The Hamptons Film Festival, 17th-21st October 2001

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

The Hamptons Film Festival (17-21 October 2001), with four nights and days of solid programming has come into its own after nine years of building its identity and audience. The program included political films from Yugoslavia and Cuba, a large amount of shorts and documentaries, and a number of well-selected features from all over the globe. A special section was devoted to "Women and Film," and another to "Artists Make Movies." There were Q & A's with film-makers, and panel discussions on current topics with numerous directors, producers, and actors.

Having proved their coverage last year with a Palestinian/Israeli series, the programmers again showed their affinity for risk with many selections from the former Yugoslavia for its annual "Conflict and Resolution" program. Among the best was *No Man's Land* (2001) by Bosnian director, Danis Tanovic, which won first prize at Cannes for its screenplay. *No Man's Land*, a black comedy that turns into a bleak Pinteresque confrontation of moral ambivalence, concerns a Bosnian recruit who lies in a trench on a mine that will explode if he moves. As conflicting forces converge, Bosnians, Serbs, United Nations workers and a spunky television journalist (Katrin Cartlidge), are horrified by the situation, but immobilized by the intractable dilemma. Tanovic also presented his earlier documentaries made during the war, describing how hard it was to find the necessary equipment. In fact, his first film, *Portrait of Artists in Sarajevo* (1994) took months to make because he literally could not recharge his batteries. The early works are sad. In *Portrait*, one artist feels so depressed about the war that, to lift his spirits, he wanders through destroyed Sarajevo streets and recreates their former beauty on his canvasses. For another artist, the war's absurdity leads him to contemplate the subjects of integrity and meaning. *Dawn* (1996) is a poignant portrait of a man who has lost both his arms and is finally reunited with his family, who are shocked at his condition but happy he's alive.

These were only part of six full programs of films from Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro and Bosnia that dealt with the tragedy of Yugoslavian fragmentation. The series was so complete and wide-ranging that it would require a separate article to cover the subjects of ethnic cleansing, nationalism, religious fundamentalism, migrations, and just coping with the effects of the war. Designed chronologically, the films begin with a time before the war, when Yugoslavia was united, and then cover the fierce struggle for secession and the confusing quilt of enmities that gave rise to horrendous atrocities.

As if that were not challenging enough, there was a separate series on "The Artistry of Cuba," dating from *Memories of Underdevelopment* (1968), the groundbreaking masterpiece by Tomas Gutierrez Alea, that deals with a writer/intellectual who can neither leave Cuba nor commit to the revolution. *90 Miles* (2001) was a brand-new autobiographical documentary by Juan Carlos Zaldiver, a Cuban-American gay filmmaker, who started in Havana in 1980 at

the tender age of thirteen as a dyed-in-the-wool Communist and was forced to join his family in the migration to Miami. The personal tone of the film is enriched with black-and-white newsreels of Castro, and of Cubans seeking asylum, while others protest the anti-revolutionary "traitors who breach the '90 miles'" barrier to the USA. Interspersed are family photos, home movies and interviews with family members that reveal a touching and complex relationship between father and son. The film ends with the young filmmaker's nostalgic but ambivalent return visit to Cuba.

Rigoberto Jimenez's *The Four Sisters* (2001), a ten-minute documentary, was an interesting counterpart to *90 Miles*, since it dwelt on the hard life of four elderly spinster-sisters, who have lived together on a farm in Cuba all their lives. The elegiac tone of the film was belied by the stress on the sisters' faces and their sense of sadness at having lived unfulfilled lives. Ghostly men appear in doorways or on horseback, suggesting lost opportunities and an inbred family mistrust of men. One wonders if there is an ironic subtext here -- contrasting the spectral macho Latinos with a failed impoverished culture.

A series called "Women and Film" was graced with Faye Dunaway's directorial debut, *The Yellow Bird* (2001). Based on a short story by Tennessee Williams, with his own voice-over narration, it was personally introduced and promoted by Dunaway. The rest of the series was a mixed bag of silent curios. A one-reeler from 1913 by Lois Weber, called *How Men Propose*, turned on a practical joke that a woman plays on three men by accepting each one's proposal and then announcing she was using them as material for her article on "How Men Propose." The program also included *Ellis Island* (1981), Meredith Monk's poetic film about immigrants at the turn of the century. Choreographed groups occupy the deserted halls of Ellis Island, and typical of Monk, the piece is silent except for the meditative wordless off-screen songs.

The "Artists Make Movies" program was a rare presentation of avant-garde works followed by a panel discussion at the Pollack-Krasna House, with its view of a placid meadow and the barn/studio where "Jack the Dripper" worked. A number of works made in the sixties by experimentalist, Stan Vanderbeek, epitomized the theme of the series -- "Montage, Collage, Collision" -- with this ultimate Duchampian visual punster juxtaposing ideological issues with highly formal fragments. Consumer objects, magazine advertisements and fashion elements pop out of bodies and faces and float across the screen; movies are screened inside an eyeball and Nixon's tongue emerges with implanted teeth. At the discussion, Joanna Vanderbeek talked about her late husband's methods and described the inspirational importance of his experiences at the Black Mountain College, with his friends -- Rausschenberg, Cage, Cunningham, et al. Edvard Lieber, another artist-filmmaker, who had presented *Seven Portraits* (1977-78), about artists like Liv Ullmann and Willem de Kooning, deplored the trivialization of art these days, with museums set up as shopping malls displaying novelties that become instantly obsolescent. He also pointed out the deficiencies of tonal range and color palette in the widespread use of digital and other video projection.

