cooke shouted out his desire to exchange his kingdom for a horse. As the Royal Circus playbill promised, "So far as can be portrayed on Horseback, MR ALFRED COOKE will delineate the varied and conflicting feelings which moved the breasts of JOCUND FALSTAFF, the USURIOUS and RELENTLESS JEW, and the AMBITIOUS and CRUEL RICHARD."

Bizarre? Unlikely? Discontinuous? Not, we would agree, Shakespearean performance as we have come to know it in the theatre or in Lawrence Olivier's and Kenneth Branagh's films, yet such disjointed, maltreated, abridged and irregular presentations of Shakespeare's repertoire formed the way in which most people, that is, people who lived in all but the larger cities with fully-staffed and equipped playhouses, saw Shakespeare and the other classics - *Richard III* truncated and performed in five minutes flat - until 1914 or even later. In America the situation was similar. Mark Twain's Huck Finn meets two scam-artists, the "King" and the "Duke", who attempt to flim-flam a rural audience with a preposterous entertainment, then escape with the takings. Two of their offerings, which persuade the hick-audience that the entertainers are, in fact, scions of the Kemble and Kean acting stock, are an athletic broad-sword combat between Richard III and Richmond and a supposed soliloquy from *Hamlet* which is a weird, unsteady melange of several dozen half-remembered lines from as many plays. Shakespeare: combat and gibberish and enthusiastic applause.

These unsettling circumstances of performance and reception are important to recall when viewing and - almost inevitably - enjoying and appreciating the British Film Institute's *Silent Shakespeare*, intelligently compiled and wisely introduced by Luke McKernan. Early cinema audiences, seeing all film in short lengths - occasionally extending to two-reels, only experienced Shakespearean plays in abrupt unexplicated extracts or in a sequence of abridged scenes and tableaux and occasional inter-titles which merely précised the actions of a full-length drama. In the music halls and variety houses, where showings of the "bioscope"

gradually replaced the live and more costly dramatic sketch, filmed Shakespearean extracts and abridgements raised the cultural tone of the establishment and partly paved the way for longer narrative films. For these reasons, if for no other, anything which illuminates the processes of early film exhibition and spectating is valuable. But this video anthology is a window onto the late-Victorian/Edwardian stage and at once a revelation of theatrical praxis and the irregular processes of exchange between stage and early film. We see what late-Victorian stage performance looked liked and what film was aspiring and attempting to emulate. At this point, there was no expectation of surpassing.

Silent Shakespeare is a compilation of films held in the National Film and Television Archive, seven in all, from an extremely early, recently-discovered brief remnant of a scene from Herbert Beerbohm-Tree's *King John* (1899) to a two-reel version of Sir Frank Benson's touring *Richard III* (1911). Between are *The Tempest* (1908) by the British Clarendon Company performed on indoor settings and in outdoor locales by a cast of amateur or simply unskilled actors, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1909) by the American Vitagraph Company with a cast of skilled professionals but which inexplicably replaces the character of Oberon with "Penelope", an eloquent, sumptuous, stencil-coloured *King Lear* (1910) by Film d'Arte Italiana with the noted stage actor Ermete Novelli as Lear and Francesca Bertini as Cordelia and again a cast of trained professionals, *Twelfth Night* (1910) by Vitagraph, and *The Merchant of Venice* (1910) by Film d'Arte Italiana and again with Novelli, here as Shylock, and Bertini as Jessica.

All of these films pre-date the longer feature films, and all make necessary concessions to obligatory brevity. The Italians are ruthless in eliminating parallel plots. *Lear* is performed without Edgar, Edmond, Gloucester, a storm scene, and a Fool in the latter episodes; *The Merchant* doesn't introduce Portia until Shylock claims his pound of flesh, and both films consequently sacrifice some clarity and coherence, which sporadic inter-titles cannot altogether rectify, but both films compensate by focusing on Novelli's lucid performances. Vitagraph's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with Theseus, Hippolyta, and Oberon abducted and replaced by the mysterious Penelope, is needlessly chaotic, and its *Twelfth Night* fails to explain Malvolio, Feste, Maria, Toby, and Sir Andrew. Frank Benson's Richard III is the most coherent and complete: a stage-play with actual stage-settings and theatrical costumes set before a camera which, unlike the practice visible in the other post-1909 Shakespeare films, never changes position. This film reveals that Benson prefaced his *Richard III* with scenes from the final part of *Henry VI* - the Battle of Tewksbury and the murder of Prince Henry - before following the drama's conventional sequence.

English, American and Italian actors whose professional skills were developed within distinct stage traditions meeting different expectations of their respective national audiences reveal much about the differences and similarities of gestural languages. All use large gestures which travel from the body, but the English are the least emotive, tending to stay parallel to the picture-plane, and the most perpendicular in stance. Frank Benson's physically energised portrayal of Richard - unnecessarily leaping onto King Henry VI's table to stab the feeble king - almost contradicts this generalisation, but Benson is the leading actor, and his supporting performers subdue their movements to give greater colour to their chief. The Italians put much vigour into their outward reaching gestures, and gestures travel back to their bodies with emphasis and force, their bodies responding in mimed emotion. Americans, especially those in comic roles, gesticulate toward the camera and give more in-your-face performances, but the females are circumspect and a little dull. All gestures, elongated and sustained, and all films, supported in turn by Laura Rossi's seven appropriate scores and ten-

piece orchestra, remind us that accompanying incidental music was an essential element both in the creation and exhibition of films.

