Before Night Falls

Dir: Julian Schnabel, 2000

A review by A. Mary Murphy, Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada

There are two remarkable things about *Before Night Falls*, based on Reinaldo Arenas's homonymous memoir, and one remarkable reason for them. First, director Julian Schnabel maintains a physically-draining tension throughout much of the film; and second, he grants a centrality to writing that Arenas himself demands. He is able to accomplish these things because his Arenas is Javier Bardem. The foreknowledge that this is a film about a man in Castro's Cuba, and a man in prison there for a time, prepares an audience for explicit tortures that never come. The expectation persists, as it must have for the imprisoned and persecuted man, so that the emotional tension experienced by the audience provides a tiny entry into the overpowering and relentless tension of daily life for Arenas and everyone else who is not a perfect fit for the Revolutionary mold. In the midst of this the writer finds refuge in his writing.

Before Night Falls is the story of a writer who has been persecuted even for being a writer, never mind for what he wrote or how he lived, and who writes regardless of the risks and costs. In the childhood backgrounding segment of the film, Schnabel clearly establishes this foundation by showing a grandfather who is so opposed to having a poet in his house that he relocates the family in order to remove young Reinaldo from the influence of a teacher who dares to speak of the boy's gift. The shame of having a poet in the house somehow transforms into the shame of having a homosexual in the house that is Castro's Cuba. Reinaldo is so compelled to write that he carves his words into the bark of trees, making them part of the landscape. Whether the boy has access to paper or not in this moment, using a knife instead of a pen underscores that these words are raw enough, closer to the bone, to require an unrefined medium. For the entirety of the film, this remains true; while the mature writer uses conventional materials for his words, the words themselves possess an unmediated quality which the O'Keefe-Gomez Carriles-Schnabel screenplay understands. Wherever possible, Arenas's words are allowed a freedom of access to listeners that those words were rigorously denied throughout his life.

Javier Bardem carries this film, quite literally at times, on his shoulders and occasionally his hips. This is a very physical performance, and Bardem's entire body sags under the weight of each defeat, just as it relaxes with every pleasure. He uses his walk as narrative, barely able to pick up his feet at times, shoulders rounded, head dipped forward under the invisible yoke, or arms loose, face at ease and smiling in the company of his friends when he wins an honorable mention for his first book. This use of gait is never clearer than near the end of the film, when Arenas is ordered to walk by an official at the dock during the exodus from Cuba. He understands that he must demonstrate he is gay enough to get out, without revealing who he is enough to be barred from leaving. Not only does he have to deny his identity by mincing and prancing about when he is not a mincer and prancer, a performance to satisfy the state audience of one (who also inflicts the humiliation of asking Arenas to describe "how he likes

it"), but he has to adjust his name on the exit documents in case he is too high-profile a figure to be let go.

It is more than a cruel irony that has Arenas sicken with AIDS once he is supposedly free. But sicken he does, and the pace of the film slows dramatically, forcing us to watch the laborious act of swallowing, the obsession with minutiae such as drinking through straws, and most pointedly of all, the fragility of those writerly hands as they move with a childlike uncertainty and carefulness. Somehow, the fingers seem longer than before, although that clearly is not possible, but they are invested with a vulnerability that is symbolic of so much lost virility and vitality, for the man and the writer. There is a profound poignancy in the way Bardem's hands tremblingly hold a glass of whiskey, fingertips grasping at the straw to guide it to his mouth, and clumsily managing all his many little pills (which he keeps in an envelope as though they were a letter, eating them as though they were words). Always, this actor's eyes are part of his performance, as they are variously sparkling, stricken, and dull, in concert with his posture.

Visually, the film is a gallery of vivid sequences such as might be expected from a visual-artist's eye. Schnabel the painter and photographers Rosas and Pérez Grobet give lush and dingy as appropriate. There are two marvellous sequences which are lovely enough to watch again and again. The first is during Arenas' time in prison; he (as always) finds a way to write and experiences a measure of joy even in those dangerous circumstances. His fellow prisoners engage him as their scribe, so he makes a nice living in limited terms, and through the bars they swing their rationed pencils tied with strings in a rather mesmerizing moment of words in motion, swirling along the corridors with a liberty that belies the power of prisons over ideas and thoughts. In the second of these sequences, Arenas (after his release) becomes part of a small and eclectic assortment of people with a dramatic escape plan. They live in a magnificent cathedral with a large circular section of the roof bombed out. The plan is for three of them to escape by hot-air balloon, because that's all it can carry, and the night before the flight, they celebrate. They look like performers after the circus, and a debauched circus at that, as the farewell banquet becomes just generally a feast for every sense and desire. As the balloon lifts through the roof, the aerial camerawork is breathtaking, drawing away from the old-world beauty of the cathedral and slowly surrounding it with rich and gloriously green vegetation. *Before Night Falls* is full of emergences, from a collective, metaphorical womb.

The film opens with the small naked boy sitting alone in a grave-like hole-in-the-ground, crying lustily. It is a scene which places the child's sorrows figuratively in the womb, figured here as cold rather than warm, at the same time that it identifies him as a product of the earth and his country. This is an image to carry through the film, as Arenas the man remains metaphorically alone and crying for the rest of his life, a scene echoed in the smothering closeness of the solitary confinement scene. Arenas grew up fatherless, deeply attached to his mother who appears always youthful and beautiful in the fantasy sequences; the mother is a powerful presence in the film even though she seldom is physically present. Arenas is asked once why he writes, and his immediate response is "revenge." He has been writing all his life - revenge against whom is never explained, although Castro and his regime are the obvious targets of the adult Arenas's revenge. But, in that case, because he has always written, the revenge has to be multi-focal; somehow Arenas' mother, perhaps even the universe for placing him where it did, is suggested as a more primal target for that revenge. The film declines to address the issue directly, perhaps too great a matter to be undertaken within the confines of a film which wants to explore other necessary facets of the life.

When at last Arenas escapes the womb that is Cuba, he does it on a boat named after Lazarus, so that the departure from Cuba becomes a rising from the grave. Set against the next scene, where Arenas boyishly rides in an open convertible with snowflakes falling like freedom on his face, it is clear a birth (and a difficult one) has taken place. The film leaves no doubt that Cuba is a grave for Arenas and many others like him. The skillful use of documentary footage is spliced so cleanly at intervals throughout the film that there is no uncomfortable sense of media-shift; rather, the film audience watches television (for example) with the Cuban audience, to hear Castro declare homosexuals a threat to the state. The absurdity of declaring Arenas an enemy of the state is made abundantly clear due to the timely placement of these segments. This man writes stories and poems, and goes to parties with his friends and has sex: politically subversive, indeed. There is nothing so paranoid as an oppressive government.

The fact that Arenas's homosexuality is never sensationalized in *Before Night Falls* is an important one. He very clearly is eagerly and vigorously active with a variety of partners, but if the film had played to the lascivious possibilities of the material available, it would have contradicted its point that Arenas personally was never a danger to anyone's political office; he was not engaging in devious deviance, not attempting to seduce and compromise Cabinet Ministers. Sexually reckless is not the same as sexually treasonous. It is Castro who politicizes sexual preference and orientation, not Arenas. The irony of his persecution is made manifest in the figure of Johnny Depp, as he plays the aptly situated dual role of a cross-dressing prison official. Slinking across the prison yard as a blond tart with spangled eyelashes and a dress slit above the hip, he retreats to the toilet facilities to retrieve Arenas' novel from his cargo bay, and pass it on, apparently to smuggle the document out of the prison. Immediately after this, Depp is so slicked back and so manly he has a generous and troublesome erection at all times, as he wears the revolutionary greens of an officer. The transition is so extreme that for a moment there is doubt this can be the same man, except for the fact that either way he smolders. Whether these are two persons or one, as I read it, the segment stresses the arbitrary nature of persecution by placing a military man, with a penchant for women's evening wear, in a position of extraordinary power and control over a gay poet. As Nazis had "favourite Jews," apparently Cuba has "favourite queers." The implicit statement here is that being a transvestite is better than being a poet, as long as the transvestite is willing to play the game for the right side.

This film is difficult to watch at times, and while there are complaints that it lets the repressive regime in Cuba off the hook too easily, it does so because this is an artist's life and not a political documentary. Reinaldo Arenas became politically vocal in his freedom (which is only a small segment of the film), and made no secret of his angers; the memoir on which the film is based condemns Castro et al vociferously. The condemnation in the film is more covert, as it portrays the poet and his words as blameless, situating full responsibility for Arenas's suffering on the President and his words. The majority of Arenas's work is artistic - poems and novels, not diatribe. Art and politics are in constant play with each other, Trotsky makes us know that, but it nevertheless is the artist who chooses how to refine and express the political experience, public and private; here, in the hands of another artist, Arenas' story becomes one of "beauty for ashes."

The Blair Witch Project

Dir: Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, 1999

A review by Deneka MacDonald, University of Glasgow, Scotland, UK

In recent years the flood of horror films (dealing specifically with a witch figure) produced by Hollywood and the film industry has been outstanding. Among them: *A Reasonable Man* (1999), *The Scarlet Letter* (1995), *Witchcraft* (1988), *Witchcraft II* (1990), *Dangerous Beauty* (1998), *Dust Devil* (1992), *The Incubus* (1981), *The Craft* (1996), and *The Crucible* (1996). In the midst of a pseudo revival for the contemporary witch in film, North America and Europe were taken by storm with the release of *The Blair Witch Project* - riveting, suspenseful, and perhaps the greatest hoax "civilized" society has fallen for in years. The film opens with a startling two sentence caption, followed by dead silence as moviegoers sit in suspense: "In 1994 three student film makers disappeared in the woods outside of Maryland while making a documentary about the Blair Witch. One year later, their footage was found." What transpires next is a series of edited films cuts, shot on both black and white and a colored camcorder. We find ourselves immersed in the film as we *are there* with Heather Donahue, Joshua Leonard, and Michael Williams as they begin their trek into the woods, at first playfully interviewing locals and then filming strange and mysterious graves and clusters of twigs. We sit more uncomfortably in our seats as they are confronted with chilling laughter in the wooded darkness, discover unexplained rock clusters (presumably graves) outside their tent in the morning, realize they are hopelessly lost and indeed being hunted by an unknown being, and then finally, as one of them goes missing and sheer terror grips their final living days.

