The Apartment

Dir: Billy Wilder, 1960

A review by Richard Armstrong, Freelance Film Tutor and Reviewer for Audiencemag.com and Sensesofcinema.com

The Apartment, dusted down for an unveiling at the 44th London Film Festival, is Billy Wilder's last great film. Like Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), it is not just a fine example of classical Hollywood aesthetics in action, but has come to appear as a timely expression of America's uncertain moral trajectory in the postwar period. The second of what might be characterized as Wilder's insurance triptych, *The Apartment* looks back to the heroic fraud of *Double Indemnity* and anticipates the ethical exhaustion of *The Fortune Cookie* (1966).

Visually out of keeping with the broad parodic style of Wilder's films from *Some Like it Hot* (1959), *The Apartment* has the look of lived experience. While generically conventional, the film nevertheless responds to a specific sociohistorical and sociocultural moment. Whilst screenwriters Wilder and I.A.L. Diamond's story pitch, involving callow arrivistes, pretty elevator girls, and corrupt executives, feels like a timeworn Hollywood narrative, the finished film feels like an account of an actual few weeks in Manhattan's business district. A commuter might have read such a saga as a true confession in a temping "free" on the train home to Westchester.

Like earlier Wilder films, *The Apartment* did what the ex-journalist did best; it adroitly told a compelling story, making of it a cautionary tale of contemporary America. By doing so, the film subscribes to a specific strand of 1950s Hollywood output. As Ed Sikov writes: "*Executive Suite* and *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* struck a chord with the public--glacially impersonal architecture, callous bosses and professional lives devoid of hope, let alone soul" (Sikov, 1998: 430). Viewing the rise of multinational capitalism as corrosive of the spontaneous fellowship of American life, the film is informed by something of the zeal of such cultural commentators as Vance Packard and Ralph Nader. Indeed, Bud Baxter's opening voiceover ardently cites statistics in a manner recalling the abstract sociological models of Talcott Parsons, whilst the film's establishing shots of Manhattan resemble documentary stock footage.

The dispute between the needs of the individual and the depersonalising effects of corporatism is central to *The Apartment*. Whilst it is not my aim to argue that a straight line can be drawn between them, it could be argued that the Wilder film and the political thrillers emerging from Hollywood in the mid-1970s do mine a burgeoning national experience. Both *The Apartment* and *Network* (1976), for example, begin with low angle shots of, respectively, the Consolidated Life and the United Broadcasting System buildings, and both films tell of individuals who rebel against the demeaning practices of corporatism, as represented by these

monoliths. In addition, both films draw heavily on the newsworthy, and both are pitched in tragicomic mode.

The Apartment's opposition to the over-rationalised life resonates in the political and cultural relationships between Bud Baxter's domestic space and his workplace. The film reiterates a distinction between the cosy brownstone where Bud (Jack Lemmon) lives with his kindly Jewish neighbours, and the milieu of strip-lit corridors and duplicitous executives where he works. The film's message is that it is better to be a "mensch" (Wilder and Diamond, 1960: 73), a caring, authentic human being, than a "taker" (Ibid: 91), someone who exploits others for personal gratification. The film's conventional romantic plot involves Bud's having to choose between promotion (in return for allowing his superiors to use his apartment for their sexual cinq-a-septs), and demotion and the love of the heroine (when he refuses to allow J.D. Sheldrake to seduce Fran (Shirley Maclaine) there). By refusing to collude with a society of "takers", Bud thus becomes a better person.

Generically, *The Apartment* and the thrillers of the 1970s owe much to film noir. Sikov looks to *Laura* (1944) for a comparison between Lydecker lurking outside his inamorata Laura's apartment, with Bud's lurking, while his superiors seduce office girls like Fran. Indeed, it is noteworthy that Joseph LaShelle shot both films. The progression from *Double Indemnity* to *The Apartment* is transparent, particularly through the casting of Fred MacMurray -- first as the corrupt insurance salesman, then as the corrupt insurance executive Sheldrake. If *Double Indemnity* suggested that there is something rotten in the middle class American suburb, *The Apartment* embodied the fear that it had now infected the public life through reproduction in office politics and sexual etiquette. In a neat reversal, a scene in *The Apartment* finds Sheldrake and Fran in a confrontation over their relationship which finds the man guilty of infidelity, rather than, as in *Double Indemnity*, the woman, and, as such, *The Apartment* systematically posits hommes fatales in the place of film noir's femmes fatales -- from Fran to Margie MacDougall (Hope Holiday), all the film's female characters are sexually vulnerable. Indeed, it is noticable how the script constantly makes an issue of identities based upon gender. Everyone is either *Mr* Dobisch, *Miss* Rossi, *Mr* Baxter, *Miss* Olsen, and even when Fran is dying, she is still "Miss Kubelik" to Bud.

A concern with sexual identity is also central to film noir. In a scene which would not have seemed amiss in a Robert Siodmak film from around 1947, the dissolute Bud blunders into his bedroom to find Fran lying on the bed. Significant in the progression from classical film noir to the political noirs of the 1970s is the emergence of a gentler, better educated male protagonist, and, with his egalitarian view of women, Bud looks forward to such figures as Turner in *Three Days of the Condor* (1975) and Bob Woodward in *All the President's Men* (1976). In *The Apartment*, there is a dissolve from Sheldrake's secretary, the exploited and discarded Miss Olsen (Edie Adams), leaving the building, to Bud walking back to his apartment. Juxtaposed, these characters will both eventually extricate themselves from Sheldrake's influence. At one point, Miss Olsen eavesdrops on a phone conversation between Sheldrake and his wife. In this sense, it is noteworthy that surveillance is the theme of *The Conversation* (1974), and the Watergate affair which significantly informed the later thriller cycle.

By the 1970s, corporatism's Darwinian morals were nationally reproduced in the vetting and "weeding-out" procedures of government agencies. Underlying the malaise over which *The Apartment*, and later films, worry was the perception that the individual, that hallowed principle of American civilization, had fallen victim to a corrupted body politic. Extending its

reach deep into private life (first under the New Deal, then wartime mobilisation, then Cold War preparedness and the procedures of Big Business), the military--industrial complex, it was felt, was eroding the rights of ordinary men and women. Such a perception would not have been lost on spectators of this brand of Hollywood output. The kindly Dreyfusses (Jack Kruschen/Ruby Stevens), barfly Margie MacDougall, and Fran's cab--driver brother--in--law Karl Matuschka (Johnny Seven) embody that populist consensus with which Hollywood had righted worldly corruption since Capra. *The Apartment* continually compares Bud's West Sixties home, with its quaint wooden fittings, cramped slovenly comforts, and gemutlich atmosphere, with Consolidated Life's clinical space, regimented by banks of IBM machines. Such a dichotomy is replayed in *Three Days of the Condor*. Here, the white light, whirring computers, and assiduous procedures of Turner's CIA cadre in midtown Manhattan, is distinguished from the mess of civilian routines in the outside world. At one point, Turner misreads the spontaneous rapport between a mother and her baby, so alienated has the American civil servant become from the society. In Wilder's film, composer Adolph Deutsch provides a martial theme for that scene in which Bud and a mass of grey flannel types converge on the elevators in the polished Consolidated lobby, turning employees into automatons.

On the level of image, the autumnal New York of *The Apartment*, and the wintry Manhattan of *Three Days of the Condor*, are closer than may have been realised. On the level of genre and history, the mysterious Parallax Corporation in *The Parallax View* (1974) recalls the growing corporatism within criminal circles in postwar film noir. Indeed, if, in 1960, corporation ethics drive Fran to attempt suicide, by 1974, the corporation causes Lee's death in *The Parallax View*, making it appear to be suicide.

If a 1950s recognition of the pernicious consequences of big corporations found expression in the undermined individual in *The Apartment*, future repercussions would be spelt out in trashed apartments and death threats in such post-Watergate films as *All the President's Men* and *Missing* (1981) -- in which Lemmon embellished *The Apartment*'s portrait of the American executive in distrait. Indeed, it is noteworthy that, according to Sikov (1998: 434), IBM lent two and a half million dollars' worth of equipment to art director Alexander Trauner, oddly colluding with Wilder's critique of corporatism. In this sense, *The Apartment* is a film in which industry aesthetics and public concerns come together. By responding to a social state of affairs, and anticipating the emergence of another permutation in another genre, it is a film which lives in the history of the American filmgoer and in the history of American film, helping plot the terms of Hollywood's post--classical conscience. It is a pleasure to see it back on the big screen.

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Brother

Dir: Takeshi Kitano, 2000

A review by Jon Wisbey, University of East Anglia, UK

Brother marks Takeshi Kitano's return to his trademark stylised violence, following the more restrained *Kikujiro* (1999). However, while *Brother* clearly recalls much of Kitano's earlier work, it also marks a departure in that it is Kitano's first film to be produced outside Japan and his first to use English language dialogue.

There appear to be no clear reasons for this development, and, indeed, Kitano himself has stated that the Los Angeles setting is an insignificant detail in the film (Campbell, 2001: 10). Nevertheless, what is significant about the use of this location for the majority of the film's action, is that it affords a firm sense of environmental and contextual familiarity, the physical world it depicts being one readily associated with the contemporary American crime--thriller format. This, coupled with the English dialogue, seems to lend the film a degree of accessibility that is perhaps absent from Kitano's previous films, and suggests its intended wider appeal.

