Beau Travail

Dir: Claire Denis, 1999

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

Beau Travail, French director Claire Denis's ninth film, is perhaps her most poetic and her most enigmatic. The story of French legionnaires in the east African enclave of Djibouti, the film is inspired by Herman Melville's 1891 novella, *Billy Budd*, a fact made evident by similarities in plot and by the inclusion of music from Benjamin Britten's opera of the same name. Told in flashback, the film recounts the experiences of one Sergeant Galoup (Michel Subor), a former legionnaire living in Marseille, and his encounter with the mysterious Sentain (Grégoire Colin), who plays the incarnation of the Billy Budd character in the film. Caught between the two men in Denis' version is the commander of the legionnaires post, Forrestier (Denis Lavant). It is Forrestier who provides the source of much of the tension between Galoup and Sentain in the film, as Galoup feels himself to be replaced in the commander's graces by the young, handsome Sentain.

Melville's *Billy Budd* is the story of a young seaman, embodying good, who is falsely accused of mutiny by a jealous superior. Struck dumb by the accusation, Billy Budd strikes his accuser and accidentally kills him. Left with no choice but to convict Billy Budd, despite his own belief in Billy Budd's innocence, the captain of the ship finds him guilty and has Billy hanged. A tale of the struggle between good and evil, Melville's version has a strongly Christian subtext, and the character of Billy Budd, who sacrifices himself in the struggle against evil, becomes a Christ-like figure.

Denis's film maintains the atmosphere of struggle and tension found in Melville's text, and it presents Galoup and Sentain as the embodiment of evil and good, respectively. Galoup is portrayed as a cruel and domineering character, who is clearly jealous of Sentain; Sentain is almost pure, admired and loved by his fellow legionnaires. His defining act in the film is the rescue of his comrades during a helicopter crash. In contrast, Galoup's defining act is the senseless sacrifice of Sentainan - an act motivated by jealousy and hatred. However, despite these similarities, Denis makes several important changes in her film. First of all, she alters the plot of the story such that Sentain strikes Galoup, but does so in defense of a fellow soldier, who is sentenced to an overly cruel punishment for abandoning his post. Additionally, it is Galoup who condemns Sentain, and not the commandant. The result is that Galoup remains alive, and it is he, not the commandant, who meditates on the meaning of his actions and those of Sentain. This change renders the film more ambiguous, as it is not a neutral third party who is left to decipher the meaning of the struggle between good and evil, but rather the evildoer himself. Ultimately, the film presents Galoup as someone attempting to understand and come to terms with his own crimes, and to redefine his place in the world in their aftermath.

Furthermore, Denis changes the setting from a British naval ship to a French Foreign Legion post in a former French colony in Africa. To anyone familiar with Denis, this shift can not be

seen as accidental, since the French (post)colonial relationship with Africa is a dominant theme in her work. The shift to Africa, in and of itself, begs a reading of the film in terms of France's relationship to its colonial past. Furthermore, the theme of the past is ever present in the film, as it is told through flashback - a muddled flashback, in which it is often difficult to distinguish the true sequence of events. Finally, the Foreign Legion is, itself, perhaps the most visible symbol of France's former empire. Read in the context of the relationship of France to its colonial past, Galoup becomes, not simply a man struggling with his past, his present and his place in the world, but rather the nation of France itself. He comes to embody, in many ways, the inability of France to let go of its colonial past, to make sense of it, to come to terms with the ills of that past, and to find its place in a post-colonial present. Wandering around Marseille - the primary port of France's colonial exploits in the heyday of Empire - Galoup becomes, like his country, a figure lost in the haze of memory, almost unable to move beyond.

In fact, the film suggests that it is precisely because of his sacrifice of Sentain that Galoup remains trapped in the past. In the film, Sentain is a very ambiguous character, neither clearly French, nor clearly African. He is the one figure able to communicate with all of the different members of the troop of legionnaires. The film presents him as some fundamental link that holds all of the men and their actions together, and it is with his death that all falls apart. In a post-colonial context, Sentain, with his ambiguous origins, is a mediating force between France's colonial past and its present. When he dies, so too does any hope for a move beyond the past. Therefore, it is precisely because he has killed Sentain that Galoup remains unable to move forward, and that the nation he represents is equally unable to do so.

A post-colonial reading of the film is sustained by other details Denis includes. The commandant, Forrestier, is also paralyzed, haunted by his past - a past that includes a stint in the Algerian war for independence. He, like Galoup, is scarred by the loss of the Empire, and unable to move beyond it. Also striking is the constant attention of the camera on the manoeuvers and activities of the legionnaires. They exercise, practice, observe, prepare, but it becomes abundantly clear that they are preparing for nothing, for something that will not come, because their mission no longer exists. The men of the legion are, in the film, beautiful but useless tokens of former glory. Their actions are intricate, almost artistic repetitions of exercises that no longer have a meaning. Seeing these exercises over and over, it becomes obvious to any one watching the film that the legionnaires, like Galoup, and perhaps like France itself, have no purpose in Africa.

Finally, the inability to reckon with the past, to come to terms with it and move on is suggested in one of the other changes Denis makes to her version of the story. Time and time again in the film, the viewer is reminded that all of the action takes place at Ramadan. On several occasions, the camera focuses on those African members of the legion who are separated from the others, fasting in observance of Ramadan. Furthermore, the soldier defended by Sentain--an African--had abandoned his post to pray and observe Ramadan. This shift from a Christian to a Muslim religious subtext could be read as a simple factor of the transplantation of the film to Africa, and this could be the case, were it not for the significance of Ramadan itself. A time of atonement, the holiday signals a coming to terms with the past, with the crimes of the past and a preparing for the future (it is believed that the coming year is determined at Ramadan). Galoup, as a person, is completely isolated from this holiday; and he is, therefore, unable to atone for his past and move in the future. Galoup, as a representative of France, embodies what the film presents as that nation's inability to do the same.

A complex, highly choreographed, and nearly silent film, *Beau Travail*, can also be read as a meditation on masculinity, as so many of Denis's films are. The emphasis on the men's bodies, on their physicality, on their camaraderie, bears out such a reading. However, the same focus on the brute animality of the actions of the soldiers - dictated to them by their function as legionnaires - on their inability to communicate either with one another or with the local population, suggests that the film is much more than that. It might be argued that the ambiguity that permeates the film is symptomatic of what Denis is trying to present: the inability of France to make sense of its own actions translates necessarily into the film's inability to make sense of them. And in the end, the film returns to the idea of a man and a nation trapped in a perpetual past, as the camera focuses on the image of Galoup, returned to Djibouti, dancing alone in a club where he used to go with his fellow legionnaires. The steps and moves to his dance are comprised of the combat moves repeated over and over in the film by the legionnaires - a reminder of the endless repetition of the actions of the past, actions now completely devoid of context.

China Gate

Dir: Rajkumar Santoshi, 1998

A review by Andrew Grossman, Rutgers University, New Jersey, USA

Before the opening credits roll for producer-director Rajkumar Santoshi's ambitiously produced Hindi adventure *China Gate* (1998), an on-screen title portentuously informs us that the film is a "humble tribute to the late Akira Kurosawa." Judging by the international influence Kurosawa has exerted on action genres in the past half-century, we can comfortably assume this will be another remake of either the sincere *The Seven Samurai* (1954) or its satirical counterpoint, *Yojimbo* (1961). Luckily - since even gutter-balls like *Death Wish 4* (1987) turn out to be unacknowledged rehashes of *Yojimbo* - *China Gate*'s model is *Seven Samurai*; only this time there are eleven and not seven valiant heroes to deliver helpless villagers from a marauding bandit's reign of terror. As such, *China Gate* may be that rare Bollywood extravaganza that can be evaluated not just as a generic *masala*, but as a film situated within the transnational arena of artistic influence and canonical film education.

Om Puri, the veteran actor who has occasionally graced Western productions such as Ismael Merchant's *In Custody* (1993) and Damien O'Donnell's *East is East* (1999), leads an ensemble cast in what is at root a story of personal redemption. Unlike John Sturges's altruistic "Magnificent Seven" - rogue capitalists who fight for spare change during hard times - the ex-professional soldiers in *China Gate* strive primarily to redeem their classist military ranks, stripped away seventeen years earlier when they cravenly refused to participate in "Mission China Gate." In fact, Om Puri does not even shed a tear when a poor village girl pleads with him to vanquish the bandit leader who terrorizes her town and who decapitated her father in slow-motion. Only when blue-tinted flashbacks of his dishonorable discharge haunt him sufficiently does he convene his former fellows and head into cathartic battle. Indeed, when the villains have been vanquished, the final award-pinning ceremony privileges the honor of the heroes, while the poor villagers, not honorable in themselves, ogle them in wonderment. In Kurosawa and even Sturges, the desperate heroes are destitute and willing to work selflessly, if only for once in their lifetimes. In *China Gate*, the outcasted heroes instead fight to reclaim elitist social honor that the heroes of Kurasawa and Sturges know is neither recoverable nor desirable. In fact, the heroes of *China Gate* are so uninterested in the $10 million bounty on the bandit leader's head that in the end they donate it to the villagers so that they can build new schools - whereas Sturges' "Seven" merely impart gems of moral wisdom. This sort of paternalism, common in Bollywood, becomes quite literal when one of the heroes adopts a poor village girl whose father forces her to sell toys to support his alcoholism. The inclusion of such an unregeneratedly bathetic ploy does nothing to suggest that the village is morally competent to begin with - why doesn't one of the other townspeople adopt her? Most importantly, though, Rajkumar Santoshi has reversed the model of the excommunicated, anti-nationalist outlaw hero, whether Japanese *ronin* or fatalist American gunfighter. *China Gate*'s heroes don't want to be expatriate martyrs - they desperately want back into a hegemony which is *above* them, not below them.

