American Movie

Dir: Chris Smith, 1999

A review by Martin Flanagan, The University of Sheffield, UK

A central feature of American film lore in the 1990s was the rise to prominence of the self-made auteur. Partly mythical, and based around the success stories of former video shop and convenience store employees Quentin Tarantino and Kevin Smith, the legend centred on a plucky geek beavering away at his screenplay behind the counter, studiously avoiding film school, generating his first feature from a combination of minimal resources and sheer *chutzpah*, getting noticed at Sundance and eventually becoming indie auteur *du jour*, a fashionable helmer besieged by A-list stars queuing up for collaborations. Endearing and romantic as the successes of Tarantino and Smith were, their infallible images were tarnished by clunky, ponderous releases such as *Jackie Brown* (1997) and *Dogma* (1999). Meanwhile, fellow tyros Robert Rodriguez and Stephen Soderbergh weaved in and out of critical and popular favour with their own variable outputs. It seems that with the exception of Soderbergh, each member of that quartet faces a tough reception next time around, a largely undeserved backlash against their seemingly effortless attainment of power and fame finally beginning to make itself felt.

Mark Borchardt probably dreams of being in such a difficult position. Borchardt is the aspiring director at the centre of Chris Smith's documentary *American Movie*, a film that manages to dissect the romantic image of the struggling film-maker pulling himself up by the bootstraps while simultaneously affirming and celebrating the democracy of film as an art form, the inalienable right of every American citizen to try to hitch a ride on the next gravy train to Skywalker Ranch, no matter how dubious his talent. Borchardt is roughly at the stage Smith was at in the convenience store, or Tarantino was at in the video shop; the stage of juggling financial and familial responsibilities while spending every spare hour filming, re-writing and editing and still leaving valuable time aside to dream of future glories and blue sky projects. This gives Smith's film a fascinating premise - what if we could have seen Tarantino as he prepped *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) or *True Romance* (Tony Scott, 1993) in the video shop, watched him progress from no-budget efforts populated by casts of family members to working with Travolta and Willis? However, we soon realise that *American Movie* does not have the narrative arc of the conventional rags-to-riches story, for two good reasons. The first is that Smith is more interested in what Borchardt's fantasies, failures and frustrations say about America's infatuation with its own celluloid dream industry; the second is that Borchardt is clearly not a very good film-maker. *American Movie* is closer to *Ed Wood* (1994) than anything else, but even this analogy is partially unfair because Borchardt is bad in a painfully honest way that makes you actually want him to improve whereas Wood was exquisitely, gloriously bad. Both films, however, share the slightly uncomfortable knowledge that their protagonists are never going to get on with their lives until their cinematic obsessions are purged, and that the glory they crave is not coming any time soon.

However, Smith's aesthetic strategy is not geared either to pity or raise a laugh at the struggling Borchardt, although such reactions are arguably unavoidable by-products all the same. His attitude to his subject - apparently first encountered while the two shared the editing facilities of the University of Wisconsin as Smith worked in post-production on his previous film *American Job* - is never patronising or superior; you get the impression that Smith genuinely admires Borchardt's irrepressibility and willingness to hustle for small breaks. Purity of motive is always difficult to assign to the documentary film-maker, but it is important to the viewer of *American Movie* that we feel that Smith is not taking advantage of the blue-collar, uneducated Borchardt; perhaps too significant, in that we manoeuvre ourselves into the predictable middle-class position of attributing too little honesty to Smith and not enough guile to Borchardt who, if not exactly cast in a Spielbergian light by Smith's camera, will at the very least achieve some profitable cult notoriety through *American Movie*. The film documents Borchardt's attempts to finish a 35-minute horror film, *Coven*, destined for a mail-order video market to raise funds for a more ambitious and artistic feature, *Northwestern*, that Borchardt has been planning for a decade. *Northwestern*, from the glimpses of old, incomplete footage that we see, is an autobiographical work feeding off Borchardt's own frustrations at being unable to make anything of his life; indeed, the very first lines of *American Movie* feature Borchardt, in voice-over, recounting his previous cinematic failures and stating why it is imperative for his own sense of self-worth that he does not fail again.

American Movie is certainly a film about failure, and, played out against a sterile Wisconsin backdrop that recalls both the desolation of the Coen brothers' *Fargo* (1995) and the decaying manufacturing town of Flint, Michigan, featured in Michael Moore's General Motors-baiting documentary *Roger & Me* (1989), it has its fair share of depressing moments. Borchardt's interactions with his family are awkward and suffused with a sense of tolerance reaching its limits. Chief investor in *Coven*, the eccentric Uncle Bill, is rapidly approaching a senility made all the more poignant by Borchardt's father extolling how sharp a mind his brother used to possess. Borchardt owes large sums of child maintenance to his estranged wife, a situation exacerbated by the necessity of his taking menial jobs to be free to work on his movies. The only quality time we see Borchardt enjoy with his kids is spent in an editing room. These moments are undoubtedly necessary to build up a picture of Borchardt's motivation in his bid for success, but there are a couple of sequences where Smith's camera feels suddenly invasive, and, in a leisurely pan around the tacky ephemera of Uncle Bill's trailer, unpleasantly ironic and judgmental. However, the policy of filming Borchardt's everyday duties and interactions also makes for some unexpectedly tender moments, such as Borchardt's assistance of Uncle Bill in the bath, that add depth to the protagonist. Moments like this reassure you that Borchardt is not simply being used as a stooge for Smith's amused contemplation of the low-end of film-making.

That Borchardt's dreams will never really be fulfilled is sown into the fabric of *American Movie*; you suspect that it is something that Borchardt himself probably realises too, but finds too miserable a scenario to contemplate. However, Borchardt is not a rube, an unwitting fall guy and figure of fun. He cites his influences as including Bergman and Woody Allen, but he is well aware that his own talents are more in line with those of another hero, George A. Romero (who rose to prominence with the raw, low-budget horror classic *Night of the Living Dead*, 1969). Ultimately we can only admire his dogged perseverance in finishing *Coven* and premiering it in a local cinema (in a scene strongly reminiscent of the finale of *Ed Wood*), if not his talent. One elongated sequence features the efforts of Borchardt to smash his principal actor's head through a cupboard door, rigged beforehand to collapse easily to minimise

injury. Several takes later, the actor is dazed and the door still stubbornly refuses to shatter. Eventually the shot is captured to Borchardt's satisfaction. But when we see the footage later, we realise that, positioned atop the cupboard and shooting straight down on the action, Borchardt's camera has failed to pick up the effect of the door breaking into pieces. A simple sound effect would have sufficed. This kind of episode encapsulates Mark Borchardt's luck, and his creative limitations, as a film-maker, as well as Chris Smith's unerring sense of the pathos at the heart of his subject's seemingly indefatigable enthusiasm.

Gladiator

Dir: Ridley Scott, 2000

A review by Sara Gwenllian Jones, Cardiff University, Wales, UK

The promotional tag-lines succinctly sketch the plotline and its major movements: "the general who became a slave, the slave who became a gladiator, the gladiator who defied an emperor", "a hero will rise" and "in this life or the next, I will have my vengeance". The Quicktime trailer at the official *Gladiator* website promises a tougher, pacier and bloodier version of the classic sword-and-sandals epic movie - *Quo Vadis* with cutting-edge SFX. And these first impressions are not wrong; *Gladiator* does indeed employ many of the conventions of the Hollywood epic genre. The plot revolves around a decadent, scheming villain (Commodus, played by Joaquin Phoenix) and a rugged, defiant hero (Maximus, played by Russell Crowe). The cinematography is spectacular, there is a cast of thousands (albeit mostly computer-generated), a vision of ancient Rome sliding into decline, tumultuous, shattering battle-scenes, political intrigue, an array of debaucheries ranging from patricide to incest, and the foregrounded savagery of the gladiatorial arena. Like other epics, *Gladiator* works through "a series of spectacular moments" that can be "traced back to the equestrian shows and circus spectacles which toured Europe and the United States at the turn of the nineteenth century" (Wyke, 1999: website). All the usual ingredients are present, only better constructed; CGI gives the film's reconstruction of ancient Rome visual depth and apparent authenticity; the chariot scenes in the Coliseum are a dazzling rupture of spinning wheels, blades and broken bodies that make the famous chariot race in *Ben Hur* (1959) seem pedestrian in comparison. *Gladiator* does everything that Hollywood epics are supposed to do, only *Gladiator* does it much better. But, for all that it draws upon the visual and thematic lexicon established by its generic precursors, the film's deployment of these conventions is skewed and unsettling. The mood is different; the familiar elements of epic cinema resonate in unfamiliar ways.