The Blair Witch Project is an exciting diversion from popular horror in some ways, while in others it conforms to traditional horror discourse. Its diversions include its filmic (deliberately naïve) technical style, and its ability to play upon our own fears, never showing us a witch, a goblin, or a ghost, but rather, letting us imagine what it must have been like for these three innocent students - alone, hungry and hunted in the woods outside of Burkittsville, Maryland. The fear of the characters in this film is raw and chilling. What is perhaps more unsettling, however, is that the majority of audiences around the world watched this film believing that it was a true story.

Eduardo Sanchez and Dan Myrick are two young film students who shot *The Blair Witch Project* in an incredible eight days at the low budget price of $35,000. Before the film was released, no more than a twenty-second trailer aired on television sets across the globe. Boldly, this unusually short trailer gave nothing of the plot away, but instead added the address www.blairwitch.com to the bottom of the screen, making the film one of the first to be extensively advertised on the internet. Thus, millions of technologically obsessed people visited the web site, craving information about the soon to come horror. What they found at the site created a hyper frenzy like no other this decade has seen.

The Blair Witch Project web site tells the story of the documentary film and the history behind it - "the true story and true history". Illustrating that people really will believe anything they read on the internet, the film was an overnight success when it opened in North America one month later, and has enjoyed a media frenzy ever since (it has even sparked the making of a second film). Although most people are currently aware that the film's claim of non-fiction was a hoax, when it was released in the United Kingdom three months later (on the heals of the century's last Halloween), *The Blair Witch Project* was completely sold out the first day, with a minimum one week waiting period.

The overnight success of *The Blair Witch Project* proves that the desire to believe overcomes critical judgement. This appears to be an important cultural phenomenon in the twentieth century, which quasi scholars such as Anthony Aveni, Margot Adler, Jeffrey Russel, Elinor Gadon, and Caitlin Mathews, whose texts on "historical witchcraft" line the walls of most mind, body and spirit sections in local bookstores, continue to capitalize on. The success of authors such as these, who claim to know the secrets of ancient pagan witchcraft, illustrates the desire of the twentieth century audience to go beyond verifiable fact. Indeed, among non-academic audiences there is an easy acceptance which wishes to believe that there is a level of supernatural horror behind the humdrum existence of modern life, as we are lured into the supernatural from the tediously predictable world created by scientific thought.

Linda Badley claims that "Horror has been a gendered issue since the eighteenth century Gothic revival" (1995: 101). Called the scariest movie of 1999, the film is horrific because it confirms society's worst fears: witches are evil, they kill small children, they perform sacrifice and murderous rituals - *The Blair Witch Project* has it all. The projection of this Medusa figure (the Blair witch herself) to the screen represents the monstrous feminine in horror film which has become our tradition. Barbara Spackman discusses this motif, arguing that "the grotesque female body is not a product of inversion... it belongs to the topos of enchantress turn-hag, a topos that opposes the beautiful enchantress (woman as lie) to the toothless old hag hidden beneath her artifice" (1991: 14). Indeed the witch has become an icon of the grotesque in literature dating back to classic representations of her in the Grimm brothers' *Bluebeard*, *Snow White*, *Hansel and Gretel*, or in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Although we never see the Blair witch, she is described in an interview with Mary Brown as having thick black hair on her arms and body like the fur of a horse. But the Blair witch is at once a figure of the grotesque and an enchantress of men. She is able to instill horror in the people she haunts, *and* she seduces Rustin Parr into performing her acts of evil on the children of Burkittsville. Because we never see her, the Blair witch can be as gruesome as we imagine her, and therein lies the key to the film's magic.

Fear of the unknown has always been a powerful element of the horror genre. Fear of the partially known (witch, witchcraft, occult), or if you will, the socially constructed *known*, juxtaposed with the arcane creates a dual effect whereby our fear becomes more than physical - it becomes psychological. Gone are the typical spectral effects of the classic horror film. *The Blair Witch Project*, instead, relies on the power of imagination to plant the seed of terror. Moreover, because the myth of the Blair witch coincides with both historical and contemporary beliefs of witchcraft, the film adopts age-old social mores.

At the beginning of the film, Donahue, Leonard and Williams confirm popular beliefs toward contemporary witchcraft: they begin the project with initial disbelief of the Blair witch. Admitting a serious curiosity, but nothing more, the trio embark on their adventure. Clearly, the characters in the film do not take the legend of Blair very seriously. While it is obvious

that the documentary project itself is a serious academic enterprise, it is equally apparent that the legend they investigate is viewed by the film-makers as simple myth. Therefore, the initial tone of *The Blair Witch Project* is playful, accepting, and tolerant, not unlike how we would view the concept of sorcery or magic *from afar*. The first few scenes of the documentary are filmed at the graveyard and at coffin rock. Still, the mood remains light, the audience is accepting. It is not until truly inexplicable events begin to transpire that the film takes a sudden turn - when there are noises during the night, and stick bundled graves outside the tent in the morning, we are no longer accepting. Rather, our fear of this unknown and age-old identity of *witch* grips us. Heather herself acknowledges the disbelief and previous light tone of the project: "You guys, what was it that old woman said about the sticks? Do you remember? Fuck, I wasn't listening to her because I thought she was crazy." And we are reminded of the fisherman's words before they entered the woods: "damned kids will never learn."

While carefully conforming to stereotypical conventions of the witch, as well as standard patriarchal principles, *The Blair Witch Project* does offer some unique filmic diversions. Moreover, the film appears to fulfill supernatural elements which the modern audience craves; thus, *The Blair Witch Project* has become a cultural phenomenon and an overnight success catering largely to the same audiences who prefer to suspend beliefs and accept pseudo histories as reality.

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Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon

Dir: Ang Lee, 2000

A review by Brian Baker, North East Wales Institute of Higher Education, Wales, UK

So, then, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* didn't become the first non-English language film to win the "Best Film" category at the Oscars. While picking up awards for cinematography, art direction, score, and "foreign film", it lost out to the more grandiose *Gladiator* (2000), whose excessive and almost vulgar display of its CGI-created Rome wooed the jury in a similar way to Cameron's *Titanic* (1997). *Gladiator*, like *Titanic*, shows you the money. *Crouching Tiger*'s use of CGI is far more discreet. There are only two, low-key, shots of the Beijing of the beginning of the 19th century, when the film is set. It is the end of the Qing dynasty, before the encroachment of Western influence: the last age of heroes. Where Ridley Scott recovers the scope of the Hollywood epic, unproblematic heroism displaced some two thousand years in the past, the world of *Crouching Tiger* stands just behind our own, historically and metaphorically. For *Crouching Tiger*'s world is dreamlike, elements of fantasy made concrete through a variety of cinematic stagings.

The opening sequences seem particularly dreamlike. In Beijing, warriors trained in the Wudan tradition of fighting fly or glide from rooftop to rooftop in chase sequences, the only sound the rustling of their robes. Remarkably staged by Yuen Wo-Ping, the stunt choreographer used by the Wachowski brothers on *The Matrix* (1999), Michelle Yeoh, Chow Yun-Fat and Zhang Ziyi become ethereal, weightless, striding from roof to roof. Through a sophisticated blend of harness and wire work, and subtle CGI, a spectacle of athleticism and grace is created on screen. One chase scene, between the older Yu Lu Shien (Michelle Yeoh) and the young Jen (Zhang Ziyi) ends in a remarkable fight sequence, blows traded and avoided with stunning speed. The action and movement ascends to the level of dance. Action cinema is centrally concerned with bodies in space (in both Hong Kong and Hollywood traditions, usually male bodies), and *Crouching Tiger* demonstrates an acute understanding of the three-dimensional possibilities of screen space. Unlike fight sequences which are based on the spectacle of boxing, essentially a flat, two-dimensional space insisting upon the conflict between the two antagonists, *Crouching Tiger* incorporates ascensions into air, running along vertical walls, and one particularly memorable sequence in which Chow Yun-Fat and Zhang Ziyi "dance" on treetops as they fight. The warriors of *Crouching Tiger* are figures from myth and legend, capable of supernatural feats of athleticism and swordplay, inviting the spectator to invest in them as figures of fantasy. They do what we cannot; they are what we cannot be.

The narrative dynamic of *Crouching Tiger* rests on two paired couples. Yu Shu Lien (Michelle Yeoh), and Li Bu Mai (Chow Yun-Fat) are mature warriors who cannot admit their love for one another. The young woman Jen (Zhang Ziyi), and Lo (Chang Chen) are star-crossed lovers, one the daughter of a politician, the other a nomadic and charismatic outlaw from Xinjiang. Criticism of *Crouching Tiger* has emphasised the elements of the film that can be found in the Chinese, and particularly Hong Kong, cinematic tradition of the *wuxia* film,

one in which chivalric heroes display their swordfighting prowess. Where Lee's film diverges from tradition is in its opening of a possible alternate female triangle of Shu Lien, Jen and Jade Fox, an assassin and outlaw who has become Jen's mentor. The film examines relationships between these women: sisterly between Shu Lien and Jen, until they become rivals and enemies; maternal between Jade Fox and Jen, until they both realise that the power in the relationship was towards the daughter/ pupil, not mother/ mentor.

In its emphasis upon female experience - and in part, it is a coming-of-age narrative for Jen, who seeks a life outside of the confines of traditional social structures - *Crouching Tiger* inherits both the visual and thematic texture of the Chinese "Fifth generation" film-makers, particularly Zhang Yimou. The role of Jen, played by Zhang Ziyi, embodies the same self-possession as Li Gong, star of Zhang's *Red Sorghum* (1987), *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) and *Shanghai Triad* (1995), and Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* (1993). Many of these films feature strong female characters, and concern themselves with social constructions of gender roles. However, few of them make the central female as dislikeable as Jen. She is a thief, she lies and breaks bargains she has made, and refuses either to trust others or place herself in their hands, even if they have her welfare at heart. After she has stolen Li Mu Bai's sword for the second time, she travels and finds Shu Lien at the latter's home. The initial warmth between them dissolves in Jen's mistrust, leading to a spectacular confrontation between them. Jen uses the stolen sword, Shu Lien a variety of weapons, but Shu Lien wins. Relenting, she spares Jen even though a sword is at the young woman's throat: she is paid back by betrayal, a wound of her own, and Jen's escape.