The series was bookended by two feature films, the enigmatic formally elegant *Cremaster 2* (1999), by Matthew Barney, partially taken from Norman Mailer's book about the murderer, Gary Gilmore, *The Executioner's Handbook*. Mailer takes the part of Houdini and Barney himself plays Gilmore. It would take more than one viewing to unravel Barney's film, and that applies as well to *Search and Destroy* (1994), a patchwork collage by postmodern artist, David Salle, with Griffin Dunne (from Scorsese's *After Hours* [1985]) as a Walter Mitty type who wants to make a film from a self-help book written by an eccentric doctor (Dennis

Hopper) and financed by businessman (or drug dealer), Christopher Walken. A lot of talent was displayed in this elusive unclassifiable movie. Michael Almereyda (who recently made the postmodern *Hamlet* (2000) with Ethan Hawke) adapted the script from a Broadway play that starred Griffin Dunne; John Turturro and Rosanna Arquette have cameo roles; and Dunne displays the same bag of nervous tics we associate with the film's executive producer, Martin Scorsese. The piece de resistance is Christopher Walken's dancing, which was Salle's primary goal, along with his own taste for cross-over genres and the subversion of labels like postmodernism, cubism and popular culture.

Birgitte Stoermose Martenson's award-winning short, *Now Look at Me* (2001), was a sensitive Danish exploration of extreme body consciousness and the sexual stirrings in two pre-pubescent sisters on holiday. Mention should also be made of Ari Gold's original short called *Helicopter* (2000), an autobiographical tribute from a son to his mother, who died in a helicopter crash with her lover, famed rock performer, Bill Graham. Gold mixes his narration with animation, live concert footage, toy models and home movies to flesh out his mournful family album.

Finally, there were a number of fine feature films and documentaries. To their credit, the festival programmers bypassed the usual mundane feel-good opener, opting instead for a somber Holocaust/Righteous Gentile story, Yurek Bogayevicz's *Edges of the Lord* (2001). Haley Joe Osment, from *AI* (2001) and *The Sixth Sense* (1999), plays a Jewish boy in Poland who passes as a Gentile to survive the war, while Willem Dafoe is excellent as a sympathetic Catholic priest who aids the boy in his concealment. The scenes of Nazi atrocities that young children are forced to witness are touching and sensitively drawn, but the film loses some of its power because of the clumsy Polish accented English that is spoken by the entire cast. Following the screening, the thirteen-year old Osment was articulate and intelligent about his own emotional experience in preparing for and acting in this tragic story.

Robert Connolly's debut film, *The Bank* (2001), was an Australian revenge melodrama with corporate greed as the villain. The anti-establishment plot concerns a young computer genius who deceives a crafty CEO (Anthony LaPaglia), and destroys the bank he holds responsible for society's problems. According to the filmmaker, "in Australia, we hate banks," which was quite apparent in the didactic script.

The Danish film, *Italian for Beginners* (2000) by Lone Scherfig (the first Dogma film by a woman), was a comedy about overcoming loneliness. Following the Dogma rules fastidiously -- natural light, handheld camera style, non-professional actors and an unadorned Copenhagen -- the story unfolds around six singles who meet at their Italian lessons, discover romance and better their lives. All of them are insecure and have trouble communicating their feelings, but their funny endearing qualities ultimately win over their respective mates as well as the audience.

Patrick Stettner's *The Business of Strangers* (2001) was a kind of feminist companion piece to *The Bank*. It concerned a tense power struggle between two tough resilient women -- Paula, a part guerrilla-girl/part pathological liar, and Stockard Channing, as a high-powered Vice President who has pulled herself up by her bootstraps to become CEO of a major corporation. Forever teasing us with ambivalence about their sexual preferences, the two indulge in a one-night drinking bash and play a grim joke on a headhunter (Nick), whom Paula claimed had raped her. This film is clearly in Neil LaBute territory, with depictions of cruel venomous relentless women, and a stylish and claustrophobic tone, played in a high-tech world of

cellphones, bars, hotel rooms, airports, and a honeycomb of spaces with parallel networks of lies and subterfuge. In the last shots, Channing stands inside a cage-like enclosure of glass and metal, and, as she opens the door to her new job, there is an ambivalent expression on her face. It is not clear whether it is pride in her new job, or yet another trap for her lonely personal life.

We very much admired the originality and spontaneity of Joseph M. Castelo's *American Saint* (2000), a debut feature which deservedly won the Golden Starfish award for Best Fiction Feature and the Kodak award for Best Cinematographer. A road-movie-within-a-road-movie that leads to self-discovery, it concerns a young aspiring actor, Miles, who wants to audition for Milos Forman's upcoming film, *American Saint*, based on the life of Jack Kerouac. Miles (is he Milos's American alter ego?) falls in with a zany cabbie who offers to drive him (for a fee) across country, visiting Kerouac landmarks, picking up people and eccentric celebrities (for instance, a cross-dressed Woody Harrelson). Suffice to say that Miles has a *crise de conscience* in the end, and Kerouac-style, gives up the "fiction of his dream," discovers the real America, and most of all, himself. In the words of the young first time director (who left Wall Street for Columbia University film school) the film is about the fabric of America, where we were free to go where and when we wanted, and to do whatever turned us on. It was a message that resonated with the terror-weary audience.

Two documentaries stood out as events as well as films. The first was from our own home-town, with an all-Philadelphia cast and crew. *Strut!* (2001) -- an ebullient documentary about the mummers and their mummerabilia -- ran away with the Audience Award for Favorite Documentary. Since everything is measured from Ground Zero these days, the two sold-out screenings were welcomed by the mostly New York crowd as "the kind of feel-good celebration of America we need!" What delighted everyone was the gaudy spectacle of a twelve-hour long New Year's day parade of men fortified with beer, dressed in peacock splendor, and strutting to the irresistible beat of "O Dem Golden Slippers," played by banjo and brass bands.

We were entertained by the boy-sterous male bonding; the legacy handed down from father to son, and the loyalties of ethnic communities, (for instance, the Polish-American Club and the South Philly Brigade). Curiously, despite the abundance of elaborate costumes and costly preparations, the popular disguise is a simple "wench dress," replete with bonnet and bloomers, with even ex-Mayor Rendell appearing, cheerfully "skirted," in the 2000 parade. As one interviewee claimed, it was the one time a guy can wear women's clothing in glorious anonymity. In fact, for him, cross-dressing defined his masculinity. "You're not a man until you walk in panty hose and a pair of high heels."