Though the film has, in the UK at least, received only a limited theatrical release, one senses that *Brother* has been designed very much with a wider audience in mind than has previously been the case with Kitano's films. Indeed, such an assertion may be supported by the fact that Kitano himself has acknowledged the impact that American cinema's dominance of the global market has had on Far Eastern film production over the last few years (Ibid, 2001: 11), and it therefore seems useful to consider *Brother* in view of this development. In this respect, the film's dual status as both a straightforward contemporary American action film and traditional Japanese samurai drama, is highly apparent. Mark Kermode acknowledges this phenomenon, commenting that "*Brother* is a peculiar hybrid, part blood--spattered post--Woo Hollywood heroism, part old--school Japanese samurai asceticism." (2001: 41)

The disparate elements that Kermode identifies can be related to *Brother*'s respective American and Japanese sections, though, as the former tend to dominate the film's action, it seems likely that most audiences will understand the film as part of the Woo heritage. Indeed, *Brother* seems only marginally concerned with its protagonist Yamamoto's (Kitano) origins as a Tokyo yakuza, and instead identifies him as merely one of many ethnically displaced gang leaders vying for control of the Los Angeles underworld. Moreover, as Tony Rayns points out, *Brother* has none of the "philosophical" dimensions of Kitano's *Sonatine* (1993) or *Hana--Bi* (1997) (2001: 26). The absence of a "philosophical dimension" seems a pity, since despite the vagueness accurately implied in Rayns' comments, this quality has served to separate Kitano's earlier films from the majority of contemporary crime films. *Sonatine* and *Hana--Bi*, for example, are not concerned merely with the spectacle of violence in the way that, say, Woo's films are, but are concerned also with their respective protagonists' psychological motivation and contemplation of their relation to the violence depicted in these films. While these "philosophical" moments, often achieved by way of a series of static transcendental shots that appear, ostensibly, to be external to the narrative, are certainly

present in *Brother*, the film's otherwise rather formulaic qualities effectively lessen their impact.

Thematically too, the film is lacking. Kitano repeatedly misses the opportunity to explore an issue central to the American gangster/crime film, that of ethnic displacement and inclusion within, and exclusion from, the "legitimate" dominant culture. Historically, these genres have depicted this as an Anglo--Saxon culture, and one that contrasts sharply with those of various competing minority groups. Interestingly, this theme is present, though never developed, in Kitano's film, existing just beneath the surface of the narrative. For example, Kitano depicts the territorial struggle between the rival LA gangs as essentially one contested by various ethnic groups, while Yamamoto's eventual slaying by the Mafia identifies that group's position as the dominant culture, albeit within an underworld context.

Ultimately, however, Kitano is perhaps uninterested in suggesting a clear line of continuity between his film and the traditional notion of the gangster as a product of immigration and socio--economic determinants. Though this might clearly have been one possibility, *Brother* departs from the American model and instead chooses to stress a sense of nihilism, an abiding theme in Kitano's earlier work. With the exception of the rather awkward optimism of the film's epilogue, in which Yamamoto ensures the survival and financial security of his gang "brother" Denny (Omar Epps), the film emphasises the nihilistic qualities of the gangster rather than the heroic qualities associated with the American form of the genre. Indeed, in his interview with Kitano, Rayns suggests that Yamamoto embodies ''a strong element of death wish'', a point that Kitano affirms. In fact, Kitano continues by suggesting that the film's deployment of character names derived from World War Two Japanese ''militarists'', indicates that *Brother* is ''a film about going to America to die", while he goes on to state that ''Yamamoto's hesitation about confronting the Mafia matches Yamamoto Isoroku's doubts about Pearl Harbour.'' (Rayns, 2001: 27)

However problematic this may be, if we accept this view of *Brother* then we might also be able to suggest that the film *does* offer a take on the theme of the immigrant gangster. But where *Little Caesar* (1930), *Scarface* (1932 and 1983), and *The Godfather* (1972) are concerned with the notion of "becoming" American, *Brother* encounters the "establishment" in the form of the insurmountable Mafia. As such, *Brother* suggests that there may no longer be a cohesive social framework to which the individual might aspire. This, it seems, is what lends the film its particular nihilistic quality. An interesting take on a convention of the gangster genre perhaps, but also one that may limit the film's appeal as part of that genre. Where, for example, the above films are concerned with the *possibility* of integration, and the gangster's inclusion within an established and "legitimate" culture, *Brother*, as Kitano suggests, is concerned with the futility of that pursuit. Furthermore, and at a broader level, the most successful American gangster films seem to be those that suggest an alternative to crime in terms of the gangster's aspirations. Generally, this has not been realised in the moral terms advocated by the early sound gangster films, but rather in the way in which the gangster has been attributed to an increasingly developed and complex psychological dimension. For example, although Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow in Arthur Penn's film may lack the ambition of Vito and Michael Corleone, they share their basic concern with human relationships (however negative this concern may be) in a way that *Brother*'s Yamamoto does not.

Ultimately, *Brother* is primarily concerned with the aesthetics of gunplay, and to this extent the film forms an interesting part of the "new violence" that characterises much of

contemporary Hollywood action cinema. Though such an approach might not necessarily exclude the possibility of exploring, for example, the gangster's social function, Kitano's particular treatment of the genre tends to be less concerned with this dynamic. Nevertheless, since this concern has become central to the American model, due perhaps to its centrality to the notion of American citizenship itself, it may be that in the case of *Brother*, Kitano has not delivered the kind of American gangster film it seems he had intended.

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23rd Cinema Du Reel Film Festival at Beauborg Museum, Paris

A review by Ruth and Archie Perlmutter, Temple University, USA

Although dedicated to exhibiting over fifty documentaries made over the past decade in Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kirghizistan, Ouzbekistan, Tadjikistan and Turkmenistan), the 23rd *Cinema du Reel Film Festival* (the International Festival of Ethnographic and Sociological Films, held at the funky Beaubourg Museum in Paris), got off to a Euro--centric start with the premiere of Emmanuel Finkiel's documentary, *Casting* (2000). The Franglais title refers to the auditions Finkiel held for the two movies he wrote and directed, *Mme. Jacques on the Croisette* (1996) and *Voyages* (1999). The new film opens with the advertisement Finkiel placed in French newspapers: "Looking for Yiddish-speaking French Ashkenazi Jews, between the ages of sixty-five to ninety, who can also sing, to appear in a fiction film." There then ensues a series of interviews and rehearsals, until the final--cut scenes in which the selected interviewees appear. The interviewees are colourfully digressive -- telling stories and joking in Yiddish with the director (who does not speak Yiddish). *Casting* succeeds admirably in capturing the voice of the elderly -- survivors of a horrific past, yet persevering, life--affirming and flavourful in their multilingual view of the world. It is not hard to discern something of the influence of Kieslowski, for whom Finkiel worked as an assistant on *Three Colors: Blue, White and Red* (1993, 1994, 1994), in his ability to capture the inner aura of his lively characters.

Like *Casting*, three other films evoked a vanishing Jewish world. *Dust* (Michale Boganim, 2000), a British/Ukrainian co--production, takes place in the city of Odessa, where a once-vibrant Yiddish culture has disappeared. The city, as a deteriorating witness to all the wars, programs and communist sieges that befell its Jewish inhabitants, backgrounds the personal recollections of three friends who come together to celebrate the past. Their memories transform them, momentarily, to their former glory.

Vienna is the site of remembrance and regrets in *Homemad(e)* (2000), by Ruth Beckermann, and specifically, one street and one cafe in the textile district where the filmmaker lives. At a time when one out of three Austrians is voting for the extreme conservative Jorg Haider, old Jews like Marc--Aurel Strasse, the last Jewish textile merchant left in Vienna, meet in a coffee house, now owned by an Iranian, and argue about the political maelstrom that surrounds them. Yet, for all their depressing discourse, their innate optimism prevents them from facing the lessons of the past. Beckermann spent one whole year filming her neighbourhood. She claimed she was interested in "the people, debating and gesticulating, manipulating and speculating or just simply journeying over the past". She also believes in the theatrical aspect of a cafe as a meeting place, since she sees it as a theatre, where people seek refuge from the "tyranny of privacy." According to Beckermann, the cafe offers a safety valve to people who can meet for years, but do not know each other's names or stories. Finally, *Shabbat* (Gulya Mirzoeva, 2000), an evocative film from Tadjikistan, about loss and injustice, reflects the period in the late eighties when thousands of Jews were forced to leave

their colourful native culture in the city of Ouzbek in Ouzbekistan, and migrate to Israel and the US.

A number of films dealt with gritty political realities. An Israeli film, *Diamonds and Rust* (Adi Barash/Ruthie Shatz, 2000) depicts a microcosm of disaffected and alienated workers, living on the edges of the world. Taken aboard a diamond--mining ship off the coast of Namibia, where miles of terrain are controlled by De Beers, the powerful anonymous diamond cartel, the film follows the daily routine of six crew members from disparate parts of the world. In contrast to the glamour of the treasures they mine, they exist in a claustrophobic vacuum, with low salaries, even less class status, and minimal shore leaves every three months. We witness their rigorous life as they interact with tension, tantrums, and deep--seated racist and zenophobic antagonisms.

Apparatchiks and Businessmen (2000), by Stan Neumann, who made the fine documentary, *The Last of the Marranos* in 1991, is a fascinating expose of the realities behind the transition from communism to capitalism, in the countries of the former Soviet Union. Traversing as far as Moldavia, Neumann follows emerging Euro--entrepreneurs who recycle erstwhile computer plants, by converting old parts into trivial consumer items, like plastic clothes pins and toy pails. In the meantime, they work in the shadow of enormous unfinished factories, once designed for grandiose National Socialist projects. The result is an unspoken horror at the junkyard of latterday capitalist commodification, and how it has contributed to an equally depressing cultural wasteland.