Whereas in Kurosawa's film the samurai have been excommunicated from the feudal system and are thus not responsible for its abuses, in *China Gate* abuses of the law are reduced to one bad apple, the local police chief who turns out to be the bandit leader's cousin. Unlike the villains of family-value Hollywood, who are often asocial loners, it is common in Bollywood films for villainy to be represented by whole clans, operating both inside and outside of the law. But even then, it is usually only the local police captain who is illegally fattened on bribes and kickbacks, while the caste system itself remains beyond reproach. This conveniently supposes that corruption is somehow bred not by absolute power but by crude, limited power - the narcissism of middle-management. In the end, we must have faith in the nationalist system: we must always seek justice from a higher authority, be it God, valiant heroes, or the demi-god movie stars who impersonate them.

China Gate's thematic and narrative model may be Kurosawa, but its stylistic model is obviously Ramesh Sippy's 1975 Hindi action classic *Sholay* (itself influenced by Hollywood Westerns), the film generally acknowledged to have introduced contemporary action scenes into the Bollywood mix. Certainly, *China Gate*'s connection to *Sholay* is obvious enough, right down to the rocky settings and male bonding motifs that would make Howard Hawks blush. When first released in India, *China Gate* was in fact criticized for being too derivative of *Sholay*. But what makes *China Gate* refreshingly different from all its models is that its heroes are not merely embittered professionals but an endearingly over-the-hill bunch of losers who barely remember how to use a gun. They further represent an array of comic typologies - the drunkard, the coward, the bully, the young, wannabe hero who must prove his mettle - each with their own personal demons to confront, from racism to blood cancer to disgraceful fathers.

Kurosawa's masterless samurai seem to have presented little difficulty for non-Japanese filmmakers intent on using them as a model. The *ronin*'s heroism is universally translatable into the headstrong action conventions of other cultures, and, although his sociopolitical status is derived from Japanese feudalism, the class system of which the *ronin* is a product can find its rough equivalent in the lopsided economies of most agrarian societies. Thus, the hired protectors of Sammo Hung's *Seven Warriors* (1989) and Sturges's *Magnificent Seven* (1960) easily function as *ad hoc* samurai outside of the Japanese system of patriarchal lordship, though the *Magnificent Seven*'s Mexican locale suggests that American farmers are presumably not servile enough to meet the Samurai formula's paternalistic needs.

The real theme of Kurosawa's ostensibly democratic film is that the samurais' content and form are divisible from one another. The murderous violence of the *ronin*, at once swaggering and chaste, can supposedly be neatly separated from the feudal form which birthed it, as if the "nobility" of that violence can be successfully filtered from its ignoble source. Without lords, the *ronin* are no longer responsible for the abuses of the class system from which they were ejected and which they now reject; nevertheless, they still embody the superhuman martial spirit (the content) that has itself perpetuated a sadistic status quo whose attractiveness goes unquestioned. Thus, martiality remains noble in the abstract, and, through some vague notion of post-MacArthur egalitarianism, is transmuted into a greater nobility when climactically mimicked by demotic peasants as it is in *Seven Samurai* and its numerous spin-offs. Martiality is only bad when corrupted by political hierarchies and the samurai's feudalistic self-abasement (the form in which the servile samurai is trapped), a masochistic ideology that is suppressed by the paternalistically imported idea of postwar American individualism. This naive scenario, in which individual perpetrators of violence can be divided from the political forms that created them, assumes that the "noble" values we assign

to heroic violence are not first products of a centralized authoritarianism which imposes ideas of nobility and iconic heroism in the first place.

The criticism that such a separation of form and content is impossible, with its logical consequences that the martial spirit is noble only in fictions and that militarism (whether feudal or fascist) and servility go inseparably hand in hand, had lent fuel to the arguments of Japanese new wave directors such as Oshima, who openly loathed Kurosawa. They excoriated their elders for paradoxically romanticizing feudalism's heroic and decorative trappings while ostensibly trying to critique the old system. For example, Mizoguchi's *Life of Oharu* (1952) would be blasted for imprisoning its alleged feminism within regressive pictorial beauty and Inagaki's overproduced "classic" *Chushingura* was in 1962 seen as hopelessly conservative, an anachronism pandering to Western tastes for oriental prettiness. To be fair to Kurosawa, though, his *Seven Samurai* does break with the classical *47 Ronin/Chushingura* tradition, in which the masterless samurais' devotion results not merely in patriarchal servility but in a suicide that cannot be seen as even masochistic because the *ronin* do not even believe in the concept of self. Yet it is indeed ironic that the seven samurai, though critics of feudal norms, reproduce through their roles as saviors another, albeit less codified, form of paternalism. Furthermore, though the seven samurai are nihilists and not feudalists, the formal, cinematic value of their cool nihilism becomes yet another sign of authoritarianism, yet another false ideal to be worshipped by audiences in the real world.

It should barely be surprising that Rajkumar Santoshi's *China Gate* is even more politically conservative than its Japanese model. India, hardly economically liberated or forcibly "MacArthurized" like Japan, still labors under its old caste system long after British colonial rule. While the Bollywood formula usually pays lip service to ideals of post-colonial democracy, the simple fact that its populist products are squarely marketed towards the lower-classes (and not upper-caste, English-speaking Indians) reinforces provincial caste dynamics through demographic elitism. Meanwhile, the *express* politics of recent mainstream Bollywood fare seem focused on either emotionalist examinations of topical surface issues, such as the psychologies of terrorism represented in Mani Ratnam's *Dil Se* (1997) and Gulzar's slightly overrated *Macchis* (1998), or on the pulpy, breast-beating propaganda best exemplified by J.P. Dutta's award-winning, uncomfortably nationalistic *Border* (1997), a dramatization of the 1971 Indo-Pakistani border war whose every line of dialog seems to praise India's soaring mountains or lament her blood-soaked soil. It generally seems gratuitous to scrutinize an immobile class system which is taken for granted anyway. Often, class issues in Bollywood melodramas are skirted by being so deeply embedded in the conventions of genre - poor, pure heroes versus rich, land-grabbing villains - that serious examinations of class are shunted aside in favor of textual pleas for improbable populist democracies, usually represented by uplifting scenes in which the *hoi polloi* miraculously and unanimously proclaim autonomous rule of local governments when the local despot has been slain. Amitabh Bachchan, India's number-one box office star, has even said in interviews that it is unrealistic, if not downright Eurocentric, to expect Bollywood films to deliver anything but the most conventionally uplifting entertainments to the illiterate masses. The paternalism inherent in *China Gate*'s "Seven Samurai Formula" thus becomes mirrored in the quasi-religious hero worship that audiences have for legendary actors such as Amitabh or *China Gate*'s Om Puri. Still, this is not the hypocritical way that *all* conventionalized *masala* films must simply be. For example, the Amitabh Bachchan come-back film *Lal Baadshah* (1999) parodies and self-parodies Amitabh's classic persona as paternal savior, even though the parody admittedly offers no real alternative to hero worship and the film was a flop.

Ultimately, Kurosawa's seven samurai cannot really subvert the social order or anything else. Their fight is a symbolic gesture of desperate selflessness that redeems them only in *our* extradiegetic eyes - the worshipful gaze of the audience - for they know it is impossible to assert selfhood in their diegetic culture of self-denial. Similarly, the fatalistic Western (anti-)hero can only resist the inevitabilities of history without subverting them, as he must move aside to make way for progress and order, as in Ford's *The Searchers* (1956), Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1969), and so forth. But there is no such chance for progress in the pre-Revolutionary Mexico of *The Magnificent Seven*, and that film's invitation to identify with the "civilized" Mexican peasants is entirely hypocritical. In Sturges's *Seven*, the Western genre's standard dichotomy of prehistoric violence (as represented by the outlaw hero) versus modern democratic civilization becomes deferred by having the locale move to non-democratic Mexico. Sturges's peasants are weak simpletons whose greatest triumph is the upholding of conservative agrarian values, and we are asked to believe that tilling is the nobler profession while the previous two hours of the film have been spent glamorizing the gunfighter.