Conceived, written, directed and produced by businessman/film producer, Max Raab (*Walkabout* [1971] and *A Clockwork Orange* [1971]), *Strut!* intersperses its jubilant optical dazzle with lots of archival footage, lively interviews, and, best of all, remarkable stills taken over a period of many years by gifted Philadelphia photographers, Seymour Mednick and his brother, Sol.

The other documentary was part of a group of films by Long Island natives. Called *Showbiz is my Life* (2001), what could be more perfect than a well-done documentary about three marvelous singers -- Julie Wilson, Baby Jane Dexter and Natalie Gamsu -- who span three generations and each have a fabulous voice to match their unique personalities. As we follow these singers, we also learn about the cabaret subculture and how it has fallen on bad times

now that jazz clubs have been replaced with rock and roll frenzies. Wilson, now seventy-seven, was once the hottest singer in town and, even today, she can belt out Sondheim's "The Ladies Who Lunch" with panache and vigor. Big, blonde, bluesy Baby Jane, as one reviewer said, was a "broad in the tradition of Ma Rainey," and Gamsu, who was a star in her native South Africa, has a round husky voice that needs no microphone. *Showbiz is my Life* gave enough pleasure on its own, but it was followed by a reception in an Easthampton eatery, where Baby Jane and Natalie appeared in person and revived the glories of the age of the great cabaret night spots.

The Hamptons really did encompass the whole range of genres and issues that are timeless and of the moment. As a result, we all savoured the "Hamp-tonic" of cinema and its setting of friendly informality.

24 Hour Party People

Dir: Michael Winterbottom, 2002

A review by Jamie Sexton, Birkbeck, University of London, UK

24 Hour Party People documents a period in Manchester through the eyes of Factory records owner, and part-time Granada presenter, Anthony Wilson (played by Steve Coogan). It begins with Wilson's life-altering experience watching the Sex Pistols, charts the formation, rise and demise of Joy Division, up until the explosion of the "Madchester" phenomenon, a period in which dance music and indie music fused together and conquered the airwaves. Directed by the genre-hopping director Michael Winterbottom, and photographed on DV by experienced cinematographer Robbie Muller (whose credits include *Wings of Desire* [1987] and *Dancer in the Dark* [2000]), the film offers a series of snapshots of "key moments" during the era.

The film is shot in a self-conscious, neo-vérité style, in which fact and fiction are deliberately placed in playful tension. On the one hand, the film attempts to disguise the fact that recognizable characters are being played by actors by use of occasional documentary-like techniques (hand-held, shaky cameras and grainy, black and white footage), the strong narrative thrust, and the characterization of Anthony Wilson, who acts as a guide through the movie. All of these elements combine to recreate a narrative and historical framework that pulls the viewer into the movie. On the other hand, throughout the movie there is a strong Brechtian distancing technique at play, in which viewers are constantly reminded that they are watching a reconstruction, and in which the notion of historical accuracy is foregrounded. The most obvious device here is Coogan's straight-to-camera asides, which are pulled out of the narrational thrust in order to provide a comment on the events from a contemporary perspective.

In the opening sequence we see Wilson, working in the earlier part of his Granada career, doing a hang-gliding stunt, which is interrupted as he walks over to the camera and speaks from a vantage point superior to that of the character he is playing. Coogan thus plays Wilson on two levels. When Wilson is watching the Sex Pistols, he again starts talking to the camera, pointing out the people in the audience who would become famous in their own right (such as members of Joy Division and even Mick Hucknall), and this is accompanied by footage of the bands that these people would eventually play in. Such moments of extra-textual interruption, which constantly feed into the narrative of the film, are extended at other moments. In one scene, in which Howard Devoto and Wilson's first wife, Shirley, have sex in a toilet (after Wilson has been caught receiving fellatio from a prostitute), the real Howard Devoto walks in, playing a cleaner, and announces that he does not remember this scene actually happening. The very nature of historical accuracy is thus directly addressed, and the historical narrative is seen as a site of contestation, at least to some degree. Finally, at a later moment in the narrative, Wilson points out the cameo roles that have already appeared on the screen, in which real protagonists of the Manchester scene play bit parts. He even shows a

clip of Durutti Column frontman Vinni Reilly from a scene that was, as he says, eventually cut from the film.

It should be noted, however, that whilst this peeling back of narrative skin is somewhat daring for a commercial film, it does have its limits. Real people playing other characters may be highlighted, but the film does not go so far as to strip away the fictional trappings of the main characters. Thus Wilson may extract himself from the narrative to comment on himself, but Coogan never states that he is actually playing Tony Wilson. The levels of filmic realities are strictly controlled so that the coherence of the film is not totally destroyed. The slippages between real life and fiction serve as a narrational device (in the sense that they provide information for viewers unfamiliar with the details of the events and characters), and as a playful juggling of cinematic codes. Such a manoeuvre is an open flaunting of a postmodern aesthetic, which Wilson is keen to profess is a key aspect of his personality. At one stage in the film, as he flirts with a female, he turns to the camera to claim that this is not sexist behaviour because both individuals are acting in a knowing manner. He was, he argues, being postmodern before it was even popular. This postmodern aesthetic is at once compelling and irritating. It is compelling in its rather fluent self-consciousness, but irritating in that it leads to a complete lack of passion in the film, with the important events that spanned the Factory records era being skimmed over in a rather superficial manner. The only moment in the film that one is supposed to "care" about is when Ian Curtis hangs himself, but even this moment feels slightly lacklustre, as though it is striving too hard to strike a profound note.