The Hollywood epics of the 1950s and 1960s constructed their past worlds to explicitly mirror twentieth century American mainstream culture, reflecting in broad outline its ideologies, aspirations, delusions and concerns. Wyke observes how, as was typical of its genre, MGM's 1951 *Quo Vadis* "offered its American spectators self-satisfied parallels between imperial Rome and modern fascist states, between Christianity and the American Way" (1999: website). While the Hollywood epic's theatrical sets and costumes connote a freshly-laundered version of distant times and places, familiarity attaches to social and political structures (the family, Christianity, the republic) that are lifted wholesale from contemporary America and dropped, with little significant translation, into the heart of one or another ancient civilisation. Stephen Neale notes how such cinema tends to stress

> the thematic and dramatic oppositions between atheism and idolatry and a belief in one true God, and between religious, political and personal freedom and the repressiveness of "totalitarian" empires, states and regimes, often represented in the ancient-world films by Egypt or Rome. (2000: 90)

Thus the eponymous hero of *Spartacus* (1962), a character based on a real historical figure who lived and died seventy years before the birth of Christ, is carefully constructed as a man ahead of his time - a cipher for an idealized, if unimaginative, American masculinity, individualistic, heroically proto-Christian and proto-democratic, a good "Christian" who happened to be born too early to *know* that he was a good Christian. Just in case its audience was in any danger of missing the point, the voice-over at the start of the film explains how the system of slavery that Spartacus failed to overthrow would soon be ended by the dawning of Christianity (thereby conveniently overlooking the fact that, nearly 2000 years later, slavery was still integral to America itself).

Gladiator similarly projects something of the American present into the European past. Maximus, the gladiator, prays at a pagan shrine to a nameless god that is glossed with Christianity when he refers to it as "Blessed Father". Like other heroes of Hollywood epic cinema, he brings down an evil tyrant and effects the restoration of power to the Senate of Rome - an elected body which, according to Gracchus (Derek Jacobi), represents "the People". But, though he is an honourable man, Maximus is not a homespun idealist like Spartacus or Ben Hur. Instead, he is a Roman general loyal to his emperor, a veteran soldier who has had enough of war and desires nothing more than to exchange his command for a peaceful life with his wife and son in the Spanish countryside. Where the classic Hollywood epic is insistently wholesome, clumsy with muscular feel-good heroics and sentimental martyrdoms, *Gladiator* is harshly tragic. Maximus is flawed, brutalised, and dangerous, a blunt man of few words rather than a bronzed speech-maker with a sword. From the outset, the film establishes its sprawling Roman world as an alien territory. The swirling, enigmatic music of composers Hans Zimmer and ex-*Dead Can Dance* vocalist Lisa Gerrard recalls another Europe, one that is ancient, elemental and unruly, a world of harsh environments and strange pagan deities, its sensibilities far removed from the classic Hollywood epic's cosy compass-points of Christianity and decadence, freedom and oppression. *Gladiator*'s mythic vision of the past is dark and troubled, its relayed heroic gestures shadowed with fury and despair.

Like Anthony Mann's *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964), *Gladiator* is set in the year 180 AD, at the end of the rule of Marcus Aurelius (Richard Harris). Also like Mann's film, the opening sequence sees the Roman army, under the command of General Maximus, confronting the last stronghold of the barbarian Germanic tribes. The battle scene amply demonstrates the ruthless efficiency of the Roman military machine. There is no gleaming choreography of red-crested troops arranging themselves around a battle strategy; no shields, helmets or breastplates glitter in the sunlight. Rather, the geometric formation of rank upon rank of Roman soldiers is a display of brutal metal surfaces, razored edges and wicked-looking projectiles. It is a spectacle of murderous hard-textured efficiency rather than of fragile theatrical posturing. The battle takes place at the edge of a dismal, mist-shrouded forest. The pace of the fighting snaps back and forth between real-time and slow motion. There are no lingering close-ups of eviscerated corpses; instead, clever choreography, fast cutting between shots, and the abrasive percussion of colliding weapons powerfully evoke the bloody devastation wrought by metal wrenching through living flesh. The colours are the muted greys, blues and blacks of twilight and the combatants fight ankle-deep in viscous mud. After this bleak opening movement, most of the film's exterior scenes are achingly bright, but this brightness is as edgy as the film's darkness, a harsh glare bleached across geographies of uncomfortable beauty - the rock and desert of Morocco, the arid lunar landscapes of Malta.

As the taglines suggest, the film's premise is elegant in its simplicity: the wronged hero seeks to avenge himself against the tyrant who has destroyed his life. Its compelling undertow issues from the constructed psychologies of characters who might have stepped straight out of a Greek tragedy. Hero and villain are both, in their very different ways, ambiguous and dangerous characters. While Maximus embodies a variety of orthodox heroic qualities - integrity, loyalty, courage, piety, mercy, love for his family - he is not unequivocally "good". Both as a general and as a gladiator, he is ruthless in his pursuit of victory. Following the murder of his patron, the great emperor Marcus Aurelius, he is stripped of his rank, taken for execution (which he escapes by slaughtering his would-be executors) and embarks on a desperate journey back to Spain in a vain attempt to reach his family before they are murdered on the orders of Commodus. Subsequently, the grief-maddened Maximus is captured by slavers and transported to North Africa where he becomes a gladiator under the tutelage of his new master Proximo (Oliver Reed). From the moment he sets eyes upon the burned and brutalised bodies of his wife and son, his primary motivation is not Rome's liberation from the rule of a tyrant but something altogether more human, more personal and more extreme; he lives for revenge, which he pursues single-mindedly. In this, *Gladiator* radically departs from the straightforward good-versus-evil binaries that structure earlier Hollywood epics. It is vengeance, rather than dedication to abstract notions of justice or liberty, that compels Maximus towards his destiny.

In contrast, Commodus is a warped Oedipal nightmare. In love with his own sister (Lucilla, played by Connie Nielson), Commodus strangles his own father, toys with the idea of murdering his own nephew, holds on to power by organising ever more extravagant and inventive crowd-pleasing blood-fests in the Coliseum, and obsesses over his murdered father's favourite, Maximus. Ambitious and scheming, he has all the qualities desirable in a first-class villain - vanity, cowardice, duplicity, self-absorption. Where Maximus is ruggedly and emphatically masculine, Commodus is an effete, clean-shaven fop who dresses extravagantly in rich fabrics and speaks with a soft, camp lisp. But, for all that he is a model of Hollywood wickedness, Commodus is not an uncomplicated cipher for evil. Cowardly, vicious, conniving and murderous, he is nevertheless not without some vulnerability. He murders his father after the dying emperor shows him not the love he craves but cruel and contemptuous pity, and Commodus sobs as his hands close around the old man's throat. Commodus's unscrupulous viciousness is allied to his failure to conform to the preferred model of masculinity represented by Maximus; it is Maximus, not Commodus, who is Marcus Aurelius's chosen successor, Maximus, not Commodus, to whom Lucilla is attracted, and Maximus, not Commodus, who the fickle crowd at the Coliseum ultimately makes its favourite.

As surely as the intricacies of the plot, the play of excess and lack that configures Maximus in oppositional relation to Commodus binds them together, dedicating each to the destruction of the other. Throughout the main body of the film, the narrative follows a fatal logic towards their intertwined tragic destinies. From Maximus's arrest onwards, the thematic trajectory of his story points towards his death. Such inevitability is, Oscar Mandel suggests, "the *sine qua non* of tragedy", residing in "an original and fatal defect in the relation between a purpose and a something within or without" (1973: 24). The tragic narrative of Maximus's story progresses steadily towards his final confrontation with Commodus in the Coliseum, a confrontation beyond which there can be nothing. The tragic fall, Mandel notes, is the "inevitable consequence of a given purpose *in a given world*, external or internal to the protagonist" (1973: 33). For Maximus, the consequences of avenging himself against the

Roman emperor can only be fatal. The tragic hero, by definition, cannot prevail. He is doomed by his own insistent defiance of a more powerful enemy.

All of the key climactic scenes are set in the Coliseum and pit Maximus against a variety of formidable opponents. The gladiators are dehumanized by their heavily stylised armour, helmets and strange metal masks. They become battling automata, whose only function is a ritual of death for the amusement of the crowd. The exaggerated theatricality of their appearance, coupled with the life-and-death desperation of their combat, dissolves the distinction between the performative and the real; the gladiators entertain by enacting battles that are both performed and real, deadly theatre. The film's closing sequence again foregrounds lethal performance as Commodus engages Maximus in a fight to the death in the arena before an excited capacity audience. This final movement is a multi-lateral theatrical event - the playing out of the film's tragic structure as a spectacle for both the diegetic and the cinema audience, the ritual slaughter of the defiant hero who has, unbeknownst to the crowd, already suffered a mortal wound before the fight even begins, the stage set for Commodus to perform the role of "hero" at last - a role that, even though it has been written for him, he still fails to realize. In the end, even Maximus's death does not save him from destiny's cruel script; at the last, he is restored again to a ritual function, to be honoured as a soldier of the empire that has destroyed him.

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I Dreamed of Africa

Dir: Hugh Hudson, 2000

A review by Katrina Daly Thompson, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA

By now images of Africa produced in the West should be quite familiar to us - an Africa that is savage and dangerous, but mysterious and beautiful. As an academic whose research focuses on African literatures and film, I am always leery when new versions of this fiction crop up. Because of my general distrust of Western depictions of Africa, I had low expectations of *I Dreamed of Africa*, especially when I learned that its director, Hugh Hudson, was also responsible for *Greystoke: the Legend of Tarzan* (1984). I would like to be able to say that with *I Dreamed of Africa* I was pleasantly surprised, but unfortunately this film was so pacific that surprise would be too strong a word. Happily there was nothing overtly offensive in the film's representation of Africa or Africans. But there was not much of interest in the film's use of Africa either, although you wouldn't know this from the actors' claims. In a making-of-the-film special aired on HBO, Kim Basinger touted the film as "the greatest experience I've ever had as an actress." "I took my own journey into Africa," she explained; "I walked away from Africa with so much respect." As such benevolently ethnocentric comments suggest, like many films of this genre, *I Dreamed of Africa* uses Africa only as a romantic fantasy backdrop for the film's European characters and Euro-American actors.