Jen's refusal to submit, to social structures which determine the role of women, to an arranged marriage, to Lo, or to even the bonds of friendship with Shu Lien, renders her isolated, in the position that Li Mu Bai rejects at the start of the film. What Bu Mai has understood is that the warrior life is one of loneliness and spiritual emptiness, and he wishes to fill this emptiness with the love they have denied themselves. His death at the end of the film negates this possibility for himself and for Shu Lien, who has lost another lover in her past. However, poisoned by Jade Fox, his death provokes the first selfless act on the part of Jen, who seeks to make the antidote. Though she fails, Bu Mai's death leads to her submission, to her abandonment of will. She kneels, and allows Shu Lien to swing a sword at her throat, accepting death. The last shots of the films show Jen gliding from a mountain top, translated to a place beyond human will, identity, or desire, an entirely ambiguous resolution.

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon deftly combines the kinetic pleasures of Hong Kong action cinema with the lush visual language of the "Fifth generation": the emphasis on Chinese landscape, and the thematic use of the colours red and green, attest to this inheritance. Chow Yun-Fat is one of the most exportable of the Hong Kong action stars, but had never used a sword before this film, and occasionally lacks the athleticism and balance of Michelle Yeoh or Zhang Ziyi. In fact, the role was originally slated for Jet Li, whose role as Wong Fei-Hung in Tsui Hark's *Once Upon a Time in China* (1991) is similar to Li Mu Bai. However, while the *Once Upon a Time in China* series achieves only a niche in American and British markets, *Crouching Tiger*'s crossover success suggests that Chinese-language (Mandarin or Cantonese) cinema must not only rely upon spectacular action sequences. It must also combine high-profile stars with characters that engage audiences in narratives which can be recognised as similar to the Hollywood pattern.

The film's credits look like an honour roll of the leading talent of Asian cinema: Chow Yun-Fat, Director of Photography Peter Pau, and Yuen Wo Ping, the action choreographer, are

from Hong Kong; Michelle Yeoh is from Malaysia; Ang Lee and Chang Chen from Taiwan; Zhang Ziyi from Beijing; and Tan Dun, the US-based Chinese composer, scored and conducted the music, in which there are cello solos by Yo-Yo Ma. *Crouching Tiger* is a showcase for this talented, moving Chinese-language cinema beyond either the art-house or the "martial arts" video rental racks. This is no accident. The film was financed through Sony's new focus upon Asian markets, Sony Pictures Classics and Columbia Pictures Film Production Asia. In the globalising film marketplace, the pan-Chinese initiative seems remarkably well-timed, and has interesting political overtones. Considering the anxieties surrounding the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, and the ongoing tensions between the People's Republic and Taiwan, Hong Kong actors and a Taiwanese director shooting a traditional Chinese narrative on the mainland seems an extraordinary gesture. If not a reconciliation, then it is a gesture surely of a new emphasis on co-operation, if one with commercial imperatives largely in mind.

Mars Attacks!

Dir: Tim Burton, 1996
ID4-Independence Day

ID4-Independence Day

(Dir. Roland Emmerich, 1996)

A review by Harry M. Benshoff, University of North Texas, USA

The alien invasion film has been undergoing a dramatic resurgence in popularity during the era of cinematic postmodernity (which, for the sake of this essay let us define as the post-*Star Wars* 70s, 80s and 90s). This fact is perhaps best exemplified by the blockbuster success of Roland Emmerich and Dean Devlin's *Independence Day* during the summer of 1996. Some six month's later, *ID4* was followed in the theatres by Tim Burton's take on the alien invasion film, *Mars Attacks!*. Generically speaking, both *Mars Attacks!* and *ID4* exemplify the narrative structure, iconography, and thematic concerns of the classical 1950s alien invasion film. However, whereas *ID4* nostalgically recapitulates the ideology of 50s patriarchal masculinity and militarism, *Mars Attacks!* performs a very different and critical project via its self-conscious use of formalist visual design and generic pastiche. By examining more closely the thematics of the alien invasion movie, and, specifically, these narratives' relationship to a social understanding of masculinity, this essay will suggest that the sub-genre's core of thematic meanings might best be understood as speaking to male fears of bodily penetration. In other words, why do aliens always insist on probing--either anally or otherwise--their often male captives? Just what is at stake in these films?

The alien invasion film, as an identifiable sub-genre of the science fiction genre, first enjoyed mass popularity in the early 1950s, and includes books such as Robert Heinlein's *The Puppet Masters* (1951) and films like *The Flying Saucer* (1950), *The Thing* (1951) and *Invaders From Mars* (1953). The alien invasion film is actually something of a hybrid between science fiction and the horror genre; sometimes these films are referred to as bug-eyed monster movies because they are closer in narrative form to the classical Hollywood horror film. Aliens in these particular films are almost always evil and menace bourgeois heterosexual culture as much as did the vampire or werewolf, whereas the broader genre of science fiction would be more likely to include friendly or helpful aliens, perhaps eschewing scare effects altogether.

Since the 50s, many critics have understood the ideological project of the alien invasion film in terms of Cold War paranoia. More broadly, one might understand the alien invaders as a metaphor for any type of cultural Other--ethnic, racial, sexual, etc.--that threatened to upset the status quo of 1950s white-bread American culture. In the recent alien invasion film, while

general xenophobia may or may not be as pronounced as it was in the 1950s, I think it is fairly safe to say that Communism per se is no longer such a frightening cultural touchstone. (However, the return to public Cold War rhetoric during the Reagan years may have helped fuel the resurgence of the sub-genre during that decade.)

Many postmodern alien invasion films have also been quick to deny any racist coloration to the monstrous invaders--or else they acknowledge it forthrightly, as in the opening scenes of *Men in Black* (1997) when government agents stop a van load of illegal Mexican aliens in search of an extraterrestrial alien. Both *ID4* and *Mars Attacks!* go to great lengths to correct the potentially racist messages of the classical alien invasion film, primarily by focusing on multicultural scripting and casting. Thus one of *ID4*'s three male heroes is played by African American actor Will Smith, while *Mars Attacks!*, as part of its project of filmic pastiche, casts blaxploitation icons Pam Grier and Jim Brown in heroic roles.

If race and Communism are being played down as metaphoric Others in the recent alien invasion film, gender (and specifically sexuality as predicated upon male-female binaries) nonetheless remains as potent an Othering discourse as ever, and comes into sharper relief upon analysis. Given our culture's continuing struggle over women's rights and gay rights during the 1980s and 1990s, it is not surprising that these issues would percolate within the sub-genre once again. Add to this the pervasive fears of AIDS and sexuality--specifically anal penetration--and you have a recipe of cultural forces that can be shown to coalesce in the alien invasion film.

Let me put it this way: one of the central recurring tropes of these films is the abduction of human beings (usually male) by alien invaders. What happens then, according to the generic narrative pattern, is that the male body is symbolically raped by little green men, either with mysterious rays, metallic instruments, actual fleshy appendages, or other sundry types of alien probes which often strike the male body from behind, in a bizarre analog of anal intercourse. The end effect of this penetration of the male body (both culturally and within the generic formula) is desecrated masculinity--some combination of submission, mental obeisance, nervous breakdown, or effeminacy. The fucker has now become the fucked, masculinity has become feminized, man has become like woman. This sexualized reading of the alien abduction is more explicit (and usually far less traumatic) in films where aliens abduct women. Often it is made clear that the aliens in these films want women for breeding purposes; as many B movies from the 50s and 60s suggest, "Mars needs women" to propagate its failing race. But when a man is abducted and penetrated by aliens, rape and violation return to the foreground of meaning, as does the truly monstrous proposition of queer sexuality. This trope has become so pronounced within the genre (and UFOlogy in general) that is has become fodder for parody shows including *South Park* and *The Simpsons*.

How then are these concerns figured within the specifically postmodern alien invasion film? Before continuing I want to make a clear distinction between two different types of postmodern artifacts. The first, following parameters outlined by Hal Foster and Ann Kaplan, might be thought of as a reactive, co-opted, or commercialized postmodernism. This is the Jamesonian postmodernism of naive nostalgia, one that recycles former tropes and styles in a realist manner without questioning the ideological underpinnings of the genre, or calling attention to itself as a recycled artifact in the first place. The other postmodernist style, a deconstructive or critical postmodernism, more readily acknowledges itself as a formalist artifact or a palimpsest, a writing upon or about the genre. To my thinking, *Independence Day* and *Mars Attacks!* exemplify these distinctions quite clearly. *Independence Day* recycles

and repackages the 50s alien invasion film with little or no regard for understanding or exposing its underlying ideologies. *Mars Attacks!*, on the other hand, readily announces itself as generic pastiche, inviting the viewer to understand the film as a meta-commentary upon the genre, rather than merely another retread thereof.

How both films figure masculinity is reflective of this difference. The nostalgic *Independence Day* looks backwards to a world wherein macho military men and advanced technology can save the planet from destruction. The film vociferously reinscribes American patriarchy, macho militarism, and handy lap-top computer technology as the triumvirate savior of the world, literally embodied in the masculine poses of the President (Bill Pullman), fly-boy Steven (Will Smith), and Jewish intellectual David (Jeff Goldblum). As one reviewer noted, all "that stands between planetary life and death are three extravagantly fit American men with good hair."

To some extent *ID4* might be better discussed as a sci-fi version of the World War II war film, focusing as it does on aerial dogfights and a tightly knit group of men who must band together to defeat a common enemy. As such, it basically excludes women from its heroic project--the few female characters present are wives, mothers, nurses, and (ahem) strippers. The action is driven exclusively by men, and if we remove the science fiction trappings or are willing to read them metaphorically, *ID4* can be understood to be fundamentally about masculinity and the threat that feminization poses to that concept.

"Failed" masculinity in the film is represented most spectacularly by the neurotic gay male stereotype played by out gay actor Harvey Fierstein. Fierstein's character is not openly denoted as gay (and in fact Fierstein has gone on record suggesting that the character was not meant to be gay). Yet, the mincing character Harvey Fierstein plays is heavily coded with homosexual stereotypes, such as when he crawls under a desk with the line "There's no shame in hiding--oh--I'd better call my mother!" (Actually, filmmakers Emmerich and Devlin may have hired Fierstein in reaction to charges that their previous film *Stargate*, 1994, was forthrightly queer-phobic. For that film, they cast the androgynous and dark-skinned Jaye Davidson, fresh from his stint as *The Crying Game*'s mysterious transvestite, to play the monstrous alien invader. Surrounding him with children further tapped into social fears of predatory queers. True to the generic imperative, the alien was also defeated by a straight white buddy pair of scientist and military man.)