If I have any reservations about this video they relate to what is missing, rather than what is present. I regret the omission of the Edison Company's 1905 duel from *Macbeth*, filmed when a long-forgotten barn-storming theatre company passed through New Jersey, because this performance, early and vigorous, reminds us how satisfying stage combats were in themselves when graced with the label of Shakespearean. The King and the Duke knew their audience. I also regret that the BFI has allowed Luke McKernan no space other than the inside of the video sleeve for his useful scholarly notes. Luke McKernan always has much of value to say about early film, and it's a shame to confine him in this manner, to print his remarks in such small type, and to deprive us of his observations.

Une Liaison Pornographique

Dir: Federic Fontayne, Belgium, 1999

A review by Stefania Atti, University of Ferrara, Italy

Her point of view, his point of view; not very different really. Little variations of words due to different ways of feeling. A matter of sensitivity. A man and a woman, two components of a large frail "architecture" of inner feelings, who simply tell their particular relationship to a mysterious interviewer.

This is the plot of the beautiful film *Une Liaison Pornographique*, first work of the young Belgian director Frédéric Fontayne.

Set in a grey and cold Paris, the film focuses on the relationship between two main characters who move inside conventional and deadened spaces: a man and a woman who meet each other for the first time in a small coffee house thanks to an advert placed by the woman in a magazine. Few words, long silences: the camera focuses on eyes, hands, facial expressions. The woman wants to satisfy a personal *sexual fantasy*. The man accepts it. So they go to a small hotel where the woman has already booked a room. This is a strange place, conventional in details - a silent hotel keeper, a silent maid, carpet everywhere- but unconventional in colours: bright and warm tones for stairs and narrow passages, cold and livid shades in the room -number 118 - they enter. Behind the door of this room, totally shut in it, they live out their sexual fantasy.

"What was *that fantasy*?" asks the interviewer to the woman. She cannot answer, she is very reticent about it. It is a secret: spectators are not allowed to enter this question and at the same time they cannot enter the room. The camera just peers on the wooden door: what is happening behind it? There is no answer for that at all. The cold and rather decadent room becomes the setting of this mysterious sexual performance. A kind of odd ritual, once a week, which slowly leads them to a good, fun relationship. Just a kind of solid "architecture", built on their mutual tacit agreement: they don't know anything about each other (the name, the age, the profession, etc.), they are only two people linked by a private relationship: never any questions about their own lives, personal details are not important for their affair, they must stay out of them. A simple rule of their game. So each time, in the same coffee house for a drink, each time the same words, each time the same looks, each time in the same room.

But something different happens: the woman has a new request. She simply wants *common sexual intercourse*. Finally, as a paradox, spectators are allowed to enter the cold coloured room to see their new performance. Silent and elegant images among blue walls; the pale light of the day comes from the window: the man and the woman are in bed. This is the most poetic sequence of the film: two bodies lying down hidden under white sheets; it is a kind of sculpture, a kind of link to great Baroque art. Grey and blue shadows on the sheet give the impression of slow movements. The effect is very deep and evocative.

Then something even more different happens between them: the "architecture" of their feelings starts to tremble. This new contact between their bodies opens a break in their relationship. The reason is not so easy to find: maybe the simple feeling of love which slowly evolves between them, maybe the dramatic death of another guest of the hotel (an old man), maybe the final misunderstanding in their last dialogue in the coffee house; both of them would like to ask something about each other, but nobody dare, they only express their own thoughts through their eyes.

What has really happened all of a sudden?

A new question, with finally no answer.

The woman says to the interviewer: "*It was sex, only sex*." Maybe at first, but no more at the end of their liaison.

Love often makes lives so complicated…it is hard even keeping it out of a shut hotel room…

Based on short but meaningful dialogues, Frédéric Fontayne's film stars two interesting actors in the leading roles: the Spanish Sergi Lopez, the man, and the French Nathalie Baye, the woman, who was awarded the "Coppa Volpi" for best actress at the latest edition of the Venice International Film Festival where the movie was presented and was very well received. Both Lopez and Baye are brilliant and clever interpreters: their way of acting is simple, yet subtle and very incisive as the story they are telling. The camera often focuses on their faces, always expressive and full of little variations: small *details* of inner feelings.

Fontayne turns out to be a "*teller of details*", he slowly reveals his characters through particular shots: the eyes, the hands, the glass, the shoes walking on stairs, the shut door. His style is very minimal, but at the same time rich in shades. Indoor spaces are ordinary and almost bare: pale lights, strong contrasts among different colours of settings, a strange vision of Paris, described as an anonymous city full of anonymous people. The coffee house and the hotel are the microcosm of this strange liaison. Fontayne also tells an odd and mysterious story: what is the *sexual fantasy* of the woman? Why can she not reveal her secret to the interviewer? Even the man is very reticent about this question. Why? Is there something so special behind this secret? It is just a question with no answer.

Finally, *love* and not only sex: the woman has fallen in love just like the man. Their relationship, which had started as an unconventional attempt to remake and redefine gender roles and sexual boundaries, is getting trapped in that normality they wanted to avoid in the first place. They want to *ask* each other questions, they need to finally *know* each other but they cannot. Their own lives must remain unknown. The man tries to follow the woman in the subway, but she vanishes in the crowd. Out of the hotel, she goes back to her daily life. Something has changed between them and the unsuccessful attempt to reach the woman in the subway is a clear sign of a deep breach: *they are falling in love*. That's the reason - or one of the possible reasons, who can tell what really happened between them? - their particular relationship suddenly ends. The space of the blue walls room slowly becomes a nice memory to tell.

Behind a shut door everything is possible…let's imagine… but *love* must stay out of the room.