Adapted from Kuki Gallmann's autobiography by screenwriters Paula Milne and Susan Shilliday and produced by Stanley R. Jaffe and Allyn Stewart, *I Dreamed of Africa* follows Kuki (played by Kim Basinger) from Italy, where she is injured in a car accident within the first five minutes of the film, to Kenya, where she bravely withstands the loss of her husband and son to the unpredictable dangers of Africa. Despite that the film begins in Italy, the location remains unclear for most of the film, and never do we hear Italian being spoken. This is not surprising since three of the four main characters (Kuki, Emanuele, and Kuki's mother) are played by Americans (Basinger, Liam Aiken, and Eva Marie Saint, respectively); none of them even attempts an Italian accent. Perhaps relying on the audience's ability to suspend disbelief, the film strikes a precarious balance between spurious attempts at linguistic realism and almost complete omission of the cultural settings in which the story is meant to take place. In this respect, the most striking aspect of the film is its use of various languages and depictions of language learning.

Kuki, her husband Paolo (Vincent Perez), and their son Emanuele (Liam Aiken) leave Italy for Kenya - usually referred to simply as "Africa" - in search of a new life, one of excitement and mystery. As Kuki explains to us in a voiceover, "This is a chance to find meaning in my life, to give it value." As soon as the three arrive in Kenya - an arrival marked by an aerial view of a herd of elephants and by Basinger's hair changing from prim and straight to wild and wavy - Paolo begins to teach Emanuele Swahili (notably, all words for animals). Ndege means vulture in this film's ideolect. The scriptwriters were pretty close - the word actually means bird. The first thing Kuki does is introduce herself in Swahili to the two Kenyan

servants who are already mysteriously waiting for her family at the abandoned farm that will become their home. "Mimi Kuki. Kijana wangu Emanuele," which would translate "Me Kuki. My young person Emanuele." Did Basinger take Swahili lessons from Tarzan himself? Without subtitles the non-Swahili speaking audience knows only from context and visual clues (Basinger pointing to herself, then to Liam) that she is greeting the servant. Presumably Kuki is meant to have been taught by Paolo, although the extent to which he knows the language is kept pretty well hidden. Children, as we know, learn languages more quickly than adults do. This holds true for Emanuele, who within a short time learns to speak Swahili in complete sentences; for these we get subtitles. Yet even Kuki, when she visits a local chief to ask him not to use the water on her land, greets him in Swahili and explains where she is from. Perhaps the audience is meant to be impressed, but Basinger's Swahili remains choppy, syllabic. At this point the film has done all it must to establish Kuki and Emanuele's Swahili skills. From here on Emanuele is not required to speak anything but English; Kuki is now addressed in fluent Swahili by her servants and we are led to believe she understands it. In reality her only response is "Asante," which means thank you.

The use of English and Italian in the film is equally implausible. When Kuki addresses the local chief in Swahili, he responds in perfect English, explaining that he was taught by European missionaries. Yet he seems shocked to see a European, a shock that does not correspond with the numbers of whites whom the film would have us believe are more numerous than Kenyans. Just as Kenya becomes "Africa", there is almost no recognition that Italy is not "Europe". Hence the use of English throughout the film among whites who look and sound like Britons, Americans, and South Africans even when they are meant to be Italian. Kuki does provide her servants with an Italian lesson, though. They learn to make and say fettuccine and when they succeed are praised with "Bravo!". In other words, only Italian that Americans can understand is used.

Like "Africa" itself, languages like Swahili and Italian are used in this film only for flavor. Just as the audience hears Swahili and is meant to think it accurate without really understanding it, they are meant to trust the film's image of Africa without understanding "Africa" for what it really is - Kuki's, Hugh Hudson's and several centuries of other Westerners' own construction.

Le Grand Bleu/The Big Blue: Director's Cut

Dir: Luc Besson, 2000

A review by Dayna Oscherwitz, The University of Texas at Austin, USA

Despite his sometime commercial success in France, director Luc Besson has never really been a mainstream filmmaker. His vision of cinema - grand, visually spectacular, and sometimes over the heads of the audience - has earned him both critical praise and condemnation. Nonetheless, Besson has continued to make, and last summer, re-make to a certain degree, his own brand of cinema. The remake, or re-release in question is the Director's Cut of Besson's 1988 film, *Le Grand Bleu* (*The Big Blue*). The film is the story of the fatal rivalry between two free divers, Jacques Mayol (Jean-Marc Barr) and Enzo Molinari (Jean Reno) and the unlikely romance between Mayol and Johanna (Rosanna Arquette), a New York insurance adjuster.

Besson's decision to re-release and re-edit this film may seem puzzling, since the film was not well received on its first release, criticized for being too long, too thin on plot, riddled with weak performances, and even slightly disjointed. Even more puzzling, given the nature of the criticism leveled at *The Big Blue*, might be the director's decision to make the film even longer, so that it now runs three hours, instead of its original two and a half. Any failure to comprehend the film's re-release, however, overlooks the fact that Besson makes films more to please himself than to please the audience. And *The Big Blue*, perhaps more than any of his other films, seems to be an intensely personal affair.

First and foremost, there is the sea. The criticism that the actors' performances are weak holds true only if one overlooks the fact that the central character, the lead actor in the film, is the sea itself. From the initial black and white shots of the young Mayol staring at the sea, this is immediately apparent. Nor is the sea merely a body of water. Rather, with this opening shot (reminiscent in many ways of the final scenes of François Truffaut's *Les 400 coups /The Four Hundred Blows*, 1959), it becomes clear that the sea is an existential sea, it is life and death, a way of living, a way of dying, a way of understanding the world. According to *The Big Blue*, this understanding is open only to those few men who are free divers - men who brave the ocean's depths without breathing apparatus, without equipment of any kind, for the pure sensation of the act.

This is a film about the sea and about men. Clearly, it is the sea that dominates - the vast majority of the film was shot on or under the Mediterranean - but the sea also becomes the focus for an examination of the relationship between Molinari and Mayol. Connected fundamentally by the sea, these two men are the only two characters in the film who share any real bond. Every other person in the film, including Johanna, is merely a witness or an obstacle to the relationship between the two men, and to their mutual relationship with the sea. This relationship, man to man and man to water, becomes a meditation on masculinity.

For, despite their common passion for diving, Mayol and Molinari have very different understandings of the sea and, consequently, of themselves.

For Molinari - a physical, competitive, sensual man - the sea is the arena in which to prove his power, the sphere in which he can dominate. This is obvious in his choice of diving costume - a suit made to resemble the Italian flag. To Molinari, diving is sport, it is done for glory. Thus, Molinari's animal maleness is presented through his insatiable desire to win, to dive deeper and longer than anyone else. Such insatiable desire is also evident in his lust for sexual (but not emotional) contact with women and in his love of food. It is Molinari who draws Mayol into the escalating competition between them that ultimately leads to both of their deaths.

For Mayol, the sea is something quite different. It is a place where his spirit and mind are free, where he feels connected to something higher than himself. Again, the diving suit proves revealing, as Mayol dives in a costume that is pure blue, not the color of any nation, but the color of the sea itself. Furthermore, Mayol competes only because Molinari wishes him to; competition is an expression of the bond between them. Unlike Molinari, he stays underwater as long as he can, not to win, not to prove his prowess, but because he almost cannot bear to resurface. Mayol is almost bodiless in the water, longing to lose himself in it. In some ways, he is an artist, performing in an effort to reach a higher meaning. Perhaps he even represents Besson himself, searching the depths of the water just as the filmmaker explores the depths of the visual image. This reading seems valid, given Besson's own fascination not only with film, but also with the sea, a fascination attested to by the fact that the director himself served as cameraman for most of the underwater sequences in the film.

Thus, according to the film, there are two ways of being masculine - the athlete and the artist, the one physical, the other more spiritual - and these two ways of being are, at one and the same time, inextricably linked and at odds with one another. They are, as it turns out, in a struggle to the death.

The film's emphasis on masculinity is presented, however, not only through the simultaneous bond and struggle between the two central male characters. It is also presented, in a contrastive fashion, through the impossible relationship between Mayol and Johanna. She, the only major female character in the film, loves Mayol without knowing him, pursues him without understanding him. The attraction is purely physical, as she lures him into (what appears to be) his first sexual relationship. Johanna is completely unmoved by the sea, and views it as her rival, the obstacle to her life with Jacques. She wants to settle down and have a baby; he cannot stand to be on land long enough to settle down, and he feels closer to dolphins than he does to her. Arquette's performance, indeed Johanna's character, has been seen to be completely out of place in the film. This is not, however, due to a poor performance on the actress's part, nor is it really the result of bad writing. Johanna is almost a caricature of womanhood that serves to highlight what Besson seems to see as the unbridgeable gap between men and women. For him, at least in *The Big Blue*, woman is purely physical, physical in a base and disturbing way that renders her less - less admirable, less spiritual - than even the most physical man. For, unlike Molinari, Johanna can not really understand Jacques, because she cannot really understand the sea.