While one is tempted to defend Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* against this charge by pointing out the director's attention to the detailed characterization of peasantry, *China Gate* tends towards the Sturges method and is, in fact, far worse. The poor villagers of *The Magnificent Seven* have about as much economic hope before the Mexican Revolution as the villagers of *China Gate* have after Independence. There are only three or four total (and hackneyed) sequences with *China*'s villagers. They are portrayed as scurrying through ineffective town-council meetings, complaining to the heroes that they really just want to live like peaceful sheep and learning how to use slingshots and rifles while jolly extradiegetic music mocks their incompetence. This hypocrisy is what has always bothered me about the Seven Samurai Formula: a perfunctory gesture must be made towards espousing egalitarian values, but, when you get down to it, the film's real action is hardly egalitarian. During *China*'s grand finale, there are but one or two cursory shots of the supposedly now well-trained villagers participating in combat. The real fighting is handled by the professional soldiers anyway - in *China Gate* it is the military pride of the hired soldiers that is primarily at stake - so the villagers' training amounts to little more than a childish self-esteem workshop. Without the latent nihilism of Kurosawa and without the democratic hope of the traditional American Western (which is deferred to a Mexican nonexistence in Sturges), the only hope *China Gate*'s villagers have is to be the very best and most economically dependent villagers they can be. In fact, the imported, "MacArthurized" paternalism of *China Gate*'s heroes, who establish schools and local direct democracy where only dictatorship existed before, renders this film actually less populist than the standard *masala*, which supposes that paternalism is only a necessary means to an end but not an end unto itself. Usually, the *hoi polloi* only need to be pointed in the right direction before they (finally) act. As examples of this depiction, we can think of the onlooking masses of Vikram Bhatt's *Ghulam* (1998) rising up in spontaneous liberation to defeat the villain's henchmen after the hero has demonstrated the meaning of courage, or the cast of thousands in Abbas-Mustan's *Agneekaal* (1989) literally crushing wrongdoers beneath their populist weight when the mortally wounded heroine reveals over a microphone who has been responsible for misdeeds. Though director Rajkumar Santoshi has chosen a Westernized (albeit nationally Japanese) filmic model that at least minimally supposes democracy in its attempts to humanize peasantry, the villagers of *China Gate* realize neither the populism of Bollywood nor the MacArthurized democracy of Kurosawa. These villagers, who demonstrate less political competence than Sturges's and Kurosawa's peasants, do not desire from their saviors the tools of autonomy, but only subsidies to build new schools - gentle, knowing paternalism instead of the uplifting fantasies of spontaneous

self-rule advanced by a *Ghulam* or *Agneekaal* or thousand other potboilers. Perhaps this is one aspect of the postwar Samurai formula that does not easily translate into India's immobile caste system, which demands that visions of (localized) democracy should be kept as fantastic as possible. Thus, *China Gate* is caught between its international model and indigenous populist traditions, and fully fulfills the democratic promise of neither.

Interestingly, Sammo Hung's ultraviolent *Seven Warriors* is the least hypocritical in this regard, perhaps because it is also the least ambitious, with wormlike peasants, godlike heroes, and absolutely no delusions of egalitarianism or lip service to salt-of-the earth work ethics. When the foolhardy, impractical villagers are efficiently raked down by machine-guns in the climax of Hung's enjoyably one-dimensional film, there is little doubt as to who the real heroes are, and no burden upon the audience to rationalize the orgasm of violent spectacle in terms of lame allegories of democracy. The peasants of Hung's film are most successful when they simply and weakly observe the action. Likewise, members of the cinema audience, who probably have more in common with peasants than heroes regardless of what country they live in, are simultaneously invited to the action and then reminded that they will ultimately be watchers and not doers anyway - indeed, we "modern peasants" can only hope to be impotent spectators and not godlike artists.

Despite these exhaustive reservations - which I think require no nods to cultural relativism because the film voluntarily places itself in the arena of transnational world cinema - I thoroughly enjoy *China Gate*. In Bollywood's recent climate, where the robust action set-piece, once the mainstay of the *masala*, has been reduced to a few obligatory nods towards excitement in the final reels, *China Gate* is a violent breath of fresh air, a lustily old-fashioned adventure we rarely see today from any country. It may indeed be true that classier action films such as Ramgopal Varma's *Scarface* variation *Satya* (1998) may now be winning favor in the wake of a backlash against the 1990's trends towards sappy romances and straight musicals, such as Subhash Ghal's *Taal* (1999). However, the more violent action films, such as Rakesh Roshan's marvelously gaudy *Koyla* (1997) and Mazhar Khan's mob saga *Gang* (1999), have failed both critically and commercially. At well over three hours, *China Gate*'s first act is distended and discursive in its exposition, as is common with Bollywood vehicles, which often need to pad their running times to flesh out a full-evening's entertainment. But once the action kicks in, it is hugely enjoyable, with only one song-and-dance sequence to get in the way of the bloodletting. In fact, the film was originally intended to be without songs - a bold step for a mainstream production - but Urmila Matondkar's splashy and subsequently popular "Chamma Chamma" was inserted to guarantee a larger box office. The fight scenes, very plentiful in the second half, are neither of the under-edited Hollywood variety nor the over-edited Hong Kong variety. They are earthy, brimming with bravado, brilliantly blocked, technically sophisticated yet charmingly old-fashioned in spirit, making intelligent use of the long shot and judicious, never-gratuitous use of slow motion. Certainly, the film is leagues ahead of Rajkumar Santoshi's previous *Ghatak* (1996), a sluggish, sentimental *masala* about a father and son who, according to formula, also deliver poor townspeople from a local potentate. *China Gate*, reportedly the most expensive production made yet in India, also features truly astounding horse stunts, many apparently accomplished with sophisticated wirework.

Producing nearly 1000 films annually in multiple languages, India is thrice as productive as Hollywood, yet its films are less penetrable to outsiders than those of other continentally Asian cinemas. Unlike Hong Kong films, Indian films are generally not equipped with the English subtitles that facilitate Western consumption - though with the DVD revolution that

is finally changing - and unlike Japanese films, Indian cinema has no long-standing history of appreciation in the West, excepting a few obvious *auteurs* such as Mrinal Sen and Satyajit Ray. With this in mind, a "transnationalized" Hindi production such as *China Gate* is probably as user-friendly an introduction to popular Indian cinema as one could wish for, even if one cannot entirely forgive some generic political hypocrisies that know no national boundaries.

Chopper

Dir: Andrew Dominik, 2000

A review by Kate Egan, The University of Nottingham, UK

Chopper opens with the assertion that although the film is based on a true story, not all the events in the film actually took place. However, this assertion is truly in the spirit of the film's memorable main character, Mark Brandon "Chopper" Read, a man who, in his own words, will not let "the truth get in the way of a good yarn".

The real-life "Chopper" Read has risen to the status of cult legend in his native Australia and, in his best-selling novel, claims that he has killed a large number of people. However, both the director and the film revel in the notion that Chopper is a consummate storyteller who uses his tales of multiple killing sprees to increase his notoriety and, in turn, his celebrity.

The film opens with a sequence, set in the present, where Chopper watches a television interview of himself. As a caption introduces us to this scarred and ferocious-looking man, he is shown intently observing, and gaining delight from, his television persona. It is clear, from this opening sequence, that this television persona is far removed from the man that sits watching in the prison and indicates that this character is in some ways two separate entities that exist in the same body. The pleasure shown in Chopper's eyes as he watches himself indicates that, not only is this character incredibly charismatic and witty, but also far from straightforward.

The film takes us from the walls of a Melbourne prison in the late seventies, where Chopper has been incarcerated for kidnapping a judge, to his eventual release into a garish, frightening Melbourne, populated with sleazy neon bars and blood-red brothels, and then back, once more, to prison in the mid 1990's. In the process the director, Andrew Dominik, lets us explore the true depths, and complexities, of a modern anti-hero. Chopper prowls around in a contemporary Australian version of hell so brash and vivid, that it makes the white-washed walls of his Melbourne prison seem to be a haven of safety and familiarity (and this is perhaps why two different cinematographers were used - one for the prison sequences and one for the "outside world").

Dominik's background in advertising and pop videos could give the impression that *Chopper* is part of a modern tradition of slick, visceral gangster flicks (exemplified by the recent spate of British films in this vein). Yet, although the film is a visual treat, where lighting and set design combine to create the other-wordly environs of both the prison and the world outside, it is the film's moments of comedy, combined with the film's sheer refusal to pass moral judgement on the character, that make *Chopper* a distinctive entry into the "serial killer" oeuvre. Indeed, it is notable, and telling, that Eric Bana, a highly successful Australian stand-up comedian, is cast in the film's leading role, and that, arguably, for an Australian audience, Bana's status could alter, or complicate, how "Chopper" Read is perceived and presented within the film.

