

Bamboozled

Dir: Spike Lee, 2000

A review by Gerald R. Butters, Aurora University, USA

The Grinch came to Hollywood early this year in the persona of filmmaker Spike Lee. His highly inflammatory new film *Bamboozled* is not just a bag of coal for the entertainment industry. It is more like an incendiary device with exploding shrapnel which injures victims of many different persuasions. The film is Lee at his most angry, malicious and politicized. Yet, *Bamboozled* remains one of his most thought-provoking and important films in years. It is far from perfect; Lee is guilty of some of his continued cinematic missteps such as incomplete scriptwriting and the attempt to take on too much subject matter in a two and a quarter hour film. But Lee must be praised for his sheer audacity and for the sophisticated ways in which he takes on contemporary portrayals of African-Americans on American television. In *Bamboozled*, things are simply not black and white (pardon the pun). Lee demonstrates how we all play a role in the continued denigration of African-American people through the visual medium.

Bamboozled stars Damon Wayans as an Ivy League-educated writer, Pierre Delacroix, who is the sole African-American at a floundering television network. Frustrated by his boss Dunwitty's (Michael Rapaport) mania to elevate ratings, Delacroix is asked to come up with the formula for a hit show or be fired. Realizing that "the networks don't want to see Negroes on television unless they are buffoons," Delacroix decides to get fired by creating an outrageously offensive and racist program - the Mantan New Millennium Minstrel Show. Complete with blackface, a watermelon patch and chicken stealing, Delacroix hopes the show will blow up in the network's face but instead it becomes a ratings bonanza, lauded by both critics and audiences alike. Delacroix, then, embraces the show despite warnings from his assistant Sloan (Jada Pinkett-Smith) and her hip hop activist brother Big Black (Mos Def) and the eventual disgruntlement of the stars of the show, Manray/Mantan (Savion Glover) and Womack/Sleep n Eat (Tommy Davidson).

Lee is being crucified for this film in the United States. Armond White in the *New York Press* argued, "It is a national tragedy that the best-known filmmaker dealing with African-American subjects and characters is as small-minded and undisciplined as Lee." Critics have recently deemed him as "disparaging," "tedious," "a cultural commissar," "heavy-handed," and "terminally angry." What such critics have failed to realize is that this film is not immediately aimed at white people. Spike Lee makes films for black audiences. The insulting ethnocentric approach which most film critics take to reviewing his work is both offensive and outrageous. Both contextual and textual factors play a role in interpreting Lee's films. The filmmaker is asking black audiences to seriously consider the entertainment they view on a daily basis and question how this medium impacts the navigation of their everyday lives. These contextual factors are critical in the social formation of the black community. Unfortunately, some critics are so far removed from this community that they would not understand the majority of intertextual knowledge which Lee transmits into film or the social dynamics presently at work in the African-American community. Simply put, how can you

interpret Lee's films if you haven't watched hours of misogynistic and homophobic rap videos on BET or unbelievably insulting black characterizations on television comedies on the UPN, WB or Fox networks.

Lee's genius is that he simply does not just point fingers at the white media establishment but sharply attacks the motivations of Black Hollywood. In a pre-production meeting, Womack is presented with a highly derogatory press kit on the show. He simply reacts, "I'm going to need a little more money for this." Lee's criticism spares no-one - including the African-American personnel both in front of and behind the camera. The self-reflexivity of this is sometimes startling and creates an unusual scenario. In a meeting, Delacroix tells Dunwitty, "I know you are familiar with minstrel shows, variety shows, like *In Living Color*." This was the very show in which Damon Wayans, portraying Delacroix, came to fame.

Lee also does not spare the hip hop community. Ridiculing black youth obsession with the Tommy Hilfigger clothing line, the director includes a fake rap commercial for Timmi Hillnigger jeans. Another satirical commercial promotes Da Bomb malt liquor which promises to "help you get your freak on." Lee's main point of contention about African-American participation in these commercials and the minstrel show which they help sponsor is that black people consciously or unconsciously aid in the creation of such products. While *Bamboozled* is clearly satire, Lee is arguing that African-American entertainers and audiences must take responsibility for the self-imagery that is present on the television and motion picture screen. Perhaps this is nowhere more evident than in the film's final montage, which shows a relentless five-minute succession of racially offensive imagery from the American past. The finale numbs the viewer and it leads one to question why African-American performers would allow themselves to be placed in such a position.

Lee's most devastating (and hilarious) attack is on white individuals who assume they know everything about African-American culture. Dunwitty, brilliantly portrayed by Rapaport, gestures the Black Power salute, speaks in ghetto street slang, and furnishes his office with black sports memorabilia yet knows nothing of the psychology of black America. His network brings in a public relations consultant Myrna Goldfarb (Dina Pearlman) to advise on the show. Claiming that she has a Ph.D. in African-American Studies and that she once lived with a black man, she argues, "Sleep n' Eat and Mantan are lazy and unemployed (on the show). But we certainly aren't saying anything about the entire African-American community." Goldfarb is the worst form of racist - a knowledgeable intellectual whose spin doctoring and legalese can make any racial affront seem acceptable.

Lee's major mistake in the film is one that he usually excels - his cinematography. *Bamboozled* was shot with multiple mini-digital video cameras (Dogma-style) and then transferred to celluloid. While this gives the film a documentary feel at times, it is usually seriously underlit and grainy. With its larger than life narrative, this seems inadequate. *Bamboozled* also falters when it comes too close to two films which obviously inspired it - Elia Kazan's *A Face in the Crowd* (1957, Lee dedicates the film to Budd Schulberg, the author of the screenplay of Kazan's film) and Sidney Lumet's *Network* (1976). Manray's on-air appeal to the studio audience members, "Cousins, I want you to go to your windows and yell out 'I am not going to take it anymore,'" borrows so heavily from *Network* that it is embarrassing. Lee's violence-ridden conclusion is so predictable that it feels as if he simply ran out of steam...But what steam. Some motion pictures entertain while others preach a message. *Bamboozled* pushes the envelope in its attempt to racially provoke spectators. Malcolm X warned, "You've been hoodwinked. You've been had. You've been took. You've

been led astray, led amok. You've been bamboozled." With his latest movie, Lee has seriously questioned the value of "entertainment."

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Bless the Child

Dir: Chuck Russell, 2000

A review by Caroline E. Wiebe, Tulane University, USA

Maybe I was a Zoroastrian in a past life, or perhaps it's simply due to my Catholic upbringing, but I have a penchant for doomsday films. You know, the eternal battle of Good versus Evil, and not of the inconsequential good guy defeats bad guy variety. That sort of thing may be fine for Jackie Chan, but I'm talking about the real deal: God against Satan, the End of the World, Armageddon, the Second Coming. And it seems I'm not the only one. At the dawn of the new millennium, there has been a resurgence of interest in this theme, a sub-genre of film, falling somewhere between intellect and instinct, rationality and spirituality, and tapping into the fear of the unknown that lurks in the back of every civilized, twenty-first century mind (though we're much too evolved to admit it). The result has been the occasional chilling, intellectually engaging thriller, but too often doomsday simply manifests itself as a contrived deus ex machina for a low-budget horror flick. So which camp does *Bless the Child* fall into? In all honesty, and depending on your point of view, both.

Bless the Child stars Kim Basinger as Maggie O'Connor, a divorced psychiatric nurse who lives alone in New York City. The movie opens on Christmas Eve, when a stranger on the bus comments to Maggie that the Star of Jacob has appeared for the first time in 2000 years, a sign that a blessed child has been born. While this moment of foreshadowing hits the viewer over the head with such force that it almost causes physical pain, it does little to phase practical, rational Maggie (her character is a clichéd rendering of the usual supernatural-thriller skeptic). She continues home, only to find her drug-addicted younger sister Jenna (Angela Bettis) on the doorstep, with nine-day-old Cody in tow. Within minutes Jenna has disappeared, abandoning the infant with Maggie, who develops an instant bond with the troubled child (again, in a moment of bells-and-whistles foreshadowing, Jenna keeps informing Maggie that the baby "just isn't right").

Fast forward six years: Maggie has eagerly filled the role of Cody's mother, defying the opinion of experts who insist the child is autistic. While anyone remotely familiar with the trademark symptoms of autism would find the doctors' diagnosis absurd, Nurse Maggie follows their advice anyway and enrolls Cody (Holliston Coleman) in the St. Francis Center, a school for learning and developmentally disabled children. One nun in particular, Sister Rosa (a small role touchingly played by *Like Water for Chocolate*'s Lumi Cavazos), takes notice of Cody's special abilities and works to draw the girl out of her shell.

Contiguous to this action, we are introduced to the ongoing investigation of a string of serial murders, all connected by one thread: the victims are children born on December 16th, 1993. In addition, all the bodies are marked with Satanic symbols, leading the NYPD to call in FBI agent John Travis (Jimmy Smits), a former seminary student who specializes in cults and ritual homicides, to manage the case. As the entire audience already knows, it is only a matter of time before Maggie and John's paths cross and Cody provides the missing link to the murder investigation. The enabling character enters the drama in the form of a drug-addicted

patient named Cheri (Christina Ricci). Though her part may be small, Ricci's role as the ex-cult member who first intuits to both Maggie and the viewer where the danger to Cody will come from - Maggie's sister Jenna - is central to the film and captivatingly acted. Predictably (for in a thriller, does anyone ever believe the first person to warn of the impending danger?), her nearly incoherent warning falls on deaf ears.