The only aspect of the film that this "postmodern" aesthetic really succeeds in is depicting a drug-fuelled atmosphere. It is only in this process that the fragmentary, flashy style of the film actually succeeds in moving beyond an ironic mode by developing a more synaesthetic mode. Drugs permeate the whole of the film -- joints are constantly smoked, whilst the "Madchester" phenomenon was seen as being fuelled, and destroyed, by ecstasy. Many of the elements of *24 Hour Party People* thus create drug-like impressions via strategies such as juddering superimpositions, surreal diversions and the hyper-real layering of mixed footage. The opening credits, whose motifs appear throughout the film, comprise of an abstract, Len Lye-esque interplay of globular colours. These credits are brilliantly done and provide a fascinating surface texture, although they are almost impossible to read.

Whilst Wilson as a narrator claims that the film is more about Manchester than himself, this is in fact a disingenuous assertion. *24 Hour Party People* documents the city through the eyes of one man, and Wilson's contribution to the script is prevalent. It is true that Wilson isn't totally glamorised: we are invited to laugh at his rather pompous manner and he is even branded as a "twat" in one of the promotional posters for the film. His bad business decisions are often emphasised, such as his tolerance of designers who continually deliver flyers after the event and his constant overspending on record cover designs and Factory offices. These decisions feed into the demise of Factory records, yet on another level they metaphorically represent Wilson's humanity and his concern for aesthetics over business. This could be taken as an oblique criticism of today's music business, in which a rapidly globalising marketplace continually marginalizes artistic opportunities and squeezes out romantics like Wilson. If this is so, the issue is never sufficiently investigated; rather it acts as a trope in which to vindicate Factory as a last bastion of artistic sincerity (linking back to the Sex Pistols). Therefore, ultimately, *24 Hour Party People* is a nostalgic film, despite its hyper-modern surface trappings.

Despite these criticisms, *24 Hour Party People* does offer a rather entertaining picture of the Manchester music scene from the late 1970s until the early 1990s. One of the most impressive aspects of the film lies in the performances. Coogan as Wilson may verge a little too close to Alan Partridge at times, but his performance is nonetheless engaging and full of comic nuances; whilst Danny Cunningham's portrayal of Shaun Ryder is an inspired act of goon imitation. The cast largely manage to pull off a convincing act of collective mimicry in a film that is a skilful patchwork of historical recreation, cartoon goofiness, meta-narrative interpolation and synaesthetic abstraction. Yet the cast itself does not have a chance to add depth to the characters, with the exception of Coogan. The fragmentary, jigsaw aesthetic overwhelms them and does not give them space to move beyond two dimensions. Such an aesthetic would be fine if it was building up towards something significant, but overall it results in *24 Hour Party People* lacking any kind of genuine insight into the phenomenon that it surveys.

American Beauty

Dir: Sam Mendes, 1999

A review by Gordon Reavley, The Nottingham Trent University, UK

Suburbia -- huh? Not a very encouraging prospect for a film -- dysfunctional family, male mid-life crisis, the reality behind closed doors. Just shows how wrong it is possible to be. *American Beauty*, the first film by director Sam Mendes, is a heart-stoppingly beautiful dissection of the pathology of the American Dream gone wrong. Some background. Since the mid-nineteenth century, when the suburbs began to spread tentacle-like into the countryside, the dichotomy between the improved lifestyle that modernisation brought about and the work of those whose perception of the city was more cynical (the gap between the mass perception of metropolitan existence and that of critics), has widened. The contrast between the two viewpoints was manifested in modernists' increasing ambivalence towards the city. Urban modernisation, the redesign of city centres and the spread of the suburbs was matched by perceptual and psychological changes -- to be modern meant to be urban, metropolitan even. However, it has long been fashionable to deride suburbia -- ignored by painters in favour of the city, its houses and the products that fill them have been neglected by "serious" designers.

Although it is clear that those who lived in the city felt increasingly isolated, deracinated and alienated, it is also evident that, for many, standards of living had improved beyond measure. "Heroic" modernism after World War One can be seen as a constant struggle between universalism and a more local sensibility which was manifested in middle-class aspirations to reject life in the industrialised city and move to the suburbs. It is evident, though, that suburbia has remained curiously invisible in the accounts of modernity. Neither nature nor culture, country or city, suburbia is a physical embodiment of a mythical solution to an essential contradiction. Of course, it is remarkably easy to poke fun at suburban houses and the products their owners fill them with, and, as such, they are a soft target for metropolitan critics. Graham Greene described suburbia as "a sinless, empty, graceless, chromium world" (quoted in: Carey, 1992: 51), while for Cyril Connolly, it was "the incubator of apathy and delirium" (quoted in: Carey, 1992: 51). Some of the more strident battles on behalf of high modernism have been fought around the presumed philistinism of suburban life. As Gertrude Stein commented on seeing Oakland: "there's no there, there".

One reason for the critical opprobrium, of course, is that suburbia is so popular -- people want to move there as soon as they can afford to do so. For them, the suburbs represent the absolute division between work and home, maintaining the sanctity of domestic life. Although suburbia is immediately distinguishable, it is never entirely familiar. At best, it is seen as a parasitic consequence, which saps the vitality of the city -- dependent and inert and ultimately self-destructive. Yet, for millions, the city was a place to be left behind, and the experience of modernity was not the street, but the avenue. In place of the naked insecurity and unpredictability of the city, they chose the security of enclosed environments. By achieving social distinction and physical distance, the upwardly mobile have made these spaces their own. Robert Fishman describes it as "an aesthetic achievement in both landscape

and domestic architecture that commands respect; but it is also a testimony to bourgeois anxieties, to deeply buried fears that translate into contempt and hatred for others who inhabit the city" (Fishman, 1989: 154).

If modernity's essence was to be found in the city and its modernism realised in the quintessential art form of the twentieth century, it is paradoxical that for every iconic film located within the city's boundaries such as *Heat* (1995) or *The Third Man* (1949), there are films like *The Big Heat* (1953), *Chinatown* (1974) or *Blue Velvet* (1986) that explore the subterranean tensions and anxieties of suburbia. (It's become one of those orthodoxys, incidentally, that the really acute filmic analyses of suburbia are American; there aren't any good British films about suburbia).