The city as a metaphor for contemporary Cuba is reflected in Uli Gaulke's *Havanna Mi Amor* (2000), an apparently light--hearted exploration of the disparity between the realities of the lives of working class people, and the soaps (called "telenovelas") that they watch obsessively on old Soviet--made televisions that are begged, borrowed and patched together. The romantic conflicts, broken marriages and dysfunctional families of the daily programs, are no match for the disenchantment, mostly of the women interviewed, who express their woes about the inadequacy and oppression of men. Although music, expressive of the Cuban spirit, runs continuously through the film, it is no *Buena Vista Social Club* (1999), where music functions as a triumph of talented ageing musicians. Without didactics, *Havanna Mi Amor* reveals the underlying political and social problems in Cuba today.

The more than fifty documentaries from Central Asia, screened at the festival, were an incisive revelation of a remote world, with the films ranging over many topics and terrains. Culled from the last eventful decade marked by liberation from the Soviet Union, they attest to the resourcefulness of film--makers trying to establish new film industries and recapture their ethnic heritage. Despite its new--found freedom, Kazak cinema, as Assia Baigojina, a director and executive producer from Kazakistan, stated in the festival program, is "an explosion of suffering and despair." Thus, many of their films are concerned with the struggle to survive in areas destroyed by Soviet indifference to ecology. In *Jana Arka* (Ersain Abdrakhmanov, 2000), a village cannot grow its own wheat, because Soviet rockets have a launching pad nearby, and the villagers must buy their bread from a train that stops every few weeks for a short time. *Polygon* (Oraz Rymjanov, 2000) is concerned with the shepherds who suffer the consequences of radiation from the area where Soviet atom bombs were tested in 1949, and *Joktaou -- Chronicle of a Dead Sea* (Serguei Azimov, 2000) is an elegy to the now dried--up Aral Sea. Here, the Soviet irrigation system alters the flow of water, so that revered Muslim graves are flooded from underneath, and the once flourishing fishing facilities are now condemned. Meanwhile, capitalism has caught up with *The Last Nomads* (Mourat

Moussine, 2000), who have been shut out by new market trends from the steppes, where their stocks had once freely grazed. In a very different vein is the black and white fiction film, *Kairat* (1992), by the great Kazak master, Darejan Omirbaev. Under the influence of the early films of the French new wave, it is a boy meets girl romance of virginity, longing and betrayal.

Although Kirghiz has its share of films about the hard conditions of shepherds and fishermen, there were a number of bio-documentaries which memorialised renowned Kirghiz musicians and bards. *I Bow to Almanbet's Ghost* (Ernest Abdyjaparov, 2000) is about an ancient storyteller, while *Jorgo* (Karel Abdykoulov) deals with horse trainers who are the source of legends and songs. There was also a delightful silent short, *Assan-Oussen* (Aktan Abdykalykov, 2000), about eight--year old twin boys, who fight as they carry pails of water. An elderly man reconciles them and they march off hand in hand. However, *The Adopted Son* (1998), another film by Aktan Abdykalykov, was the standout Kirghiz film. (As it turns out, it was this film that inspired the programmers to have the Central Asian retrospective in the first place). A fiction film (like *Kairat*), it deals with the sexual initiation and coming--of--age of an adolescent orphan. However, instead of taking place in an alienated urban environment like *Kairat*, the Kirghiz film manages to delve into the inner spirit of a village, by revealing its colourful communal life and customs, while, at the same time, confronting the psychological hardships that the main character undergoes to become accepted into the community. The film's formal values -- minimal, understated, with patches of documentary realism and adroit transitions between black and white and colour -- add texture and complexity to the involving plot.

The *Cinema Du Reel Film Festival* explored many terrains, unearthing remote cultures with a thoroughness usually reserved for professional archaeological digs. Wedding the personal to the political, the selected films dealt with the breakdown of borders, the blurring of national identities, and the ever--pressing need to remember and record testimonies, in the face of a dehumanizing avalanche.

Enemy at the Gates

Dir: Jean--Jacques Annaud, 2001

A review by Ted Johnson, University of Southern California, USA

Set during the battle of Stalingrad in World War Two, *Enemy at the* Gates is about a Russian sniper, Vassili Zaitsev (Jude Law), who becomes a national hero and helps restore hope and courage to Soviet soldiers. The film is entertaining enough to hold the interest for two and a half hours, and gives lip service to some interesting themes, but in the end is an average, mostly forgettable, war movie.

When an idealistic reporter for the military newspaper, Commander Danilov (Joseph Fiennes), witnesses country--boy--turned-soldier Vassili's shooting skills, he thinks he's found just the hero he's been looking for. Danilov writes about Vassili's exploits and the sniper soon becomes a front--page regular, bringing Vassili fame and the young reporter greater rank and Nikita Khrushchev's ear. As Vassili's legend spreads from Stalingrad, stories of his triumphs help to pick up the morale of the beleaguered Russian army, but the news also reaches Germany and prompts Hitler to send his top sniper, Major Koenig (Ed Harris), to eliminate Vassili. The movie turns into a one--on--one battle of wits and shooting skills between Harris and Law, in a plot device that is reminiscent of De Niro and Pacino in *Heat* (1995). In typical fashion, the film also revolves around a love triangle, with Law and Fiennes fighting for the hand of a beautiful young Soviet soldierette (Rachel Weisz).

Jude Law and Ed Harris have charisma coming out of their pores. Several sequences cut from an extreme close--up of Harris' cold blue Nazi eye looking into his rifle's site, to a matching close--up of Law's eye, and the result is gripping. There is a theory that you can break down, into percentages, what makes a film successful: 49% story, 49% casting, 2% everything else. If the film has one particular strength, it is that the casting is extremely effective, and this is really the thing that makes it watchable at all. Arguably, Jude Law, in a supporting role, stole *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999) from the leads, Matt Damon and Gwyneth Paltrow, in much the same way that Brad Pitt jumped off the screen in *Thelma and Louise* (1991). If Jude Law, in a starring role, is ever combined with a strong story, there ought to be fireworks.

However, perhaps the most interesting thing about *Enemy at the Gates* is the fact that it's a major production, albeit a European one, that portrays Russian soldiers as the "good guys". It seems like just yesterday that President Reagan was pronouncing the Soviet Union as the "Evil Empire." I remember watching *Red Dawn* (1984) as a twelve--year-old boy, and shuddering in my seat as the evil Soviets invaded America to rape and pillage our Great Land, laying waste to all things good and pure.

So how is the film able to get away with showing the Soviets in a positive light, considering all the baggage Westerners have saddled on the former empire? Unfortunately, rather than dealing with this issue head on, *Enemy at the Gates* takes the easy way out. Commander Danilov is portrayed as a bleeding--heart Communist, and, unsurprisingly, he's presented as,

largely, evil; while Nikita Khrushchev and the Russian generals, who shoot their own retreating soldiers, are also depicted in a negative light. However, according to the film, Vassili is different. He's just a simple farm boy and, therefore, is no communist. He is portrayed as just trying to make a living, find himself a nice girl, and settle down; and at no point does he utter a single positive word about Communism or the Soviet army. Hence, what this film, fundamentally, sets up is the opposition between the evil Communist Soviets, and the good non--Communist Soviets, and, in this sense, the film turns out to be something that even Reagan himself would have liked.

The central theme that *Enemy at the Gates* keeps touching on is the idea that Vassili is only a "hero" because he's been manufactured as one, by his writer friend Danilov. Just as future young stars and starlets are discovered sipping chocolate malts at the corner drug store, Vassili is discovered by Commander Danilov in the trenches. Vassili picks off a half dozen Germans with amazing accuracy (that a flashback has shown us he learned from his grandfather, who hunted wolves in the Urals), and Danilov, lying next to Vassili among mounds of dead Russian soldiers, gets a gleam in his eye, seeing star potential in this young man.

So Vassili, who would never have been famous or thought of as any kind of hero, is thrust into the limelight and becomes the greatest Soviet hero of the time. Just as Hollywood stars must constantly struggle between their public personas and private realities, so must Vassili. As he is pursued by the Nazi sniper Koenig, Vassili doubts himself and begins to feel like a fraud -- he begs Danilov to stop writing about him and building up expectations he can't possibly meet. He feels that he's just a simple country boy, nothing more, and that he's certainly no match for the world--renowned sniper--supreme Major Koenig. It's interesting, here, how, while Vassili begins to realise that he's not the super--human fighting machine he's being portrayed as in the press, he still believes whole--heartedly in the legend of the equally famous Major Koenig.

Hollywood stars know that producers and the press not only giveth, but also taketh away, and that adage holds true in this story. When Vassili steals Danilov's girl, Danilov turns on Vassili, and changes the stories he writes. He portrays Vassili as a coward and an enemy of the state, and, in the blink of an eye, Vassili goes from hero to goat.

However, just when it appeared that *Enemy at the Gates* was going to drive home the idea that there are no such things as heroes, that a hero is just something manufactured by a storyteller to inspire others, the film lets us down. Instead of showing us that Vassili is really just a man, he instead becomes a glorious, triumphant hero and rises above, and beyond, even his most flattering press depictions. In this sense, *Enemy of the Gates* is a film that just can't resist constructing a hero of its own, and the potential for an interesting, insightful story is lost, due to the necessity of cramming the plot into the standard Hollywood cookie cutter.

We know, from watching *Behind the Music* (1988) and the television series, *The E! True Hollywood Story*, that an interesting way to have ended this film would have been to flash--forward to a pitiful middle--aged, drugged--out Vassili, desperately trying to launch a comeback, and somehow recapture a little piece of that wonderful fame that he once knew. However, for the purposes of giving the film closure and to provide an, ultimately, positive view of the hero, the film ends on a triumphant high, and loses any potential it possessed to complexify its "rag to riches" take on heroism.