But it doesn't take long for Jenna to show up in the flesh, with her new husband Eric Stark (Rufus Sewell). While Stark has been hinted at as a key player in the storyline before we are introduced to him as Jenna's husband, it quickly becomes clear just how central he and his Neo-Satantic New Dawn movement are to the plot when he kidnaps Cody.

The kidnapping leads Maggie to John Travis, who realizes she may just be his first real lead. And while the NYPD, this being a simple custody dispute, can't do anything to assist Maggie in her battle against Stark, the Devil's minion, the newly-reappeared Cheri can. Cheri's disclosure of Stark's preferred hideout, and subsequent murder at the hands of New Dawn thugs, leads Maggie to hunt Stark down, only to find herself nearly killed also. The fight is on, the special effects take center stage, and before you know it, the Catholic Church is involved (then again, can you make a movie about the end of the world and not include the Catholic Church?). Considering the obviously limited budget, what money is spent on computer-generated creepiness is generally well-chosen. Demonic phantoms and vermin familiars nicely complement suspenseful scenes and manage to deftly walk the line between intellect-driven psychological thriller and adrenaline-fueled horror as the film draws to its climax in (where else?) an abandoned church in the countryside .

While clearly Russell adheres to the most common cliches of the Armageddon genre, his *Bless the Child* is fortunately marked by a unique element that raises it from being purely a weak B-grade horror flick: performances that often go above and beyond what is normally called for in a film of this caliber. Holliston Coleman's heartfelt and dramatically restrained interpretation of Cody marks her as a potential Haley Joel Osment in the making, and Sewell's Stark is so deliciously evil, and yet so sympathetically human, that you almost wish he would win. These actors, their struggles and those of their castmates, are what make this movie captivating; they make you believe in the power of faith, the struggle for what is good and the seductiveness of evil. Without the emotional involvement that they inspire in the viewer, *Bless the Child* would be little more than a watered-down straight-to-video thriller, not even marked by enough special effects to be included on the horror shelf. Unfortunately, the weak link in the cast is Basinger, who seems determined to prove that winning an Oscar doesn't necessarily mean that you can act. This is not to say that she isn't likable in the role of Maggie, but that she brings no development to her character, a rationalist who has lost touch with her childhood spirituality, and then proceeds to experience miraculous events of epic proportions firsthand. Basinger greets scenes that would leave the staunchest atheist a confirmed believer with a complete lack of surprise. In fact, by the end of the film, the storyline is far more believable than her line readings. This is part of Russell's power in depicting the struggle for the soul of one innocent child in such a subtle, understated manner; he enables a plausible story to become completely believable, even when the central character is not.

Which leads me back to the question I asked at the beginning: does *Bless the Child* prove itself one of the better renderings of the Good versus Evil battle for the fate of Mankind, or is it simply a glorified scary movie? There is no definite answer. If you place an emphasis on the occasional contrived plot devices, the at-times poorly rendered special effects, the open-

ended conclusion (in which Good does overcome Evil, but only for now), and, most obviously, Basinger's B-grade performance, maybe it does warrant being relegated to the same shelf as all those Wes Craven classics. But if, like me, you find yourself drawn in by well-written and skillfully-acted characters (Basinger notwithstanding) and a depiction of Evil that makes temptation understandable and the downfall of all that is Holy credible, you might just find yourself pleasantly surprised by *Bless the Child*.

Or maybe you were just a Zoroastrian in a past life, too.

Cast Away

Dir: Robert Zemeckis, 2000

A review by Jamie Poster, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, USA

While *Cast Away* is largely a simple Hollywood story of endurance and survival, there is actually much more going on around and through these themes. The film opens at an intersection. Literally, the camera takes a series of long tracking shots of the dusty western American landscape. The real story begins in Russia with a shot offering a FedEx truck in the foreground and the Kremlin in the background. The camera then oddly takes the point of view of a particular box as it is carried from the truck in the hand of a delivery person, and delivered to Tom Hanks' character, Chuck Noland. With these densely loaded signifiers (the Kremlin and FedEx logo), and a series of shots taken from package POV, the film announces from the start that it is going to do something peculiar with global capital, consumer culture and subjectivity.

Cast Away is about FedEx efficiency expert Chuck Noland. A Texas native, his job requires him to travel frequently in order to manage the seamless operation of a multinational corporation. During Christmas dinner, Noland receives a page indicating that he must get on a plane and improve the functioning of a South Pacific FedEx office in a state of inefficient emergency. In a mildly sentimental and overly foreshadowing scene, he bids adieu to his fiancée Kelly Nealy (Helen Hunt) and boards an airplane donning the FedEx logo (a regular fixture of the mise-en-scene). Mid-flight, an emergency hits; something is wrong. The plane hurls out of control and plummets to the ocean beneath. Its painfully long descent is reminiscent of the sinking in *Titanic* and the turmoil of the violent water beneath resembles that of *The Perfect Storm*. Miraculously, Noland is the only survivor; he drifts onto a small island where he struggles with survival for one hour of run time. He uses ingenuity and all but one of the several FedEx packages that washed ashore with him, barely getting by with an odd array of reconfigured consumer objects. Noland finally gets off the island by constructing a makeshift raft. A day or so later an oil rig spots him and, a total of four years after the crash, he arrives home a hero, only to find that his squeeze has created a new life for herself. Unopened package in tow, Noland hits the road to return it to the sender, who, as the last shots imply, will be his new romantic interest.

In recent years themes of visibility and disconnection are emerging in many cultural products. The increasing presence of surveillance cameras, the development of complex databases, and the progressive wiring of the planet set a context in which people are seen and traceable to an unprecedented extent. Some programs and movies have made a turn to invisibility; concealment is offered as a way for a person to escape the watchful eyes of global information. For example, the SciFi channel revived the old story of the *Invisible Man* in a new high-tech rendition. In the year 2000 Kevin Bacon starred in *Hollow Man* where his character ingests a serum rendering the body invisible. In a somewhat different vein, fantasies about "getting off the grid" are also cropping up, such as the CBS's *Survivor* programs. The

two types of stories respond differently to global economy and information. *Cast Away* is the latest incarnation asking the question, "what if I were invisible or completely off the grid?"

Chuck Noland and FedEx represent the technological and material matrix that allows for instant communication (or object transfer). The purpose of the company, and his specific vocation therein, signify the contraction of space and time attendant to globalization. It is not serendipitous that this very figure gets cast away; the island is as "off the grid" as possible, and it represents the physical limits of global communication. This film offers another cultural fantasy of what it might be like to get jettisoned out of the grid, and seemingly beyond the reach of global capital. Unlike the above cited stories of invisibility, *Cast Away* is not delighting in the freeing (and devious as in the case of *Hollow Man*) potential of invisibility, rather, it is imagining the worst possible consequences of being accidentally propelled from vision. *Cast Away* is, in many respects, a horror film. We watch Chuck, shot by shot, situation by situation, grapple with the loss of technological infrastructure and commodity culture. His pager is water-logged and therefore will not page. He struggles to create fire, and destroys the skin on his palms in the process. In perhaps the most successful moment in the film, he removes his own troubled molar with the nearest blunt instrument. The pleasure of watching is the safe, sadistic delight of wondering what one would do without contact and technology. Noland and the spectator long for him to be seen, traced, detected.

As Noland struggles to reconsider existence sans products and technology, he also rethinks the few remnants of global capitalism that are stranded along with him. In the beginning of the film, he seems overzealous in his commitment to the seamless functioning of FedEx. His devotion is over the top, bordering on ridiculous. Stranded yet still driven by that compulsion, Noland grabs the few packages that drifted ashore with him and organizes them according to destination, still operating through the illusion that he will be able to fulfill his duties, let alone survive. Several days into the island stay, he finally breaks down and opens the packages to see if any of the contents can help him survive. Within the water-logged white, purple and red packages, he finds the following: videotapes, ice skates, women's clothing, and a Wilson volleyball. He uses the contents in creative ways, eking from them multiple and unintended uses. For example, the above noted dental work is performed with an ice skate blade. The appropriations fall under the conventional *MacGyver* purview of making something multifunctional under unforeseen conditions. Yet, there is also something more complicated going on. The audience finds wonderment and humor in Noland's use and reconfiguration of the objects. People laugh, for example, when a port-o-potty fragment washes to shore and he employs it as a sail for his escape raft. More chuckles resounded when he co-opts women's clothing for his own body. Within the larger conversation about global capitalism, Hanks' character is a test, a fantasy, of what happens to our relation with the products of multinational capital when we are no longer located (or tracked) by it. The pleasure of watching him with the objects is that of enjoying their hybridity, as they contain traces of their old function while performing as something new.

The most fascinating and profound resignification happens around the volleyball. Diligently trying to make fire, Noland breaks a piece of wood and cuts a deep gash into his hand. In a fit of rage, he grabs the Wilson volleyball (which appears to have no alternative uses) and casts it away. He drops to the sand, looks to his side and reexamines the ball, which now bears a bloody handprint. Noland waxes artistic and begins to draw a primitive face in the handprint. He sets the ball on a rock, calls it "Wilson" and there begins the most interesting and complicated relationship in the film. (This *by far* beats his "love" for the character developed

by the willfully one-dimensional Helen Hunt as Kelly Frears.) Wilson becomes Hanks' devoted friend and confidant. The most touching moment in the film occurs when, after four years of "companionship," Noland loses Wilson to the waves. The loss propels Noland's most dramatic display of sadness and desperation. An *Entertainment Weekly* review suggests that Chuck's relationship with the ball is either an indicator of madness or it speaks to our "primal instinct to connect" (Schwarzbaum, 46). This may be true, but why the Wilson volleyball and not a coconut? The friendship opens up the question of how we interact with consumer products. In content, it is a query for Noland and in form it becomes one for the spectator too. Wilson watches Chuck in his struggles, injuries and successes; he is a silent witness, much like the cinema spectator. We share with Wilson the position of blankly watching Noland, and a double operation occurs therein. We watch Chuck being watched by Wilson, and we watch Wilson watch Chuck. Identification is fostered with both "characters." Wilson is rendered not only a subject by Chuck, but by our identification with him/it as well. Identification with a ball is no surprise considering the early shots taken from parcel POV.