Like all the best cinematic anti-heroes (from Razzo Rizzo to Travis Bickle), Chopper is shown to be a weak and insecure figure. His paranoia and need for attention combine to create the persona that is shown on the TV screen at the beginning of the film, yet his moments of violent outburst are diluted by his immediate regret for what he's done. In the final climactic shoot-out, Chopper kills for no greater reason than insecurity and the fear that there are those who are "out to get him", yet he immediately, and comically, apologises to his victim, and, in another incident, drives a victim to hospital after he has shot him.

Yet, despite the film's obvious humanity and comedy, it is the film's construction of two contrasting heightened "other-wordly" environments that upgrades *Chopper* from a gritty, "real" account of prisons and modern crime (along the lines of the British film *Scum*, 1979), to a more allegorical, and psychological, tale of a modern anti-hero. The film, frequently, does not present events as they "supposedly happened" (in a realist sense) but plays with the facts presenting certain incidents in certain ways, depending on how Chopper interprets them. The most striking example of this is the scene where Chopper kills a potential enemy of his, Sammy the Turk. The scene is first played out as it appeared "to have happened", then is shown again in a modified form, constructed around Chopper's interpretation of the event, and, finally, is shown in a "nursery rhyme" form, where characters are shown turning to the camera and reciting couplets about their role in the event. By this stage, the killing has become meaningless and comic, and has lost its ability to shock. Indeed, it is the introduction of comedy in all of Chopper's murders or attacks that seems to dispel any sense of shock at what has happened, and suggests that the film is seeking to distance the audience from any moral condemnation, or sense of disgust, at what the character has done.

Yet, it is the fact that the film is clearly fascinated, and structured, by Chopper's ability to tell stories that underpins the film's seeming refusal to present its character as either resolutely "bad" or "good". In some ways, Chopper is shown to be a character who reaches almost tragic proportions, and the key example of this is when he is unceremoniously stabbed by his best friend, Jimmy, with the scene changing from comic absurdity (as Chopper calmly deals with his stab-wounds) to high emotion (as Chopper embraces his friend and reacts to his betrayal). In scenes such as this, the film seems to encourage us to engage with the character and identify with his pain and rage. Yet, at other moments, Chopper is seen to react to events in a bizarre, and hugely self-destructive, fashion - cutting off his ears to be annexed from prison, and engaging in moments of paranoia and sudden bouts of unprovoked rage.

In many respects, it appears that the film is suggesting that Chopper can be whatever he, or anyone else, wants him to be, and, for this reason, it appears important that the film is framed around a television interview, where Chopper is presented as a self-styled media figure, with a million stories to tell. Embracing the filmic tradition of charismatic anti-heroes, exemplified by *Taxi Driver*'s Travis Bickle, and linking this back to a public, and media-prompted, fascination with the cult-figure of the criminal or serial killer, *Chopper* is a film which discards attempts to represent the "real" in favour of a tongue-in-cheek exploration of the image and persona of a complex mind, and its changing, and contrasting, media representation.

Hollow Man

Dir: Paul Verhoeven, 2000

A review by Marlon Kuzmick, Cornell University, USA

For Hollywood cinema, the problem of invisibility has never been merely one problem among others. From James Whale's 1933 adaptation of H. G. Wells's novel to Paul Verhoeven's new *Hollow Man*, the steady stream of "Invisible Men" in mainstream film bears witness to the marketability of this topos. I would argue that this trend's conditions of possibility are no doubt rooted in film's constitutive relations to vision and visibility. This structure would give us two ways of understanding the phenomenon of Invisible Man-films that operate on either side of the spectacle/narrative opposition: 1) the spectacle of the "Invisible Man" offers a unique form of visual pleasure (i.e. something not provided by Invisible Men in print) and 2) the Invisible Man (as voyeur) provides a site for metaphorically examining problems related to the cinema and the viewer.

Given his title's reference to T. S. Eliot, one might expect Verhoeven to provide us with a critically self-aware and self-reflexive examination of cinema and spectatorship in *Hollow Man*. Sadly, while there are a couple of moments that gesture towards the possibility of insight, reading the whole film as a meditation on scopophilia would require the strongest of what Bloom would term "strong misreadings". As he is about to inject himself with the invisibility serum, Sebastian Caine (Kevin Bacon) says, tellingly, "If I die, tell them I said something really profound". This summarizes the attitude of the film: in its rush towards its special effects money-shots, it rides roughshod over every one of its (very few) moments of intelligence. The intellectual level of the film is most clearly signalled by Sebastian's rather vulgar joke about Superman, the Invisible Man, and Wonder Woman which many will remember from early adolescence - this joke prepares the way for the puerile phantasies to come. So, although we are treated to some fantastic images, the film as a whole doesn't ever rise above the prosaic. The technology of visual effects that lies behind a big-budget Hollywood film like *Hollow Man* is truly awe-inspiring; but, to borrow from Eliot's poem, something terrible goes wrong "Between the conception and the creation … Between the desire and the spasm … Between the potency and the existence".

The plot is in keeping with all the necessities of the "experiment-gone-wrong" genre. Kevin Bacon plays Sebastian Caine, the hubristic genius (to make sure we get the point, Bacon refers to himself as "God" on occasion) in charge of a top secret government research team. As the film opens, Bacon is ironing out the final flaws in his research while intermittently walking to the window to spy on a supermodel neighbour (Rhona Mitra) who conveniently undresses with all her lights on. Just as she is about to take off her bra, she quickly shuts her blinds. The reaction shot depicts a frustrated Sebastian muttering "dammit!". This moment is clearly intended to make Verhoeven's ideal spectators (probably 13-25 year old males) feel their complicity with Sebastian's voyeurism. Once Sebastian becomes invisible, he and the audience get to see "everything." *To see without being seen* is no doubt the ultimate scopophiliac phantasy, but it is also the essence of film-viewing. Sebastian watches women use the toilet; he sucks the nipples of sleeping women; he returns to his neighbour's apartment

to see what he was denied earlier in the film (the film seems to suggest that he rapes her, though we aren't absolutely sure).

Like other films in its genre, *Hollow Man* must negotiate a shift in focalization midway through the narrative: the first half of the film is presented from Sebastian's point of view, while the second half is focalized through his victims (his ex-girlfriend [Elizabeth Shue] in particular). This transition is handled clumsily, and it is certainly the point where the film's foreclosure of intelligent narrative options becomes most evident. The invisible Sebastian grows increasingly psychotic, but the reasons for this aren't explored sufficiently. To be fair, the film offers some intriguing possibilities, but it doesn't do very much with them. Sebastian's eyelids are transparent, so *he can't ever stop looking*; though this demands to be explored and allegorized, it isn't. Sebastian can no longer see his own body, but this fact isn't explored other than to facilitate the wisecrack, "it's amazing what you can do when you don't have to look at yourself in the mirror anymore".

Once our rooting interest has shifted to Shue's character, the film becomes a run-of-the-mill horror film with cookie-cutter suspense sequences. Sebastian stalks his victims and brutally kills them. I was left playing the game of simplistic symbolic-equation, trying to read Sebastian's grossly gratuitous bludgeoning of the women as an accidental allegory of the violence of the male gaze (it provided a few moments of relief).

All we are left with at the end of this two hour ordeal is the spectacle provided by the visual effects. And while it is no doubt necessary to critique the film's narrative elements, we must also attempt the more complicated task of interpreting the ways in which it makes use of the new digital-effects technology. Indeed, it is *painfully* obvious that the lion's share of the intelligence behind this picture has gone into the effects.

Hollow Man, like last year's far superior film, *The Matrix*, uses digital film-making technology to explore new (or at least extreme) modalities of visual pleasure. If *The Matrix* grants us complete mastery over the object by allowing us to visually "swallow" it - for what are the 360 degree high-speed orbiting shots of frozen/slow-motion objects if not a way of visually surrounding the object that asymptotically approaches a sort of mastering introjection - *Hollow Man* grants us the mastery that comes from digestion. The subjects of the invisibility process don't "fade out" as one might expect; instead, their skin goes first, then their muscles and organs, then their bones. Verhoeven is intent on reproducing the skinless plastic models found in the corners of the high-school biology labs. At other points in the film, heat sensitive cameras are used, again showing us what's *inside* the body. In place of *The Matrix*'s fascination with surfaces (muscles, leather, latex), *Hollow Man* displays an unsettlingly violent fascination with a gaze that is capable of *penetration*. Strangely, the film that investigates voyeurism is *less* interested in visible phenomena. Or, to be more accurate, this film about making the visible invisible is paradoxically most interested in making the invisible visible.

But for all its attempts to shock us, *Hollow Man* proves to be a shockingly boring film. In fact, it's really an open question whether or not Verhoeven has actually created something deserving the designation of "film" by dragging effects sequences through this series of banal suspense-cliches.