In America, Southern California had grown up (and out) during the early twentieth century, fuelled by industrialisation and, with the outbreak of war, the need for ships and weapons. The consequence of the rise in automobile ownership, and the growth of steel plants and the armaments industry, led to the poisoning of the air and the subsequent decline in agriculture. However, those returning veterans washed up in California after World War Two and, in the fifties, those heading West after Eisenhower's 1955 Federal Highways Act linked up the country, headed for Los Angeles and the Valleys or anywhere else that would fulfil their dreams and aspirations. As memories of the Depression faded and the sybaritic lifestyle promoted by movies and television shows kicked in, the American Dream became a reality for many. The corruption and laissez-faire capitalism of the early years is well documented in *Chinatown*, while the later era of the massive appropriation of farmland by developers cute enough to realise that the millions of de-mobbed servicemen would need single-family dwellings, and the subdivision of what had been agricultural land into streets and neighbourhoods, is portrayed in *Chinatown*'s flawed sequel, *The Two Jakes* (1990).

When did the dream go wrong, then? For some, probably in the 1950s when the image of "togetherness" started to fall apart, and the plays and books and, eventually, films of that decade and those after began to describe the cracks below the surface of family life and the American Dream. From Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* through Edward Albee's *The American Dream*, and such seminal texts as *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*, *The Exurbanites*, *The Lonely Crowd* and *The Organisation Man*, reality was demonstrated to be nowhere near the dream of families caught in the experiential landscape of single-family dwellings, alienated from friends and neighbours in endless suburbs with no sense of community, working for corporations with no sense of loyalty. In the sixties and early seventies, there was a very real backlash against convention and conformity from which America never really recovered.

This, then, is the context in which *American Beauty* is located. From its opening moments, when the narrator, Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey) declares that he's forty-two and "in less than a year I'll be dead….in a way I'm dead already", we know that this is another portrayal of dysfunctional family life. No ordinary portrayal, though. If the synopsis of the film sounds clichéd, Mendes consistently avoids the trap. Aided by the mordant dialogue of Alan Ball (interestingly enough, the writer/producer from three series of the TV sitcom, *Cybill* -- again, not very promising raw material), Mendes describes with deadly accuracy the gradual disintegration, reawakening and premature demise of the anti-hero. Suburbia has seldom been so perceptively observed. The white picket fence along which the eponymous roses grow hides, not, as in Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, a severed ear, but the matching shears and gardening clogs (a telling metaphor, this) of Lester's wife, Carolyn (Annette Bening). Next door, a

homophobic ex-U.S. Marine (Chris Cooper) and his family -- the almost-comatose wife who apologises for the way things look when everything is, superficially anyway, perfect and their visionary, drug-dealing son, Ricky -- have just moved in. From the moment that Lester (a sedated "whore for the advertising industry", whose central pleasure in life is to masturbate in the shower every day and who wonders when things became so joyless) rebels against the "Lawrence Welk shit" as background to the nightly ritual of dinner, throws up his job while coercing the company into an attractive severance pay-out, takes a job as a burger flipper, buys a 1970 Pontiac Firebird (the same car his cousin bought when young) and buys Grade A dope from Ricky next door, you know it's not going to end happily.

Every frame of the first half of the film tells a story of imprisonment and reinforces the sense of entrapment of the characters, all locked in prisons of their own making. Lester is caught in a series of cells: the bedroom, the shower, his office, where even the computer monitor shows a bar chart as if to emphasise his incarceration. The brilliant crimson of the roses against the otherwise muted colour palette only serves to heighten the sense of loneliness that suffuses the film, and Mendes cuts endlessly back and forth between characters and scenes until the moment that Lester enters the tunnel of fantasy at the basketball game. The first real moment of tenderness comes when Ricky shows Jane the video he has shot of a plastic bag blowing around in the wind. This sequence is at first absurd and tacky, then beautiful. She takes his hand and the film changes from satire to something more haunting.

From then on, the dénouement approaches through a series of set pieces in which Mendes demonstrates his mastery of an ensemble cast in which Spacey is only the leading player. Indeed, the rest of the misfits and losers never put a foot wrong. Perhaps as a result of Mendes' work in the theatre (*Cabaret*, *Company*, Shakespeare, Chekhov), the interior shots and, indeed, some of the exteriors too, are realised in formal, symmetrical tableaux -- elegant, stylised framing shots that freeze the family at the dinner table, the neighbours in their living room, the couple walking down the cypress grove road (almost like the Clarks' shoe advert from the Fifties), the red door in the rain, Lester and his daughter's friend, Angela, in the aborted seduction scene. These, with the help of designers and the veteran cinematographer, Conrad Hall, are more like *The Marriage of the Arnolfini* or *American Gothic* than scenes from a movie.

Deconstructing the American Dream becomes a central motif for the film. As Lester achieves a rare moment of tenderness with the brittle, neurotic Carolyn after she has begun her adulterous affair with the loathsome Peter Gallagher (Buddy Kane), she warns him not to spill beer on the couch. "It's just a couch", Lester exclaims; "this isn't life, it's just stuff", echoing Edward Norton's tirade against Ikea in *Fight Club* (1999). It's become something of an orthodoxy to say how good Spacey has been in *Seven* (1995), *L.A. Confidential* (1997) or *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1992), but the moment in his evolution from corporate hack and "gigantic loser" to redemption transcends anything else he's done, and comes in his extraordinarily sensitive handling of Frank's suggestion of gay sex.