In asking the question "what if I were completely invisible or off the grid," this particular fantasy answers by reflecting upon the quotidian, minute, detailed, functions of consumer objects. Through Noland's multiple, hybrid reconfigurations and the repeated product POV, the film chooses to imagine being cast away from civilization while retaining intimate connections with and reliance upon the products of multinational capital. The film is a meditation on the potentially inescapable reach of global capital. Noland and the spectator experience only partial disconnection from civilization. This particular vision is about how deeply consumer culture (funded and produced by multinational capital) resides in our consciousness. The dominant intent of the film is to return to a primitive, pre-civilization hominid, yet it really suggests that though there may be a few uninhabited and disconnected sites on the globe, complete escape from civilization is impossible. Even disconnected, the grid is always there, it formed you.

I wandered into the theater expecting to be dazzled by the oft-cited one hour of run time without non-diegetic sound. According to some critics, this experimental attempt at realism propelled Zemeckis into the realm of "artsy" filmmaking. But, I found myself less interested in this gesture, and more preoccupied by what was going on with consumer objects, point of view, and the ubiquitous presence of the FedEx logo. An interesting investigation bubbles out of an otherwise conventional Hollywood film. It is generally a typical Tom Hanks epic-style, big budget film. *Cast Away* wants to be about conventional notions of survival instincts, but while making this very Hollywood and banal point, it actually enters a larger conversation fielding more compelling and innovative questions about the limitlessness of global capital.

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Dancer in the Dark

Dir: Lars Von Trier, 2000

A review by Martyn Bone, University of Copenhagen, Denmark

Already eagerly anticipated as Lars Von Trier's follow-up to the controversial Dogme project *Idioterne* (*The Idiots*, 1998), and as the acting debut of pop pixie and all-round Nineties icon Björk, *Dancer in the Dark* caused a storm at Cannes last year. Though the film won the Palme D'Or and Björk beat allcomers to win the best actress award, many film critics (led in Britain by Peter Bradshaw of *The Guardian*) expressed astonishment at the jury's decisions. As reviews of the film's general release further testify, the extraordinary polarity of opinions about *Dancer in the Dark* have focused upon a couple of central points: either that Von Trier has produced one of the most heart-rending celluloid experiences ever, or that he is a clinical master manipulator of audience emotions; and that either Björk has managed a Method-like performance of astonishing intensity as Selma, the central protagonist, or that she is barely acting at all - that at best, it is Björk being über-Björk, a solipsistic star turn which barely acknowledges the rest of the cast. (One of the most notorious anecdotes doing the rounds in interviews and articles is that on one occasion, a tired and emotional Björk took a bite out of her costume; Von Trier, while not present at this alleged scene, has not exactly denied the rumour, thereby giving credence to both Björk's björkers image, and tales of the mutual antipathy between director and star.) Well, at the risk of resorting to cliché, this is a film and a central performance that each member of the general paying public - not just reviewers - will either love or hate. And at the risk of rendering this review redundant, it really is a film one *has* to see before taking sides. For even those who would usually dismiss the very idea of going to see a "musical" will have to admit that Von Trier has twisted the genre beyond any preconceptions (which for many younger viewers will be, at best, rainy Sunday afternoon snippets of *The Sound of Music* or *Mary Poppins* on the small screen). Whether one actually likes the film which emerges from Von Trier's genre-bending is another matter.

Björk plays Selma, a Czech single mother who has emigrated to the United States in the 1950s to obtain the American medical expertise which will guarantee her young son's future health - Selma fears he is about to be afflicted by the same hereditary eye problem which, as the film begins, she is starting to suffer from herself. Scrimping and saving wages from the grim manual labour she performs in a rural metalwork factory, Selma's only modes of escapism are the Hollywood musicals she devours together with Cvalda, a fellow factory worker (Deneuve) and her role in a local production of well, of course - *The Sound of Music*. It is Selma's infatuation with musicals which allows her to imaginatively recast the drudgery of factory work, with all its attendant mechanical clatterings, into a sepia-tinted musical stage set worthy of Fred'n'Ginger. Given that Von Trier has turned from the ostensibly "authentic" (actually playful) ten principles of the Dogme group to the musical, with all that genre's high camp connotations, the move has met with understandable scepticism. Many of those who preconceive *Dancer in the Dark* as an exercise in pure style or postmodern pastiche will feel vindicated when Selma and other characters are seen discussing the musical genre even before the first song sequence comes along (surprisingly late in proceedings - about forty-five

minutes in). Von Trier's defenders will say that such self-referentiality negotiates the inherent "artificiality" of the musical genre. Yet that first musical sequence - in which Selma bursts into "I've Seen It All" at the moment that her adoring suitor (beautifully played by Peter Stormare) realises that the subject of his admiration is going blind - will surely make clear to all that Von Trier is not interested in making a merely nostalgic musical-by-numbers (in that sense *Dancer in the Dark* is a million miles away from Woody Allen's execrable *Everyone Says I Love You*, 1996). Certainly, the fact that the musical sequences only take place in Selma's mind, and that this somewhat abstracts the generic form from the narrative itself, may encourage detractors to argue that this merely proves Von Trier's emotional disengagement. Yet this torque also allows Von Trier to emphasise the gap between Selma's American Dream - as expressed in her love of Hollywood musicals, and her own mental-musical transformation of her rural-industrial environment into a Norman Rockwell landscape of singing and dancing suburban families - and the rather grimmer social reality. Indeed, the second song sequence, "Cvalda," even more clearly emphasises the gap between the mundane labour the factory workers perform, and the metal machine music - "clatter, clash, clang," Björk sings in onomatopoeic ecstasy - playing in Selma's head. (Yet I suppose this oblique social critique, too, may be taken by some as evidence that the director, with his Danish hippie-commie upbringing and all that, does not sufficiently love the Hollywood musical to accede to its accompanying, all-American cultural assumptions. One also suspects that Von Trier is well aware that Selma's fantasy of happy proles approximates Soviet art as much as it does the - dare one use the phrase nowadays? - false consciousness of Hollywood musicals. Furthermore, the film strongly suggests that the terrifyingly casual anti-communism of the McCarthy era is one of the larger social forces that casts a grim shadow over our Eastern European heroine, pushing her that bit quicker towards her doom.) Perhaps most importantly of all, however, the musical sequences manage to be, if not exactly integral to the general narrative, emotionally effective perspectives upon Selma's optimistic worldview.

To return to the plot: Selma has almost saved up enough hard cash for her son's operation when - well, without giving too much away, fate (or rather, Selma's increasing blindness and others' desperation or lack of sympathy) conspires to separate working mother and hard-earned wages. Von Trier sends Selma on a desperate mission to recover the cash and, with it, her boy's future. Suffice it to say that Selma's quest merely takes her from bad to worse to an almost inevitable terminus on death row. *Uncut's* Chris Roberts put it succinctly: Selma's "relentless bad luck makes Emily Watson's in Von Trier's '96 doom-fest *Breaking the Waves* seem like a stroll in the park." Hence, those who were highly affected by that film will have their heart well and thoroughly wrenched by *Dancer in the Dark*; those who balked at what seemed to be Von Trier's purging of his Catholic guilt through Watson's character will be appalled by Selma, another woman so selfless as to seem like a latter-day saint suffering for all our sins. (Such is the harrowing nature of Von Trier's script that one can fully understand the rumours that, by also becoming Selma *outside* the studio in true Methodic fashion, Björk suffered intense emotional torture; the actress herself has supposedly accused the director of "emotional pornography.") The fact that Selma remains so determined and so selfless will seem implausible, even insulting to many viewers. Yet I never felt that Selma's actions, her nigh-on saintly selflessness, ever came *completely* detached from her experiences and, especially, her sense of obligation to her son. It is also likely that certain facts which Selma keeps secret will infuriate many moviegoers, as her reluctance to tell the truth dooms her. However, I think that these secrets, too, can be traced back to Selma's ultimate concern for her son's future.

It is, to say the least, testament to Von Trier's daring that Selma's trip down death row is interrupted by the final, most outrageous musical sequence, jauntily titled "106 Steps" in reference to the number of strides taken on the walk itself. For some, the moment that the singing Selma pauses and lies down for a moment with another doomed denizen of death row will be the moment at which her saintliness is carried beyond any boundaries of taste. Yet I would suggest that already this sequence has been offset by the previous scene, in which Selma has desperately tried, but for once failed, to transform her reality into musical fantasy by conjuring an a-capella "My Favourite Things." Similarly, the incongruous *joie de vivre* of "106 Steps" is compensated by the film's final act; at the risk of being facetious, I defy George W. Bush to watch that scene and then defend the death penalty on *Oprah*.