A Ma Soeur! (Fat Girl)

Dir: Catherine Breillat, 2001

A review by Sally Hussey, University of Melbourne, Australia

A stark, primeval study of virginity, Catherine Breillat's *A Ma Soeur!* (*Fat Girl*) deftly confronts the issues of pre--adolescent sexuality. The French director's eighth film, *Fat Girl* echoes Breillat's dominant thematic concern with the ritualistic sexual passages of female desire. Through the narrative of a girl's defloration whilst on a family summer holiday, the film explores the relationship between two adolescent sisters. The title character, twelve year old Anaïs (played by thirteen year old actress Anaïs Reboux), directly observes the defloration of her beautiful fifteen year old sister, Elena (Roxane Mesquida), by an Italian law student, Fernando (Libero de Rienzo). Set in the French seaside holiday estate of Royan, *Fat Girl* presents a revisitation of Breillat's earlier narrative, *36 Fillette* (1987). By representing female adolescent sexuality, Breillat suggests its exposé: the anticipation of denouement that structures virginity divorces shame from desire, and avoids any direct confrontation with girlhood sexuality.

Fat Girl presents the issues of adolescent sexuality within a stark atmosphere of unimpeded visual clarity. Through static frames, long takes and a naturalistic soundtrack, sparsely punctuated by the use of popular song, Breillat observes her characters with an intense acuity. Elena is portrayed as possessing both a beauty and precocity. She is at once yearning, yet hesitant in her embrace of Fernando. In her naiveté, Elena is seen to circumscribe to the myth of virginity. As Fernando declares, "You'll always remember me…I'll always be the first", Elena replies, "Won't you remember me?" However, Breillat incisively captures Elena's ambiguous emotional position, as the narrative manages to withhold an easy assimilation of her sexual desire into a predetermined notion of adolescent tumescence.

Directly confronting the notion of adolescent sexuality, Elena's characterisation suggests an irrepressive desire. Those who are familiar with Breillat's films will here recognise her canny ability to confront contemporary society's obsessive moralisation of sexuality. Bringing sexual adolescence into stark relief, the young Elena lays stretched out before Fernando, rolling a condom over his erect penis. Actively desiring, the figure of Elena speaks to the adolescent's possession of a sexuality that is presented as neither a deviance, unapprehendable in the child/girl, nor a trauma. Through the figure of Elena, Breillat undercuts an easy association with either the (adult) eroticisation of the girl as "un--knowing" temptress or, conversely, the moralising of the girl as a victim of sexuality.

Providing a counterpoint to Elena, Anaïs's desire is lost to her constant appetite. What her veiling symptom speaks to, however, is a hunger that may otherwise be experienced as a longing. Over the opening credits, Anaïs sings the rhyme written by Breillat for the film, "*Moi Je M'ennuie*". Boredom structures Anaïs's life; and hers is an existence bound by an overt onlooking. (She dutifully waits for Elena, guarding her sister's sexual relationship with

Fernando from their parent's detection.) But Breillat uses girlhood singing rhymes to reveal that Anaïs's longing is experienced as both abstract and dissociative:

> If only I could find
>
> A man or a woman,
>
> A body or a soul,
>
> A werewolf.
>
> I couldn't care less.
>
> Just to dream.

Further pointing to this depersonalisation in the opening dialogue, Anaïs rejects her sister's preservation of virginity, stating "If I met a man I'd want to be broken in. He won't think my first time counts…The first time should be with nobody." In the narrative of virginity, where Elena is represented as naive, Anaïs's depersonalisation makes her aware of the position of "object" that Elena must occupy in her sexual initiation.

Fat Girl confers a visual and narrative difference between the sisters, explicitly enforced by Elena in her retorts to Anaïs ("fat slob", "lump"). Through the discursive theme of the proximity of love and hate, however, Breillat suggests their interchangeability (reflected in the French title of the film *A Ma Soeur! -- To My Sister!*), and Breillat encourages this identification within the narrative context of defloration. As Elena gives herself "properly" to Fernando, Anaïs's figure is foregrounded, making us conscious of, and uneasy in, our voyeurism. In the right foreground of the frame, Anaïs lies crying whilst Elena, "introduced to the ways of love" by the implicitly cruel Fernando, is background left. The composition suggests Anaïs as both experiencing Elena's painful loss in defloration, and expressing her own feeling of emptiness.

In the narrative context of virginity, this interchangeability plays on the ambiguous boundary that the virgin occupies. Elena's fear of vaginal penetration, the final "act" of virginity (the narrative progresses from anal to oral to genital) positions her at the boundary between adult/child. To Fernando, Elena's anxiety symbolically infers an "asexuality", as he says, "you're a little girl that looks like a woman", and, through this, Fernando shores up the contradiction through which the figure of the virgin is constructed.

The narrative reveals that this contradiction is produced by an overriding discourse: the inhibition of female desire, in fact, resists the gratification of male desire. Breillat does not force the mandatory assumptions about the male rite of passage in taking a girl's virginity. In contrast, in Elena's satisfying of Fernando, she teases out the fact that the defloration of the virgin is presented as a symptom at which the cultural repression of female sexuality emerges. In a listless sequence, in which the usually static camera drifts pendulously, Fernando lights a cigarette and proceeds to narrate how he "got a kick" out of "dumping" a girl he literally made "drunk" with want. For Elena, Fernando allegorises the punishment of any overt want and clarifies the importance of satisfying his desire to diminish a perceived and threatened loss. Indeed, it is in this sequence that he persuades the reluctant Elena to engage in anal sex to preserve her virginity.

However, in a compelling counterpoint, the figure of Anaïs (and her sexuality) consciously functions as shame. To punctuate my point, Anaïs is imaged sitting in the shallows of the beach, singing the rhyme, "*J'ai Mis Mon Coeur a Pourrir*". Her abandoned figure is set against an endless horizon and a displaced dead tree branch, and Breillat cuts to a close image of Anais, who refers to her body in song as "this lump of raw meat". Her hair is dank from the ocean's spray, and her downcast eyes represent the characteristic inward--turning gaze of shame. Further in this sequence, as Elena and Fernando return from their petting on the sand dunes, Anaïs squats naked beneath the branch. Breillat links the self--reflexive look of shame and sexuality almost iconically through the figure of Anaïs. At another point in the narrative, Anaïs stands on a stool before the bathroom mirror, lifts her dress above her unformed breasts and exalts, "slut!" Rather than evoke pathos in her representation, Breillat reveals that shame made flesh produces a girl's desire.

Representing Anais's shame, I would further argue, Breillat short circuits the eroticisation of a virgin's anticipated defloration. Shifting the film from its naturalistic tone into a symbolic register, it is the figure of Anais who provides the source of ambiguity in the coda's concert of violence and defloration. The symbolism of the shocking conclusion is suggested by the characters portending the dramatic action. Driving back to Paris, Elena prefaces the coda as she wishes that her mother (Arsinée Khanjian) would die, adding, "I don't care, I'd die with her!" To Anaïs's protest, Elena indicates that she would be saved because, positioned in the back of the car, she "doesn't sit in the dead man's seat". Other factors that enforce such a reading are the diegetic use of David Bowie's "The Pretty Things Are Going to Hell" on the car radio. Most importantly, the singing rhymes that present Anaïs's depersonalisation, suggest the coda as both a shocking terror and a wish fulfillment.

Certain details of the sequence matter less to my argument than the representation of Anaïs's defloration. In a staccato sequence, a "werewolf" attacker pushes Anaïs to the ground and devours her. Stretched above her, the animality of the sequence is laid bare as he rips at Anaïs's yellow underpants and stuffs her mouth (the predominance of yellow in the girls clothing suggests something of the symbolic use of a primary colour palette in the costuming). While the stunning visual metaphor exalts the cinema's capacity for violence, an ambiguity is suggested, and indeed is given voice, through the figure of Anaïs. Once devoured, Anaïs holds her attacker's gaze and takes the pants from her mouth. In the light of day, the police guide her from the trees and announce that "she says she wasn't raped". (Again, according to my argument, Breillat here suggests her depersonalisation in the use of third person narration). Emphasizing an ambiguity, we hear a voice, from behind Anais, say "you don't have to believe me if you don't want", as she turns to face the camera.

However, it should be noted that the concluding freeze frame, of Anaïs turning to address the audience, doesn't suggest the same self defining gaze that concluded Breillat's previous film *Romance* (1998). Indeed, the concluding direct--to--camera address in that film confirmed the "murder" of a woman's fiancée as a symbolic act of her self--definition. In comparison, the freeze frame that catches Anaïs's gaze in *Fat Girl* is incomplete, as she looks off screen right. The ambiguity that Breillat asks us to engage with *is* confrontation. The interstices of death and desire in the narrative coda, and the inter--relation of sexuality and shame in the figure of Anais, speak of a girl's violence of imagination -- where the usual contradictory states of shame and desire, in the narrative context of defloration, sit side by side.

Les marchandes de sable

Dir: Pierre Salvadori, 1999
Le petit voleur & Tontaine et Tonton & Les terres froides & La voleuse de Saint--Lubin & Nadia et les hippopotames

Le petit voleur

(Dir. Erik Zonca, 1998)

Tontaine et Tonton

(Dir. Toni Marshall, 1998)

Les terres froides

(Dir. Sébastien Lifshitz, 1998)

La voleuse de Saint--Lubin

(Dir. Claire Devers, 1998)

Nadia et les hippopotames

(Dir. Dominique Cabrera, 1998)

A review by Adriano Piccardi, *Cineforum* Editorial Board, Italy

These are difficult times for those who try to spot differences. A few years ago it was easy to distinguish between the good and the bad, the reactionaries and the progressives, left--wingers or right--wingers. Now things have changed, as Bob Dylan reminds us in the song that has won him an Oscar. They haven't changed in the same way Dylan had imagined in that other older song of his, about the utopist and the visionary. Forgive him, he was young (and forgive us too, we were young when we listened to it and believed every word). Yet, what remains is a sense of conflict, and the necessity to examine such a conflict. To assess whether, in the knot of confused ideas and of the bodies that express them (through gestures, reactions and emotions), we can still manage to re--establish a coordinate -- a focus for a new perspective, that can fix a point of view that is more suitable to understand what we have become nowadays, and what history has led us to be.