Nurse Betty

Dir: Neil LaBute, 2000

A review by Jacob R. Smith, Texas A & M University, College Station, USA

One of the most treasured qualities of cinema is the guilty laugh. From films like Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) to more recent films like *Fight Club* (1999), the guilty laugh is a mainstay of almost any dark comedy. With *In the Company of Men* (1997) and *Your Friends and Neighbors* (1998) - his first two features - director Neil LaBute proved himself an expert at the guilty laugh. These two films pulled the viewer in by the lapels and effectively said, "I am going to make you laugh, you are going to hate yourself for it, but in the end you will like the film because it has important ideas behind it."

Nurse Betty lacks such dark aspirations. The plot centers around the title character Betty (Renée Zellweger), a waitress in a small Kansas town who shows more interest in her daily soap opera than a customer's coffee. She is infatuated with the lead character on the soap, the heart surgeon Dr. David Ravell (Greg Kinnear). When assassins Charlie and Wesley (Morgan Freeman and Chris Rock) murder Betty's husband Del (LaBute veteran Aaron Eckhart) for his shady dealings, Betty has a complete breakdown and begins to think that the soap is the real world. Firmly believing the fiction she has created for herself, she goes in search of her dream doctor by impersonating a nurse in Los Angeles, all the while being pursued by the hitmen for being a witness to their crime. Even more problems ensue not long after Betty meets the real actor who plays the doctor.

One of the flaws that hinders this film is the fact that the screenplay credit does not belong to LaBute himself, as was the case with his first two films. Screenwriters John C. Richards and James Flamberg have constructed a story that contains a paucity of meaningful dialogue and a mediocre narrative. LaBute's direction, however, is also problematic. In his prior outings, LaBute has exhibited wonderful composition in both the 1.85 and even the usually maligned 2.35 aspect ratios. Unlike the clever compositions of LaBute's *Your Friends and Neighbors* or Wes Anderson's *Rushmore* (1998), *Nurse Betty* uses the wide-screen format to no intelligent avail.

The performances on the whole are disappointing, largely because the characters are given no satisfying dimensionality. Morgan Freeman and Chris Rock play the hired killers as if they were built on an assembly line with *Pulp Fiction*'s John Travolta and Samuel L. Jackson as the behavioral template. Freeman's eloquent voice is occasionally a comfort, but that alone is not enough to salvage the character. Zellweger's Betty is given virtually no back story, so the audience is given no way to empathize with her save a couple of shots where she is staring directly into the lens. Greg Kinnear's character - that of an actor playing an actor - is potentially the most interesting character. The self-reflexive possibilities are cut short by the fact that the actor (the character, not Kinnear himself) plays into a stereotype of shallowness.

The principal message underwriting the film concerns our want to make our troubles or feelings of routine vanish into the realm of fiction. In the wake of the reality television shows that are beginning to inundate mainstream American airwaves and popular culture, dealing with a soap opera seems a poor choice. Whereas films such as *The Truman Show* or *EDtv* inadvertently served as harbingers of things to come, the message of breaking free from the grasp of fiction seems too little, too late.

The film attempts to be a mainstream comedy with dark moments. This brings us back to the guilty laugh. Whereas some of the statements or actions in LaBute's other two films are unflinching and inflammatory - yet still bitingly funny - *Nurse Betty* backs up its actions with few substantial ideas. For example, when the hitmen are holding Del captive and he makes an inappropriate remark about American Indians, Charlie expostulates on the raw deal historically given to Native Americans. After this discursive tangent, however, Wesley actually scalps the husband before Charlie has to mercifully put him out of his misery. There is no real intelligent motive behind the depiction; the act has only shock value.

Renée Zellweger's Betty provides another instance of the film's faulty thinking. Her confusion between fact and fiction is the butt of comedy, but it lacks the sting of tragedy. Most of the other characters just concede to her role-playing without confrontation until she wakes up from her fantasy. As a result, everyone else in the film appears in want of common sense in turn giving the viewer only cheap laughs at a character's expense. By the end, when Betty is predictably realizing her own individualism as a woman, it unfortunately appears laughable.

Nurse Betty serves as an example of what can happen when a filmmaker who has only directed his own scripts loses sight of his ideas in order to construct a comedy intended for relatively wide release. Instead of respecting the audience enough to challenge both its notions of humor as well as its ideas on relationships and life, this film steals from us the glorious ambiguity of the guilty laugh and replaces it with a celluloid entity that is less interesting to watch than the green exit signs on either side of the screen.

The Cell

Dir: Tarsem Singh, 2000

A review by Lisa K. Perdigao, Northeastern University, USA

While many film theorists debate the issue of interiority in film - film's ability to reveal the intricacies of characters' thoughts - *The Cell* illustrates film's power to access the mind directly, revealing the beauty and horrors trapped within. The concept is by no means new, for Trumbull's *Brainstorm* (1983) is an early prototype for virtual reality headgear that grants access to another character's visions after dying, Ruben's *Dreamscape* (1984) renders access to nightmares through the main character's psychic powers, and Bigelow's *Strange Days* (1995) features data-discs that record memories and allow its main character to uncover a murder. What is so striking in *The Cell* is the manipulation of the images - the coupling of the beautiful and horrific, the mutability of this interior life. While recent films like Andy and Larry Wachowski's *The Matrix* (1999) and Jonze's *Being John Malkovich* (1999) have experimented with the concept of entering the mind, *The Cell* illustrates a dreamlike world that, in its beauty, reminds us of the images of heaven from Ward's *What Dreams May Come* (1998) that easily become hell. *The Cell*'s illustration of the vulnerability of the mind, the ways in which good and ill coexist in one chamber, is, in its best moments, brilliant.

Its premise, though, falters under the weight of its possibilities. The narrative is, at its best, mediocre, and repetitive, for it has been done before, and done better, in Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). In *The Cell*, a serial killer, Carl Stargher, victimizes women through slow physical and mental torture and then mutilates their bodies when there is no mind left to violate. *The Cell*, in its most basic sense, represents the chamber in which Stargher drowns his victims, a cell where water gushes at intervals to scare the abducted women and allows Stargher to keep the women helpless under his control. The brutality depicted in this film is atrocious in its torture and murder of these women, and the narrative pushes the violence even further as women's bodies are manipulated to become dolls, cold, pale, and vulnerable to Stargher's designs. But *The Cell* is derivative, in that Stargher's actions - the abduction, imprisonment, murder, and desecration of the women's bodies - are strikingly familiar to those of the killer in *The Silence of the Lambs*. And *The Cell* leads us into the killer's mind, as Hopkins' Hannibal Lecter similarly leads us through the killer's thoughts in *The Silence of the Lambs*. But where *The Silence of the Lambs* retains its tension through Lecter's cat and mouse game with Foster's FBI agent Clarice Starling as well as the deferment of the revelation of the killer and his capture, *The Cell* rids that tension from the onset of the film, revealing the killer in its first scenes. The film fails to be the thriller it intends, and our interests lie elsewhere.

Vince Vaughn's FBI agent Peter Novak is able to track and capture Stargher easily, but cannot save the latest victim until he turns to Jennifer Lopez's child therapist Catherine Deane. Stargher has a seizure that renders him unconscious as the FBI tracks him, and, once they discover his body, the FBI are at a loss to discover the chamber's location before the latest victim perishes. Deane is Novak's last hope of finding this woman, for, as we witness at

the film's opening, Deane is able to enter the mind of her catatonic young patient through technology and psychotherapy. Deane reluctantly accepts the challenge of entering Stargher's mind to discover the location of the woman, but, as we anticipate, becomes ensnared in the nightmare of his mind.

While director Tarsem Singh creates visually stunning and potent images of this surreal world accessed by Deane, they are almost too powerful for the film's plot. The narrative collapses as Deane's vulnerability traps her within this nightmarish world, and we realize that we do not know her character at all. At best, the characters remain elusive and ill-defined to us; even in our travels into Stargher's mind and Deane's manipulation of this world, her vulnerability appears dictated by a need to force Novak into action, and not a result of her character's struggle with her gift, both an antidote and poison. The timeline ticks too loudly, and the film hurries to find the location of the woman at the risk of flattening the intrigue of the film - the exploration of the mind that should be at the film's center. Instead, Deane and Novak become straw characters, forced into Stargher's world and evacuated in time for the "thriller" to resolve itself.

The images of Deane trapped in Stargher's world, imprisoned within his mind because of her own fears, are incredible. And yet despite *The Cell*'s attempts to explore the possibilities of accessing another person's thoughts through such hauntingly beautiful images, its screenplay is unable to provide the depth that such an exploration demands and continually tears us from the interior world of the mind to further its thin plot. Images of Deane, painted in the colors of Stargher's vision, surrounded by and donning evidence of his torturous mind, are surreal, and, as with the logic of dreams, demand we suspend our notions of reality. But Deane's character needs to be defined enough so that we understand why she allows Stargher's mind to become the cell that entangles her. But we never know her story, even when the feed is reversed and we enter her world, a point where her mind illustrates the beauty that Stargher's lacks, and the poison that he brings into hers. We remain detached from Deane, our focal point, as she attempts to reach the boy Carl and rescue him from his tormentor, the killer born from the hate in his cell, so that her appearance in Stargher's world and transformation in her own reflect a shallow exploration of her character arc. As Deane is surrendered to this world, she remains ambiguous at best, and we are left disconcerted because the film could have done more.