So, I liked *Dancer in the Dark*. A lot. But beyond that, I would not presume to speak for others. What I will say is that there is another sense in which you have to see this film: whether you love or loathe it, you will have to admit there is no-one - certainly no-one in Britain - taking the chances which Lars Von Trier takes in this film. Not even the Lars Von Trier who made the Lynch-ier than thou *Riget* (*The Kingdom*, 1994), the brilliant *Breaking the Waves* (1996) or the censor-baiting *Idioterne* (1998). Who else would cast the archetypal French ice maiden Deneuve as a working-class Czech immigrant spinster? (This is, lest we forget, the man who cast Denmark's premiere porn star in *Idioterne*.) Who else would cast a pop star in a film like this (OK, OK, there was Madonna in *Evita* but this isn't *Evita* any more than it's *Chicken Run*), and insist she also writes the music (Von Trier, of course, wrote the lyrics) in order to fully express Selma's being? Which brings me to my final point - this is one case where the maxim "see the film, buy the soundtrack" obtains. Not only does "Selmasongs" completely redefine our expectations of both traditional musical and modern tie-in soundtracks, it also ranks with Björk's best work. Besides that voice, the production, by Björk and former LFO man Mark Bell, is a revelation. 'I've Seen It All' and 'New World' approximate the grand sweep of "Jöga" or "Play Dead" (the former features Radiohead's Thom Yorke performing Stormare's part; as one wag has said, it's the closest that the man behind "Kid A" has come to a melody in some time); "Cvalda" manages to marry the sound of musicals to techno beats'n'pieces which brilliantly approximate the industrial "rhythms" of the metalwork factory. Björk has said she'll never make another film; well, here's hoping both she and Von Trier, in their respective fields of choice, can maintain the inspiration they found together - whatever their mooted mutual dislike - during the making of *Dancer in the Dark*.

Girl, Interrupted

Dir: James Mangold, 1999

A review by Diane R. Wiener, University of Arizona, USA

Girl, Interrupted (1999, released on VHS and DVD in 2000) is James Mangold's adaptation and embellishment of Susanna Kaysen's 1993 memoir of the same name. Starring Winona Ryder (Susanna), Angelina Jolie (Lisa), Clea DuVall (Georgina), Whoopi Goldberg (Valerie) and Vanessa Redgrave (Dr. Wick), the film boasts an ensemble cast whose Little Orphan Annie-like antics vacillate between pointedly and tritely rendering inpatient psychiatric traumas lived during a time of social and political upheaval and friction.

Ryder is often given the task of portraying outsiders, and here does her finest job since *Beetlejuice* (1988), despite the fact that *Girl Interrupted*'s audience cannot be expected to consistently believe that she is supposed to be eighteen years old. Veteran Redgrave and flexible Goldberg give the film its spine, lending a firm backdrop for Jolie and Brittany Murphy, who are the film's star and best kept secret, respectively. Murphy splendidly portrays impudent and depressed hoarder Daisy, adding to her list of "madwomen" roles, since she played Lisa in Oprah Winfrey's 1998 television remake of Frank and Eleanor Perry's 1962 classic, *David and Lisa*. Jolie's portrait of sociopathy won her a deserved Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress, upping the ante from a comparable but far less developed role as Legs in *Foxfire* (1996).

Kaysen's story of psychiatric institutionalization during the tumultuous late 1960s was a bestseller and quickly joined the ranks of American mental health classics like *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* (adapted for film in 1977), *The Bell Jar* (adapted for film in 1979). Like the memoir, the film wrestles with many critical mental health issues, including: what it means to be mad in a mad and maddening world; whether or not diagnoses are reliable or even real; how gender, class, ethnicity, and psychiatric labeling practices act in relationship to each other; and how recovery often occurs outside of (and sometimes despite) the arenas of medication and monitoring. Notwithstanding its success at summoning pivotal questions about psychiatry, the movie is more romanticizing of madness than the memoir. The film's sentimentality hinges upon sexual and racial devices that engage the audience, and that are completely distinct from the book's storyline.

Looking at the film's sexuality messages proves both distressing and exciting. Redgrave's Dr. Wick is scathingly referred to by Lisa as "Dr. Dyke." This label plays upon the audience's recognition of Redgrave in *Julia* (1977). When a secondary character, Cynthia, asserts that she, like Lisa, is a sociopath, Lisa meanly chimes in, "No, you're a dyke." The book in no way alludes to the existence of eroticism between intimate friends Susanna and Lisa. In contrast, Ryder and Jolie's heightening on-screen sexual tensions culminate in a less-than-naïve kiss on the mouth, achieved while smoking marijuana during an escape-from-the-asylum scene. No aspects of this scene exist in the memoir (no running away, no pot, no kiss).

The kiss scene is a hot topic for audiences wondering about Hollywood's ongoing fascination with lesbian chic, and the mainstream film industry's appropriation of queer sexuality to sell images. Jolie's reputed bisexuality adds to the steaminess and irony of her portrayal of a flirtatious woman who enjoys verbally bashing "dykes." Jolie's Lisa has been potentially received by audiences of various likes and persuasions, including those viewers who celebrate her as Jon Voight's daughter, given that Voight's role in *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) has gay cult movie status. It is important to emphasize that Susanna's kissing of Lisa is only permitted with the use of an illicit drug, thereby disclosing the film's apparently phobic reaction to consenting homosexuality. *Girl, Interrupted* simultaneously downplays and invokes (or markets) lesbianism.

The film's racial messages are even more problematic than its charged opinions about sexuality. The memoir's black characters include the father of Lisa's post-hospital life child, absent from the film's attention, since only Daisy and later Susanna's discharges are highlighted. Notably, Daisy's horrific end (witnessed by the film's Susanna and Lisa, who after running away stay in Daisy's apartment) bears no resemblance to the memoir's story, in which her death is calmly reported to her former inmates by the staff. Perhaps melodramatic plotlines that feature suicide augment the rewards filmmakers reap beyond those abetted by homophilic titillation. If this is the case, it is an understatement to say that highlighting a suicide is perilous in a movie of this type. While the memoir includes multiple African-American presences (albeit secondary to the story's nucleus), the film has only one: Valerie/Goldberg, also invented for Hollywood consumers - head nurse Valerie in Kaysen's memoir is white.

In *Playing in the Dark* (1993), Toni Morrison asserts that Blackness as a sign indexes Whiteness within myriad European and Anglo-American literary and non-fictional spaces. According to Morrison, white people symbolically and tangibly rely on black individuals to define themselves; whites cannot know their true selves in the absence of comparison to what many scholars call "the Other." Morrison's logic is prominent in the translation of *Girl, Interrupted* from page to screen. Valerie is inscribed throughout the film as a character who is time-bound and historically trapped. She wears a tacky poncho and has a huge afro, while Susanna/Ryder looks like she could step off the screen at any moment into a scene from *Reality Bites* (1994). Goldberg as Valerie is a coalescence of all the black women staff members mentioned in the memoir. An essentialized, primary caretaker for the large number of upper middle class, young white women around her, Valerie is the film's concocted black stereotype who literally tells Susanna who she is and who she can be. After Susanna refuses to get out of bed, Valerie carries her to the washroom and throws her in the tub in an act of tough love. Susanna protests, calling the asylum "fascistic," and Valerie quips, "I've worked in state hospitals and this is a five star hotel." Susanna racially mocks Valerie, who says, "You are not crazy. You are a lazy, self-indulgent, little girl who is driving herself crazy." Valerie is then met with Susanna's racist speech: "Did you learn that at night school for welfare mothers? You pretend to be a doctor, you just a nursemaid." Valerie retorts, "You are just throwing it all away."

In a later scene, Susanna confides in Valerie, "I know what it's like to want to die, to hurt yourself on the outside to kill the thing on the inside." Valerie replies, "It's fine to tell this to me, but you need to say this to your doctor." Susanna continues, "I don't understand what's wrong with me - how can I get better if I don't even know what's wrong with me?" and Valerie responds, "You do understand your disease...you were just very clear about it...get it out of yourself, get it away, so you can't curl up with it any more." Susanna takes these

comments as inspiration to write, and apologizes for having racially attacked Valerie ("Sorry I was such a bitch"), her emblem of sanity in a crazy place. While she is not tragic like Delilah in *Imitation of Life* (1934), Valerie can be interpreted as a 1990s version of a Hollywood "mammy," who tells Susanna "Don't drop anchor here, understand?"

Goldberg's Valerie is exceedingly sensitive, ultra-mothering, and hyper-real. Her strong portrait is aided by viewers' familiarity with her roles as Guinan, the empathic hostess who intermittently appeared during five seasons of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, as healer/medium Oda Mae Brown in *Ghost* (1990), and as compassionate political helper Terry Doolittle in *Jumpin' Jack Flash* (1986). Her recent role as The Grand Banshee, the fairies' shapeshifting bird leader in the television production *Leprechauns* (1999) is parallel to her character in *Girl, Interrupted*: as *Leprechauns*' sole black character, who is surrounded by and oversees white juniors, Goldberg's head changeling responsibilities are unquestionably central to the tale.

Susanna and Lisa's shared ethnicity (Jewish) is altogether absent from the film, and therefore cannot be easily read as one reason among many for their fervid bond. Valerie's influence vis-a-vis Susanna, despite what is depicted as her utter difference from her, makes it possible for Lisa's power over Susanna to be incomplete. Valerie/Goldberg as the catalyst for Susanna's recovery is therefore the film's driving force.