ID4, like many other buddy, action, and/or war films, thus celebrates masculinity and male homosocial bonds while negating or denigrating their shadowy other, male homosexual bonds. Practically though, homosociality and homosexuality are inescapably intertwined, for one cannot really delineate male homosocial bonds without at the same time vocally disavowing the homosexual possibility, lest the audience (or members of the group itself) get the wrong idea. Indeed, like homosocial institutions in general, the macho men of *ID4* seem obsessed with phallic symbols (they are always chomping on big black cigars) and anality. Masculine competence is after all measured by not being penetrated or, as the popular phrase has it, by "keeping one's butt covered." One character in the film, frustrated by military authority, expresses this sentiment by noting disgustedly that "NASA's been on my butt all morning." Other military men worry about being "wusses" and joke about their having to "kiss some serious booty" in order to get ahead in the military hierarchy. Somewhat surprisingly, even the issues of gays in the military and homosexual marriage are raised by the film when, rather outlandishly, the filmmakers maneuver pilot Will Smith and buddy Harry Connick Jr. into a scene where it appears that one pilot is proposing marriage to the

other. In an excellent example of the process of inoculation, wherein counter-hegemonic ideas are addressed in order to be contained, the scene is played for laughs: the issues are jokingly raised and then reassuringly dismissed as having nothing to do with the world of heroic masculinity; indeed, these issues are not even worth the consideration of "real" men.

Yet, as these few instances of conflict and containment have demonstrated, traditional masculinity and male homosocial groups are on some level obsessed with forthright homosexuality--if only in their obsessive need to deny it. Seminal queer theoretician Guy Hocquenghem noted over twenty-five years ago that "we find the greatest charge of latent homosexuality in those social machines which are particularly anti-homosexual--the army, the school, the church, sport, etc. At the collective level, this sublimation is a means for transforming desire into the desire to repress." In other words, while the men joke nervously about gay marriage, they soon acknowledge that what they really want to do is get into their phallic jet planes and "whup ET's ass." By fucking the Other they reassert their masculinity and reinscribe the active/passive binary of heterosexuality and traditional gender roles.

Ultimately, all of *Independence Day*'s thematic subtext coalesces around the failed masculinity of character Russell Casse (Randy Quaid), a man who has been abducted by aliens in the past, an event that has so destroyed his identity as a man that he has become an alcoholic. It is strongly implied that Casse has been anally penetrated by the aliens, and other male characters in the film taunt and tease him about it mercilessly. At the climax of the film, Casse reclaims his heroic masculinity by destroying the aliens via a phallic jet plane which he drives into the bowels of the alien space ship, triumphantly "topping" the aliens while exclaiming "All right you alien assholes--in the words of my generation--up yours!" In this climactic act, masculinity is reaffirmed as an active, penetrating phallicism dependent upon the forceful submission of the Other.

On the story level alone, *Mars Attacks!* looks very much like *ID4*. Aliens approach Earth with the intent of taking it over, attack US institutions such as Congress and the Presidency, cause panic and a lot of disaster movie special effects, and are eventually thwarted. Unlike the more straightforwardly realist film style of *ID4* however, *Mars Attacks!* immediately announces itself as a pastiche of the specifically 1950s alien invasion film. *Mars Attacks!* uses its state of the arts special effects budget to make space ships that aren't impressive or frightening by 90s standards; rather they look exactly like the cheesy flying saucers from the 50s films. Danny Elfman's musical score explicitly recalls the theremin-scored classic *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) while actor Pierce Brosnan, playing the scientist role, seems to be channeling Richard Carlson (the original B actor who created so many of those characters), complete with wooden B-film delivery and an ever-present pipe. Such explicit genre pastiche invites the viewer to consider the film critically--as a text that has something to say about the genre itself. Rather than being merely a nostalgic reworking of the genre, *Mars Attacks!* sets out to unravel its ideological assumptions.

Perhaps the most interesting way *Mars Attacks!* does this is by making the allegedly "external" threat of Martian invasion a reflection of the dominant white patriarchal culture as opposed to that of some minoritized Other--its aliens are obvious masculine id figures run amok. When not shooting down everything in their path (and "high fiving" each other afterwards), they sit around their space ships in their underwear, reading *Playboy*, drinking alcohol, and watching *The Dukes of Hazzard*. They seem to want to conquer earth for the malicious fun of it - just because they can. Their experiments upon human beings are bizarrely pointless and humorously queer--as only Tim Burton can imagine them. For

example, Burton satirizes the heterosexual love story of the Hollywood formula by playing it out between the scientist's severed-but-living head and his paramour, who after some bizarre alien surgery, exists as a female human head grafted onto the body of a chihuahua. (Compare this to the solemn heterosexual nuptials of *ID4*, where fly-boy Will Smith marries his stripper girlfriend before God and country.) In another sequence, the film self-consciously parodies the woman-as-alien motif, acknowledging that construct even as it uses the sequence to satirize the establishment libido. Dressed as an over-the-top, parody of the slinky, big-haired femme fatale, one alien (Lisa Marie) gains access to the White House because of its Press Secretary's blind lust.

Ultimately, unlike the masculine saviors of *ID4*, in *Mars Attacks!* the President, the scientist, and the military men are all destroyed by the aliens: killed by their own id figures run amok. It is postmodern pop culture itself which defeats the alien invasion, via a recording of Slim Whitman yodeling the "Indian Love Call," the sound of which causes the aliens' heads to explode. The film ends with a Mariachi band playing the National Anthem on the ruined steps of the Capitol, as the President's surviving daughter gives medals of honor to a teenage slacker boy and his wheel-chair bound grandmother.

Independence Day became one of the top grossing films of all time. *Mars Attacks!* was a box office bomb. As a naively nostalgic commercialized postmodern artifact, *ID4* recycles and celebrates the chest-thumping masculinity of the 50s alien invasion film, whereas *Mars Attacks!* actively critiques the same institutions and the generic formulas that support them. Sadly, such pop deconstructions of filmic genres rarely succeed financially; those fans who hunger for the genre's ideological reassurances would be outraged at the satire of *Mars Attacks!*, and those who might be open to such a critique probably don't go to see alien invasion films in the first place.

Ultimately then, and by way of concluding, I want to propose that the alien invasion genre--or UFO mythology as a very real life phenomenon--is based on a kind of "tentacle porn"--if I can borrow that term from Japanese animation, or anime. "Tentacle porn" is the result of certain Japanese censorship dictates that forbid the depiction of "normal" human sexual activity. As a result, the censoring bodies have created a situation in which animators, still wanting and needing to draw sexually explicit scenes in order to sell their product, create violent inter-species sexualities. Rather than depict human beings engaged in mutual sexual couplings, which they are forbidden to do, they now present people (usually women) being sexually mauled and raped by all manner of alien pseudo-phalli. I'd like to suggest that the postmodern alien invasion film operates in similar ways. Censorship--both social and psychic--has forbidden the representation of queer sexualities that might disrupt the rigid binaries inscribed by heterosexuality. What might happen to a man who is raped by another man, or even more unthinkable--a man who chooses to be penetrated by another man--or by a woman--these are not topics that can be countenanced within mainstream media. Yet the fears and anxieties surrounding these issues find coded expression in the alien invasion film. Sexual difference is turned into metaphoric science fiction warfare--according to this paradigm, and in the words of another best-selling media text, truly, "Men are from Mars, and Women are From Venus."

The Last September

Dir: Deborah Warner, 1999

A review by Shirley Peterson, Daemen College, USA

In *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*, Declan Kiberd argues that "to be Irish [in the nineteenth century] was to be modern in the sense that the Irish were seeking to find a home for themselves after a period of chaos and disruption"(1995: 134). By the *fin de siecle* Ireland was of course experiencing the decline of British imperialism and has remained to this day a salient example of the intransigent and deplorable consequences of colonialism as well as the first modern postcolonial country. One dimension of this conflict has been rendered in the genre of the Big House novel, which begins in 1800 with Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* and, some have said, was finally exploded with John Banville's *Birchwood* in 1973. These and other Big House novels have helped define the Anglo-Irish dilemma: "a hyphenated people, forever English in Ireland, forever Irish in England" (367).

In 1999, a film version of Elizabeth Bowen's Big House novel *The Last September* (1929) was produced by Irish filmmaker Neil Jordan and Yvonne Thunder. English director Deborah Warner made her crossover from theater to film in this work, and John Banville wrote a partially successful screen adaptation of Bowen's coming-of-age story in the middle of Ireland's war for independence (1919-21). The film, like the book, is a story of the personal quest of Lois Farquahr to find an identity without losing her "self" to a husband. While Bowen's heroine contends with "the myth of the ancestral home" and all the assumptions it entails (Lassner, 1990: 27), Warner's and Banville's heroine struggles primarily with her romantic attraction to two men, one a British subaltern garrisoned in county Cork near her family's estate, Danielstown, and the other an Irish rebel who lives with a tenant farmer family of Danielstown. While there is much to recommend the film, including exquisite scenery shot by Polish cinematographer Slawomir Idziak in Slane, County Meath, and fine performances by Maggie Smith, Michael Gambon, Fiona Shaw and Keeley Hawes as Lois, *The Last September* takes the complicated situation of Anglo-Irish identity and simplifies the colonial dilemma into a more digestible and accessible romance.

Let me say, first of all, that I do not subscribe to the fidelity argument that films must, or even should, be faithful to the books that inspire them. Especially among modern novels, this is a difficult and not often successful endeavor. Bowen's modernist narrative is not so much concerned with the external world that constitutes its setting - what Virginia Woolf referred to as "materialist" - but the internal world that the external world both contains and constructs. Director Deborah Warner clearly does not subscribe to the fidelity argument either, having been banned for life from producing Beckett's work by his estate after staging *Footfalls* in London with Fiona Shaw playing a part intended for a man.

Danielstown is the overpowering external world that defines Lois's identity, an identity fraught with contradiction and paradox, caught nicely in the film in scenes shot through windows that reflect rather than transparently reveal. Warner's visualization of Danielstown does convey its beauty alongside the darkness and claustrophobia that Lois struggles against.