Instead, it returns to the "thriller" mode when it never was, and never should have been. The images Singh so vividly renders of the cell that is the mind, heaven and hell at once, pale under the glare of the domineering and weak plot. Even Novak's character, tormented by the images in Stargher's mind and by nightmares from his own past, remains vague as we follow him throughout the film. And we leave the theater feeling as if we'd watched two films spliced together. Because of its jarring fragmentation, the film consists of a montage of beautiful and nightmarish images instead of a journey through the mind. Because *The Cell* only offers us glimpses of the characters' deepest secrets and fears, it reduces its field of vision from the infinite to the myopic.

The Thomas Crown Affair

Dir: John McTiernan, 1999

A review by Mark Jancovich, The University of Nottingham, UK

The Thomas Crown Affair is not just a remake, it is a film about art and artifice; about authenticity and replication; about identity and duplication. For those unfamiliar with the original, Crown (Pierce Brosnan) is a fabulously wealthy businessman whose graceful, effortless ease in business leaves him feeling dead inside. As a remedy, he plans and executes staggeringly brilliant robberies, and when he steals a major artwork from a museum, he becomes the target of another equally brilliant mind, Catherine Banning (Rene Russo), a female investigator assigned to recover the painting.

However, while the original film made much of the sexual nature of this manhunt, in which the two leads play a dangerous game of cat and mouse as if flirting with one another, McTiernan's remake takes a much darker and more romantic angle on the tale. From the opening scene in which Crown's psychiatrist (Faye Dunaway, who played the Catherine Banning character in the original) asks him whether any woman can trust him, the story hinges on the problem of authenticity: how can the two brilliant lovers "give" themselves to the other without being "taken", but equally, how can they convince the other of the authenticity of their own feelings. Both are such skilled game players and such consummate dissemblers that it seems impossible for them to not only read the other's feelings, but also find a way of proving the authenticity of their own emotions.

Indeed, as I have said, authenticity and identity become a recurrent problem within the film. Catherine, for example, identifies Crown with the subject of Magritte's painting *La Grande Guerre*, a picture of a faceless business man whose only identity is located within his professional uniform. What is more, in so doing, she pinpoints the motivation behind Crown's acts of larceny. It is therefore significant that Crown finally performs the seemingly impossible - returning the painting that he has stolen to the museum - through an elaborate stunt in which he fills the museum with replicas of himself - men who are wearing exactly the same clothes as both himself and the subject of Magritte's painting.

In the process, the film proves to be every bit as thrilling and compulsive as the original; it is a film which may not be profound, but is one of the most pleasurable films in a long time. Indeed, it has a very "classic" or "old-fashioned" feel. The leads are both mature and make no pretense to be anything else, and their romance is that of professional people in their late thirties and early forties. Furthermore, the stars and the chemistry that they generate positively revel in a very nostalgic glamour. The fact that Brosnan plays Bond should not be underestimated here, but he proves an absolute revelation in the role of the perfectly groomed Crown. His performance seems at once graceful, complex and gestural - every movement of his body and inflection of his voice appears to be effortless and yet unreliable, too smooth to be anything but a well-polished performance.

Although he produced the movie, Brosnan has the modesty and foresight to recognize that this is not his movie, but rather Russo's. Crown is primarily the object of our investigation and fascination, not the subject of our identification. It is Catherine who becomes our point of identification as, like her, we try to make sense of Crown and remain profoundly unsure where he or the film will take us. But also like her, we know that the process of investigating Crown is one in which we are condemned to perform actions that have been programmed for us, actions that we cannot ultimately choose or control and, at times, we find ourselves willing for both Crown and the film to trick and deceive us. In other words, the film is about Catherine's dilemma: to win the game of cat and mouse is to destroy the object of her desire, but to lose is to destroy herself. Both characters are therefore trapped by their own roles, and find themselves in an impossible situation. Of course, the film has to resolve these dilemmas and it does so in a way that is all the more impressive for the apparent impossibility of the task that it sets itself.

In this way, the film is also about gendered identity. As Barbara Ehrenreich has pointed out, concerns with the conformity and lack of identity associated with the corporation man are ultimately concerns over changing definitions of masculinity (Ehrenreich, 1983). But the film is not just about masculinity, but also about femininity. For example, Catherine is trapped within a post-feminist dilemma (and here I am using the term post-feminist in the sense that Brunsdon uses the term): she is seeking to negotiate an identity in which she can work within the masculine values of the professional world without surrendering her femininity.

However, it is also the case that both characters share a common dilemma: both long for self-sufficiency, independence and control, while also equally desiring a situation in which they can surrender to the other, admit emotional dependence and ultimately, in the process, relinquish control over themselves. This is not to suggest in any sense that this is a profound or original film: it is "classic" precisely in the sense that it seems to take features and materials that are so familiar and well-known - so incredibly unoriginal - and to put them together in a way that has a kind of graceful, effortless beauty, which is, in a sense, what this film is all about in the first place.

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Titus

Dir: Julie Taymor, 1999

A review by Pascale Aebischer, Darwin College, University of Cambridge, UK

After one century of Shakespeare on screen, the first ever feature film of Shakespeare's earliest tragedy, directed by novice film director Julie Taymor, has finally been released in the UK. Hitherto confined to rare, but almost infallibly successful theatrical stagings or low-budget productions for television or the horror-cult video market, *Titus Andronicus* has suffered from the condemnation of its literary critics and the queasiness of its producers. Even Taymor has had to fight the prejudice of the big Hollywood studios that refused to finance her venture. As a result, her $25 million film is fiercely independent and true to its director's intelligent, spectacular and phantasmagoric vision of the tragedy.

Julie Taymor is not a newcomer to the play. Better known for her award-winning Broadway production of *The Lion King*, Taymor directed a production of *Titus Andronicus* in New York in 1994. Traces of her stage production linger on not only in the shapes of Harry Lennix (Aaron) and Elliot Goldenthal (Music), but also in a number of ideas which Taymor first tried out on the stage. The film opens with a shot of a boy with a paper bag over his head playing increasingly frantically with action-man puppets of ancient Roman warriors that are cluttering a kitchen table, splattering them with ketchup that anticipates the bloodshed to come. Then, terrifyingly, play and reality fuse as an explosion breaks the kitchen window through which a big man wearing old-fashioned pilot's goggles enters to pick up the boy and carry him into the Roman Coliseum (filmed in the well-preserved amphitheatre in Pula, Croatia). While the opening is clearly derived from Taymor's stage production (described by Lennox, 1995: 36), the conceit of using the boy Lucius as an intradiegetic figure for the audience, mediating between the modern world of the viewer with its violent games and the ancient world of the Coliseum as "the first great theater of cruelty" (Stone, 2000), is a borrowing from the 1985 BBC film directed by Jane Howell. Taymor's use of Young Lucius is analogous to Howell's, both directors foregrounding the boy's role as a liminal observer of the violence whose compassion represents the only ray of hope at the end of the tragedy. Taymor's final shot of Young Lucius slowly carrying Aaron's baby out of the Coliseum into the sunrise while church bells on the soundtrack announce the beginning of a literally brighter era could seem clumsy were it not immensely powerful.

The same can be said of all of Taymor's borrowings from previous productions of the tragedy. It would be easy to pan her film as largely derivative, and several critics have already pointed out that she appropriates elements from Fellini's *La Strada* (1954, significantly, her production designer Dante Ferretti has worked for Fellini), Loncraine's *Richard III* (1995, for the Fascist background), and Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996, for the use of kitsch, high camp, and 'nineties rock gear and tattoos). I would much rather describe Taymor's mixture of features taken from contemporary and expressionist film, "primitive" rituals (her credentials include extensive research of Balinese and Sri Lankan ritual theatre), and the tragedy's stage history, as creating a dense and meaningful palimpsest that preserves

the best of many traditions in a single vibrant and exciting post-modern collage. Especially with a play as under-exposed as *Titus Andronicus*, there is nothing wrong with an interpretation that intelligently builds up on preceding experiments and brings their most striking directorial choices to a large audience.