Read through the filter of the exploration of masculinity, the changes Besson has made in the film are highly revealing. In the original version, Molinari dies in an attempt to defeat Mayol's diving record. Mayol tries to save him, but ultimately releases him to the sea after

realizing that Molinari shares the same profound connection to the water that Mayol does. Mayol, in the original version, wishes to drown himself as well, but is prevented from doing so; he is revived, and left with Johanna. In the Director's Cut, Molinari dies, and Mayol is reanimated, but he has clearly crossed over the border between land and sea for good. He hallucinates that he is under the water, bleeds from his nose and ears, and ultimately leaves the pregnant Johanna for a final reunion with the sea.

These changes make the film even more markedly masculinist, as the two men, linked through their mutual aspiration to a higher meaning, remain far more connected than Mayol and Johanna could ever be. In this version, only men are capable of spirituality, of grandeur, of transcendence, while woman is left alone, trying to understand, but completely unable to do so. While the film's presentation of men and women does not constitute a technical flaw, it is highly essentialized and stereotyped, suggesting that man, whether physical or spiritual, is still the only being capable of truly living, while woman, on a lower spiritual plane, is characterized by her physical, biological drive to procreate.

Leaving aside the issue of gender representation, *The Big Blue*, is, it must be admitted, a gorgeous film. It is a visual ode to the sea and to those who feel most drawn to it. The film is a bit long, and the plot is a bit thin, but that is not really the point. Besson is not a partisan of tightly constructed narrative cinema. He is interested in visual spectacle, in the power of the image, in meditating on existence. For those who expect something else from cinema, *The Big Blue* is bound to be disappointing. For everyone else, it is definitely worth seeing.

Les Conveyeurs Attendent

Dir: Benoît Mariage, 1999

A review by Benjamin McCann, The University of Bristol, UK

"Une porte se ferme, une autre s'ouvre" (*one door shuts, another one opens*) or "cela va lui ouvrir des portes" (*this will open doors for him*). Either idiom may be employed as a structuring metaphor for Mariage's first feature. Shot in vivid monochrome in the Belgium town of Charleroi, this is a film tinged with what French director Bertrand Tavernier refers to as "the gaze of the underdog". Blending the documentary and the poetic, Mariage has imbued his film with misérabilisme but has also informed the narrative with a life-affirming conclusion. It must be something in the air, for such kitchen-sink dramas characterised by stark social realism have been flooding out of the continent over the past few years at an alarming rate. *Seul Contre Tous* (1998), *Rosetta* (1999), *Festen* (1998), *Ça Commence Aujourd'hui* (1999): all have concentrated on dysfunctional protagonists just "getting by" and the trials and tribulations of the family, and Mariage's film is no exception. As a gripping portrait of a family in turmoil, the narrative may rehash the same hoary Hollywood clichés that informs even glittery behemoths like *American Beauty* (boorish husband, brow-beaten wife, mute children, dim-but-kind neighbour), but what elevates *Les Convoyeurs Attendent* out of the ordinary is a skilful blend of sadness, quirkiness and melodrama.

Roger Clossot is an ambulance-chasing paparazzo covering innocuous *faits divers* in his local suburb of Charleroi. This hinterland is a depressing milieu with constant reminders of a murky, grimy industrialism in the background. Tired of using a scooter to get to work, and craving the new car offered by the local shopkeepers, he enters his son into a competition. Throughout the film, the car is represented as the symbol of social advancement and mobility. It is highly ironic then that the way for Roger to achieve this goal is to coax his son into breaking the world's door opening-and-closing record. Shot in vivid monochrome by Philippe Guilbert, the film is peppered with bizarre, uncanny images typical of a documentary film-maker. Mariage has described the film's more *outré* moments as "a kind of hyperrealism", and these are reflected in the Magritte-style tableaux of the door in the back garden and the ghostliness of the competition boxing-ring.

The narrative is perfectly pitched, delicately juxtaposing farce and brutality to such an extent that shifts between the two in the same scene are often imperceptible. This is in part due to the nuanced performance of Benoît Poelvoorde, who first commanded attention as the suave psychopath in the astonishing *Man Bites Dog* (1992). Coming across as vicious and pathetic, Poelvoorde dominates the film (he is in virtually every scene). From the outset, when he spits olive pips across the kitchen, to the final, unbearably moving outburst in the kitchen, we are presented with a man for whom status and recognition is the *sine qua non* of his existence. His son is the means through which his own dreams will be osmotically achieved, and it is his repeated bullying that results in Michel ending up in a coma. The scene in which he tries to persuade Michel to jump off the wall to build his "self-confidence" is hilariously reminiscent of our own childhood when our parents seemed to be a constant, painful source of

embarrassment, yet this is juxtaposed to, say, the shaving scene in the hospital where father and son bond for the first time. Like these antecedents, there are touching, intimate moments which offset the gloom. Jocelyne and Michel's first romantic liaison is filmed like a Bergman fantasy, all dappled light and birdsong, while Michel's guest slot on the local radio spotting continuity errors in old movies is a further incongruous, yet affecting meditation.

Literally translated, the title means "the carriers are waiting"; a reference to the pigeon-racing competitions that the Clossot's slow-witted neighbour enters. It is also slang for bad weather brewing, an apt description for a film in which inclement weather is a leitmotif : the perpetual rain, the tennis ball-size hailstones that ravage the farmer's crops, the gale that blows through the stark Godot-like tree after Michel has crashed the car. Even when Roger throws a balloon into the air, hoping it will meander across the globe, the wind blows it to the ground. Indeed, symbolic motifs of movement and escape perpetuate the narrative but are constantly undermined; for example, it is telling that the Clossot family live at 30 Impasse Jaunet.

It is a lonely existence. Mariage's camera alternates between static and kinetic which subsequently informs the framing of the narrative. Protagonists are frequently isolated in their environment and it is no coincidence that it is Luise, the moral centre of the film, who is consistently subjected to the fluidity of the camera. Witness the scene where she trudges across the scruffy landscape with a Yves Saint-Laurent poster, or her perceptibly melancholic gaze as she rides on the back of the scooter. Most telling is her recital of the poem at the Father's Day Parade: the camera tracks back, framing her frail figure amidst the butch condescension of the adult world. Like the girl in *Don't Look Now* (1973), her pre-emptive gaze carries a powerful emotional charge. Although the *mise en scène* generally privileges the grimy, Mariage consistently ups the ante on the poetic. The silent scenes carry a powerful emotional charge: there is no diegetic sound in the scenes when father and daughter drive to the hospital on the scooter, when the pigeons are released, and when Jocelyne and Luise embrace.

So, "tout est foutu" as someone dolefully intones in the film. Everything may be ruined, and yet as 2000 arrives, talk is not of Y2K bugs or massive street parties, but of the redemptive power of a new-born child. All is very reminiscent of the denouement of Mike Leigh's *Secrets and Lies* (1996): in both films a birthday party is the catalyst for emotional outburst and then reunion. Indeed, Mariage's feature can be traced back to the social commentary films of mid-90s Britain: *Brassed Off* (1996), *Little Voice* (1998), the works of Loach and Leigh and, further still, to the granddaddy of all humanists, Renoir. As someone muttered as I stumbled out of the cinema, "it was a bit grim, wasn't it?" And yet this is the point; showing not how the other half lives, but how we probably would live if the door was ever shut in our face.

Love's Labour's Lost

Dir: Kenneth Branagh, 2000

A review by Patrick J. Cook, George Washington University, USA

Love's Labour's Lost is Kenneth Branagh's boldest translation of the Shakespearean play-text into cinema. Audacity resides in the very choice of this brilliant, but extremely strange and difficult play, written early in the playwright's career. It is no accident that the word "wit" is used more often here than in any other play by Shakespeare, for both the author and his characters seem determined to demonstrate their wit through verbal pyrotechnics. As a result the play bristles with page after page of obscure reference and wordplay that borders on the nonsensical. The meter is often conspicuously regular, calling attention to the artificiality of the language (the pedant Holofernes goes so far as to assess the metrical success of another character's love poem), and rhyme occurs more frequently than anywhere else in Shakespeare. The plot is arguably Shakespeare's least interesting, relying more on formal patterning than on motivation or intrigue. With the partial exception of the courtier Berowne, the characters lack the psychological complexity so evident in the later plays. Or perhaps one should say, since all of Shakespeare's writings plumb psychological depths in one way or another, that these characters are blithely unaware of the their sub-conscious minds.