In 1997, Pierre Chevalier, producer for the French company, Arte, launched a challenge to a mixed group of directors (expert film--makers, first--timers and semi--debutantes already appreciated by critics and audiences). This challenge was that, in the ideological quagmire that seemingly swallows and chokes any social contrast and any effort towards political thought, they should try to talk about the Left and the Right. If they couldn't evoke these exact notions, then they should try to evoke their phantom or their memory (which, in some ways, could be seen as the same thing). The necessary premise was to give precedence to narration. Thus, the directors who took part in the project traditionally conceived cinema as narrative; in fact, as genre narrative. By introducing a political component, the cycle of six films that resulted from Chevalier's challenge aim to renew traditional generic scenarios, and to compose them around authentic characters, and their feelings, their sufferings, their plans and wishes, their frustrations and their anger, their determination and their ineptitude.

An interesting challenge, which was probably lost even before the shooting. Yet, an exciting challenge. Surely, Pierre Chevalier must have thought this while he was circulating his offer, and knew that it was an outdated challenge and, therefore, a necessary one. It was needed to investigate our historical moment, our generational context, and the possibilities that cinema still has (or hasn't got any longer) to act as a mirror of reality. The outcome is a series of six films which diligently complied with the production's remit to belong to an identifiable cinematographic genre: film noir, gangster movie, courtroom drama, comedy (in its double variant: entertaining and bittersweet, with a more explicit social background).

So has the challenge been won? In a way, it has. In all the films in the series, the motif of the conflict (in its various forms) is certainly central, and in each of the conflicts we can detect (sometimes through explicit elements, other times through more veiled references) the two opposed political instances which Chevalier had urged must be examined. The films also show that such instances cannot be confused and remain distinct, in spite of all the revisionist efforts that muddle official political discourse and of the popularization of such discourse by the media. The problem is elsewhere. I am not sure which secret hope prompted Chevalier's endeavor. He probably didn't intend to find a ray of hope for the future, with which to illuminate a certain form of exaggerated, die--hard optimism. Yet, if this was the case, after seeing the result of his laudable project, Chevalier should have asked himself whether to carry on voting for the Left (assuming that he voted for the Left before embarking on this project).

What is striking about the world depicted in these six films is the mistrust - or the bewilderment at best - about the Left's abilities, about the spaces and the modes handed over by history and by which the Left seems hypnotized. If we then analyze the three films whose genre oscillates between film noir and gangster movie, we cannot help noticing the attraction for an ambiguous outlook on reality (at the same time, right--wing and left--wing), as in the best tradition of these genres. For example, if we consider Pierre Salvadori's *Les marchands de sable*, we are faced with a universe completely controlled by economic interests, which are linked to the traffic of narcotics. Everything is subdued to the circulation of money, which functions as the main engine of social life, conditioning friendships and family ties. Obviously, the circulation of money described in the film is illegal and becomes metaphoric of the economic system *tout court*, given that both, after all, respond to the same request to keep active the on--going process of accumulation and reinvestment of capital.

Through the lack of intervention by the police, the "forces of Evil" move without causing any friction in the social texture of the quarter. The clients of the bars, controlled by the racket,

are completely unaware of what is going on. At night, in the bedrooms, people undress to go to bed or make love, as usual, while, in the streets, the pushers come to a showdown with those couriers who have tried to make a profit at their expense. Can we consider left--wing the individual, moral revolt of the barman who burns down his own business and reports everything he knows to the police? His honesty may be left--wing, but our experience shows that such exemplary gestures soon become material for the crime sections of newspapers, or for brief reports on television. In the end, they become goods for the system of consumption of daily information, another vehicle for the circulation of money. Salvadori has chosen to represent this radical and shocking assumption according to traditional modes, and there is no room for narrative or visual experimentation. The film's style is conventional, at times even didactic, probably in order to communicate to a larger audience its extreme conclusions. This is a choice in favor of clarity. Yet, it remains to be seen whether, in the case of this particular topic, such a choice ends up following the same logic that it would want to condemn.

In *Les terres froides*, almost a debut movie for Sébastien Lifshitz, the circulation of wealth has a firm foundation in the "legal" mechanism of industrial capitalism, based on the use of the workforce for the production of goods for the market. The protagonist is a young worker of Algerian descent who moves from Paris to Grenoble and finds employment in the factory owned by Monsieur Chamblasse. To Lifshitz, normality is just a surface that doesn't hold out to closer scrutiny. The young Djamel (the film's protagonist) is not what he seems and doesn't want what he is apparently seeking, while, at the same time, Chamblasse is not that typical capitalist we first think he is: he has acquired his factory thanks to his wife's money and is facing a very serious economic crisis.

Djamel's arrival takes the situation to a breaking point. He introduces himself to Chamblasse as his natural son, born from an old relationship that Chamblasse had with an Algerian woman. Djamel also reveals his legitimate son's homosexuality to Chamblasse, with instrumental reasons in mind. Instrumental to what? What does Djamel want, and what does he hope to obtain with his trip to Grenoble? In *Les terres froides*, two left--wing myths, of the class struggle and the liberation of the former colonies from the colonizers, are mercilessly located in a cul--de--sac, in a frozen present with no hopes for the future. These two important myths are ironically embodied in the movie by the young immigrant, assertive but with no future, looking for his father. The situation is both mocking and tragic at the same time. What is at stake here is not social justice, class consciousness or collective claims -- the trade unions are almost only part of the factory's furniture, while Chamblasse thinks that the workers on strike are defending their interests and it is their right to do so. Djamel is already dead even before he begins his journey into Grenoble's winter: he is dead as the symbol of something that preceded him, and of which he is a parody. In sum, *Les terres froides* is a film that leaves no hope and is not interested in revenge.

In *Le petit voleur*, Erik Zonca apparently takes us on a journey of descent into hell with final redemption (Good and Evil, Integration into the job market and Deviance: the Left and the Right?). At first, the film seems shamelessly conciliatory, but turns out to be just the opposite. Its conclusion is, once again, bewildering, as it challenges the received vision of society as divided between criminals and honest workers. The decisive choice for Zonca is to adopt the point of view of the young protagonist Esse: and, through this, to assert that values exist only through those who live, experience, accept or reject them. Running away from his job made of sacrifice, toll, anonymity, subordination to hierarchy and a frustrating wait for unlikely change, Esse ends up in a mythical place that apparently promises him everything he wants: easy money, anarchy, and satisfaction for his show--off personality. However, the

character's naïve vision is soon replaced by a structure of power and humiliation that is as merciless as the previous system: the modes are different but the substance is the same. Both systems demand the same contradictory prerequisites to those who wish to be integrated: obedience, independent thinking, and the ability to take but also to be aggressive, and, thus, both systems demand a determination that seems to exceed, by far, Esse's strengths. Thus, Zonca's narrative is not equivalent to the parable of the Prodigal Son, and is rather the exemplary tale of a generation who obey to a "world without ideals, a world of oscillations", to quote the director's own words. The expression "a world of oscillations" implies the vision of two points of reference (the Right and the Left?), and a movement that doesn't undo them as such, but transforms them into the end--points of an incessant, circular and anonymous thrust. Back where he had started, Esse bears the mark of death avoided by sheer chance. Yet, there is no hint that this mark should be considered as a sign of growth or choice, a sign of rejection of what the film shows us as the only idea of existence.

In these three films, all by male directors, the generational dimension is very clear. Although they come into conflict with older people, who control the social scene where they are forced to move, their protagonists belong to that generational context historically characterized by the disappearance of political discourse. It was precisely that political discourse that allowed the previous generations to identify the concepts of the Right and the Left with convictions, behaviors, and coalitions. With all their differences, the three films mirror a common feeling of confusion without (and rightly so) judging it. Such a judgment would imply an external point of view that the three directors don't want to, and above all cannot, adopt.

There are marked differences between these films and the remaining three, which are all made by female directors-- *La voleuse de Saint--Lubin* by Claire Devers, *Tontaine et Tonton* by Tonie Marshall, and *Nadia et les hippopotames* by Dominique Cabrera. Their most interesting aspects are an explicit class discourse and an overtly political tone, which in the other three films were addressed indirectly, through other themes. Devers, Marshall and Cabrera confront their topics with less reticence than their male counterparts, and the three female directors have boldly taken on the initial challenge, willing to run the risk of falling into the trap of *dèja-vu* or of simplifying too much, whether for didactic or entertaining purposes. While Salvadori, Lifshitz and Zonca focus on topics that revolve around the problems of crime and exclusion, the films by Devers, Marshall and Cabrera are more varied: a courtroom drama (*La voleuse de Saint--Lubin*), a comedy (*Tontaine et Tonton*) and a "proletarian" film (*Nadia et les hippopotames*), all of which borrow from different genres (the committed movie, comedy, and docu--drama).

La voleuse de Saint-Lubin is a rigorous piece of work that doesn't allow for any reconciliation. Claire Devers focuses on the story of a female worker caught while stealing food in a supermarket. Formal charges are brought against her, and she has to face two trials. The key words of the film are "poverty" and "justice". Poverty is embodied by the women in the movie, who are forced to economize on the shopping to be able to survive. In spite of their job as workers, they cannot give to their children the amount of meat prescribed by the dieticians' aseptic tables. As such, there is no such thing as justice in the world of the film. When the protagonists steal the amount of meat that is prescribed for a correct diet, but which they cannot buy due to their social condition, they are faced with an efficient system of condemnation and punishment.