Danielstown is another in a series of devouring Irish maternal figures, smothering Lois as the house "press[es] down low in apprehension, hiding its face" (Bowen, 1929: 66). She is the orphaned niece of Sir Richard Naylor (Michael Gambon) and Lady Myra (Maggie Smith), her own mother having had the audacity to first marry a northerner, who conveniently died, and then to die young herself. The burden of Lois's ancestry looms in portraits on the walls of Danielstown, which also seem to shut out the real world of 1920 where Irish rebels assemble in darkness outside Danielstown to ambush the British. Lois's immediate environment consists of tennis parties and dances, yet her near encounter with a rebel in the dark just beyond the lane of Danielstown (only referred to in the film) is a reminder of the serious danger in the "unwilling bosom whereon [Danielstown] was set" (66).

One seemingly minor, but perplexing, change in the film adaptation concerns the name of Lois's suitor: Capt. Gerald Lesworth of the British Rutlands becomes Capt. Gerald Colthurst in the film. While this change may seem trivial or even less heavy-handed, it does tend to minimize the importance of Gerald's class, one of the paradoxes developed in the book. Gerald hails from a mercantile family in England, and is made painfully aware of his deficiency as a suitor by Lady Naylor who humiliates him when he proposes marriage to Lois. This is, of course, the crux of the Anglo-Irish problem. By over identifying with the Anglo side of that binary, the Anglo-Irish deny their own subordination to their British counterparts in Ireland. As Mrs. Vermont (wife of a British officer) reminds us, one never quite knows what to think of the Irish. She relishes the British caretaker role and finds the rebels simply ungrateful: "Who would ever have thought the Irish would turn out so disloyal - I mean, of course, the lower classes." Later, Mrs. Vermont is horrified to think they're risking their lives to protect people like the Naylors: "when one thinks these are the people we are defending!" So Gerald's surname, Lesworth, implies not only much about the complex class politics between English occupier and Irish Ascendancy but, also, it ironically underscores one of the muddles produced in all colonial enterprises: the threat to the homogeneous identity of colonial power and the potentially subversive counterforces that accompany any encounter with the "other," who cannot remain "other" enough. From the colonial viewpoint, a Lesworth should certainly outclass a Naylor. While the film acknowledges this class difference in various exchanges between characters, the change of Gerald's name to Colthurst seems to mute that point unnecessarily.

Like many modernist novels, Bowen's is short on action and long on introspection. One of the more animated moments, however, is the Mill Scene in which Lois and Marda Norton, a Danielstown guest infamous for her unconventional lifestyle and disruptive visits, confront a rebel hiding out in an abandoned mill. When the man accidentally fires his gun, Marda is wounded in the hand, another clumsy episode in a long series of disruptions, not the least of which is the sexual threat that Marda poses to another guest's marriage. While Lois and Marda are confronting the rebel, Hugo Montmorency waits for them outside the mill entertaining lustful thoughts of Marda. Yet Marda's sexuality is ambiguous. The well cast Fiona Shaw brilliantly portrays the androgynous Marda who has so far refused to marry but is planning to return to England and marry once and for all to have things settled. She wants children but worries that she may be barren. She confides to Lois that Hugo "couldn't be anything's father" (Bowen, 1929: 128). The novel, in fact, is filled with characters, particularly men, who seem sexually impotent, a symbolic reference to both post-WWI cultural exhaustion (Bowen herself was very traumatized by the war), the protracted British/Irish "troubles," and consequent Irish indolence. Marda's homoerotic (Lois's real love object may, in fact, be Marda, not Gerald), disruptive but finally socially compliant behavior points also to the fear that the Anglo-Irish hybrid represented degeneration and ultimately

extinction. In this culture, as cousin Laurence puts it, "sex seem[s] irrelevant" and "children seem in every sense of the word to be inconceivable" (42-43). The film diffuses this important point in the novel in favor of a more conventional heterosexual romance, perhaps more in line with Banville's own view of the Big House as the arena for heterosexual battles, including incest (see *Birchwood* in which Banville's heir to the estate is the product of incestuous relations between a brother and sister). His screenplay resituates the theme of sex/death from its basis in cultural exhaustion to the heterosexual attraction between Hugo and Marda, and, more surprisingly, Lois and Peter Connor, a character who is mentioned but never appears in the novel.

Lois's romance with Peter Connor, of course, completely redirects us from the novel's central problem: female identity in a dying culture that refuses to acknowledge its own decline. In the novel, the Naylors' most salient characteristic is a failure to notice things. After Lady Naylor has confronted Gerald about his interest in Lois, she retreats into her protective fog: "The less talk, the less indirect discussion round about things, the better, I always think" (181). The Naylors retreat into the cocoon of their manor house, away from the sound of gunfire and thundering lorries beyond the demesne of Danielstown. Rumors that Peter Connor is hiding at his mother's home elicit some concern, but the news that he's been taken away in the middle of the night only inspires Sir Naylor to send grapes to his poor mother. (Michael Gambon as Sir Naylor conveys much more concern; in fact, he seems to fret endlessly about the situation rather than retreating into the willful distraction of Bowen's Sir Naylor). In Bowen's story, Lois's isolation from the Ireland surrounding her and her desire/fear of a "fixed identity" contribute to her infatuation with the subaltern Gerald, whom she longs to love but can never think of without thinking also of death. Anglo-Irish men, like cousin Laurence, are effete and Irish men too remote from her world to have an impact.

Banville's script reconfigures, and I think diminishes, Lois's problem into an eroticized love triangle involving Lois, Peter Connor, and Gerald Colthurst, including a lusty sex scene between Lois and Peter with Lois fleeing bare-breasted from the barn where Peter seduces her (presumably securing the "R" rating?). In turning Gerald's subsequent murder (in the book by anonymous rebels; in the film by Peter Connor) into a crime of passion based on male rivalry, Banville mutes the larger questions of identity, gender, politics and family that dominate Bowen's novel. In fact, he turns the film into an Irish *West Side Story* at the expense of the story of a depleted Anglo-Irish Ascendancy oblivious to their own political reality. The final scene of the film indicates this shift visually. Bowen's novel ends with the burning to the ground of Danielstown while its heroine seeks the all too common Irish identity of the exile in France, pursing educational interests and possibly a life removed from the strictures of Anglo-Irish society. The implication is that Lois has escaped the inevitable destruction behind her and has hope of finding an identity not so determined by heritage or marriage as by her own accomplishments. By contrast, the film ends with the haunting image of an abandoned swing at Danielstown, symbol of Lois's lost childhood and sexual innocence. The menace posed by rebels or British soldiers is lost in the final scene, which by now is fitting because it is no longer the story Bowen intended.

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Mansfield Park

Dir: Patricia Rozema, 1999

A review by Irene Morra, University of Toronto, Canada

With recent film adaptations of *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*, it was only a matter of time before *Mansfield Park* should join the Austen pantheon of adapted works. Many would argue that such a choice could only be a manifestation of a filmmaker's frustration that all the "good" Austen novels had already been adapted (*Northanger Abbey* is a novella, and more suited to television adaptation). With a heroine notable for her passivity, self-effacement and lack of identifiable personality, a hero distinguished by his prudish moralizing, and a rake whose prime vice seems to be bad taste in his choice of objects of affection, *Mansfield Park* is more often than not considered an unfortunate anomaly in Austen's otherwise satiric, witty, and romantically-entertaining body of work.

Fanny Price, impoverished niece to Sir Thomas Bertram of Mansfield Park, is taken in by her uncle's family. The inferiority of her social status is assumed by all at the Park (particularly Fanny), including Lady Bertram and her children, Tom, Edmund, Maria, and Julia. Fanny admires Edmund for his pious appreciation of virtue, modesty, and temperance. Edmund admires Fanny for her devoted adherence to his moral convictions. The arrival of the brother and sister pair of Henry and Mary Crawford complicates matters at the Park; Maria, engaged to the bumbling but wealthy Rushworth, finds herself enamoured of Henry, while Mary falls for Edmund despite his inferior income and his designs to become a clergyman. Henry inexplicably becomes enamoured of Fanny who objects to his apparent frivolity, while Edmund duly falls for Mary despite her occasional objectionable behavior. He confides his alarm at this behavior to the ever-patient Fanny who is all the while enamoured of him and despairing of the influence of Mary Crawford. Ultimately, Henry reveals his true artifice by running off with Mary, now Mrs. Rushworth, while his sister finally succeeds in alienating Edmund. In good time, it begins to strike Edmund "whether Fanny herself were not growing as dear . . . as Mary Crawford had ever been," and whether he could persuade her "that her warm and sisterly regard for him would be foundation enough for wedded love." The plot is problematic enough in its presentation of two cousins so close in their upbringing as to make their romantic relationship seem almost incestuous. The novel's lack of a heroine of interest tends to dissuade the reader from the ways of Fanny Price, rather than to invite any appreciation of her apparent virtues. Edmund is obtuse in his admiration of Mary, and his conversion from older brother to romantic suitor towards his cousin is neither convincing nor satisfying to those familiar with the likes of Knightley, Wentworth, or even some virtuous heroes of eighteenth-century literature. The novel is primarily serious in tone, and lacks the consistent satirical gaiety which characterizes most of Austen's novels; as a result, the reader is left to contemplate the moral truths presented, rather than to take any great interest in the fate of the characters. No matter whether this effect was intended by Austen, or whether her audience may have been more susceptible to the virtuous charms of her novel, the work ultimately has proved to be unsatisfying to the majority of modern readers.