It would be wrong to assume, though, that the power of Spacey's performance unbalances the film. In an ensemble of such diversity and strength, it is difficult, at least among the supporting cast, to single out one particular performance. Wes Bentley hits the right note as the initially rather creepy Ricky who videotapes Lester's daughter, Jane, and exhibits the legacy of all the repressed trauma of his violent and reactionary father. (Something which gives the film another of its recurring motifs -- multiple shots through windows, reflections and views through camera monitors). Peter Gallagher, as the successful estate agent who

Carolyn holds in awe and with whom she eventually begins an affair, demonstrates just the right mixture of late nineties corporate unthinking bravado and machismo dumbness; and Mena Suvari as Jane's friend Angela, in a role (thankfully) rather different to her part in *American Pie* (1999), demonstrates her mastery of Valley Speak and her facility with the one line put down which masks her insecurity. However, the film belongs to Spacey and Bening and, in a finely observed and touching performance, Annette Bening comes close to equalling Spacey. The sense of emotional breakdown just below the surface of the shell she has erected around herself is, at times, almost too uncomfortable to watch.

Perhaps the only wrong note in an otherwise flawless film comes from Mendes' use of "quasi-surrealism" in scenes where Lester fantasises about Angela -- where rose petals explode from her dress or where she bathes in a bath of roses. These metaphors are too "easy", too stagy and detract from the film as a whole. Maybe, as some would contend, this and the notion that the lead character is speaking from beyond the grave, are examples of American audiences' growing openness to surrealist interludes, providing they are placed within a standard narrative. Indeed, *Fight Club* and *Being John Malkovich* (1999) are just two examples of recent films which use these strategies.

American Beauty is not the treatment of moral deterioration of either Ang Lee's *The Ice Storm* (1997) or Todd Solondz's coruscating *Happiness* (1998), nor does it possess the rather mannered weirdness of David Lynch. Essentially, this is a film about memory. It resonates through moments when the camera searches out photographs placed around the Burnham house which show the family together in moments of happiness; when Lester's journey back to his past reveals his ability to surprise himself again; when Carolyn responds to her daughter Jane's question about whether this is a "Kodak moment" and exclaims "we lived in a duplex -- we didn't even have our own house"; and the elegiac closing moments when the camera pans over multiple evocations of the same scene and episodes from Lester's past, and he remembers his grandmother's hands and their paper-like skin.

In a film so suffused with anger and disillusion, and apart from the overall assurance of a director so clearly the master of his art, it is this sense of rebirth, not only of Spacey but Bentley and Birch too, as the teenagers for whom redemption means escape, that ultimately makes *American Beauty* so special.

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Apocalypse Now Redux

Dir: Francis Ford Coppola, 2001

A review by Steven Wolfe, University of Houston, Texas, USA

To watch *Apocalypse Now Redux* is both puzzling and distressing. One wonders whether Coppola set out to debunk the myths surrounding the film, because he has so successfully played right into the hands of his severest critics. The original version of the film was criticized frequently for the incoherence of its philosophical pretensions, with the undeniable sensory force and hypnotically focused momentum that drive the film toward the final act -- the arrival at Kurtz's compound -- suddenly disintegrating into muddled and cacaphonic symbolism. The ending is brilliantly constructed, say Coppola's critics, out of sound and montage to disguise the plain fact that he did not know what his film was about, even after shooting was completed.

Coppola has not hidden the fact that the ending was improvised during shooting, and one's response to the original film as a whole depends in large part on how one reacts to the glorious mess of its resolution. The tremendous visual and rhythmic power of the images, the waterfall of rhythm and color, and the Brando/Kurtz character who consists mainly of shadows, tortured monologues, and bits of brilliant, arresting physical business -- recall, for instance, the unforgettable moment when Brando sprinkles water on his shaved head and then flutters his fingers over the stubble like two frantic spiders -- all these elements combine to produce a powerfully immediate experience that can feel substantial enough to make the issue of coherence irrelevant.

Now, twenty-two years later, Coppola and Walter Murch, his editor, have felt compelled not just to release a much-needed new print of the original, but to reintroduce material originally cut. The result manages to weaken the virtues of the original without correcting any of its flaws, which are thereby magnified.

The new material ranges from the simply odd to the awful. There is an extension of the famous beach attack, featuring Robert Duvall, that seems calculated to turn his iconic Colonel Kilgore into a slapstick buffoon, and there is a depressing scene wherein the crew happens upon the stranded centerfold dreamgirls of the aborted USO show, proving that the women are, in fact, ordinary, exploited and not too bright -- perhaps not the most original or relevant insight -- and carrying an ugly whiff of mockery. The longest addition, a seemingly endless scene set in an isolated French plantation along the river, is perhaps the most disturbing in that it contains a brief exchange of dialogue so stupefying in its banality that the sensory power of the film has its grip shattered once and for all.

The exchange takes place following several minutes of Willard and a young French woman gazing at each other across a dinner table as shrill romantic music swells on the soundtrack. In a moment we find them upstairs, framed within a gorgeous sunset riverscape. The woman asks, "You know why they say you can't step into the same river twice?" Willard responds, "I

guess because it's always moving." This descent into greeting-card aphorism, unadorned by any apparent irony, does not bode well for the difficult and complex final scenes to come.

Finally, we face the essence of the problem with this revision, and, ultimately, with the original film as well, in the final scenes that take place once Willard's boat has arrived at Kurtz's compound. Even a devoted fan of the original film, of which this writer is one, must admit the justice in criticisms of the ending's coherence, and, to a lesser extent, the underlying coherence of the entire film. The problems are clarified by a look back into the source material.

Clearly, Coppola had little interest in making an updated *Heart of Darkness* (excerpts from John Milius's screenplay which appeared around the time of the original release demonstrate a closer fidelity to the sense of Conrad's story). However, by altering the very heart of the source material, he leaves himself unmoored for the climax. The book's additional layer of narration, offering the tale as a sort of confession, creates a Marlow (Willard, in the film) who is full of self-knowledge and self-criticism, and whose narrative is directed precisely at the reader rather than himself. He becomes a sort of Ancient Mariner, forced to retell the story of his moment of moral failure as both punishment and warning. The essence of the tale, its true climax, occurs not with the death of Kurtz but with the subsequent meeting between Marlow and Kurtz's fiancé back home. Marlow's inability to speak truth to her -- his spur-of-the-moment decision to offer a last sop to her illusions by maintaining the figure of Kurtz as a Great Man -- is his climactic failure, a shooting of the albatross for which he is doomed to wander, repeating the story as a lesson to others. This essential narrative layer is missing from the film, which forces us into a far less critical involvement with Willard; he seems to be speaking only to himself, his internal dialogue (written by Michael Herr) superfluous except as exposition.