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Kikujiro

Dir: Takeshi Kitano, 1999

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

The reception of Takeshi Kitano's films, insofar as they have penetrated the popular imagination of Anglo-American culture, has largely concentrated upon the violence which punctuates them. The video release of *Sonatine* (1993), for instance, displays Kitano wielding an M-16; the American DVD release of *Hana-Bi* (1997) promises "scenes of harrowing carnage". In a manoeuvre which reveals an Orientalizing taste for a violence excised from mainstream Hollywood cinema, even Takeshi Kitano's most well-known films - *Violent Cop* (1989), *Sonatine*, *Hana-Bi* - have been aligned with the "heroic bloodshed" mode of Hong Kong action movies. The European and American consumption of these Hong Kong actioners, particularly exemplified in the work of John Woo, seems problematic. The cultural distance which allows the (white) spectator to enjoy the spectacle of Chinese on Chinese, or Japanese on Japanese, violence, is a distinctly uneasy pleasure.

Where Woo's films are suffused with sentimentality and a rather crass religiosity to balance the ultraviolence, Kitano's films concentrate upon the failure of a violent masculine ethos, one which eventually betrays the protagonist. Woo's films, particularly his pre-Hollywood work, are destabilised by a central homoeroticism between paired male protagonists/antagonists, the excessive violence being an estranged representation of sexual release. (Watch *The Killer*, 1989, for the circulation of the gaze). Kitano's central characters, however, usually played by himself, are men whose reliance on *yakuza* or police codes of conduct leaves them bereft, and eventually leads them to suicide.

In Japanese cinema, the *mythos* of masculine heroism is located in the *bushido* code of the samurai. Toshiro Mifune's wandering ronin in Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* (1961) and *Sanjuro* (1962), while not invulnerable, triumphs through the prowess of his sword arm, and the power of his cunning. Both these films end with the wanderer returning to the road, free from societal, communal and familial ties. If the contemporary *yakuza* or cop in Kitano's films inherits this *mythos*, it is one shown to be closer to that revealed by the wise Kambei in *Seven Samurai* (1954): in exchange for a life of violence and excitement, the ronin becomes homeless, lost, and treads a life-path that only leads to an unhappy death.

The narrative of *Kikujiro* also consists of a journey or quest, a motif common to other Kitano films. Here, the young parentless boy Masao, played with poignant reticence by Yusuke Sekiguchi, is living in Tokyo with his grandmother. He finds a photograph of his absent mother and an address, and sets off to find her. He does not get very far before he is noticed by a friend of his grandmother, who then orders her husband, Kikujiro, played by Kitano, to accompany the boy on his journey. The first half of the film is then an episodic series of misadventures, in which the boy and the ageing *yakuza* try to find Masao's mother, and begin to construct a friendship.

Kikujiro begins and ends on a bridge, as had *Violent Cop*, but here, the image is not of Kitano himself, but concentrates upon the other central character of the film, Masao. He runs across the bridge, toy angel wings protruding from his backpack, an image of transcendence at odds with the suicides of *Sonatine* and *Hana-Bi*. The bridge is a potent symbol for Japanese art, relating to the *hashigakari* of noh theatre, which is a place of transition between the natural and supernatural worlds. This bridge stands between two states, or selves, in relation to Masao: between the isolated, wary, pained early childhood, and a more open and happy boy, a character forged in the friendship with the older man. It also suggests the painful transitions of modern Japan. Postwar Japanese cinema is pervaded by narratives of struggle between tradition and modernity, between communal values and the individual, between an older generation and youth. The bridge is an attempt to find a space between these two forces. It is analogous to the beach camp that Kikujiro creates for Masao later in the film, a place of games where conflicts are put aside.

The bridge also stands between the split author of these films: Takeshi Kitano, the internationally recognised film director; and "Beat" Takeshi, television star, actor, and consummate physical comedian. In previous films, elements of comedy (such as the sumo on the beach in *Sonatine*) have co-existed with the violence, but *Kikujiro* seems an attempt to find a third way between the mode of gangster narrative, and Keatonesque physical comedy. Kitano suggested that *Kikujiro* would be a deliberate break from his *yakuza*-inflected films, and also seems a project with a strong personal investment: Kikujiro was the name of Kitano's own absent father. The film is, in a sense, a narrative of healing, of reconnection.

Kikujiro is beautifully shot by long-time Kitano collaborator, director of photography Katsumi Yanagijima. When Kikujiro and Masao finally reach the address of the boy's mother, Kikujiro investigates alone, and discovers the mother to have a husband and another child. Unexpectedly, Kikujiro protects the boy by telling him the address was incorrect. They then stand on a nearby beach, the *mise-en-scène* emphasising their isolation in the landscape, and also their growing interdependence. The beach is an important symbol in Kitano's films, a terminal place in both *Sonatine* and *Hana-Bi*. However, here Kikujiro and Masao turn away from the emptiness. Previously a place of death, the beach becomes the site of reconciliation. Now surrogate father and son, they begin their return to Tokyo.

This scene forms a caesura in the middle of the narrative. The first half consists of the outward journey; the second half concentrates upon Kikujiro's creation of an encampment to entertain Masao, for which he enlists the services of two (rather sweet-natured) bikers, and a traveller who had offered a lift. The camp revolves around a series of comic games, usually involving the humiliation of at least one of the three helpmates. *Kikujiro* is, in large part, a festive comedy, and its editing makes much of both Kitano's bandy-legged shuffle and of his blank face. The film generates its laughter through staging scenes of physical comedy, then cutting away to either the blank or stoic faces of onlookers, or the rueful aftermath. Any scenes of violence are elided. Curiously, the camp constitutes a world without women, an innocent substitute family of men, much more benign than either the *yakuza* or cop fraternities found elsewhere in Kitano's films.

The journey is a traditional motif in both Japanese literature (travel literature is called *kiko*) and film, and a mystique often surrounds the traveller. *Kikujiro*, like Ozu's *Tokyo Story* (1953), narrates a journey and a return, a movement in space mapped onto an inner or symbolic transformation. Kikujiro and Masao eventually return to Tokyo having connected with each other, and both having acknowledged and compensated for an absent mother.

Kikujiro has been accused of sentimentality, but this narrative of healing seems particularly poignant and pertinent to our post-ironic times. It seems a pity that a film which deals with emotion in a tender and moving way should be castigated as "sentimental". As in *Hana-Bi*, Kitano's own art plays an important role in the visual texture of the film, an art which became an important personal mode of expression for the director after his near-fatal motorcycle crash. An emergence of a means of expression, particularly of male emotions, seems at the heart of the film. This is repeated as the narrative ends and the pair part. Finally, Kitano, who has dominated and nicknamed everyone he meets, reveals to Masao the secret of the film's title, and his own name: Kikujiro.

Muertos de Risa

Dir: Alex de la Iglesia, 1999

A review by Andrew Willis, University of Salford, UK

Muertos de Risa is a comeback film for its director Alex de la Iglesia, following the relative critical and commercial disappointment of *Perdita Durango* (1997). It is certainly a smaller film than his quasi-sequel to David Lynch's *Wild at Heart* (1990), which is something of a positive after his sprawling adventures south of the U.S border. *Muertos de Risa* certainly represents a homecoming for de la Iglesia, working once again with such long term collaborators as screenwriter Jorge Guerricaechevarria, actors Santiago Segura and Alex Angulo, and set designer Biaffra. With these talented contributors de la Iglesia has created a wonderfully crazy comedy about entertainment, stardom and television in contemporary Spain.

Alex de la Iglesia came to international prominence with his first feature *Accione Mutante* (1992), a generic hybrid involving terrorism, space travel and, most of all, visual excess. Barry Jordan and Rikki Morgan-Tamosunas, in their *Contemporary Spanish Cinema*, describe the film as "a sharp satire of the intrusiveness and manipulative nature of the visual media of television and video" (194). Certainly, this satirical view of television plays a central role in *Muertos de Risa*, as it did in de la Iglesia's second feature, *El Dia de la Bestia* (1995). Again, as Jordan and Morgan-Tamosunas argue, that film contains "a lurid recreation of a television 'exorcism'" and "presents a witty, shrew and savage critique of media prophets, evangelists and hucksters" (194). In *Muertos de Risa* the focus of de la Iglesia's critical eye is television light entertainment.

Muertos de Risa tells the tale of two stars of popular television, comedians Bruno and Nino. It opens as the pair hurtle towards the studio, cursing each other in separate cars, to record their 1993 New Year's Eve show. After a surprising twist, their manager (Alex Angulo) tells the story of their rise to fame in the world of light entertainment. Amidst an array of 1970s fashion statements and colours, which also adorn the film's promotional poster, the story of the two mismatched comedians unfolds. Nino begins the film as a singer in small bars, one of which Bruno works in. The pair are thrust together as an army unit on manoeuvres trashes the bar and leaves it in flames. Bruno and Nino head to Madrid to seek their fortune in the world of television. At an audition for a variety show, which they fail miserably, they meet their future manager. After finding a focus for their comedy at an open mike fairground show the couple begin to tour with the carnival, eventually becoming the stars of the show and finding their way back to television. This is marked by a phone call which offers them a spot on "the greatest TV show of all time", 1, 2, 3. They are a hit and their already strained relationship goes from bad to worse as jealousy and paranoia take over.