It is therefore surprising that Canadian director Patricia Rozema (*I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*, 1987; *When Night is Falling*, 1995) should have chosen *Mansfield Park* as the source of her next writing and directorial project. With an impressive array of actors which includes Frances O'Connor (Fanny), Jonny Lee Miller (Edmund), Alessandro Nivola (Henry), Embeth Davidtz (Mary), and Harold Pinter (Sir Thomas), the film has been credited by many for "breathing new life" into Austen's tale. If "new life" must constitute not-so-subtle lesbian undertones and depictions of sexual activity with requisite bare breasts and buttocks, the novel has certainly undergone a modern transfusion. Fanny and Mary propound social and economic ideas to crowded family rooms, there is apparently no social impropriety to public kissing, and Tom the reprobate is merely a badly-raised worthy spirit in need of a "noble mission". The film has been credited with breaking away from more traditional by-the-letter adaptations of Austen, a break which it acknowledges by claiming to be based upon "Jane Austen's novel *Mansfield Park*, her letters and early journals." Instead of being admirable for her virtuous adherence to humorlessness, Fanny is energetic, witty and unaffected, perhaps more in keeping with modern perceptions of Austen's own character. Like that of all good feisty heroines, Fanny's imagination is fuelled by her reading of novels, and she writes stories for Edmund and her sister, Susie (the elder brother William to whom Fanny is devoted in the novel is omitted in favor of a source of female bonding). In an apparent attempt to break away from Austen's potentially unpalatable moral assertions, the film resorts to more acceptable unsubtleties; Mansfield Park changes from menacing gray edifice to idyllic sunlit lawn as all become imbued with a spirit of tolerance, happiness, and worthiness; evil Sir Thomas Bertram the slave-owner and woman-oppressor (Fanny objects to being "sold off" like one of his slaves) becomes benign Sir Thomas the permissive father; and visual and verbal references to caged birds wanting to be let out abound. Aside from her novel-reading, Fanny is well-versed in the works of abolitionist writers so that her horror at the atrocities committed by Sir Thomas in Antigua solidifies her worthiness for romantic happiness.

Indeed, despite its socially-aware feminist feistiness, the film ultimately conforms itself to the perceived central interest of the plot, which is the eventual union of Edmund and Fanny. Not only is Fanny rendered more worthy of attention, but Edmund also becomes significantly more appealing; close-ups of his anguished eyes and tense cheekbone only confirm the audience's suspicion that he has loved Fanny all along and is a vulnerable sensitive male only temporarily oppressed by the dictums of his father. Rozema tantalizes the audience with moments of charged physical contact between hero and heroine to create a romance plausible to the post-Harlequin generation, rather than the idealistic union offered at the end of the novel. In so doing, of course, Rozema ultimately conforms Austen's "problem novel" to the tradition of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*. Furthermore, she heightens the satiric quality of the original work by granting its authorial witticisms a greater importance, and by adding a few of her own; as Mary Crawford states, "this is 1806, for heaven's sake." In keeping with other recent adaptations, the film is beautifully photographed, scored and cast to evoke idyllic romance. Ironically, the film's deviations into modern social didacticism problematize that romance in much the same way as the original novel hinders it with an excessive interest in moral rectitude.

Austen's novels are of course characterized just as much by their masterful narrative structure and social perception as they are by their presentation of romantic reconciliations. While the film offers an unnecessarily obvious presentation of "issues," it ultimately succeeds where Austen does not in unifying idea and structure so that the plot moves consistently forward in both narrative action and character development. Henry Crawford is granted the fuller treatment which the novel suggests he deserves; the film allows him looks of sympathy,

resentment, and disappointment which one can only feel to be thoroughly justified. As a result, Fanny's choice between Edmund and Henry is even more problematic than it is in the novel, and the narrative avoids any simplistic presentation of moral choice. Fanny is not so much an example of quietly righteous conviction as she is a fundamentally grounded young woman who is nonetheless susceptible to romantic and economic temptation. Her progress through trial to a firm awareness of her own convictions defines the narrative interest of the film in a way in which the novel does not. This progress is aided in no small measure by the acting talents of O'Connor, who surpasses the script in investing Fanny with a necessary energy, intelligence, vulnerability, and charm. Ultimately, therefore, the film overcomes its cliched social concerns to offer an entertaining and plausible examination of character and situation, and to present *Mansfield Park* with the "whole new life" of which it is so desperately in need.

The Ninth Gate

Dir: Roman Polanski, 1999

A review by Kara L. Andersen, Northeastern University, USA

In Roman Polanski's *The Ninth Gate*, Dean Corso (Johnny Depp) is a rare book dealer hired by a rich publishing magnate, Boris Balkan (Frank Langella), to authenticate an extremely rare and expensive satanic book, *The Nine Gates of the Shadow Kingdom*, supposedly written in collusion with Lucifer himself. Corso travels to Europe to compare Balkan's copy with two other known copies, unknowingly followed by both Balkan and the wife of the previous owner of the book, Liana Telfer (Lena Olin). Suspense builds as it becomes apparent that immediately after Corso examines the other copies, the owners are mysteriously killed and the books burned. As often happens in films about the occult, the closer Corso gets to unraveling the secret of the books, the more dangerous his situation becomes. The film opens well with impressive opening credits and an intriguing premise. As it progresses, however, it becomes evident that the film does not live up to its potential.

The main flaw is the static characterization of Dean Corso. Although Corso is portrayed as "unscrupulous" from the opening scene, his supposed transition from money-grubber to devil worshipper never occurs. He begins the quest with entirely financial motives, and then at the last moment he turns on his financier and wants the book and the knowledge it contains for himself. Polanski may have intended Corso to be an innocent character in over his head, along the lines of Tom Welles in Andrew Kevin Walker's *8 Millimeter* (1999). As Max California tells Welles, "You dance with the devil, the devil don't change. The devil changes you." However, unlike *The Ninth Gate*, in *8 Millimeter*, Welles' descent into the pornographic underworld has comprehensible motives, and is wonderfully contrasted with grounding images of his wife and infant daughter in suburbia. The viewer of *The Ninth Gate* is left to assume Corso has been drawn into his quest because of something inherent in the nature of the book, but this is unclear. The only clue as to why he continues to seek the book after completing the job for Balkan is his unsatisfying statement: "You know why." Not even Depp's masterful acting can compensate for such a poorly-written script.

Most viewers of the film criticize the abrupt ending, but in truth the conclusion was a wise move on Polanski's part. Hell is unknown to human beings, but the desire to gain knowledge about evil is a common (though not universal) experience. The film is about Corso's journey from ignorance to enlightenment, and therefore the journey appropriately ends the moment Corso steps through the gate. However, the motif is obscured by the fact that Corso is neither particularly innocent (as he snatches the first edition *Don Quixote* from an unsuspecting couple) nor particularly evil (as he does show concern over the murders of Bernie, Victor Fargas and Baroness Kessler), and as a result, many viewers miss the point. What makes the ending unsatisfying is the fact that Corso never expresses any desire to enter the gate, so his achieving the goal is meaningless and unsatisfying to the viewer. Had Corso's growing mental involvement in the quest somehow been evident, the mere fact of his crossing the

threshold would have been a goal achieved rather than just another thing that happens to him in the film.

Additionally, at all times Corso is an unlikely follower of Satan. He tries to prevent Liana's death in spite of her previous attempts on his own life, and then shoots Balkan rather than allowing him to painfully burn to death, as though his instincts were toward compassion and mercy. Yet Corso does not seem particularly disturbed by the murders Balkan has committed and is capable of violence himself, as when he beats Liana's bleach-blond lackey, and again when he shoots Balkan rather than extinguishing the fire. Other than these brief moments of action, Corso is for the most part a passive character. He believes his quest to be unnecessary because Balkan's book shows no signs of being a forgery, but he agrees to authenticate it anyway because of the size of the check Balkan presents him with. Polanski presents further evidence of Corso's passive nature when he allows both Liana Telfer and the green-eyed woman (Emanuelle Seigner) to seduce him. After finding his apartment ransacked, Corso is visited by a confrontational Liana Telfer, who wants the book. Despite the fact that Liana is likely responsible for the apartment break in, Corso falls for her sudden change in tactic and does not resist when she begins pawing his body. Liana's apparent reason for seducing him is to tire him out so she can search his satchel for the book. When she doesn't find it, she viciously bites Corso and then knocks him unconscious.

This unpleasant experience in no way affects Corso's later passive compliance to the green-eyed woman's advances. She is the other big enigma of *The Ninth Gate*. Her ability to swoop down from above to save Corso (but only half of the time), and the transmutation of her eyes from human green to demonic fluorescent green at random intervals mark her as a supernatural being, yet Corso doesn't seem to notice. Whether she is on the side of good or evil is open to debate: she both protects Corso from harm and leads him to the kingdom of hell. It has been argued that she is a reflection of Corso's unconscious, and that as his interest in the occult grows, she also becomes affiliated with the book. Her inscrutability, if nothing else, should be a sign to Corso that she is not just the college student on summer vacation she appears to be. Nevertheless, after Corso has just killed Balkan, and has barely escaped from the fire in the castle, he sleeps with the green-eyed woman in a truly disturbing sex scene that features him looking up at her writhing on top of him with demonic glowing eyes in front of a background of flames. At this moment the viewer expects all the secrets to be revealed, but instead Polanski cuts to a commonplace scene of the two in an SUV driving down a daytime highway. No explanations are forthcoming, either. The misogynistic message that women are dangerous and sexually insatiable is archaic in a film released in 1999, though perhaps not surprising given Polanski's recent personal history.

What saves the film from complete mediocrity is the cinematography. The lighting and set design are both ominous and beautiful throughout the film, and Polanski uses subjective camera, such as out of focus shots when Corso is knocked unconscious, and swooping camera movements that rhyme with the green-eyed woman's supernatural movements, which makes the viewer feel personally involved. All in all, the film is enjoyable on a purely visual level, but any attempt at satisfaction through narrative or characterization will lead to disappointment.

Shower

Dir: Yang Zhang, 1999

A review by Daniel Friedman, Yale University, USA

Shower is a poignant and entertaining film that provides a gently nostalgic criticism of the way that progress in contemporary China has come at the cost of community. When Da Ming, a successful businessman in the southern city of Shenzhen, gets a postcard from his mute and mentally challenged younger brother Er Ming in Beijing, he rushes home believing that the crude picture drawn on the card is of Er Ming at their father's deathbed. He arrives to find that his father and the family bath house are still both well but it transpires that his visit will outlast both. Da Ming finds himself in a situation where he has to make his peace with the father he has rejected, look after the younger brother he has never told his wife about, and deal with the destruction of the bath house and the neighbourhood in which he grew up. In doing so, both he and his brother have to reconcile themselves, in their own ways, to the unavoidable changes that are taking place around them.