What is a popularizing film-maker to do with such material? Branagh's answer is ingenious. The story and language of the central plot remain Shakespearean, as the King of Navarre and three courtiers vow to retreat to a life of study without women and other sources of sensual pleasure, only to find such renunciation impossible once the Princess of France arrives with her three beautiful companions. The complications developed through the group of extravagant characters in loose orbit around the court also adhere, for the most part, to the original in story and language (with a few provocative changes, such as turning Holofernes into the female Holofernia, which may throw new light on his/her relationship with the curate Nathaniel). But over two-thirds of the words, and along with them a hefty portion of the play's obscurities, have been jettisoned, as Branagh reverses course after his full-text-and-then-some *Hamlet*. The setting remains Shakespeare's Navarre, but the date is now 1939, and Europe hovers on the brink of destruction. So, following both the logic of the play's linguistic artificiality and the logic of the updated chronology, Branagh replaces the discarded words with mock newsreel footage introducing the characters and situation, and with a set of ten elaborately choreographed song-and-dance numbers drawn from the great age of the American musical film.

Many on-line and newspaper reviewers have reacted to these changes with horror, finding George Gershwin, Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin and Cole Porter odd bedfellows indeed for the Bard. But a play that relies so heavily on specifically Elizabethan concerns, on such things as shifts in social manners and linguistic and literary styles, requires radical pruning and re-contextualization if it is to make sense to a modern audience. The most successful modern stage productions have played fast and loose with the text - consider only the most famous, the 1968 Michael Kahn version which cast the King of Navarre as the Maharishi Mahesh

Yogi and his disciples as the Beatles. When Branagh was asked in an on-line interview "how far is too far" in taking such liberties, he replied that there may not be a too far, only a "too bad." He's right about that, and so the question becomes whether this is a good or a bad translation from the dramatic to the cinematic medium for a modern rather than an Elizabethan audience.

It is an excellent translation on the whole and a brilliant one on occasion. The film's most impressive feature is the creative selection and placement of the songs. The scorings of Branagh's veteran collaborator Patrick Doyle integrate the familiar melodies beautifully into the surrounding dramatic matrix, creating a fascinating sonic equivalent for the original play's verbal self-reference. They are often cued by an important Shakespearean word and develop some kind of implicit commentary on it. In the play's most famous speech, when Berowne tells us that "when Love speaks, the voice of all the gods / Makes heaven drowsy with the harmony," the men are now lofted into the air to the tune of Berlin's "Cheek to Cheek" ('I'm in heaven…"), as the speech's imagery of transcendence is realized visually. Omitted text, moreover, is replaced by genuinely interesting, intelligently interpretive equivalents. For a modern audience little is lost, for example, and much may be gained, in Branagh's replacement of the men's love sonnets, whose main interest lies in Shakespeare's play upon poetic conventions, with the Gershwins' "I've Got a Crush on You" as sung (and danced too) by the men in the earliest of Shakespeare's great eavesdropping scenes. The continuity and variations of the men's use of conventional love language finds a fascinating equivalent in their ability to interpret the same song individually.

Or, to take one more example, when the preposterous Spaniard Don Armado launches into Cole Porter's "I Get a Kick Out of You," the lyrics interact with the actions portrayed to evoke the ambiguities of the Don's relationship with his page Moth. In the jettisoned text these ambiguities are created through lengthy wordplay that to the modern ear is tedious and through the generally inaccessible discourses of mythology and Elizabethan medicine. The studious reader will find in this section of the text Shakespeare's inevitably complex consideration of the human animal's erotic dimension, but the film's viewers can experience much of this through Armado's singing of champagne, cocaine, and flying too high with some girl (or did he say "guy"?) in the sky. This, like several other musical escapes into wish-fulfillment, ends with one man embracing the other to their intense mutual disgust. Has the poet who so interested Freud been really thrown out with the bathwater? The other songs similarly gain from their placement and treatment, allowing Branagh to convey much of the psychological acuity and emotional impact of Shakespeare's text in ninety-three entertaining minutes.

Shakespeare's words come across adequately from all of the actors, British and American, and Branagh himself works his usual magic with the play's best lines. We have come to expect such individual brilliance and collective competence from our time's premier popular interpreter of Shakespeare. But I was continually surprised by the effectiveness of the visual comedy, which, at the two screenings I attended, produced swells of laughter. Don Armado may have lost many of his lines, but the hilarious preposterousness of Timothy Spall's looks and gestures, not to mention his impossible accent, makes the most of those that remain. As Costard the Clown, Nathan Lane, brandishing rubber chicken and ceaselessly inventive shtick, shows again why many think him the funniest vaudevillian of our time. The performances of Spall and Lane should remind us that Shakespeare's texts were staged by actors skilled in improvisation and visual humor; Costard in fact was originally played by the legendary Will Kempe, the most gifted physical comedian of his age.

As the crestfallen Berowne is reminded by his departing beloved, "a jest's prosperity lies in the ear of him that hears it." As a result of a barrage of negative pre-release press coverage and inadequate studio promotion, in the summer of its release *Love's Labour's Lost* was shown in relatively few theatres to relatively sparse audiences. Its prosperity will lie on video, as audiences of the future explore the work of the man who - it must be said - has helped more people to enjoy Shakespeare than anyone else.

6th Viva Spanish Film Festival at Cornerhouse Cinema, Manchester

A review by Andrew Willis, The University of Salford, UK

At the latest Cannes film festival there were no Spanish films in competition. This sorry state of affairs drew a great deal of criticism from those involved in the Spanish film industry. Having attended this year's Viva film festival, I can fully understand their concern. On the evidence of the films shown at Viva, Spanish cinema is certainly alive and kicking and displays signs of increased productivity and high production standards.

The Viva Spanish film festival, based at Manchester's Cornerhouse cinema, was inaugurated six years ago. Its aim is to highlight the diversity of film production being undertaken in Spain. Viva 2000 offered audiences the chance to see fifteen new films and a variety of shorts produced in Spain over the past couple of years. Most of these titles will not be distributed extensively in the UK. However, since the festival started, the international profile of Spanish cinema has steadily increased, and this has coincided with an increase in feature film production. Slowly, more Spanish films are finding their way onto British cinema screens.

Spanish cinema's time may well have come. The recent, successful releases of Alejandro Amenabar's *Abre Los Ojos* (1997,"Open Your Eyes") and Julio Medem's *Lovers of the Arctic Circle* (1999) have shown that directors beyond the familiar names of Almadovar and Bigas Luna are producing interesting work within Spain and that British audiences are willing to see their films. Indeed, whilst there were only two Spanish films that went into distribution during 1999, according to festival programmer Linda Pariser, 2000 will hopefully see at least six Spanish films entering distribution in the UK. One of those films will be the Viva 2000 opening choice, *La Lengra de la Mariposas* ("Butterfly's Tongue", 2000).

La Lengra de la Mariposas, directed by Jose Luis Cuerda, is in many ways a typical UK art house release. Set in Galicia, and beautifully composed and shot, the film is about the growing relationship between a young boy and his liberal teacher in the months preceding the declaration of the civil war. This relationship is lovingly presented as the child Moncho moves from being under the influence of his family, or more particularly his mother, to the wider world of the school and its Republican teacher. It would be easy to dismiss this film as simply a beautiful, visual treat, but that would be to do it an injustice. Its tough ending suggests that Spain and, in particular, its impressionable young children, fell into the hands of the Franco regime because many were too afraid and too weak and selfish to speak out against it. In the end, as the teacher is taken away, Moncho is handed back to the influence of his mother. *La Lengra de la Mariposas* is a moving film that does not avoid some of the unpleasant truths of the civil war. Not all republicans are presented as heroic martyrs and it is this aspect of the film that is perhaps the most thought-provoking.

One of the major guests at this year's festival was actress, writer and director Iciar Bollain, and her latest film *Flores de Otro Mundo* ("Flowers from Another World", 1999) was expected to be one of the highlights. Whilst in many ways an accomplished piece, it was, in

the final analysis, a disappointing film. It focuses on the experiences of a small group of women who respond to the call from a small village for single women to come and meet its bachelors. The initial idea had come from a TV documentary about the real-life problems faced by single men in Spanish villages and one community's attempt to solve them by inviting a busload of potential spouses to visit. The film focuses on three women who begin relationships with village men. The women's experiences are different and each has specific problems to overcome. However, the film fails to grapple satisfactorily with important issues such as racism (two of the women are black), which are hinted at, but not directly presented as daily problems for the women. *Flores de Otro Mundo* seems a film that likes the rural community it presents a little too much and, therefore, fails to develop fully its critique of masculinity.

As with many of the films on show at this year's Viva festival, *Flores de Otro Mundo* contains a host of excellent performances. One of those is from Jose Sancho as the bachelor who imports his bride from Cuba. Sancho delivers another fine performance in Mariano Barroso's *Los Lobos de Washington* ("Washington's Wolves", 1999). The film also stars Javier Bardem and is the tale of a pair of former truck drivers who now run a bar but think they can secure their future by ripping off their former boss. It is the sort of contemporary thriller that Spanish directors have done very well in recent years, but this one suffers from an overly complex plot that contains too many characters and too many twists. As ever Bardem is good as the lumbering, alcoholic Alberto, disillusioned with life since he has lost his driving licence and his wife. But this good-looking film promises much without delivering a satisfactory punch.