The film is a veritable pamphlet, and doesn't resort to any form of sensationalism. The filming of the events is direct and bare; and the importance of the dialogue resides in what is

being said, not in how it is staged. Devers doesn't turn to the usual editing devices that characterize most courtroom dramas, and which have the function of making the audience identify with the character chosen by the director and the script-writer. Instead, in *La voleuse de Saint-Lubin*, the trial sequences are static, almost theatrical, and define clearly the central thesis of the film: in spite of its apparent impartiality, the application of the law is based on class prejudice. Against such a system, the margins of intervention for those (left--wing ?) magistrates that have common sense are extremely limited and doomed to failure.

Tonie Marshall has clearly chosen very different themes and registers. Her comedy *Tontaine et Tonton* focuses on the crisis of sexual desire affecting male/female relationships, as well as on the lasting legacy, in the French political imagery, of the legendary figure of Mitterand. Marshall's choice favors paradox, and the brilliant result is a comedy of sexual frustration where any attempt to obtain sexual pleasure repeatedly fails. The figure of the macho/seducer is torn to pieces, and he finds himself in the middle of an erotic and political nightmare, populated by sexy women that he cannot have. The film reaches its climax when the "phantom" of Mitterand walks through Justine's bedroom. Yet, with an emblematic anti--climax, the "phantom" suddenly turns out to be a mischievous device deployed by an exhausted suitor of Justine, who is a passionate fan of the late President. Marshall's playful film displays a precise aspect of the general crisis of politics (and therefore of the application, in the practice of political confrontation, of the concepts of the Right and the Left). Politics is, thus, reduced to a sentimental consumption of symbolic images. To this general topic, Marshall adds the historically--specific question of the fascination that a left--wing character such as Mitterand could hold for his fellow citizens, and of how left--wing Mitterand's policies really were. This is a thorny contradiction, symbolized in the film by the fact that Justine's sexy body denies itself to any sexual intercourse. The film is also extremely well--acted. Emmanuelle Devos, appreciated so far for her dramatic roles, perfectly portrays Justine, and faultlessly acts as a vehicle for incredibly funny situations.

Dominique Cabrera makes us take part in a workers' struggle, the *cheminots*' strike that took place in France in 1995. Cabrera uses traditional iconography to reach an uncomfortable conclusion: with all its apparent radicalism, the union's strike fails to take into account the needs and the requests of the population's most underprivileged layers. The character of Nadia, an unemployed, single mother, is the catalyst of the struggle's bad consciousness. When she finds herself among the strikers, while she is looking for the father of her child, she makes clear to them all their contradictions. Her harsh words express all the anger that she has so far repressed inside. *Nadia et les hippopotames* gains its strength from the authentic workers and trade unionists in its cast, and from the fact that part of the speeches and dialogue are based on interviews and statements given by the strikers in 1995. The film is successful because it doesn't simply celebrate the strike, but opens it to a possible critique from within. Though the story never exceeds the strikers' limited circle, their dialogue is characterized by a legitimate fear rooted in our present of economic and financial globalization. Serge's final speech is the moment when all this appears clearly. The term "fear" is uttered without hesitation, and the speech becomes a confession of weakness which is necessary to strengthen the political consciousness and the human solidarity that will support the strike. Cabrera's film is also in part a comedy, thanks to its sub--plot concerning the relationship between Nadia and Jean-Paul, a fellow striker. Their relationship, made of clashes and imperceptible reconciliation, is characterized by a development of emotional solidarity, and reproduces in its microcosm the themes of the film as a whole. In contrast to the other five directors, Cabrera focuses on characters and themes that are traditionally identified with the Left: workers, trade union struggle, and political debates on class

perspectives. Several questions remain unanswered at the end of the film, and this is probably due to its imperfect narrative structure. Yet *Nadia et les hippopotames* is an excellent example of politically--committed cinema, of a kind which is able to portray its characters effectively and realistically.

These six films constitute, in their varieties of register, narrative, and *mise--en--scène*, an intellectual provocation for the audience. Through them, we will be able to test our political sensibility to that still controversial topic, made up by the only superficially worn-out binary "Left/Right".

Goya in Bourdeaux

Dir: Carlos Saura, 1999

A review by Antonio Lázaro Reboll, The University of Nottingham, UK

Goya in Bordeaux is Carlos Saura's thirtieth film, and yet its preoccupations reach back to the early 1950s and Saura's first --unfinished -- film documentary, *The Meadow of San Isidro*, a recreation of Goya's depiction of the national pastimes and popular festivals of the people of Madrid. Saura's interest in this painting marked the beginning of a recurrent concern with popular traditions; which is prevalent, for instance, in *Carmen* (1983), part of a trilogy which explores Flamenco dance in order to recuperate it from the cultural ghetto of españolada film (that is, from the official constructs of a homogeneous Spain). Saura's "reading" of Goya, which draws a portrait of the artist driven by three passions: Cayetana, the Duchess of Alba; Spain; and the desire to paint both the personal and social crises that marked his life, is the latest of his explorations of Spanish cultural identity.

Goya in Bordeaux traces a path back through the life and works of the eighty two--year--old Spanish artist Francisco de Goya y Lucientes (Francisco Rabal as the old Goya, José Coronado as the young Goya) and depicts the final days of the painter in exile, in the company of his lover and partner Leocadia Zorrilla (Eulalia Ramón) and her daughter Rosarito (Dafné Fernández). It is to Rosarito that Goya recounts his life story: his life as a portraitist of the court and its entourage, his near--fatal illness, and his love--affair with the Duchess of Alba (Maribel Verdú). It is a life story marked by political change and revolution: exposing him firstly to the pleasures and aspirations of an Enlightened Spain under Charles III, then to the corruption of the reign of Charles IV (which led to the martyrdom of his country under the Napoleonic occupation); and, finally, to the chaotic years of confrontation between liberalism, and the tyranny of Ferdinand VII, which forced him to end his life in exile in Bordeaux. Bordeaux in 1824 was full of Spanish refugees, who formed a colourful community of writers, bankers, politicians and aristocrats. They met in the house of Braulio Poc, an Aragonist liberal, to dream of their country, discuss the news, talk a great deal and hope for better days.

The film is dedicated to the memory of Saura's brother, Antonio, with whom he shared a passion for Goya's work. Antonio Saura, himself a painter, claimed Goya as his "artistic grandfather", and always acknowledged him as a starting point for his own creations. Indeed, Goya's words: "I see neither colours nor lines, just shadows advancing and retreating", are, for Antonio Saura, the most lucid manifesto of modern painting. Given Carlos Saura's particular working of scenes (for example, the translucent walls behind which run the silhouettes of, among others, the Duchess), the film-maker creates a layered and mobile space in which distinctions between the imagined and the real are consistently blurred. Formally, *Goya in Bordeaux* is an investigation of light and shadow, theatre and reality, and is the latest collaboration between Saura and the cinematographer Vittorio Storaro -- a collaboration begun in *Flamenco* (1993) and continued in *Tango* (1998). The result is a pictorial conception of cinema, most evident in the film's dramatization (or tableau) of Goya's *The*

Disasters of War by the Catalan theatre group *La fura dels baus* -- an avant--garde group, whose performances frequently challenge the space between actors and audiences. Saura's work with *La fura dels baus* reflects his interest in the distinction between the event represented, and the event of representation itself.

The film reflects themes consistent with much of Saura's cinema, one of the most varied and original bodies of work in contemporary Spanish film. A staple in Saura's work is the importance given to the historical context and the socio--political milieu, and, once more, Saura draws on Spanish culture to frame his concerns about Spanish history and cultural representation, linking Goya's paintings back to the cultural preoccupations of the artist -- war, violence, religion, art, and politics. Goya insinuates the inherent ambivalence of painted representation, as both artistic creation and historically situated narrative, and he warns us against seeing painting merely as narrative -- that is, in terms of the event represented, where what "really happened" has already left the scene. At one point the film depicts Goya as a viewer of his own work (the caprichos). Perhaps, here, Goya is depicted as the ideal viewer, since the exhibition corridor along which he walks -- a walk down memory lane -- attempts to forge a link between the present, and a past partially obscured by learned assumptions of how to look at or read a piece of art. But these moments, like the beautifully constructed credit sequence in which a blood--red hanging carcass fuses into the dying Goya's head, are mere brushstrokes of what the film could have been: an exploration of the risks of art and creation.

Saura's film falls between two stools. By providing the spectator with unnecessary historical information about the period and Goya's life, the film follows the well--trodden path of the historical Goya (perhaps made most apparent by the film's inevitable emphasis on the relationship between Goya and the Duchess of Alba). The film opens with a recurrent nightmare in which the painter anxiously chases the spectre of the Duchess. When he wakes, distressed and disconcerted, he draws a spiral on the window and murmurs "the spiral is like life". In this respect, *Goya in Bourdeaux* is too close to a biopic of the life of the artist, and leaves unexplored the many different Goyas: the bourgeois, the enlightened, the religious yet anticlerical Goya. A heavy--handed scripting sits uncomfortably next to the startling tableaux of Goya's work. The sumptuously crafted *mise en scène*, as well as the imagery offered to the audience, are disconnected from the narrative, and fail to offer a significant reading both of Goya's aesthetics and the conflicting views of his life and art.