The shift of focus onto Kurtz and his famous final words, "The horror! The horror!", changes everything. Whereas in the book those words are understood ultimately to reflect back upon Kurtz himself, in this film the words are portentous, without irony, and reflect only onto some vague sense of his situation. Coppola's nods to Conrad through repeated references to T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" are therefore nonsensical. As written, and as embodied by the awesome Brando, Kurtz is made out to be far from hollow; he meets and surpasses every expectation of Greatness that has been built up around him. Thus, the essential emptiness that Conrad embedded at the center of his story disappears, reducing the narrative to simply a hero's journey to slay a mad genius. It is not Kurtz but those who persecute him who are to be understood as "hollow", in this case, a vague condition of bureaucratic hypocrisy that is neither explained nor supported.

The earlier version overcame much of this vagueness through sheer force of image and through Brando's powerful performance. If, as the film demands, we are not to see Kurtz ironically -- if we are to take him as being, in fact, as brilliant and powerful as he has been described -- then the whole power of the narrative will rest ultimately on his being so, convincingly. However, the new material complicates matters. It does make Kurtz into one of the Hollow Men himself; unfortunately, the filmmaker seems unaware that this reduction of stature is occurring. The material is offered without irony: he, himself, believes in the depth of the thin gruel being passed off as philosophy.

In the longest newly-added scene, the sight of Brando in daylight is amazing: shaven-headed, his bulk majestic under black pajamas, he cuts a godlike figure. The brief scene is a

masterpiece of subtle physicality. Kurtz is sitting on stone steps, surrounded by children as he reads from a newspaper. One of the children moves in front of him, and, without ceasing to read, Brando's enormous hand gently moves the child aside. That single movement, so striking, full of command and kindness at once, makes it clear why Coppola would have wanted to resurrect the scene; it must have seemed a terrible waste to leave it in the cutting room. Still, if only we could watch that scene without hearing it, because the monologue Brando performs -- perhaps one of those semi-improvised scenes he and Coppola worked up when they were trying to figure out an ending -- is so flat, so predictable, and the moral so pedestrian, that the overall effect is lost. We know, we can feel, that the being whose movements command the physical space so completely and with such ease would simply have to contain a greater and more complex mind than what is on offer.

Disappointingly, both the best and worst of this new version remind us of the degree to which Coppola has fallen since the chaotic brilliance of *Apocalypse Now*. The best, because as sheer cinematic experience it withers the likes of *The Godfather III* (1990); the worst, because it seems to demonstrate an inexplicable lapse in judgment and comprehension of his own best work. Are we now to be subjected to a version of *The Godfather* (1972) in which Don Corleone gets drunk and tells off-color jokes? Perhaps, with luck, *Apocalypse Now Redux* will once and for all kill the myth of the Director's Cut -- the cinematic equivalent of a Sex Pistols reunion tour -- and force latent talents such as Coppola to concentrate on creating much needed new masterpieces instead of fiddling with the old ones.

Close

Dir: Atom Egoyan and Julião Sarmento, 2001

A review by Jeanne Deslandes, Providence University, Taiwan

Close was the masterpiece of all video art creations shown at the forty-ninth Venice Biennale in 2001. In this art installation, a voyeuristic approach is linked to an obscene refusal to grant the spectators a minimum viewing distance from the spectacle. As such, Atom Egoyan and Julião Sarmento explore the abject promiscuity of film projection.

The obscenity of the installation derives from the fact that, demurring the transparency of the medium, the immediacy of the film experience is repudiated from a voyeuristic bias. The exhibition refuses to let the acknowledged conventional modes of film screening take place and instead goes abstract, reinventing cinema. The installation allows for an extremely minimal space, which en*closes* the spectator in a non-spectacle environment, a space of propinquity and, at its very heart, a space of voyeurism.

In the artists' installation, the film projection originates from behind a translucent screen. A three-foot deep standing space remains for the viewer, the back wall confining the spectator so close to the screen that the frame's border exceeds the field of vision. These screening conditions characterize the obscenity of the work of art, and result in a displacement of the spectacle from both its usual spacious cinematic space and its related comfort zone. This displacement results in an invading spatiality which swallows up the spectator, refusing her the distance of alienation, the distance from which she can deny a sense of responsibility. Thus a different reading, an abject gaze reading, is the dominant result of this deliberate obscenity.

In *Close*, obscenity is reiterated at three different levels. It is displayed in the screening strategy with its extreme narrow space; and it is also displayed in its film form, and in its content. The screening strategy explained above further encloses the observer, bringing into play a magnifying effect with the constant use of extreme close-ups. The short film's strategy is affected by a strong formalist influence. However, unlike the formalist school of the late 1960s, whose dada was to play with the film form at the expense of content, Egoyan and Sarmento explore a type of formalism that still keeps a narrative. Thus, *Close* differs from the avant-garde formalist trend in two different ways. On the one hand, it opts for the maintenance of narration, and on the other it expands formalism even further by playing with the forms of both the cinematic language and the screening experience itself. This avant-garde film therefore surpasses the formalist school in that it not only visits the border of cinematic language, but also walks an experimental path towards a screening experience within a new distinctive viewing space.