Manolito Gafotas ("Manolito Four-Eyes", 1999) is a very different film, and certainly indicates the huge variety of filmmaking being undertaken within the Spanish film industry. Based on Elvira Lindo's popular books and radio plays, this film focuses on the adventures of its ten year old eponymous hero when his friends leave him alone in his Madrid district as they all head off for their summer vacations. Manolito is forced to entertain himself and his troublesome younger brother but relief is at hand when his truck-driving father offers to take him on a job to relieve the boredom. Manolito observes the antics of the adults around him and the film celebrates the innocence of his youth. *Manolito Gafotas* offers a feel-good approach that delivers lovingly captured comic moments (for example, the scene where Manolito and his brother are left to watch videos in a neighbour's flat), rather than a coherent, whole film. There seems to be an uncertainty in the film about who its primary audience is - young people or adults - which results in a failure to satisfy either.

Another film set in Madrid is Alfonso Albacete's and David Menke's *Sobrevivire* ("I Will Survive", 1999). Once again this film offers a fine central performance, this time from Emma Suarez, in a part specially written for her. Marga is thirty something when she loses her boyfriend in a car accident only to discover that she is pregnant. The film centres on her attempts to put her life together and move on. Once again a gallery of warm-hearted friends, from Cuban ex-dancers to gay best friends, inhabit the Madrid of the film. Both camp and sentimental, *Sobrevivre* is typical of a particular strand of popular Spanish filmmaking. It certainly works on its own terms, but those terms are very limited. Wider social and economic contexts are only touched upon (as in the scenes of Marga seeking social security before and after the baby's birth), but they are never given a central place in her recuperation and creation of a new life. *Sobrevivire* is a bittersweet romantic comedy and, in a limited way, works as such.

Romantic comedy is perhaps also the best way to describe the Catalan film *Boom Boom* (1989), directed by Rosa Verges. It is a lightweight romantic story about two characters, who, although clearly suited to each other, do not manage to meet up until the final, celebratory moments. A Cinderella story, the film verges on being almost an abstract fairytale. Showing as part of the festival's focus on Barcelona-based films, it is not hugely successful, even on its own terms, and I am not at all surprised that *Boom Boom* failed to find distribution in the UK.

Ricardo Franco's *Lucky Stars* was an audience favourite at the 1999 Viva festival. Therefore, I approached his latest and last film *Black Tears* (1998 - Franco died during production) with high expectations. However, probably suffering from the level of expectation, *Black Tears* was probably the biggest disappointment of the festival. It focuses on obsession and the darker side of love. Andreas, played by Amenabar regular Fele Martinez, is kidnapped by two female drug addicts - one of who forces him to make love to her. Slowly, he becomes obsessed by the mysterious woman who humiliated him. Featuring drugs, mental illness and violence, *Black Tears* is a confusing and disjointed film. Neither extreme enough to be challenging in terms of content, nor slick enough to pull the audience through the plot holes, the film is a poor epitaph for a filmmaker who, after beginning in the film industry as an assistant to his maverick uncle Jesus, went on to make a number of important contributions to Spanish cinema such as the influential *Pascual Duarte* (1975).

The three most impressive films at this year's festival were all made by first time feature directors. *Los Sin Nombre* (1999), directed by Barcelona-based Jaume Balaguero, is based on the novel *The Nameless* by the British horror writer Ramsey Campbell. A mother begins to get phone calls from her daughter whom she thought had been murdered five years earlier. This unleashes an exploration of the darker side of humanity which is handled very confidently and presented with a refreshing seriousness in this age of ironic Hollywood horror. *Los Sin Nombre* is a serious genre film that utilises real locations in its creation of growing horror and despair. Like many of the other films on show at the festival, *Los Sin Nombre* contains a very strong central female performance, this time by Emma Vilarasau as the mentally tortured mother. Visually influenced by dark thrillers such as *Se7en* (1995), the film is thematically linked to European horror films that have explored the potential links between horror and World War II death camps such as Franju's *Eyes Without a Face* (1959) and Jess Franco's *Faceless* (1988). *Los Sin Nombre* is certainly worthy of distribution in the UK

Another excellent female performance, this time from Ana Fernandez, is at the centre of another debut movie, Benito Zambrano's *Solas* ("Alone", 1998). The film won the Panorama Audience Prize at the 1999 Berlin festival, and had been well received internationally on the festival circuit. The film focuses on the changing relationship between a mother and daughter as they are forced together due to the father's illness. Emotionally charged and well-observed the drama has a rather reactionary core. The modern, city-dwelling daughter slowly comes to understand and respect her mother's values. Whilst not wholly uncritical of the older generation, the film has an air of nostalgia for a time and value system that the modern world has forgotten as it is forgetting its older members. Solas is another Spanish film that contains wonderful performances and a strong, if small story. It includes many elements that are typical of the new Spanish cinema, and shows many of its strengths.

Director Javier Fesser made a name for himself in Spain directing a number of idiosyncratic adverts for products such as Pizza delivery services and a handful of short films such as *That Rhythm* (1995). The startlingly original imagery of these products is transferred to Fesser's

first feature film *El Milagro de P. Tinto* ("P. Tinto's Miracle", 1998). A huge success at the Spanish box-office, *El Milagro de P. Tinto* is packed with wonderfully weird images as it tells the story of a couple desperate for children who, just as they are about to give up, find the strangest "children" thrust upon them. Packed with humour, Fesser's film is unlikely to gain distribution in the UK, simply because it is so culturally specific in its humour. This is a pity as the film is one of the most striking debuts of recent years, not only in Spanish cinema, but also in European cinema.

The closing film of the festival was from the established Catalan director Ventura Pons. Shot in Catalan, *Morir (o no)* ("To Die (or Not)", 2000) is more experimental than most of the titles on offer at the festival. It mixes colour and black and white, and plays with our narrative expectations as the characters' actions are shown to have a variety of potentially different consequences. Deceptively simple, *To Die (or Not)* plays with the codes and conventions of narrative cinema. However, ultimately the film lacks the politically motivated reasons for such experiments, when compared to, say, the work of Alexander Kluge, and comes dangerously close to being simply a clever game for clever audiences. That said, the film was certainly an entertaining end to the festival, and left one looking forward to next year's fare with optimism.

Finally, whilst the festival offered a number of interesting new films, it is worth noting that this year saw the beginning of a retrospective strand at Viva. The first choice was Luis Garcia Belanga's 1952 landmark film, *Bienvenido Mister Marshall* ("Welcome Mister Marshall"). This screening provided a great opportunity to see, on the big screen, a film that is discussed in almost every study of Spanish cinema I have read. It was not a disappointment, and this development in the festival programme is to be applauded.

Viva serves a very important service for those interested in contemporary Spanish cinema. This year's festival certainly showed the depth and variety of work being undertaken in Spain, and identified a number of first time feature directors to look out for in the future, most notably, Benito Zambrano, Javier Fesser and Jaume Balaguero. The other lasting impression that I was left with was the depth and variety of female acting talent within Spanish cinema. Many of this year's films offered great parts for women and the actresses cast gave marvellous performances. This might not be new within contemporary Spanish cinema, but it remains something of note.

Space Cowboys

Dir: Clint Eastwood, 2000

A review by Geoff Weiss, University of Kentucky, USA

Since the U. S. release of the spaghetti westerns in 1967-68 Clint Eastwood's career has followed the social trajectory of the American baby boomer. While college-aged, middle-class American boomers protested "the Establishment" in the late sixties, Eastwood played the anti-heroic Man with No Name. During the seventies, fresh-from-college boomers carried mistrust of institutions into the world of families and careers while Eastwood brought his anti-hero into conflict with the establishment in *Dirty Harry* (1971) and kept him there with two sequels in that decade. Boomers achieved financial success during Reagan's eighties even as they tried to escape the spiritual emptiness of conspicuous consumption through the gospel of the "New Age". Eastwood, too, vacillated between profit-making potboilers like the fourth and fifth *Dirty Harry* sequels and more "personal" films, indulging his love of jazz (*Bird*, 1988) and his fascination with his own screen persona (*White Hunter, Black Heart*, 1990).

The nineties brought Eastwood the critical respectability of *Unforgiven* (1992), three Oscars and a lifetime achievement award from the American Film Institute, entrenching him in the Hollywood establishment just as the election of the boomers' own Bill Clinton connected middle-aged boomers to political, social and economic systems and institutions they had once derided. Eastwood has been something of a representative for American male boomers reared in the youth culture of the sixties. Thus, the central and unintended irony of Eastwood's newest release, *Space Cowboys* (2000), is its murderous hostility toward young men. *Space Cowboys*' heroes think of themselves essentially as geriatric rebels without cause. Audiences are supposed to think the same way, so the film acknowledges the heroes' ages with smirks and old age jokes. The jokes are not borne out by the men's physical performance within the plot, which depends on the conceit that they still have the right stuff. Despite "Tank" Sullivan's (James Garner) obviously bad knees, Jerry O'Neill's (Donald Sutherland) severely receding hairline and myopia, "Hawk" Hawkins' (Tommy Lee Jones) self-absorbed melancholy, and Frank Corvin's (Clint Eastwood) wrinkles, these guys can still pass muster. This proposition the film must prove in every arena, usually to the cost of younger men.