Muertos de Risa takes a number of broad swipes at the 1970s and 1980s. It does not avoid the Franco dictatorship, using the early bar scene to reveal how much power the army wielded in rural areas, often going unchecked in their activities and prejudices. This is effectively done

through the fear and resignation displayed by the bar owner as the soldiers drink his stock without paying, finally burning down the building and driving off throwing insults as they go.

Alex de la Iglesia is a former comic artist and art director and his keen visual eye is displayed throughout the film. The settings create a marvellously camp version of the 1970s and the selection of emblematic guests such as Yuri Geller, heighten the humour of the piece. Certainly the flight from serious issues and the hardship of day to day life, and the celebration of excess and freedom that marked the post-Franco period, is presented through the celebrity of Bruno and Nino. Their act is nothing, a set of emperor's new clothes. It is represented as something that gains popularity because it is not threatening in any way. When asked to explain their popularity they simply repeat the already invented reasons offered by their manager. Here the film seems to be at its most critical. We are made aware, through a montage that reveals the couple's rise to the top, that they have no comedic skills. The audience seem to love them simply because they are stupid. Within the film, they become the best loved entertainers on Spanish TV, their act allowing a population to turn their backs from serious social and political issues. Ironically, both Santiago Segura who plays Nino and El Gran Wyoming who plays Bruno are both very popular figures on Spanish television.

de la Iglesia also pokes fun at symbols of Spain's acceptance into the new Europe. The spectacle of the Barcelona Olympics is ridiculed as Nino fires the arrow that lights the Olympic flame and marches with the Spanish team in the opening ceremony. We soon learn that he has bribed officials to gain these positions. The film is suggesting that the high levels of corruption, that so marked the dictatorship, did not vanish in 1975. Indeed, the film is marked by moments when serious issues appear only to be ignored by the main protagonists as they bicker and jibe. This is perhaps most effective in a sequence that shows Bruno and Nino squabbling as they record a TV special, once again more concerned with their personal, petty jealousies than their work. At the same time an army unit has taken over the TV station as part of the real life attempted coup, led by Colonel Tejero, that rocked the post-Franco democracy in 1981. The soldiers who appear at the TV station are also ridiculed by de la Iglesia as they are more interested in beer than taking over the Spanish state, and their leader shouts for the recording of Nino and Bruno to continue as they are his favourite television act.

Thanks to its excessive mise-en-scene, its beautifully timed performances, and its madcap tale of television, *Muertos de Risa* is an exciting film. It shows Alex de la Iglesia as a filmmaker confident in his work and unafraid to go further than "good taste" may expect. Long may he continue in this irreverent vein! Currently unreleased in the UK, it is to be hoped that a distributor gives fans of de la Iglesia's, and Spanish cinema in general, the opportunity to view this wonderfully inventive comedy and meet its fantastic central duo of Nino and Bruno (or is that Bruno and Nino?).

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Requiem for a Dream

Dir: Darren Aronofsky, 2000

A review by Lisa Rull, University of Nottingham, UK

Addictions - whether to sex, drugs, television, or chocolate - all share a common emotion: the exultant kick of "the first time". Recapturing the nerve-tingling thrill of that first exhilarating moment subsequently becomes an all-consuming desire, wherein the desperate ennui of physical repetition serves only to remind how much you crave the emotional satisfaction provided by the original experience. Further acquisition and consumption rarely generate the same hauntingly unrepeatable joy.

Watching some movies creates similarly addictive responses: how many of us find ourselves instinctively drawn to the same movies in our video/DVD collection? It is difficult to believe that many will take Darren Aronofsky's *Requiem for a Dream* to their hearts in such a manner, chasing repeat screenings, even out of black-humoured perversity. *Requiem* is an uncomfortable and bleak film whose visual quirks arrogantly mirror the traits and experiences of addiction. The compelling narrative and, especially, its extraordinary visuals drag in the viewers almost against their better judgement. The film follows the entwined lives from summer through to winter - there is resolutely no spring - of four Brooklyn characters: Sara Goldfarb (Ellen Burstyn); her son, Harold (Jared Leto); Harold's girlfriend, Marion (Jennifer Connolly); and his best friend Tyrone (Marlon Wayans). It begins with the pawning of a television, wheeled across the walkways of a sunlit Brooklyn and Coney Island fair in order to buy drugs; it ends with amputation, sexual degradation, and electro-convulsive therapy, set against wintry urban decay and barren institutional interiors. A blue-grey death-like pallor banishes all heat from the screen in these latter scenes.

In between, the seasons' captions slam down the screen on us like heavy garage doors. Sara, a lonely woman alienated from her fellow Brighton Beach widows, begins as a frumpy, chocolate-devouring enthusiast for diet infomercials, so hooked on television that she cannot bear to watch as Harold pawns the set for the umpteenth time. (This first virtuoso sequence allows us to gracefully switch our attention across the split screen juxtaposition, from Sara's cowering in the cupboard to Harold's impatient pleading, without ever skipping a beat). Desperate to escape into the past, and her beloved red dress, Sara chases her dream of being on TV all the way to the doctor's surgery and a colourful prescription of "appetite suppressants". Soon she is dramatically "speeding" - in all senses - towards her fate. Sleepless, terrorised by her animated fridge, she ends up ragged and incoherent in the television studio reception. The "beautiful people" that finally place her in the hands of the psychiatric care system can hardly bear to look at this vivid embodiment of ageing. Sara's former neighbours, who encouraged both the original dieting and subsequent quick-fix pills, finally find her - blank, emaciated and terrified after endless ECT - in the local asylum. Their guilty sobs outside in the snow-edged streets suggest an acceptance of responsibility none of the addicts are capable of expressing.

Though they each make brave efforts to stretch themselves, the three younger actors cannot possibly hope to compete with the experienced and barnstorming performance Burstyn gives. Throughout much of the film, but especially in the first sequence, Leto and Connolly's sun-bright passion and elegantly wasted "heroin chic" style is conveyed less by their acting than by the film's wistful camerawork and choice of locations. Cloudless blue days overlook lush green grass; enticingly tall buildings offer privacy and a vantage point for launching nostalgic paper aeroplanes. Against such settings, the lovers are hollow figures, ultimately disappointed by their own reality and representation. Bleakly artificial blue lights that emphasise (emotional/physical) distance replace the tender and intimate caresses captured across split-screen body close-ups. A once-precious summer-lit photograph of the couple eventually provides Marion's entry to the sex industry. The telephone number for the seedy pimp/supplier Little John (Keith David) is scrawled on the back of the photograph, thus identifying the image's original hopes as all the more poignant and unrealisable.

Although overshadowed by Burstyn, the young wastrels are nevertheless plausibly sympathetic, with Wayans's performance as Tyrone indicating a dramatic talent ill-served by the actor's inclination to comedy. However, inescapable discomfort with Aronofsky's handling of race and gender is always at the back of your mind. Why do the scenes of Tyrone and his girlfriend convey such over-sexualised voyeurism (and must Marion's sex-party performance be so degrading)? And yet... the only character that might even get to spring is Tyrone, who dreams in prison of his long-dead mother's reassuring affection.

Overall, the film is an unrepentantly dark morality tale tracking the predictable emotional and physical decline of its addicts, but this description is not intended to be negative. As syndicated Cox News Service reviewer Steve Murray remarked, *Requiem* is a movie "that few people will enjoy (or even tolerate). It doesn't want to please you. It doesn't want to make you happy" (Murray, 2001). Given the film's origins as a 1978 novel by Hubert Selby Jr., there was never likely to be a redemptive upbeat ending. When Uli Edel directed *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (1989), Selby's once-banned novel provided cinema with a searing indictment of humanity's inability to deal with love, sex, and emotion. *Requiem* is a similarly pessimistic narrative, but where Edel's *Last Exit* filmed the novel's multi-character plots with brutal realism, Aronofsky's team deploys a full-range of technical experimentation to depict *Requiem*'s inevitable descent into hell.

Reviewers in both the USA and UK have been divided over almost every aspect of Aronofsky's second feature film. Maybe they expected another (pseudo) cerebral thriller after his breath-taking debut feature *Pi* (1998) had flaunted its low-budget arty b/w cinematography and kabbala/mathematical driven plot. *Pi* granted Aronofsky a Sundance directorial award and the promise of production upgrades. With *Requiem*, what they got instead was a seemingly morally naïve "all drugs-are-bad" tale ill-suited to the complexities of contemporary attitudes towards addiction. Yet many of these problems derive from Selby's original novel, and as a Selby co-scripted film the impact of AIDS or the "war on drugs" remain strictly off-limits. In demonising all addictions as equally disastrous - whether television, "diet pills" or heroin - the film also allows little room for comfortable liberal moralising. Every socialising activity or pleasure becomes tainted by the possibility (likelihood) of addiction, almost to the point of ludicrousness.

Yet it is Aronofsky's trademark visuals that have stirred the most diverse, and extreme, reactions amongst reviewers and audiences. Does the application of his imposing visual style (split screens, abstracted corporeal close-ups, and manipulation of camera and sound speeds)

enhance or detract from the narrative? Does it make it seem more cinematically radical than it actually is, or does it lend the film many of the qualities of an addictive drug? Whatever the viewer decides on, credit for the undeniably stunning aesthetic of *Requiem* belongs to Aronofsky's smart collaborations with his editor, Jay Rabinowitz, and director of photography, Matty Libatique. Previously associated with Jim Jarmusch, Rabinowitz creates much of *Requiem*'s disconcerting spiral of terror through a smart hip-hop cutting room style. Similarly, Libatique, in his second association with Aronofsky, powerfully demonstrates how the camera can convey an acute and often uncomfortable sensuality in his beautifully focused cinematography. Backed by an ear-splitting soundtrack from Clint Mansell (who also worked on *Pi*) and the violent strings of the Kronos Quartet, the end result is a full-on assault to the mind and senses.