Goya's art, whether as a painter, engraver or lithographer, was driven by innovation, experimentation and creative risk, but Saura's cinema seems to have lost these in *Goya in Bourdeaux*. For those audiences who expect a more personal expression from Spain's most international auteur, there will, ultimately, be disappointment, as the interaction between the visual and the verbal does not reach the heights of Saura's psychological dramas of the 1970s (*Ana y los lobos* (1972), *Cria cuervos* (1975)) or his early 1980s productions (*Bodas de sangre* (1981), *Carmen* (1983)). However, for those audiences interested in learning about Goya and his life history, *Goya in Bordeaux* remains a useful "exhibition" of an artist's life and work.

Jesus' Son

Dir: Alison Maclean, 1999

A review by Marion Muirhead, University of Waterloo, Canada

The film *Jesus' Son* is based on a collection of short stories of the same title published by poet and novelist Denis Johnson in 1992, but that had appeared previously in other publications such as *Esquire* and *The New Yorker*. The screenplay, by Elizabeth Cuthrell, David Urrutia, and Oren Moverman, is a reasonably faithful transformation of these unconnected stories, into a linear narrative which simplifies and unifies the text. The story is recounted analeptically by a narrator (played by Billy Crudup), who hesitates, revises, and redirects his story unconventionally in the voice over. Aided by captions that act as an index to the time line, a plot that is easily followed and resolved, unfolds. The incidents upon which the plot hinges are, in the collected stories, merely mentioned, making the stories of the collection appear as extended vignettes, between which the narrative voice provides continuity. The voice in the film is rendered faithfully in direct quotes from the text and captures, well enough, the wit and absurdity of Johnson's poetic prose style.

Haltingly, in the voice over, the narrator, who sounds as though baffled by his own profundity, recites a passage from an untitled story, a passage in which the relationship between the narrator and his girlfriend is summarized: "we made love in the bed, ate steaks at the restaurant, shot up in the john, puked, cried, accused one another, begged of one another, forgave, promised, and carried one another to heaven" (Johnson, 1992: 55). Here, Johnson manages to reduce an intense relationship between lovers into a formula that insinuates a feedback loop, a series of causes and effects that will be repeated interminably. Loops and repetitions are Johnson's favourite devices, with which he plays out a mechanized view of addictive behaviour, against the pathos of humanistic striving. Similarly, a scene in a laundromat depicts the glowing icon of a laundry machine (with its repetitive cycle rotating the clothes relentlessly), juxtaposed against another glowing icon (one of a heart tattooed on a man's chest, that comes to life and beats with mystical energy). The narrator concludes that the man, whom he has been following, must be Christ, although he claims his experience would have been the same whomever he had followed. His observation suggests an allusion to the humanistic concept that the divine can be found in every individual. However, like the clothes in the laundry machine, the characters are pounded by the repetitive mechanism of their addiction, though they seek something beyond the endless feedback loops of physical existence.

In an earlier drug--induced mystical experience, the narrator finds himself at night, in a field filled with rows of glowing white crosses. The face of an angel appears above him and he falls to his knees. This lyrical description appears in the story entitled *Emergency*:

> On the farther side of the field, just beyond the curtains of snow, the sky was torn away and the angels were descending out of a brilliant blue summer, their huge faces streaked with light and full of pity. The sight of them cut through

> my heart and down the knuckles of my spine, and if there'd been anything in my bowels I would have messed my pants from fear (Ibid: 81).

Suddenly, the crosses are revealed to be the posts that hold the speakers at a drive--in movie site, and the angel is a film star on the giant screen. Such mystical experiences inevitably turn out to be the result of misfiring synapses in the narrator's brain, rather than evidence of a spiritual existence beyond the organic--machinic realm. The characters are marvellously incompetent at interpreting their world, and yet have an endearing naivete that reveals little deliberate malice (with the exception of Dundun, who wants to be a hit man).

Relationships in *Jesus' Son* are based on a shared interest in substance abuse, rather than on goals or values held in common, or bonds formed through shared achievement. The story entitled *Work* illustrates the superficial connections made between individuals in bar--rooms and dance halls. While helping Wayne, a drinking companion, scavenge the wiring from a flooded house that he is surprised to discover belongs to Wayne, the narrator learns that his friend once lead a normal life, with a wife and a home. Gazing from an upper story of the building, the two men witness the appearance in the sky of a naked woman with flowing red hair. This vision is revealed to be --not another hallucination-- but Wayne's former spouse suspended from a hang--glider, which is guided by a speedboat on the river below. In this striking image, the combination of body and machine achieves a transcendental status, in sharp contrast to the brief but intense transcendence of the junkies' high; and as the air flows over her skin, the woman appears to float in defiance of the law of gravity.

Apart from some visual effects, the film possesses a texture of gritty realism unenhanced by any depth or aesthetic richness. Set in the 1970s, rooms are painted a repellent shade of "TV yellow", or are covered in velvet--patterned wallpaper. Anachronisms that would add interest or ambience to the settings have been deliberately excluded, and, as a result, the viewer can hardly blame the characters for wishing to escape their dreary reality. As if in a critique of voyeurism or scopophilia -- in *Already Dead: A California Gothic* (Johnson: 1997), Johnson critiques the Hollywood film industry and its media marketing techniques -- Denis Johnson plays the part of Terrence Weber who, in the segment entitled *Emergency*, arrives in the Emergency Room, with a hunting knife protruding from his eye socket. He claims that his wife caught him spying on a neighbour in her bath; and a repetition of this theme occurs in a later story, in which the narrator spies on a Mennonite woman in her shower. The repeated emphasis on voyeurism, combined with the dreary settings, suggest a critique of image consumption, especially when the knife is suspected to penetrate the man's brain -- perhaps suggesting the degenerative, or even violent, effects of colonisation by the popular media in contemporary American culture.

Some of the more disturbing passages from the text have been omitted or revised to make them less objectionable and more willingly consumed. In Johnson's text, the women dated by the narrator (after his rehabilitation from addiction) are always physically deformed, which he describes as "unwholesome, and very erotic," and he describes his former girlfriend, the junkie, as "honestly the most beautiful woman I'd ever known." Her psychological deformity of addiction, and the physical deformity of paralysis or dwarfism in his later lovers, seem to function as the means of avoiding intimacy. The narrator elaborates when describing the awkward proportions of one woman's limbs, and how they make love with the television on, so that he can avoid making eye contact with her. The physically deformed woman makes a better partner than the psychologically deformed junkie, and it is not so much that he cannot overcome his feelings about his more recent lover's physical difference, but that it is the

physical deformity, rather than her character, that interests him. Johnson's subtlety, and his skill in disguising sinister realities with humour, are qualities that suggest a similarity with another critic of consumer culture, novelist Don DeLillo.

However, these meanings are omitted from the film and, even when committing acts of voyeurism, the narrator remains likeably ingenuous, not unlike Jeremy Irons' portrayal of Humber Humbert in *Lolita* (1997). In sum, while the text is a satire on the perversions of consumerism (the consumption of heroin and alcohol on the one hand, and the consumption of products and images on the other, constituting equally sinister addictions), the film may appear to be a narrative of social and/or spiritual redemption.

References:

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The Tailor of Panama

Dir: John Boorman, 2001

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

In a time when most opening title sequences for films showcase the ability to create images bereft of meaning, *The Tailor of Panama* provides a welcome change. During most of the main titles, we see the film's title character Harry Pendel (Geoffrey Rush) cutting a suit in his shop. The camera is at a slightly lower speed than twenty--four frames per second, so that we see him at a faster than normal pace, and the scene cuts progressively faster and faster until the end of the sequence. In this array of images, the audience views the beginnings of a film that is exactingly playful, unpredictably sinister, and always poised to move faster than we might think.

The film begins with the introduction of MI6 agent Andy Osnard (Pierce Brosnan), who is about to be drummed out of the service for his various transgressions (gambling, blown cover, scandalous affairs). Instead, MI6 all but banishes him by sending him to Panama to maintain English interests in the canal, now that America has returned it to the Panamanian government. In order to carry out his mission, Osnard coerces Pendel into becoming his informant, by revealing that he knows about Pendel's present financial troubles and past criminal exploits before he started his tailoring business. So that his wife Louisa (Jamie Lee Curtis) will not find out about his secrets, Pendel agrees to become Osnard's spy. With no "silent opposition" or covert plans to jeopardize the future of the canal, however, Pendel finds himself concocting the information that Osnard will relay to his superiors. Pendel's "fluence" in fabricating truth gets the better of him, though, and before he realizes it the whole country is in peril -- all the while with Osnard serving more than British interests.

Many recent thrillers have found themselves forced to rely on surprise endings or inordinate twists in order to differentiate themselves from each other. *The Tailor of Panama* finds itself in no such predicament, for any twists that the film possesses never feel inappropriate to the story. In opposition to forfeiting overall quality for a shocking ten --minute ending, *The Tailor of Panama* instead uses flowing dialogue and fascinating characters, in conjunction with almost somber photography, to create a pernicious world in which no one's motives are always entirely clear -- or always entirely good.

Much of the strength of the writing surely derives from the source novel by John le Carré. In addition to the fact that the screenplay was co--written by le Carré (along with Boorman and Andrew Davies), the film accomplishes what any solid cinematic adaptation should: it remains faithful to the spirit of the source while creating issues of its own. The screenplay excels, especially in the exchanges between Osnard and Pendel (resembling in tone those of Orson Welles and Joseph Cotten in *The Third Man* (1949)). In fact, whether reading the novel or watching the film, it seems like no other actors, than Brosnan and Rush, are suited to hold these characters' conversations.

On the subject of performances, Rush portrays Pendel with an amazing physical subtlety and tension. His body language in the film, notably as he begins spying on his wife Louisa (who works for the Canal Authority), makes the viewer cringe at this man's dilemma with nearly every shot. In addition to his bodily acting, his dialogue delivery is flawless, creating the portrait of a man who can be amusing with his lies, until they break those he loves and even himself. Brosnan, however, is the supreme treasure of this picture. His very presence lends the film a sense of deconstructionism that would not have existed with anyone else in the role.