The simple plot of the film is that Corvin, the only engineer to understand the aging guidance system on a failing satellite, will only do the repairs if he can take his original team with him on the shuttle mission. A prologue set in 1957 reveals that the civilian National Aeronautics and Space Administration prevented Corvin's Air Force Team "Daedalus" from being the first Americans in space. The first half of *Space Cowboys* resembles Phillip Kaufmann's *The Right Stuff* (1983), except that instead of Air Force against Marine pilot, the conflict is generational with six young astronauts scheduled to fly the original mission train as backups alongside Team Daedalus. The teams exchange jabs in which the older astronauts inevitably emerge the winners. At the beginning of training, the younger astronauts send cans of geriatric dietary supplement to the older astronauts' table at lunch. After completing the flight satisfactorily, the older astronauts send the younger ones picture books and jars of baby food.

Eastwood's reluctance to train Ethan (Loren Dean), his backup, can only be described as petulant. "What do you want me to do," he snarls in his trademark voice, "draw you a picture and connect the dots?". "I hold two Master's degrees from MIT [the Massachusetts Institute of Technology]," replies the younger man in his defense. Of course it's not education or even experience that's the real currency here. The real currency, especially with American movie audiences, is affability. How else to explain the boomer generation's collective outrage at President Nixon and its collective apathy towards President Reagan, whose illegal Iran Contra dealings arguably did greater damage to American democracy than Nixon's Watergate caper? Reagan was genial with the same purpose as the space cowboys, to cloak a mailed fist in a velvet glove. The first half of the film shows how genial these four actors can be. Corvin hoists his wife up on a washing machine for a little impromptu sex in the garage. Hawk gives a puke-making acrobatic biplane ride to a pimple-faced teen on his birthday. Tank preaches from the book of Team Daedalus to his captive congregation. Jerry announces on the *Jay Leno Show* that he is a babe magnet for women who want to "explore their infinite capacity for orgasm."

The glove comes off in the second half of the film, which metamorphoses from *The Right Stuff* to *Apollo 13* (1995), but with a more selective *esprit de corps*. Once the men are weightless in space, Roger (Courtney B. Vance), floats up to welcome the older astronauts to "the club." Hawk pushes him backward with a patronizing finger on his head, and the generations only divide more during the remainder of the film. A disaster in space knocks Roger out of action with a concussion. Ethan, the agent of that disaster, is nearly killed in a spacewalk. Finally, in a maneuver for which the movie rates a twenty percent chance of survival, Jerry gleefully pitches both men overboard as the crippled shuttle descends over Florida's Atlantic Coast. Of course, he attaches the men to parachutes, but the movie never resolves the fate of the two unconscious astronauts drifting toward the Atlantic.

Women fare slightly better than young men only in that they face no mortal danger from the space cowboys. In a veneer of liberation, the film is populated with female astronauts, engineers and physicians, but they play Hollywood's traditional role for women, the cheerleader and certifier of heterosexual masculinity. This certification occurs through the association of the penis with the phallus in the Freudian sense and the veneration of the latter in the former. Frontal male nudity terminates at the waist so as not to reveal the penis as simply a penis. Instead, audiences see proper veneration of the imagined phallus through the reaction of women. A female physician enters the room where the four naked astronauts await their physical examination. While the other three men cover their groins, Jerry clasps his hands behind his back and proudly grins. This doctor is so impressed that she later covers Jerry's deficient eyesight from public notice by having hip prescription sunglasses made for him. Of course, they also set up a date to eat oysters after the mission. In another scene, the mission's chief engineer (Marcia Gay Hardin) encounters Hawk in the men's locker room. He emerges before the camera wrapped in a towel, but she has seen him naked and averts her eyes submissively in embarrassment. Seeking Hawk in the men's locker room, what has she encountered that is unexpected? Is Hawk incredibly well-endowed? Has he been masturbating? Perhaps we are to accept that this woman is flummoxed like a school girl by her own sexuality, for, despite her embarrassment, she immediately accepts a date with him. Scenes of their date link the two characters together so that when Hawk is caught later in a major plot point, the camera cuts to her in mission control where, it is implied, we are to read the "proper" response to his fate.

Many U.S. reviews of *Space Cowboys* have focused on its four male stars. One wants to enjoy this movie and this cast, they say, but ... Indeed, the special effects and some of the gags are enjoyable. One does not feel the two-and-a-half hour running time. Yet, a vague dissatisfaction remains at the film's conclusion. Perhaps it is that the film fails to address the issues it raises about aging in a youth culture, preferring instead to rely on the American prescription that a man's gotta' do what a man's gotta' do regardless of thinning hair, failing eyesight or bad knees.

The Patriot

Dir: Roland Emmerich, 2000

A review by Marlon Kuzmick, Cornell University, USA

Mel Gibson's new film, *The Patriot*, opens with a rather ominous voiceover: "I have long feared that my sins would return to visit me . . . and the cost is more than I can bear". This line, which formed the centerpiece of the film's marketing campaign, was Gibson's most substantial addition to the original screenplay (see Fred Schruers, "The Theory of Revolution", *Entertainment Weekly*, 14 July 2000: 26-32); and as it hovers in non-diegetic space before the narrative even begins, we may be forgiven for nudging our companions in the audience in order to whisper that these "sins" most likely involve directing and starring in *Braveheart* (1995). Indeed, for those of us who always suspected *Braveheart*'s tremendous commercial and critical success in America to be due to its rather obvious celebration of the American ideology, *The Patriot* is not much of a surprise. True, Mel refrains from bellowing 'Freedom!' at every swell of the score, but he does do more than his share of slow-motion flag-waving and even flag-jousting at particularly climactic moments. As in *Braveheart*, Gibson is wronged, then fights the good fight for Freedom, portraying to perfection the singularly tortured and righteous masculinity demanded by the role.

Of course, Gibson is hardly the auteur of this project; director Roland Emmerich (also responsible for box-office juggernaut *Independence Day*, 1996) and writer Robert Rodat (the man behind the script for *Saving Private Ryan*, 1998) were undoubtedly the prime movers here. Indeed, deriving the lowest common denominator of *Independence Day*, *Saving Private Ryan* and *Braveheart*-which is, more or less, what *The Patriot* is - promised to be an absolutely sure thing for the film's producers. At first glance, the Revolutionary War seems to offer ideal narrative possibilities (what could woo American audiences like a *Braveheart*-style fight for freedom set in *America* and released on the Fourth of July?); however, as most industry publications have noted, the Revolutionary War hasn't made it to the Hollywood screen with great success. While one would expect the conjunction of the warfilm genre and the 18th Century period piece to work wonders at the box office, not to mention with the academy, the American Revolution's very few cinematic adaptations have not been hospitably received. It is not improbable that this general commercial failure is due to the way the subject matter makes audiences recall the boredom of middle school history class. Indeed, these memories of boredom are relics of a time in one's life when one is still young enough - and thus smart enough - to recognize ideological programming when one is subjected to it.

For all of the film's attempts to offer complexity, the narrative is relatively simple, and the moral center is relatively stable. Gibson plays Benjamin Martin, a pacifist farmer with a mysterious military past who begins the film as the patriarch of a hyper-idealized domestic space. When war intrudes on this space, Martin is forced to return to his violent ways in order to fight for his family, leading a militia that forms an integral part of the American war effort.

However, as the press has delighted in pointing out, the model for Gibson's character was hardly the "great American hero" that Gibson portrays. Francis Marion, "The Swamp Fox", was actually a racist who hunted Indians for sport and regularly raped his female slaves. Of course, the enlightened farmer of *The Patriot* has no slaves at all; though we see his corn and cotton being picked by African-Americans, we are informed almost immediately that they are free men who choose to work the land. Race has indeed been a major focal point for American critics of the film (such as Spike Lee); though the film bends over backwards to be on the right side politically, it has chosen to represent a period in American history where idealizing a white farmer will inevitably seem problematic to say the least. The film is peppered with "moral lessons" about race - but these lessons are delivered with all the subtlety and sophistication of a seventh grade school play. The token racist (yes, there's only one racist member of this 1776 militia) is saved by the lone African-American soldier, and comes to respect him as a fellow man. Gabriel (Heath Ledger), Benjamin Martin's son, takes this same African-American soldier aside to inform him that they are fighting for "a new world where all men are created equal in the eyes of God" (sic!)-the film manages to neglect the fact that a black man in South Carolina would have seen his freedom thirty-two years earlier (1833 vs. 1865) if Britain had won.

The scene just noted aside, Ledger is a welcome addition to the film, allowing many of Gibson's leading man duties to be displaced. Whereas in *Braveheart* Gibson's primary love-interest is killed within the diegesis, here the mother is long dead and memorialized in only the most symbolic of ways. While this saves us - thank goodness! - the indignity of again watching Mel exact his revenge by cuckholding his enemy, it does lead to an equally problematic, if less gratuitously instrumental, treatment of women as a chain of replaceable objects of desire designated by the sign of the dead mother: a pendant representing the North Star, i.e. an abstract, but stable, libidinal direction. But even though Ledger gets the shirtless scenes and the romantic subplot, in the end all narrative roads lead to the Father. Gabriel would seem to be entitled to *some* vengeance when his young wife is locked in a church with her entire town and burned alive by the evil Colonel Tavington (Jason Isaacs), but Gabriel's father has already marked Tavington for death, so the moment the son rides off we know things will end badly. In the elaborate choreography of the Mel Gibson-action-film-genre (and however much this picture strives to exceed this genre, it remains firmly locked within its conventions), Gibson and the villain always get the final dance. The narrative tasks that were split off from the father now return to him, and the full burden of seeking vengeance returns to Benjamin Martin's shoulders.