In fact, Taymor's film brilliantly succeeds in capturing moments with which generations of producers have struggled. Similarly to Deborah Warner's production for the RSC in 1987, which emphasised the tragedy's macabre humour, Julie Taymor embraced the "outrageous humor juxtaposed to potent tragedy" which she felt "is exactly right for our times" (Stanley, 1998: 30). There is something disturbingly hilarious in the cut from the slaughter of Chiron (Jonathan Rhys Meyers) and Demetrius (Matthew Rhys) to a shot of two steaming pies cooling on a window-sill while the bel canto song "Vivere senza malinconia" is playing on the soundtrack. Anthony Hopkins's Titus in a gleaming white chef's outfit carries the dangerously funny mood into the final scene with its notoriously difficult line "Why, there they are, both baked in this pie." Taymor's camera, which focuses on Tamora's (Jessica Lange) face as she is trying to make herself vomit the son-pie, dares its audience to laugh at the sheer horror of the mother's cannibalism. On the other hand, there is nothing funny about the way Taymor eerily and shockingly handles the scene where Marcus (Colm Feore) discovers his raped and mutilated niece. Preceded by a series of hunting scenes that emphasise the tiger/doe imagery that is so prominent in the tragedy's text (Lavinia is a "dainty doe" and Rome a "wilderness of tigers"), Taymor sets this scene in a bleak swamp covered with dead tree stumps. Emerging from the wood, Marcus sees the lone figure of Lavinia (Laura Fraser) swaying on one of the trunks. As he moves towards her in a trance-like gait speaking the monologue which critics and theatre practitioners alike have traditionally deplored as unspeakable (even in this film, it is cut by two thirds), the camera alternates between shots of his appalled face and Lavinia. Where in Brook's symbolic staging of the scene in 1955 blood red streaming ribbons had been tied to Lavinia's wrists to great effect (Taymor acknowledged her debt to Brook in her 1994 programme), in Taymor's film (and stage production) bunches of twigs are tied to the mutilated girl's stumps. This grisly parody of hands has the additional benefit of giving visual emphasis to Marcus's lines "what stern ungentle hands / Hath lopped and hewed and made thy body bare / Of her two branches". In fact, Taymor's most inspired moments stem from such a close engagement with the text, duplicating its verbal imagery in visual pictures of great power. The square in front of the Senate (filmed on location outside Mussolini's Palazzo della Civilità del Lavoro) is strewn with oversized sculptures of broken-off hands and feet and Tamora is given a snake-like tattoo, costume, and hairdo. As the tragedy relentlessly literalises metaphors such as "Lend me thy hand and I will give thee mine," the film visualises the text's images of mutilation and bestiality.

Having said that, I do have problems with certain aspects of the film. While its portrayal of Aaron is a triumph, giving this figure of unalloyed evil so much authority, intelligence and charisma as to succeed in turning the play's racist imagery on its head, the representation of the white characters' evil is more problematic. Taymor's film establishes a clear division between the "straight" family of Titus and his sexually depraved opponents. This is textually grounded as far as Saturninus's passion for the elder Tamora and Tamora's extramarital affair with Aaron are concerned, but I must query the decision to show Chiron cross-dressed in brassière and stockings for his impersonation of Rape. Earlier scenes portray him incestuously nestling against his nude mother in the midst of an orgy (Tamora's mature sexuality is otherwise brilliantly conveyed by the sexy Jessica Lange in her suggestive golden armour) and show the brothers tumbling on a huge bed in a parody of love-making. The

whole point of the rape of Lavinia, it seems to me, is to show heterosexuality at its misogynist worst. Stamping the rapists as transvestites of indeterminate sexuality shows a bias that deflects attention from the tragedy's exposure of the violence that underpins the metaphors of Petrarchan heterosexual love-making.

I am also doubtful as to the justification of the five excessively kitsch collage-like visions with which Taymor punctuated her film. The visions have the effect of distancing the viewer and of providing simplistic "footnotes" to the film (rather like Branagh's insertion of explanatory shots of Priam and Hecuba in his *Hamlet*, 1996). Showing Mutius as a sacrificial lamb on an altar obscures the fact that the violence starts with Titus's sacrifice of Alarbus. Similarly, Taymor's heightened carnivalesque staging of the moment when Titus is brought his hand and the heads of his sons works to distance the viewer from the horror at the very point at which the tragedy provides a touchstone of human warmth and compassion in the messenger's lines "woe is me to think upon thy woes / More than remembrance of my father's death." These lines are cut, and with them disappears the sense of a shared humanity that survives in spite of Rome's invasion by the bestial Goths.

These caveats, however, have little weight when compared to Taymor's overall achievement. The film is visually stunning, dense, compelling, intelligent, and is a long-overdue contribution to the revival of critical and theatrical interest in *Titus Andronicus* in the past two decades. I can only hope that it will eventually achieve the box-office success it deserves.

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What Lies Beneath

Dir: Robert Zemeckis, USA, 2000

A review by Phillip Serrato, University of California, Riverside, USA

My interest in dysfunctional and haunted male subjectivity has resulted in my attraction to films such as *Psycho* (1960), *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), *Taxi Driver* (1976), and *Halloween* (1978). As a result, I could not help but get a bit excited when I first heard about *What Lies Beneath*. When I heard the film's trailer, "He was the perfect husband until his one mistake followed him home," and then saw clips that suggested the devastating return of the male repressed, I imagined that I would be treated to a provocative portrayal of the repressed horror that really subtends the patriarchal social order and lies beneath the fiction of stable male subjectivity. The first hour of the film does enable discussion about the kinds of interests that prompted me to want to see it, and consequently I was lured into thinking that I would be able to add it to my personal masculinity-studies canon (part of which I list above). But then, despite early promise, *What Lies Beneath* ends up unable to do anything original, for what could have been a productive and interesting representation of the kind of repression that maintains patriarchy and the fiction of stable male identity ultimately breaks down uninterestingly into a duplication of *Psycho*. In fact, as a result of the last half of the film, I was left without much motivation to take the film seriously.

The film centers on Norman and Claire Spencer (Harrison Ford and Michelle Pfeiffer). They are a middle-aged and financially very comfortable couple living in a lakeside home in Vermont. Norman is a noted genetic researcher while Claire is a former musician who now stays home and tends her garden. The central storyline of the film begins when, after Claire's daughter leaves for college, Claire starts to experience different kinds of hauntings. First, doors open by themselves and a stereo suddenly turns on. Then Claire begins seeing a female apparition's face in the bathroom, sometimes in the mirror and other times in the water of the bathtub.

The face that Claire sees is the same one that, while bathing at the beginning of the film, she envisions as submerged deep beneath the surface of the lake. Because of the clips I had previously seen, I already knew that Norman had some tie to the dead woman. Subsequently, I expected to see played out, as occurs in *Psycho*, the exposure of the awful, even murderous secrets that really lurk behind the façade of the Norm(al)man. In this case, the woman at the bottom of the lake is Madison Elizabeth Frank, a former student of Norman's whom he murdered when she threatened to expose their adulterous relationship and thereby ruin his otherwise perfect public and professional identities. A particularly interesting triangulation is encouraged by the film via the visual similarities between Madison, Claire, and Mary Feuer, a neighbor unwilling to leave a volatile marriage. All three women have light skin and hair, comparable builds, and similar facial features. Moreover, different camera shots end up foregrounding and thus suggesting the cross-identifications that are possible.

Of the three women, Claire is at first the only apparently content one. Madison is obviously upset and unable to rest in peace, and on several occasions Claire sees Mrs. Feuer (whose name seems a promising play on "Furor") traumatized by her marriage yet fully inclined to repress this trauma. One encouraging feature of the film, however, is the suggestion that Claire is progressively sutured into a kind of feminist consciousness. As she bears witness to the anguish of the other two women, she is jolted into realization of the kind of distress women (including herself) experience specifically within the private space of patriarchal domesticity. Claire is ultimately prompted, in fact, to want to help these women. Although her efforts with Mrs. Feuer are fruitless (due to the woman's unwillingness to risk the limited comfort and conveniences her marriage can provide), Claire does achieve justice for Madison. Of course, in the process, Claire/the film ends up exposing the pathological extent to which the Norm(al)man is committed to the protection of his "normal" public and professional images.

Interestingly, at the same time that feminist possibilities are suggested, we also see the male regimes that work and conspire to control and repress specifically feminine threats to the stability of the patriarchal status quo. For instance, when Claire begins reporting her sightings, she is sent (presumably by her husband) to a male psychologist. Later, when Claire is trying to solve the disappearance of Madison, neither Norman (for obvious reasons) nor a male contact at the police department offers any help. In fact, the police contact comes across as indifferent to the fate of Madison. Taken in conjunction with Norman's attempts to obfuscate the truth, the indifference that Claire encounters in the police suggests the collusion of social institutions and patriarchal self-preservation. In turn, such collusion points toward the practically totalitarian extent to which women are subjects of patriarchy.

For me, the most compelling suggestion of patriarchal totalitarianism lies in the glimpse of two male scientists demonstrating to a female student how a special liquid can temporarily paralyze a rat (which, as one of the scientists notes, happens to be a female). After freaking out because the stereo suddenly is blaring, Claire runs to her husband's lab and passes by this trio, and incidentally this is the same liquid that Norman later uses to subdue his wife when she threatens to disclose his secret. This juxtaposition of masculinized science, Caire's hysteria, and Norman's professional identity effectively serves to foreground the authors' smart awareness that they have the opportunity to capture the machinations of the patriarchal state.