As he has portrayed James Bond for the past three outings of that series, Pierce Brosnan's star image now embodies the ultimate populist representation of the secret agent. By taking on the character of Osnard, Brosnan's performance exposes the depravities of a spy who is bankrupt of conscience. In the book, Panama is Osnard's first mission as an up--and--comer in the service. However, the movie constructs Osnard as a ragged veteran, who feels empowered to do whatever he likes and get away with it. In other words, this is a portrait of a 007 with his "Queen and Country" sentiments removed. In addition, the tongue--in--cheek sexual comments one would recognize in any Bond film, are instead pushed to full--blown misogynist insult. It is all well and good and "that one-liner was amusing" when it is in the context of a Bond film, when nothing is meant to be taken too seriously, but, in *The Tailor of Panama*, Osnard is the fantasy image made reality, and Brosnan magnificently makes us choke on what might normally be humorous.

Also worthy of laudatory remarks are Brendan Gleeson's sympathetic turn as Pendel's old comrade and former revolutionary Mickie Abraxas, Martin Ferrero as the snide columnist Teddy, and Coen Brothers regular Jon Polito as Pendel's swindling banker Ramon Rudd. Harold Pinter's short appearances as Uncle Benny are enjoyable as well. Pendel's dead uncle, Benny, who was a cause of Pendel's criminal past, serves as Pendel's dysfunctional conscience -- ironically the only thing that can save Pendel from himself. Finally, in Leonor Varela's character of Marta -- Pendel's assistant -- we see the one female character in the film who is strongly portrayed. Varela's is a performance that is delicate or strong, restrained or urgent, and always persuasive, dependent on the scene's demands.

The other two female leads create one of the flaws in the film, although it is a flaw that strangely plays into the strength of Brosnan's portrayal of misogyny. As Louisa Pendel, Jamie Lee Curtis overacts in her depiction of a deceived woman. Her performance occasionally crosses the line into melodrama, which, combined with her sparse screen time, does not bode well for a connection with her character. In Catherine McCormack's character Francesca, the audience sees, at first, a British Embassy aid immune to the cutting quips and flirtations of Osnard. When she succumbs to his pursuit, however, the hope for her as a strong female character dissipates. However, as stated, this plays to the misogynist angle and makes Osnard even more contemptible, and thus the effect of Brosnan's acting even more effective.

Boorman and cinematographer Philippe Rousselot create 2.35:1 compositions that are simultaneously stylish, and atmospherically dismal. The Panamanian night scenes are particularly amazing, with the neon that often illuminates Osnard and Pendel's dealings contrasting with the squalor of their surroundings. Boorman also creates a story that respects the audience, by being willing to move ahead of it. We are often left wondering where these characters are taking us, as opposed to hoping for the characters to catch up to our own knowledge of the plot. Arguably, people may fault the third act of the film, for taking a comic direction that could appear as unexpected to audience members. However, I believe Boorman

and the filmmakers should be commended for going so far, and making political and military bigwigs the funniest and scariest they have been since George C. Scott, in *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), tripped over his own feet, rolled over backwards and yelled, "Look at the big board!"

Certainly one may compare *The Tailor of Panama*, as I have, with the Bond films or with the book, but in the final analysis it is simply a well--made film. As desolate as the American cinematic landscape is so far this year, to find a well--made film is a treasure in and of itself. To find a film that can provide its audience with anxiety and surprising originality within an established genre -- this is a blessing. In other words, try this film on for size; it is a good fit.

Voyages

Dir: Emmanuel Finkiel, 1999

A review by Kimberly Lamm, University of Washington, USA

At the beginning of *Voyages*, a woman separates herself from a group of tourists visiting a Jewish cemetery in Warsaw. Away from the cloying voice of the guide and the bumbling tourists in winter parkas, Rivka has a moment of contemplative privacy in which the present and the past reverently come together. She sits before a gravestone, and with a sense of satisfaction, writes down dates in a small notebook. The bare trees crack and tilt achingly in the sky, and time seems to expand away from the quotidian to include and sanction the imperative not to forget. This moment is quickly undermined, however, by the terribly ordinary and annoying buzz of chainsaws cutting away the branches that now envelop the gravestones, and the image of Rivka turning the corner of the cemetery's entrance to see that the tour bus has left without her. Attending to her private need to remember, Rivka has been forgotten.

The voyagers in each of Finkiel's three cinematic portraits are Holocaust survivors (played by non--professional actors), searching for a way to attend to their past and still not be forgotten by the present. In a style that is both austere and emotionally rich, their subtly linked stories examine the intersections of remembering and forgetting that continually shapes the course of their lives. In the first portrayal, Rivka and her husband (French residents of Tel Aviv) have joined a group of French Jews, travelling by bus through Poland in order to visit Auschwitz. In the second portrayal, the elderly Graneck returns to Paris after a life in Eastern Europe to reunite with his middle--aged daughter Regine. And in the final scenario, Vera roams quietly and defiantly through the packed and dusty bulldozed spaces of contemporary Tel Aviv, in search of a cousin she hasn't seen in twenty-five years. The connections between these stories (each with its own distinct milieu and narrative form) are not insisted upon, but are rather suggested, and this choice speaks to the pervasive tone and approach of *Voyages* -- gentle detachment.

It is fitting that recent reviewers introduce Finkiel as a former assistant to directors who have left indelible marks on European cinema -- Krystof Kiezlowski and Jean--Luc Godard. The unique strength of *Voyages* is the sense that the director doesn't forge or insist upon the film's shape, but instead, with a rare humility, inquisitively follows a few days of change and significance in the lives of his characters. By parting a curtain of privacy to reveal their lives *in media res*, Finkiel allows for the imaginative possibility that these lives, and the history that has shaped them, actually exist before and beyond his filmic portrayals. Which is to say that Finkiel understands the limits of film's capacity to fully document or comprehend the historicity, or lived consequences, of events such as the Holocaust. He gracefully accedes to those limits, instead of flagrantly repeating and flailing against them as one might say Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (1959) does.

Conscious of the inherent difficulty in making a film that represents Holocaust survivors, Finkiel creates the impression that he has gracefully handed the film over to his passengers' more knowing eyes. The morning after Rivka is left at the cemetery, her sleepy but resilient fellow travellers climb on to the tour bus. One of them, seeing a young cameraman, wryly comments, "Oh the films. They are always so terrible." This cameraman documents the bus trip from Warsaw to Auschwitz, and serves as the director's surrogate: comically undermining the grave seriousness of Finkiel's undertaking.

Rivka's warm brown eyes possess and express the emotional tension at the core of *Voyages*, and they turn to sculpted ice whenever she is forced to look in her husband's direction. It is his fault she was forgotten, and her haughty arrogance and angry beauty contrast sharply with his looks that alternately express bewildered sadness and defiant, gruff anger. When they finally speak, their words are bitter, full of venom. A well--rehearsed diatribe expresses his resentment about the trip and all it represents. For him, it is a puzzling waste of time. "Stop this endless brooding," he maliciously whispers, speaking of not only this moment, but also of many others. Yet the last image of this couple suggests that her husband may, after all, understand her need to remember, and her need to share that remembering with him. Rivka remains on the bus asleep, while he stands at the gates of Auschwitz plaintively looking back at Rivka's still silhouette; he is uncertain, it seems, whether to go in without her or wake her. His torn, indecisive stance suggests that he recognises the importance of seeing even a small bare part of the life and death she might have suffered, but for chance. As she continues to sleep, the long barbed wire fence of the camp hauntingly aligns with the tilt of her head, as if to suggest that a threatening image of Auschwitz will always be with her.

Looking is an important aspect of *Voyages*, and the patient pace of its documentary style constructs acts of looking that are not invasive. I do not think I have ever seen a film that looks at elderly faces so wholly, and without a patronising sentimentality. In the second portrayal, Regine brings the same simple scrutiny to Graneck, the older man who has, after fifty years, come to claim her as his lost daughter. One night, when looking through photographs together, Graneck mistakes a photograph of a cousin for Regine's daughter, and enthusiastically claims that Regine looked exactly the same way when she was a baby. His mistake betrays a blind hope, and Regine wakes in the night to observe him sleeping, staring at his snoring face as though it was an image in a photograph.

The last portrayal develops themes of homelessness and exile that the previous narratives only begin to touch upon. Vera, the warm and gentle heroine, has accompanied a young family from Russia to Israel. The night before she sets out to find her cousin in Tel Aviv, she overhears the pregnant wife express her frustration about Vera's presence. Her wearing journey, through the crowded city streets and dusty, empty sprawls of Tel Aviv, becomes all the more poignant when we see that Israel's gestures of homecoming do not mean so much without a family's accompanying gesture. Without a private home to claim as your own, Israel doesn't become a public or a national home, but another bewildering, post--modern, and alienating urban landscape.

Like Kiezlowski, Finkiel draws upon the emotional resonances of chance and coincidence, and their ability to generate experiences of meaning and pattern in a restlessly secular world. So when Rivka, from the first portrayal, generously picks up Vera's book of notes, names and addresses from the floor of the bus (a small, humble book that echoes Rivka's own), viewers witness the deft turn of a director unexpectedly, but smoothly, circling the film back to its beginning. Without the slightest bit of artifice or force, and without betraying what has been

indelibly lost, Finkiel gives, or rather lets Rivka give, emotional cohesion and a sense of homecoming to a film about exile. *Voyages* is a film that seems to almost newly discover cinema as a means to memorialise lives as they move through history and encounter others, in time.