Though it would be difficult to prove this point without a copy of the screenplay, it seems to me that the word "father" occurs in this film more often than in any film I've seen. Martin's children preface each of their statements with an obligatory "father," and this helps to create the context for what may well be the film's key subplot. Martin's youngest child, Susan (played by the absurdly cute and consistently scene-stealing Skye McCole Bartusiak), has been mute for some time - perhaps, though we aren't told this, since her mother's death. When Martin goes away to war for the first time all the children but Susan say "goodbye, Father"; we see Susan's lips quiver in an attempt to form what looks to be an "F" for father, but she can't quite manage to get the word out. When Susan later becomes angry at her father's absence, the question of whether he can regain her love becomes quite pressing. During another goodbye scene, Martin kneels before Susan begging "just one word, that's all I want" (after all, nothing will come of nothing) - and we can guess which word he's looking for. She seems to refuse, but just as Martin gives up and walks away she runs crying after him (offering precisely what Cordelia wouldn't), "Papa, papa, don't . . . I'll do anything. Please,

papa! I'll say anything you want, I'll say anything you want me to say - I just don't want you to go". Since this film is, in part, designed to make us remember and recognize the sacrifices of the Founding Fathers, it is no surprise that this moment of daughterly recognition seems to be the emotional center of the film (a connection to the *Saving Private Ryan* phenomenon is clear here, one of that film's major cultural purposes being to facilitate filial recognition - Spielberg himself declared that he had made it for his father).

Finally, one thing that mustn't go undiscussed here is the film's depiction of the British army. The factual bases of the film's representations have come under great scrutiny in the popular press, however, the question of whether or not a given portrayal is factual is perhaps less interesting than the *modality* of the "distortion" and the question of *why* a given distortion of fact has taken place. British soldiers are depicted as both effeminate and ruthless. When General Cornwallis is not destroying American forces, he is seen drinking tea in a flowered dressing gown, getting a nice close shave (Tavington too pays attention to personal grooming, while the members of the militia are rather dirty and unkempt) and later getting dressed for a formal ball while complaining that he has nothing fashionable enough to wear. The film gives us the sense that there is something unmanly about the British army's obsessively officious fetishization of antique rituals of warfare. Simultaneously fey and savage, equally delicate and brutal, Tavington, Cornwallis, et al. embody both the cruel father and the perversely seductive queer. By providing focal points for both Oedipal anxiety and homophobic panic, they play on the twin threats to hegemonic masculinity - not to mention the American male's prized possession: the patriarchal nuclear family. The film's nostalgic pleasure is coextensive with the fantasy of a position of absolute righteousness from which all these threats can be parried.

In the final analysis, the film's treatment of the British is a symptom of a structural problem that is no less evident in Emmerich's earlier film, *Independence Day*. The fact that there aren't any alien tabloids around to damn that film's representation of their readers shouldn't blind us to the fact that it asymptotically approaches the Platonic form of jingoistic xenophobia. These narratives offer a purely negative definition of freedom as *freedom from* these radically other agencies. And this essentially conservative definition of freedom seems destined to hold sway as long as films like *The Patriot* trick America's cultural unconscious into linking liberty inextricably to the revenge-narrative.

Topsy -Turvy

Dir: Mike Leigh, 1999

A review by Sarah Stubbings, The University of Nottingham, UK

This is a Mike Leigh film which few would recognise as belonging to his oeuvre, although the cast includes many of Leigh's regular troupe of actors (including Alison Steadman and Timothy Spall). *Topsy-Turvy* is set in the 1880s and it is about Gilbert and Sullivan, specifically the writing and staging of *The Mikado*.

Given my preconceptions about Mike Leigh films, I looked forward to *Topsy-Turvy* offering a sideways comment on current social mores through the lens of the 1880s. However, this is a straight period piece. When *Princess Ida* is badly received, Sullivan becomes consumed with the ambition to write a "serious" opera and threatens to break his contract with the Savoy Theatre to give himself time to do so. The narrative traces his artistic crisis which is also partly mirrored in Gilbert when Sullivan rejects his proposed libretto as being too magical, contrived and remote from real human experience. In short, set in the topsy-turvy world which gives the film its title. When Gilbert finally agrees to write the libretto for *The Mikado*, the film becomes to all intents and purposes a backstage musical leading up to the inevitable triumphant first night.

Within this framework, the detail of the 1880s theatrical milieu is meticulously reconstructed - even down to references to sugar cubes, then a fashionable novelty. What the film significantly lacks, in disappointing contrast with Leigh's earlier work, is the ability to bring the characters and their relationships to life. Gilbert and Sullivan are total opposites - Sullivan a pleasure-loving, sensual single man and Gilbert controlled, buttoned-up with a very strained marital relationship. Yet, even these central characters do not live and their relationship with each other, though clearly hostile, is only perfunctorily sketched in. The two rarely share a scene. This results in fragmentation as each occupies a separate narrative. To really appreciate the film, it may be necessary to be at least a theatrical fan, and ideally a devout Gilbert and Sullivan fan.

At two hours forty minutes, *Topsy-Turvy* is certainly an hour too long - two hours in an uncomfortable chair with a full bladder. The comic, poignant observation which was previously a hallmark of Leigh, the pathos which pains while it amuses, is wholly absent and the detailed reconstruction of 1880s theatrical life is not a sufficient replacement. The high point is the lead-up to the production, which generates the film's only dramatic tension as the team battle to overcome the teething problems of the production.

The concluding scenes hint at the film's missed potential. After the opening night, Gilbert's undervalued wife tries to make an emotional and sexual connection with him. On being rebuffed she goes into a surreal fantasy of a comic opera in which an oppressive husband strangles his neglected wife with her umbilical cord each time she tries to be born. Meanwhile, Sullivan's mistress Fanny tells him of her pregnancy and this time refuses his

offer to "make arrangements". (Sullivan is blithely unaware of her sadness, merely viewing her pregnancy as an annoyance to be sorted out with the minimum of fuss.) A focus on the complexities of these relationships, and especially on the lack of male/female communication, would have enlivened the previous two and a half hours greatly.

Topsy-Turvy threatens to develop in different directions without fulfilling its promise. The theme of Japan is one example. Gilbert's wife takes him to see a Japanese exhibition which provides the inspiration for *The Mikado*. Gilbert shows a typically imperialist relation to the Orient, as representative of exoticism and the Other. Carrying on the critique of imperialism, there are passing references to General Gordon's defeat at Khartoum, a "Fenian" bomb and murders committed by the English in the Isle of Skye. Yet these themes are undeveloped and, as such, fit strangely with the overall tenor of the piece which offers a largely uncritical, apolitical take on 1880s theatrical life.

A motif of over-indulgence and over-restraint is touched on but largely lost in the film's overriding shapelessness. Sullivan is variously shown eating, drinking, and kissing prostitutes as well as his mistress. He is tormented to breaking point by his passion to be a serious composer. Actors Grossmith and Barrington similarly represent overindulgence, becoming sick after eating excessive amounts of oysters, while Grossmith is also a morphine addict. By contrast, Gilbert is rarely shown consuming anything and his wife's attempts to detain him in her bedroom are always rebuffed. Twice he is faced by emotional outbursts from his closest family: his wife's fantasy previously referred to and his father's fit of madness early in the film. To both he responds wholly inadequately, with embarrassment and withdrawal. This emotional constipation is carried into the topsy-turvy world of his librettos, which, as Sullivan complains, portray no emotion.

Topsy-Turvy has the feel of a Sunday night classic novel adaptation - it is as though faithfulness to some original constrains it from flying off on its own way. The production values are again equivalent - despite colourful costumes, expect no visual pyrotechnics. And, sadly, expect no verbal pyrotechnics - this is a solemn portrayal of a period and people which are clearly very dear to Leigh's heart. The film feels tired - it has the old gag of the patient at the dentist who can't talk back for all the implements in his mouth, and the stalwart of costume dramas where, with the benefit of our hindsight, characters are made to look intellectual or foolish. So we bear with Gilbert's father who is scared of being electrocuted by the electric doorbell, which we of course know to be harmless, and Carte's manager is ludicrously in awe of the phone, which, to us, is our commonplace servant. A couple of times characters speak out of time - so there is Dorothy Parker's line that "the more I see of men the more I admire dogs" and a misreading of a line of Gilbert's as "this is another fine mess you've got me into". Yet, this play with time is not sustained, as it is in, for example, *Shakespeare In Love* (1998), to form a running joke and comment on the Shakespeare industry. The two instances jar with the otherwise straight, non-ironical narrative style.

It would be possible to situate *Topsy-Turvy* in a genre of backstage musical or biopic. However, I think it fits more comfortably into a specifically British formation. I would suggest that there are two dominant trends in recent British or British-influenced movies: realistic depictions of working class life (e.g. *Trainspotting*, 1996; *The Full Monty*, 1997), and soft-focus heritage movies about middle-class protagonists (such as *The English Patient*, 1996). In *Topsy-Turvy* Mike Leigh has gone over to the soft-focus heritage camp. Come back to the twenty-first century Mike!