The main theme of *Shower* is the struggle between tradition and progress in the "Bluewater Lake" bath house as it is handed down from Master Liu, the owner, to his two sons, Da Ming and Er Ming (played beautifully by Jiang Wu, the younger brother of Jiang Wen, the well-known actor-director). With its traditionally comforting role in the community and its peculiar mixture of the communal and the intimate, the bath house has a particular claim to be representative of wider society. Zhang invites us to read the community of "Bluewater Lake" as a cipher for Chinese society and the two sons as the inheritors of modern China. As representatives of the new generation it is to them that we turn to see how they accommodate progress. Yet, the film is marked by the inability of either brother to articulate his own predicament or that of the bath house they inherit.

Zhang, the director of a series of music videos and the light, tangy feature *Spicy Love Soup* (1998), is not interested in presenting a considered judgement of the serious issues involved in accommodating traditional virtues in a changing world. He would rather show the raw emotions played out by Er Ming experiencing this transition. With his charm and childish enthusiasm, Er Ming provides the film with the excuse it needs to dwell on sentiment rather than society. Having him, rather than his brother, as its tangible centre the film can leave key issues unresolved and unarticulated since Er Ming is unable to either resolve or articulate them. Moreover, our sympathy for his situation lets us enjoy the film despite its lack of resolution. Instead of becoming frustrated by the film's inability to view progress and tradition with anything but suspicion and nostalgia respectively, we laugh and cry with Er Ming as he is buffeted by forces that he cannot explain or resolve. By concentrating on Er Ming, Zhang can show the emotional effects of modernisation while avoiding either moral didacticism or political polemic.

The camera is seduced by Er Ming's guilelessness and Zhang places him at the centre of the film thematically, strategically and structurally. Er Ming is structurally central to the film - providing the initial impulse for the film by writing the letter that summons his brother to his

father. It seems as though the film is based on his needs as he also provides the link between the body of the film and the exotic interludes (in Sha'anxi and Tibet). In the first interlude, narrated by Er Ming's father, we see a woman's family collecting precious drops of water for a rare bath that is part of her pre-nuptial ritual. Rather than explaining that this woman was his wife, Master Liu chooses to explain that it was Er Ming's mother. Although it appears that he is telling the story to Jin Hao, who is in the bath with him, this way of referring to the woman makes the audience feel as if the story was told specifically to Er Ming. The second interlude is also prompted by Er Ming, whose picture postcard begins the story of a grandmother's and a granddaughter's trip to the "Blue Water Lake". The interludes, though beautiful parables in their own right, feel extraneous and it is only by understanding them as stories told for Er Ming's benefit that their presence makes any sense.

Er Ming is strategically central to the film's success because its success is contingent upon its ability to make the audience sympathise with the loss of communal life and its ability to engage the whole audience's sympathy for the male society in the bath house. The loss of communal life is most keenly played out by Er Ming, who loses the home, work and friends that have kept him smiling, useful and happy. He will not be able to re-train for a new job or re-locate to the high rise apartment blocks to which the bath house guests are resigned. By placing Er Ming at the structural and strategic centre of the film, Zhang forces the audience to identify with his pain at the loss of tradition without having to articulate either the benefits of progress or any possible accommodation of the old world and the new.

As the title suggests, it is the shower that is the featured site of the struggle between tradition and progress. The two competing visions of what showers should be like are represented in the two most memorable scenes of the film: the opening scene and the teenager's song at the community's cultural event.

The automatic shower of the opening sequence is the ideal of progressive private showering. At first sight, it seems like a marvellous invention. Situated in a public square, it looks like an individual public toilet - a "Superloo". This "Supershower" invites the user to select a setting, put the coins in the slot and then enter the cubicle. We see an individual customer (He Bing) make his selection and then follow him through the door. Inside, the personalised shower - like an automatic car-wash with hose-sprayed water, spray-on soap and large revolving brushes - scrubs our customer, rinses him and then blows him dry. The sequence is filmed so efficiently that we see no-one else's face and the "Supershower" does not waste even a minute of the main film, the opening credits run over the shower action and they end as it does. This shower is carried out in a minimum of time and completely alone with the showerer's eyes closed.

The trouble with the "Supershower" however, is that, although it cleans off the physical dirt, its isolating efficiency leaves the spirit as grimy and unkempt as before. After the opening credits He Bing is portrayed in a negative light. Among other scams, He Bing has installed a neon light at the 'Bluewater Lake" but is demanding more money from Mr Liu to make it actually work. When Da Ming comes home He Bing tries to hustle him for some cash to sponsor an ill-advised business venture. Despite these marks against his character and his alignment with the forces of progress (illustrated by his use of the "Supershower") when some gangsters, to whom he owes money, corner him in the bath house he is shielded by Master Liu who embodies the protective spirit of the place. From his father Er Ming inherits this ability to embody the bath house physically, and this contributes to the keenness of his loss when it is finally pulled down.

We witness Er Ming succeed his father in embodying the virtues of the bath house as he showers a teenage singer at the community cultural event. This shower is a culmination of a series of showers he has provided for the teenager and is emblematic of the second type of shower that the film shows us. Although Er Ming is not able to articulate himself, he shows a childlike joy in art, and especially music. To Er Ming's delight, the teenager comes to the bath house every day to sing *O Sole Mio* at the top of his mediocre voice. However, he is too nervous to sing without the shower and when Jin Hao, another regular, turns the water off to escape the din, he stops singing. Each time this happens, Er Ming turns it back on and then sits listening with a beatific smile on his face. Er Ming's approval is enough for the other regulars who love him to put up with the noise for his sake, and for the sake of the community. We are expected to go along with them and forget about Jin Hao's right to a peaceful bath. Zhang uses our sympathy for Er Ming to overrule Jin Hao's legitimate complaint, a complaint that would complicate the supposedly simple benefits of visiting a communal bath.

On stage at the park, during the public rehearsals, the young singer freezes into silence without the shower to calm him. When the show finally takes place and it is his turn to sing, he stands transfixed and silent in his tuxedo. The crowd begins to boo his silence. It is left to Er Ming to grab a hose (left to water the bushes by the stage) and spray it up on stage, showering the fully-clothed boy and freeing him to belt out *O Sole Mio* one final time in full mediocrity to a standing ovation from the crowd at the cultural event and much silent cheering from the film audience. Even Jin Hao, the bath house critic, stands and applauds as enthusiastically as the rest.

This redemptive shower is typical of how Zhang uses Er Ming throughout the film. It is intended to show how Er Ming's ability to act from his intuitive understanding of traditional bath house values proves the worth of those values. However, it is not clear exactly what those values are. Er Ming showering the boy is an event that demonstrates the community values that we have previously seen in the bath house but what he does is unrepeatable. He has no idea of the context in which he took the action. It was an intuitive move that was fortunate to break only harmless conventions. His next move might be entirely inappropriate and, however well-intended, hurtful. Zhang uses Er Ming's action to make us assume that the traditional shower is good without being able to question that assumption. The decision to forego, in favour of a nostalgic portrayal of Er Ming losing his lifestyle, considerations of their relative worth leaves the value of both tradition and progress moot.

The Contender

Dir: Rod Lurie, 2000

A review by Elizabeth Abele, Temple University, USA

The Contender presents itself as an exposition of modern-day politics, "in the tradition of" *The Candidate* (1972), *All the President's Men* (1976) and *The Seduction of Joe Tynan* (1979). Though these previous films presented complicated portraits of how idealism, ambition, service, cynicism and manipulation merge and become indistinguishable, this film presents caricatures of politicians without redeeming qualities. I would not be as upset by this shallow, rambling film if it did not waste the talents of such a strong cast and end with the pronouncement "FOR OUR DAUGHTERS." The producers and writer/director of this film (all male) have done no favors for contemporary women - let alone for our daughters.

The Contender is the first major feature written and directed by Rod Lurie; his previous political thrillers (*Deterrence*, 1999; *4 Second Delay*, 1998) have been produced for cable and video. *The Contender* revolves around the nomination of a woman, Laine Hansen (Joan Allen), for Vice President and the efforts of various men to bring her down - led by Republican senator Shelly Runyon (Gary Oldman). William L. Peterson plays Governor Jack Hathaway, the candidate coldly pushed aside in favor of the female candidate; wily Democratic President Jackson Evans (Jeff Bridges) sees this nomination as his "legacy." The film's tag line is: "Sometimes you can assassinate a leader without firing a shot." However, the film fails to deliver either the tragedy of a literal or metaphorical "assassination" or the portrait of a "leader" worthy of our support -- or any regret if actually lost.

Promoting a potential female Vice-President - and the indirect potential of a female president - is not the same thing as promoting the potential of women. As Laine Hansen is nominated for vice president, after the sudden death of a Vice President, few of her qualifications are demonstrated besides her looks, her political heritage (governor's daughter) and her gender - no one in the political circle is convinced that Hansen would be nominated if male. The film tries to present itself as feminist, yet gives us few examples of capable, political women. There are no women on the legislative committee, no female presidential staffers-just pretty Laine. The enigmatic female FBI agent (Kathryn Morris) also depends on her looks and feminine charms to unearth the "real" scandal of the film -- a scandal that also objectifies and destroys another woman.

Though Laine's college sexual indiscretions may have little bearing on her qualifications as vice president, her current sexuality - and sexual hypocrisy - may actually be relevant. She testifies that she voted for Bill Clinton's impeachment while she was a registered Republican. She explains that though he may not have been technically guilty, he was responsible. Yet she had an affair with her married campaign manager during her first senatorial campaign. The first time we see Laine Hansen, she is having sex with her husband in her office. Though she may not be "guilty" as an adulterer - because she was single at the time of her affair with the man who was then her employee and husband of her best friend - she may be as "responsible" as Clinton. Later, Laine tells off Senator Runyon that he'd better hope that the

woman who has her finger on the button is getting laid - indirectly perpetuating the stereotype that some strong women "just need to get laid." *The Contender* seems to want to have it all ways: it condemns Clinton, yet insists on Laine's right to privacy, though in the end asserting that she was mostly innocent the whole time.

Gary Oldman, who serves as executive producer, has been quoted as charging Dreamworks with mangling the film to eliminate the nuances of his character - and accusing Dreamworks of deliberately manipulating *The Contender* to be anti-Republican in an election year. Whatever the motives behind these changes, Oldman is correct in his assertion that Runyon is presented as a caricature of a Republican - only interested in abortion and sexuality. Since Oldman brought greater subtlety to his cartoon-villain in *The Fifth Element*, surely he could have made a senator seem human. Since I was embarrassed to see Oldman associated with this role, I am relieved to know that he was as well.