In the long term, as with any "shocking" film, *Requiem* is unlikely to be proved cinematically important, either for its content or its style. Echoing the initial thrills of an addiction, in its aftermath you are breathlessly impressed by its excesses, but emptiness can quickly overwhelm you. In the time since I viewed *Requiem* its vitality has become more ambivalent in my mind. Is Burstyn pushing the boundaries of award-winning acting, or is she a caricature of the hysterical mother? Are the endlessly repeated quick cuts of varied scenes of drug consumption (cut the line, cell splits, needle, heat, dilated pupil, pill, TV remote click) the vivid realisation of repetitious addiction, or is Aronofsky simply showing off a lazy visual shorthand?

I exited the cinema with nerves frayed, grateful that Aronofsky hadn't succumbed to the recent tendency for films of two hours and forty minutes plus (*Requiem* cuts a thankfully brief 102 minutes). Despite a longing for alcohol to overcome my queasy emotional exhaustion, I settled for a non-addictive fruit juice. I think I may have to go back for a second viewing...

Reference:

Murray, Steve (2000)
<http://www.coastfm.com/shared/entertainment/movies/requiemforadream.html> (22 January 2001).

The Wind Will Carry Us

Dir: Abbas Kiarostami, 1999

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

The main thrust of narrative film criticism, under the guidance of realists such as Kracauer and Bazin, has framed the cinema as a derivation of and expansion upon the stage, with the front-and-center theatrical subjectivity of the Edisonian camera eventually giving way to the freedom of camera dollies and widescreen, a thesis demonstrated quite literally in the opening of Olivier's *Henry V* (1945). Yet a secondary influence on the development of film, equally obvious though less scrutinized, is the frozen image not only of the photograph but also of the painting, as the cinema image appropriates the "high art" pedigree of still images as its own. One need only consider the pastoral Western landscapes of W.S. Hart's *Hell's Hinges* (1916) and the Impressionism of Renoir's *A Day in the Country* (1935) to more recent "moving paintings" as diverse as Paradjanov's *The Color of Pomegranates* (1969), Malick's *Days of Heaven* (1978) - whose cinematography drove critics to their thesauri to find synonyms for "beautiful" when they really meant "pretty" - and Huo Jianqui's *Postmen in the Mountains* (1999), which exploits traditions of Chinese landscape painting. To bring the association even closer, we should also recall that many filmmakers celebrated for their visual styles - Kurosawa, Lynch, Jarman, Greenaway, etc. - were also professional painters. While there is, of course, a legitimate place for painterly aesthetics in film, and while the media should be entirely free to steal from one another, a problem of *judgment* has arisen in film criticism. In recent years, this sort of uneventful pictorialism - the ironic reproduction of near-static images in a medium of intrinsic, mechanical motion - has become fallaciously equated with "art" (i.e. that which is good) simply because it imitates paintings, which are presumably still considered a higher art than film. The innate irony of statically boring images in a medium of motion forces audiences to be self-conscious of their roles as spectators of a drama whose privileging of image over story and stasis over movement attempts to call attention to both the limits and the new possibilities of the medium. But because we are self-conscious of the ironic production of these near-still images, we meditate not only on the pictorialism of the passing filmic moment but on the very act of producing uneventful images in a medium where we expect action. When we become cognizant of this act of production itself, we become aware of the filmmaker's presence. Beguiled by this awareness, many among us will feel the need to raise the *auteur* flag anytime we think a director is self-conscious of the fact that he is a "director."

Abbas Kiarostami's *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999, *Bad ma ra khahad bord*) is among the more extreme of this type of still, purposively uneventful films; it is a work which will be called ingenious because, as is often the case with minimalism, its lack of content can be mistaken for a brilliance of form. A troupe of urban travelers posing as engineers arrives at a rural Iranian village for vague reasons, though presumably to report on the imminent death of an old, withering woman. Along the way, the hero forms a tenuously avuncular bond with a local boy, repeatedly drives up to altitudes high enough to facilitate the use of his cell phone (the "new technology" is inoperable in the archaic village), helps villagers rescue a

ditchdigger who has stumbled into his ditch (the bonds of traditional community), and so forth. Towards the end of the film, while we have been enjoying subtly sentimental images of pure, pre-modern Iran for lack of anything better to do, the character of an old, poetry-spouting doctor redundantly informs us that the key to life is in the enjoyment of nature - as if the film's rolling landscapes did not already make that obvious - and the celebration of life (as opposed, presumably, to the hero's waiting for the old woman to keel over).

The title of this film is a reference to a line in a poem by Forough Farrok-hzad, itself based on the Rubai'yat, a work banned in Iran as heretical. I have little doubt that Kiarostami's humanist statement resonates more in its native context: indeed, the diasporic Iranian audience with which I saw the film were glowing. Yet why are Western critics, who can *at best* only appreciate the film's themes in the abstract, so quick to champion a film the universality of whose sentiments, if presented in any other medium, would be immediately revealed as naïve? There may indeed be a problem in translation, as the English subtitles provided for the poems used in the film give no indication of their profundity. Yet Western critics - and the Venice Film Festival judges in particular - did not have cultural relativism or specificity on their minds when they praised this film. Rather, they emphasized the film's universality, spreading whatever Iranian resonances the film may have into a bland paste of generic humanitarianism. But while the film may be noble politics, it is, I believe, bad art.

When *The Wind* snatched the Grand Jury prize at the 1999 Venice Film Festival, the judges justified their decision thus: "For its lyrical sense of nature, its intriguing narrative, and its trust in the viewer's participation in the creation of its poetry." While the Venice judges may praise the film for "its trust in the viewer's participation," I am not sure I trust the film: its stimuli are not stimulating. In a novel, the author may dwell upon objects and introspect for us; but in a film, the camera's blank stare upon surfaces offers us only exteriors which we then use as springboards in a reader-response game whose boredom or excitement is contingent on the *quality of the stimuli* we are given. Furthermore, in trying to avoid the oppression of narrative - a theoretically noble pursuit, I agree - the film winds up oppressing us with the self-righteousness of its boredom. While we, desperate souls, are tempted to praise any rare film that is a "personal statement," and while there are inarguably certain lazy pleasures to be had from *The Wind*, there is no logical reason why products of personal craftsmanship are *automatically* good. The underlying idea here is that "poetry" is so rare in any film today that anything even slightly reeking of the stuff will be labeled a masterpiece - yet is it not possible that this is *bad* poetry, a series of naturalist clichés evincing a bland humanism which succeeds only at winning awards instead of winning minds, a jejune philosophy of naturalism wrapped in a band of self-righteous *auteurism*? Or are we, deluged by a sophomoric "indie" film culture offering only flubbed bank heists and twenty-something pseudo-existentialism, now willing to say that even bad poetry gleams like long-forgotten, *auteurist* gold?

We are invited by Kiarostami's Realist camera to first study and then lose ourselves in the labyrinthine architecture of the white, twisting town and the simple nature that surrounds it. Without our attention being directed - or oppressed - by a linear narrative, we are asked to find our own pleasures not in the text itself but in the subjective interaction that exists between enigmatic images and the mind that decodes them. But the blank stare of Kiarostami's camera upon the village's cobbled stone or lonely terraces, or ancient trees jutting from dusty earth, merely makes us aware of a narrative lack without actually delivering us from it. The film is not less simple than it seems, nor does it wield the effect of the ironically surprising *haiku*, which stimulates thought, for the irony of this film's

intentionally meandering narrative only offers a formal demonstration of what is already obvious: that fact that we need *some* alternative to Hollywood's connect-the-dots narratives. The ultimate problem is that this alleged minimalist solution to Hollywood bombast is in fact but another symptom, a reactive measure that implores us to worship the holy, simple, old-world film artisan (be it Kiarostami or Hou Hsiao-hsien or whoever) for rescuing us clueless, corrupted sheep from our capitalist cinema hell.

It is only when enigmatic forms are valued over the specificities of content that a film whose theme is simply that we should stop to smell the flowers can be declared a masterpiece. As an added irony, we must endure tired formalist arguments from Kiarostami cultists who insist that the film's meditative uneventfulness is in fact an intellectually demanding existential challenge - as if this were the cinematic equivalent of Kierkegaard - and that the film's organic structure transcends the mundanity of its content by paradoxically presenting something more real than reality through a monastically ascetic style. (So, then, is style reality?) The mere recognition of conspicuously realistic time in a medium known for its temporal trickery becomes a *de facto* false ideology of naturalist realism. Somehow we need technology (the cinema) to tell us we should enjoy nature, for, as Bazin might argue, only through artificial reproductions of nature can we see what nature really is. The utterly baffling thing is that both popular and "serious" critics still seem to believe in this fantasy.

Contemporary mainstream critics will call such films "lyrical" (as if there were no bad lyrics) and "poetic" (as if there were no bad poems), as their (un)critical vocabulary comes to signify even less than the sum of its Pavlovian clichés. Perhaps critics should learn that "poetry" is simply a genre and not an intrinsically positive value judgment, and that *The Wind Will Carry Us* is as generic in its minimalist-pastoral humanism as, say, *Die Hard* (1988) is in its American populist sadism. *The Wind* has many incidental boredoms along with its few incidental pleasures, but those boredoms do not themselves become pleasures when critics call boredoms brilliant, nor do impressionistic adjectives such as "lyrical" or "sublime" become denotative rather than connotative the minute they are printed in a review.