For fans of *Dog Day Afternoon* and *Taxi Driver*, the film's representation of the delicateness of patriarchy's stability is welcomed. This fragility is captured by the several instances of Norman in a desperate condition. When Norman is confronted first with the affair and later with the murder, Harrison Ford performs a physical and vocal quiver that manages to signify masculine desperation to preserve patriarchal social order and stability. In effect, we see suggested the idea that instability and insecurity inhere in male subjectivity.

Unfortunately, the revelation of Norman's responsibility for the murder and his subsequent desperate cover-up opens not an interesting exploration of patriarchy's repressed, but an uninspiring nod to *Psycho*. Then, as if this is not bad enough, the last fifteen minutes of the film are overwhelmed by the deployment of Hollywood horror conventions that seem to bring the film down to the level of conventional horror. As I watched the film, I found increasingly offensive the willingness to resort so blatantly to such a lack of originality. Such willingness is particularly disappointing in the case of *What Lies Beneath* because the film had seemed to hold so much potential to be smart.

In fact, I really feel like the authors of *What Lies Beneath* just did not know what to do with this otherwise promising film. Even the final scene makes me feel this way. In the final shot, with Norman by now exposed and justly dead, Claire is seen standing above Madison's grave dropping a rose on it to put her to rest. With this ending, however, it seems that there is too much emphasis on closure. The villain is dead, the unjustly treated woman is avenged, and Claire is left to carry on her life free of her demons. At least with *Psycho* the power of its ending lies in its open-endedness. With Norman Bates barely beginning to become the subject of psychological discussion and the implication that there is much to be discovered in the swamp, we are left by Hitchcock's film with the almost ominous implication that we are only beginning to realize the scary complexity of the Norm(al)man. In contrast, with *What Lies Beneath* the lasting implications that the film could have with regard to male subjectivity and patriarchy are, due to the breakdown that occurs over the last half, neutralized by a lack of development, a lack of originality, and ultimately too much apparent emphasis on closure. As a result, in the end it is difficult to take the film as seriously as I wish I could have.

X-Men

Dir: Bryan Singer, 2000

A review by Keith McDonald, Birkbeck College, University of London, UK

Whenever a much-loved text is translated to the screen, inevitable discussions concerning the merits and failings of the adaptation process follow. The filmmakers undertaking the task must bear in mind that an audience will judge not only their skills as filmmakers, but also their ability to translate what some will see as genius. They may encounter an audience made up of fans, a far harder group to please, because of the expectations that audience brings to the work. The fans of comics, or graphic novels, take this scrutiny surrounding adaptations and elevate it to a new degree of detail and intensity.

This is never more evident than in the recent film *X-Men*, directed by Bryan Singer. For months preceding the release of this film, readers of the hugely successful series of *X-Men* and *X-Men*-related publications have poured over every emerging detail about the oncoming adaptation. On web sites and in magazines, all aspects of the film have been argued and discussed. This discourse and criticism includes, not only casting and setting, but also the choice of director, writer, composer and even designer. My point is that the fans of these publications are incredibly loyal, in that they will sometimes visit the cinema many times to re-watch a film, they may also purchase the surrounding merchandise including the all important video and DVD releases, yet they are also somewhat difficult to please.

To use a comparison, in the 1991 film adaptation of Fannie Flagg's *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*, there was a great deal of disappointment and anger felt by fans of the novel surrounding the fact that the two main female protagonists of the novel, who are effectively married, were re-invented as *just good friends*. This was seen as being not only unfaithful to the intentions of the author, but also insulting to any viewer who had actually read the novel. In the debate surrounding *X-Men*, I remember reading heated outcries on the film website, *Ain't it Cool*, concerning the liberties Singer had taken with the original because the designers had altered one of the character's costumes from yellow and blue, to plain blue. This anticipation, scrutiny and trepidation surrounding the film may be interesting and somewhat amusing, but you may ask, what does it have to do with the finished film as an independent text? The answer, in the case of this film, has to be everything. *X-Men* is a film so self-aware that it is not only an adaptation, but as the beginning of a franchise, it is crippled by the constraints brought on by its mode of production.

A good deal of time is spent at the beginning of the film setting up the premise of the story: in a not too distant future a phenomenon has occurred where certain people develop genetic anomalies which exhibit themselves in an array of special abilities or powers. This group is stigmatised and feared by "normal" humans, and reactionary political forces are seeking to marginalise and oppress the beings labelled "mutants". The mutants themselves are a divided group. The X-Men, led by Professor Xavier, see integration and education as the way forward, this group has set up an academy for mutants who have nowhere else to go in order

for them to properly understand their abilities and potential. Another group, the Brotherhood, led by Magneto, an old friend of the Professor, prefers direct and violent action against the would-be oppressors, whom they view as base and a lower link in the evolutionary chain. The opening scene depicts Magneto as a child in a Polish ghetto in 1944; his powers first manifest themselves as Nazis separate him from his family. The obvious links and similarities to world history and culture as well as current technological and political debates are blatantly evident from the outset, and this is one of the film's biggest strengths.

We do not expect a huge amount of subtlety and political reflection from a superhero action picture and this is also a short film running only ninety minutes. However there are a number of clear metaphors employed, simply and unsubtly. For example, one of the characters, Logan, is haunted by a past that has scarred his memory and made him emotionally uncommunicative and withdrawn. We see this metaphorically in the fact that he has a skeleton made of a metal alloy, and that he has an accelerated healing rate. Another character, Rogue, is a shy teenager uncomfortable with her emerging sexuality, her mutation inhibits her from touching another mutant for fear she will take on their powers, and, in doing so, gravely injure them. Magneto is able to manipulate metal, an ability that allows him to remove weapons from his oppressors hands, stop bullets and bend bars that would otherwise function to imprison him. These devices, then, are not subtle, yet they are an effective and interesting narrative incentive and a way of giving clear characterisation to a number of the players given little dialogue. This simplicity is somewhat refreshing, and gives some characters in a large ensemble a definitive voice. The characters who do not have such powers that in some way relate to their experience or personality, are wholly lacking in any sort of identity and chance for development. Storm, the character played by Halle Berry, is completely unexplored and we must assume that she is included in the film simply because she is also in the comics.

There is also evidence that the set, designs and aesthetic mood of the film have been given a good deal of attention and budgetary clout. Both camp bases are reflective of their rival status. One is a cavernous prison, inhabited by Magneto the estranged genius, the other an academic and social haven for gifted children, with an underground base in which the adults hone their own skills for the greater good. These settings are visually impressive and function to set up this world as like our own, yet also significantly different enough to hold interest. The plot itself, concerning a campaigning politician's kidnapping and forced mutation, and the plan by Magneto to repeat this process on a larger scale, using Rogue's powers as a catalyst, is entirely secondary to the establishment of the premise of the world itself.

This is the main problem of the film: it obviously functions as the first part of a franchise, rather than a film in its own right. This problem can be seen throughout. For example, there is an obvious problem with its length; once the characters and their situation have been established, there is simply no time left to create an engaging plot in which they can function. I was not expecting anything philosophical here, just an action film with a plot would be fine. The story itself does not evidently manifest itself until midway through the film, and as such, its execution is rushed. It has been said that the film seems to act as a long trailer for the franchise that will follow, and this is evident in the closing scene, which depicts a conversation with Xavier and Magneto where they state they will meet again in battle. There is also an obvious problem with budget, which was substantially cut in mid-production by executives nervous about pouring money into a project the target audience may reject on the basis of authenticity. The release was also brought forward to appeal to the summer audience, which may explain the length of the film and the feeling that the second half seems rushed.

The result of this can be seen when we are introduced to the X-Men team at the beginning of the film: Logan is attacked by the menacing Sabertooth and is in trouble, only to be saved by Storm and Cyclops, who simply walk on to the set. Any conception of a modern action scene here would have obviously consisted of a number of special effects and a long battle (as, for example, in *The Matrix*, 1999), but it becomes clear that funds are needed more to establish the two main sets that can obviously be re-used in the sequels.

The irony is that Singer has done a very good job of establishing the premise and has been extremely faithful to the source material. The cast also put in solid performances, in particular Ian McKellen. However, they have failed in actually making a whole film. For example, near the climax of the film we are introduced to the X-Men's plane, an impressive looking vehicle that we are told is extremely powerful. And how is this beast used in the film? As a way of getting from A to B quietly, simply as transport that will not cause too much of a fuss. This illustrates the problem of the film; care has been taken to establish the ship, characters, and aesthetics, but there is no room left to let them function either as part of a narrative, or even as part of a spectacle. The end result is the feeling that you have not seen a film as such, but rather an exercise of adaptation from one medium to another. The weight of expectation about details and trivialities has obscured the goals of the narrative so no real story is told. Singer should have been less concerned with different genres and mediums, and perhaps should have concentrated more on his role as narrator.