In defense of the partisan charge against Dreamworks, Jeff Bridges' Evans is more arrogant and subtly malicious than Aaron Sorkin's perfect liberal presidents of *The American President* (1995) and *The West Wing* (1999). Evans is a man who thoroughly enjoys his power - demonstrated by his penchant for ordering impossible dishes from the kitchen at a moment's notice - and frankly more concerned with his image than with substance. Laine Hansen is put through the nomination ideal for no real political objective, but only for her symbolic value as the crowning image of Evans' presidency. Everyone in this film, Republican or Democrat, is motivated first by their personal desires and, only at a far second, by what is best for the country.

The generally charismatic Sam Elliott turns in a rather one-note performance as Kermit Newman, the presidential staffer charged with shepherding a nomination of a contender that he never comes to respect. Saul Rubinek's Jerry Tolliver is equally reluctant in service of President Evans and equally uninteresting. The most interesting characters get short shrift. Mrs. Runyon (an actress unidentified in publicity materials) has a brief scene that is the most intimate and revealing of the film. Petersen's Governor Jack Hathaway is a fascinating character, central to the first four scenes of the film. He then mostly disappears until the unlikely ending -- which is telegraphed halfway through the film, without the character exposition that could make it believable. Hathaway's story or the story of Shelly Runyon or story of Jackson Evans or the story of the ambitious freshman Congressman, Reginald Webster (Christian Slater) all seem to have more potential to be interesting than the story of the doe-like Laine Hansen.

The more honestly sensational *Disclosure* (1994) with Demi Moore and Michael Douglas was at least sophisticated enough to present solid, dimensional supporting characters - male and female - as a counterpoint to the more-questionable character of the leads. *The Contender* leaves you with no leader worth cheering for, with little hope of a future worthy of our daughters.

The Other

Dir: Youssef Chahine, 1999

A review by Lina Khatib, University of Leicester, UK

> "Cultural creations are for everybody. It doesn't matter who gives what to whom... We have to transcend having to belong somewhere... I hope the day comes when we stop saying us and them, and instead say we."

This is how Edward Said--as himself--addresses two Arab students at Columbia University in the opening sequence of Youssef Chahine's *The Other* (1999). Said's words seem to underlie the narrative of the film. *The Other* is an ambitious film that aims to be different from mainstream Egyptian films. The story revolves around Adam (Hani Salamah), an upper-class, half-Egyptian, half-American student doing research on Islamic fundamentalist terrorism, and Hanan (Hanan et-Tork), an ordinary journalist whom he falls in love with and marries, to the dismay of his mother, the American businesswoman Margaret (Nabila Ebeid). *The Other* is a melodrama driven by binaries. The innocent love between Adam and Hanan juxtaposes the evil and greed of imperialism on one hand, and fundamentalist fanaticism on the other. The couple's romantic nature of love is in striking opposition to the elements of the artificial, oppressive culture surrounding them.

Chahine obviously intended for *The Other* to be a message against essentialism and intolerance. But as the film moves on, it not only deconstructs Otherness; it also keeps on reconstructing it. This is the contradiction of the film. On the one hand, we have Said's introduction. On the other hand, we are faced with two Others: American imperialism and Islamic fundamentalism. American imperialism is the central Other in the film, portrayed in the money-hungry American business people, led by Margaret, who indulge in a world of fraud. Margaret serves as a classical villain: her unholy alliance with terrorists, her selfishness, artificiality, "immorality" and total immersion in a constructed cyberworld detach us from any identification with her character, and highlight her contrast with Adam and Hanan's ingenuousness. Margaret, moreover, sees the Egyptian people as an Other and is outraged when Adam donates blood to Egyptian victims of an explosion: "why give blood to 'them'?". This is again set off against the film's embrace of anti-essentialism, seen in Adam's declared patriotic "choice" ("I have chosen to be Egyptian"), and thus his rejection of the "America" represented by his mother.

Islamic fundamentalism--the film's marginal Other--is the polar opposite of America, and at the same time its parallel. While differing on the surface, with the fundamentalists' plain living conditions and dress offsetting Margaret's lavish lifestyle and attire, they are similar in their lack of a political agenda. The political actions of both do not seem to go beyond immediate damage. Fundamentalism is embodied by the character Fat'hallah, Hanan's brother, and his partners, who are portrayed as living on the edge of society and yet participating in it fully (though destructively) through the use of the Internet. Fat'hallah and his accomplices are outcasts who evoke an image of Mafiosi in the ghettos cum teenage computer nerds. They are also depicted as America's allies and its tool of destruction, getting their weapons supply from the United States to kill their fellow Egyptians. They use the

United States and it uses them in a rat race for power. Yet both sides backstab each other, consequently causing more destruction and more blood shed. Margaret conspires with Fat'hallah to divorce Hanan from Adam, yet informs the Egyptian government about the hiding place of the fundamentlists, which results in bloodshed, while Fat'hallah actually plans to feign the divorce to get a ticket and visa to the US from Margaret. In this Chahine goes beyond the mere portrayal of fundamentalists as "bad" in their own right; he also uses them as a tool to vilify the United States by demonstrating how it is as disloyal and bloodthirsty as the fundamentalist terrorists. Fundamentalism is contrasted with religious moderation, portrayed in Adam's (a Christian) marriage to Hanan (a Muslim)--a marriage celebrated by all the "good" characters in the film.

The film presents a strong gender axis revolving around the contrast between Margaret and Hanan. Both women serve as classical symbols of the (im)morality of their respective nations/groups. Margaret follows the idiosyncratic character of the devouring mother who swallows up her children while the father is factually or symbolically absent. In *The Other*, Margaret is obsessed with her son and tries her best to be number one in his life, casting on him the "duty" of compensating her for the romance she never had with her husband. That preludes Margaret's latent rejection of Adam's marriage to Hanan, and her consequent endeavors to outdo the multiethnic coupling. The inevitable and classical outcome of this drama is that Margaret ends up destroying her child. Throughout the film, Adam and Hana's anti-essentalism is caught up between the poles of imperialism and fundamentalism. This entrapment is epitomized in the film's tragic ending. In front of Margaret's eyes and amidst a shoot-out between the fundamentalists and the government military troops, the loving couple die holding hands.

Chahine also uses classical icons to underlie the difference between Margaret and Hanan. In the final third of the film, we find out that Margaret is an alcoholic. She is also portrayed as having a derogatory view on other women, whose purpose, in her eyes, is merely for (sexual) pleasure. Margaret's role is ultimately as a symbol of the United States in all its degeneracy. Chahine stresses this symbolism towards the end of the film in a conversation between Margaret and her Egyptian husband. We hear Margaret reminding him that he would be nothing without her, and at the same time, she declares, "who leans on me, I bust him", while throwing her whiskey bottle at a TV set. Using the only distinguished avant-garde technique in the film, the scene is then cut to that of missiles being launched--obviously a sign of destruction. Moreover, Margaret's appearance is that of the "super bitch": lots of make up, jewelry, big hair, sophisticated clothes. Hanan, on the other hand, is a pretty, laid-back woman in youthful casual clothes. She becomes a symbol of liberal (liberated) yet "wholesome" femininity that stands for the moral integrity of the modern/moderate Egypt. Unlike the power-hungry Margaret, she is a friendly, modest, and independent journalist who respects her mother and her family and loves her husband. The contrast between Margaret and Hanan is also that of culture versus nature, where Margaret is the representative of degenerate culture (Internet, alcohol, women as artifice), and Hanan is the symbol of good (Egyptian) nature. This is for example seen in the first few love scenes between Adam and Hanan, where they declare their love in the outdoors and get engaged in the rain.

Chahine introduces ambiguity into clichés about the "good" Egypt through his representation of two less-than-perfect aspects of sexuality. In the second half of the film our attention is drawn to Hanan's diary, where she reveals that she was involved in an incestous relation with her brother when she was fourteen, which has caused him to become a fundamentalist. Fundamentalism is presented in the context of sexual represssion and misplaced guilt (which,

incidentally, Hanan does not seem to suffer from). The second aspect is Margaret's Egyptian husband, who we find out is unfaithful to her, and is partly blamed for her "evil". However, the fact that there is not one "good" American character in the film signals Chahine's failure in transcending stereotypes. He might have shown us an imperfect image of Egypt, but his presentation of the United States as all evil is an East/West dichotomy in reverse, with the East this time viewing the West as an Other. This is in addition to the film's reliance on classical binaries: good/evil, us/them, culture/nature. Thus, Said's introductory words become ironic. By letting everybody fit into their expected place, the film not only undoes but actually strengthens the notion of Otherness.

The Other's melodrama, acting style, and representation of the rich as being corrupt as opposed to the lower/middle class being "good" correspond with those of many other mainstream Egyptian films. However, *The Other*'s sexual politics are extraordinarily different in their tolerance towards issues such as incest. The general trend in mainstream Egyptian cinema is for incest to be condemned with no exception (for example, *Execution of a Dead Man*). *The Other* is also different in the way it naturalizes pre-marital sex (between Adam and Hanan), as premarital sex is commonly used as a symbol of immorality in Egyptian films (for example, *Girl from Israel*, *Birds of Darkness*, *Execution of a Dead Man*). Another difference follows from Chahine's distinctive blend of different ethnicities and religions (as seen in his previous films such as *Saladin*,1963; *Alexandria Why?*,1978; *Egyptian Story*,1982; *The Emigrant*, 1994; and *Destiny*,1997) -- something rarely seen in mainstream Egyptian cinema, where the vast majority of characters are Egyptian Muslims. *The Other* therefore pushes beyond and, at the same time, reaffirms Egyptian cinematic conventions.

Chahine has obviously intended for this film to carry a strong patriotic spirit, as many of his films do (see, for example, *Egyptian Story*). The film's anti-fundamentalism message is also one of Chahine's defining themes, introduced after his 1994 film *The Emigrant* was opposed by fundamentalists who thought it was blasphemous. In 1997 Chahine directed *Destiny*--a representation of Chahine's own struggle with Islamic fundamentalists in a historical epic about freedom of speech in the twelfth century. Thus, *The Other* can be seen as one more in a long list of personal films in which Chahine reveals to the audience yet another element of himself.