The problem, ultimately, is not Kiarostami's film *per se* or even the genre of the naturalist "painted film," once we realize it is itself a generic set of muted stimuli and not really a Warholian statement of antinarrative (whose entire point is the absence of stimuli). Instead, the real problem lies with those critics who have lost their critical faculties, and in their paternalistic blindness tell us they know what is good for us. Because the production costs of Hollywood children's films are now greater than the GNP's of some entire nations, we have long since reached the point where watching films is just as much of a political act as making them. We must see films for what they are, and be as suspicious equally of the non-event as we are of the super-event: we must not be lured by the fallaciously "transcendental" promise of uneventfulness, or enticed by the treason of the minimalist enigma. We cannot be suckered by critics who cannot tell the difference between boredom and intellectual difficulty, or critics selling ideas of prestige if not tickets, telling us we are insensitive philistines if we refuse to accept their candidates for the canon. So I will say that *The Wind Will Carry Us* is not a beautiful film because its ideas, as far as an American like myself can see them, are too blatant to be beautiful. It is simply a film which takes the fact of its own heretical existence as its subject matter - for there is no other subject matter here. That the film makes demands on your patience does not mean that it makes demands on your intellect; in fact, rather than being elitist, its humanitarian ideals are downright bourgeois. We have instead so given up on the possibility of insurrectionary political subject matter in film that we are left with this combination of false humility and self-righteousness. I should stress the words "subject

matter" here because, while *The Wind*'s use of a banned poem is certainly a political act in itself, it is a formal gesture, and the actual subject matter of the film on the whole is apolitical (though I realize, yes, that being apolitical can itself be political). I am loathe to suggest that political filmmakers should risk their personal well-being for their art, though a film such as Tian Zhaungzhuang's *The Blue Kite* (1993) should demonstrate that such risks have been taken. Rather, I would simply like to see critics become *critical* again, to stop confusing noble political goals with the false veneer of "art" that conceals them, to create a new vocabulary which values real philosophy above emptily pregnant images, which qualifies art in terms of its content instead of quantifying it into the competitive capitalism of awards and star-ratings.

But is it I, now, who is being heretical?

Traffic

Dir: Steven Soderbergh, 2000

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

Traffic stands as one of the most important and powerful films to rise from Hollywood in the past one or two decades. In the midst of its rough appearance, the movie's cinematic traits exhibit exquisite finesse and subtlety from script to screen. The film not only raises relevant and necessary sociopolitical questions; with the help of its aesthetics, *Traffic* furthers the promise of director Steven Soderbergh as an American *auteur*.

Adapted by Stephen Gaghan from the British mini-series *Traffik*, the film follows multiple characters across three main storylines. The first involves Judge Robert Wakefield (Michael Douglas). Upon being granted direction of the Office of National Drug Control Policy, the judge discovers that leading the war on drugs entails more politicking and complications than one could ever dream. He also learns that his own daughter (Erika Christensen) is slowly destroying herself using those very drugs that he has been assigned to stamp out.

The second story revolves around Helena Ayala (Catherine Zeta-Jones), a wife and mother of one with another child on the way. When the Drug Enforcement Agency arrests her husband (Steven Bauer), Helena learns from the couple's lawyer (Dennis Quaid) of her husband's real business as a drug smuggler. Subsequently she has to engage in harsh yet necessary actions to keep her family from harm. While this is occurring, two determined agents (Don Cheadle and Luis Guzman) investigate her to assure the downfall of this crucial niche of the drug trade.

The final narrative comprises events in the life of Mexican policeman Javier Rodriguez (Benicio Del Toro). In attempting to do right by himself and his idea of law, he simultaneously attempts to survive the shifty entanglements between Mexico's law enforcement and drug cartels. In doing so Rodriguez finds himself caught between a Mexican general trying to wipe out the Tijuana cartel his own way and DEA agents trying to get Rodriguez to go to work for American drug enforcement.

While these details might seem somewhat intricate for an initial idea of the plot, they merely embody the basic details of this celluloid epic. Any further information ruins one of the appeals of the film's surface structure. Relying on scarce character intersection, the fractured narrative allows for the distinct and equal treatment of these characters and their stories. No one character becomes a central protagonist or hero in the Hollywood sense. The filmmakers give the audience enough respect to enjoy the multi-layered characters and to make connections on its own between those characters.

Performances leave nothing to be desired. Michael Douglas provides a determined yet controlled performance as a man pulled in opposite directions by occupational and familial duties. Catherine Zeta-Jones leaves behind her star image in favor of a magnificent transformation from a naïve and complacent character to a sinister one who throughout is

thinking of nothing but protecting her family. Playing a man who feels traitorous on his road to heroism, Benicio Del Toro gives the best performance of his career as Rodriguez. Don Cheadle and Luis Guzman's roles bring much-needed comic relief that never feels inappropriate. The agents that they play may be loose in behavior, but they are also resolute and commanding in occupation.

While more can be written, it would be a disservice not to at least mention Dennis Quaid, Albert Finney, Steven Bauer, Amy Irving, Miguel Ferrer, and even James Brolin for their remarkable supporting roles. Erika Christensen also warrants much acclaim for her depiction of Judge Wakefield's daughter. Her character's anger fascinates the viewer with its complexity. She expresses animosity not only toward her parents - for their apparent neglect of her - but also toward herself without a concrete cause, representing much of the displaced teenage angst tormenting America.

The film succeeds on an ideological level in the same way as its narrative. *Traffic* does not attempt to place any one idea before the viewer and claim that that idea is the only correct one. Rather, the movie honors its audience by serving as a forum for ideas. Some critics will inevitably sum up the many themes of the film by writing that the U.S. is losing (or indeed has lost) the war on drugs. While this is technically correct, making that statement irrevocably oversimplifies the movie. Amongst other ideas, *Traffic* presents a pairing of parental responsibility and the responsibility of law enforcement similar to the concluding scenes of Fritz Lang's *M* (1931). Politically the film explores issues of how the volume of drugs coming into the U. S. has increased and how the government does not possess the resources, the funding, or the ideas to combat the organization and manpower of the cartels. Treatment of addiction becomes significant also, in that the film makes a case that treatment policies are concurrently failing right alongside law enforcement.

Perhaps more important than the politics, however, is the concept of the salvation of family. An element shared by all three stories, the film presents the confidence that families can be saved from the problem of drugs no matter on what side of the war they rest. Whether through treatment of addiction or saving others' children by getting them off the street, the reprieve of family from tragedy is the ultimate hope. Yet, one cannot fully condemn Helena Ayala's actions to save her family either. She represents the villainous side of the drug war, but we are sympathetic with her efforts to protect her child. Rather than a simple good vs. bad duality, *Traffic* delivers us the necessary complexity to empathize with the so-called enemy as well as with the just.

Aside from its political implications, *Traffic* should ultimately confirm Steven Soderbergh's position as one of the greatest American directors today. In a time in American cinema where one film can make a director marketable as an *auteur*, Soderbergh has built a body of work (e. g. *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* 1989; *Kafka* 1991; *Schizopolis* 1996, and *Erin Brockovich* 2000) and has grown from it rather than remain a one-, two-, or three-film wonder. This film proves once again that Soderbergh can vary in material while retaining his impeccable sense of craft. The key, therefore, to understanding Soderbergh's directorial authorship lies not in his residence in a specific genre but rather his use of aesthetics.

He has utilized, for example, the fractured narrative in one form or another many times, including *The Limey* (1999). Unlike some directors, however, Soderbergh always uses his technical prowess to enhance the story. For instance, in *Traffic* Soderbergh (also the director of photography) uses three distinct color palettes to help tell the three stories. For the judge's

scenes, which mostly take place alternately in Washington D. C. and Cincinnati, a stark blue fills the screen, suggesting an atmosphere of detachment from the real battles in the drug war. This blue not only references *Out of Sight* (1998), where Soderbergh used this color to emphasize the steeliness of the Detroit sequences. In *Traffic* Soderbergh goes further, adding jeopardy to the detachment provided by the blue once Judge Wakefield's daughter is revealed as an addict. Reality has intruded upon the theoretical world of policymaking.

For Helena's world of La Jolla, California, Soderbergh relies on a mere white tone provided by natural light, indicating the middle ground of the drug war between the family and the business. For Javier Rodriguez's story in Tijuana and Mexico City, Soderbergh uses the natural environs to gain an orange desert feel, but he goes one step further and utilizes (probably) a high speed film to make the Mexico sequences look as rough as possible. Rodriguez's world is a world of fire. Besides his meaningful colors and love of natural light, other technical traits merit brief mention as well. Hand-held camera movement predominates throughout the film, but Soderbergh provides the gritty realism that comes with a hand-held camera without it seeming like a pretentious amateur shooting something for MTV. His occasional re-framing of the camera set-ups in the middle of a close-up uniquely alters the audience's perception of a character. He exhibits flawless frame compositions; indeed, like the best directors, he brings paintings to life.

Traffic bestows upon its audience proof of a director who is at the top of his game and yet, one senses, has not reached the peak of his craft. It gives its audience a horrifyingly futile look at the war on drugs in the United States. Primarily, *Traffic* accomplishes what any great classic film should - it imparts feeling and thought, dismay and hope, and it will furnish these for any viewer for years to come.