Because the film outshines the formalist school by remaining within the parameters of narration, the process of watching this short film is abstract, but the film itself is not. It remains representational with a minimal narrative. Its visual representation shows the fantasy

of cutting nail-clippings into someone's mouth, and it is provocative and shocking in that it forces the viewer to invade a private realm. Furthermore, the storyline is equally outrageous in its voice-over narration. The voice, which could be that of the nail-clipping women, questions the norms of fetishism, and the beliefs in good fortune icons such as a rabbit's foot. The voice then relates the memory of cutting her pet rabbit's claws. The soft voice remembers with guilt cutting one claw too short, thus causing pain to the animal. This musing then extends to an adult version of the story of Cinderella. The allegedly "original version" of the story finds the mother-in-law cutting the toes of her daughter to make the shoe fit. The content therefore represents a visual connotation of eating the body, signifying a mild form of cannibalism, while the voice-over evokes diverse narratives of repulsive mutilations.

This shocking narrative, and its voyeuristic representation, are augmented by an eternal water drop noise that suggests both the privacy of a lavatory and the anomalous convention of a horror genre soundtrack, announcing a mischievous suspense. On the whole, the positioning of the spectator in a close spatial relationship to the screen explores the possibilities of a voyeuristic gaze. Moreover, the film only uses close-up shots with an almost whispering voice-over narration, suggesting intimacy and confidence. The woman divulges her childhood memories, dragging us into her privacy. Hence, all aspects of the representation conjure, for the spectator, a sense of closeness in a different disturbing way.

However, the nearness of the representation refuses the spectator her usual control over the spectacle, and the oppressive screen ruthlessly overlooks the weakened bystander. The resulting voyeuristic gaze is therefore abject because it cannot encompass the entire screen without resorting to a wandering gaze, an eye motion that brings about the puzzle, piece by piece. The obscene apparatus forces the viewer to re-adjust her habitual viewing habit. One cannot simply look, one must scrutinize in order to access the closed up representation. The gaze becomes abject since it is not granted the minimal distance, which is necessary to perceive an overview.

The abject gaze strategy pushes the viewer to the edge of accepted cinematic experiences. First, the film's prologue refuses to grant the comfortable establishing shot that would bring about a bigger picture of the surrounding context. Second, the screen is too near (both by its physical proximity and its encoded obscenity: editing together only close-up shots). Third, the spectator is so close to the screen that she is exposed to a pixelisation of the screen image. Throughout this general strategy, distance is characterized by intimacy. However, the residual effect is an experience related to screening a digital film on the computer, one of touching the surface and not quite penetrating the virtual space of the narrative.

The abject gaze is not merely the wandering low angle gaze on a screen that overwhelms the field of vision. The concept involves a displacement of the comfort zone where heuristics are devalued. One strives to understand the representations, but the exposure is perverted in the concealment of the "bigger picture", in the restriction to a close forced obscenity.

Moreover, the abject gaze strategy demands an abject object. In this case, *Close* evicts the body of a formal character from the screen. Mere fragments of bodies are visually mutilated by the treatment of extreme close-ups. The representation is reduced to fragmental bodies: one mouth and one foot, with hands to clip the toenails -- body parts with no identity, no integrity, and nothing but a mere phantasmal aura.

In this production, Egoyan and Sarmento create noise within the narrative space of cinema. They bring about a truncated spectacle space, confining the spectator to the edge in a countercultural aesthetic. The co-creators of *Close* make a strong comment regarding the mediation of the screen -- they remodel the film screening, turning it upside down. In fact, looking at this piece from a traditional film projection background, it feels almost as if you are walking behind the screen in a movie theatre. A displacement confined to interpretation restricts the viewer to a puzzling wandering gaze, a hyper-immediacy, getting so *close* that one loses all aspect of transparency. This is a space that is saturated with obscenity, a narrow exiguity where the representation invades and overruns the viewer.

Egoyan and Sarmento turn down the option to seduce, and, instead, they favor the sordid formalist aesthetic of the abject object. The obscenity of the video art installation destroys the staging of the spectacle, and the superfusion of different meta-texts of mutilation alludes to an eyeless tactile perception. There is something of an overcoming of vision in this haptic installation. The experience is purposefully similar to watching a scene through a keyhole, where one must resort to imagination in order to fill in the missing elements of the entire scene.

In *Close*, the world of intimacy is ubiquitous. The abject gaze strategy obscures the image signification, so that one literally misses the forest for the trees, in a close up keyhole-like stratagem that makes the viewer conscious of her gaze. Hence, the film makes image and sound an active form of putting together bits and pieces.

Close's aesthetic composition eclipses the natural pleasure of the spectator. Categorically overpowering, the despotic team of Egoyan and Sarmento sets up the spectator and has her remain on the surface. By resisting the viewer's desire for entertainment, the scene never becomes spectacle but goes reverse and goes ob-scene. *Close*'s dislodgement of the spacious cinematic space thus resolves in an invading spatiality that consumes its spectator.

David and Lisa

Dir: Frank Perry, 1962
Oprah Winfrey Presents: David and Lisa

Oprah Winfrey Presents: David and Lisa

(Dir. Lloyd Kramer, 1998)

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

David and Lisa is a love story about two mentally troubled teenagers who meet in a residential facility for the "disturbed." Both the 1962 film (released on VHS in 1999) and the 1998 ABC television broadcast (*Oprah Winfrey Presents: David and Lisa*) are based upon psychiatrist Theodore Rubin's fictionalized case study, *Lisa and David*. Even though Dr. Rubin referred to them as "exceptional children," the difficulties David and Lisa face are beyond those of childhood and clearly fall into the purview of adolescent angst. Frank Perry, who directed the 1962 film, accentuated this distinction, and it is also strongly emphasized in Oprah's 1998 production. *David and Lisa* is imparted as a coming-of-age story, with more than a hint of honesty about adolescent sexuality.

ABC-TV notes on its webpage, "David and Lisa: The Inside Scoop," that:

> *Oprah Winfrey Presents: David and Lisa* is a classic love story updated with a '90s twist. A moving tale of hope and triumph, it follows two teens who are living at a school for disturbed youth. As the pair slowly fall in love, they find in each other the power to rebuild their lives.

The site includes the "Spotlight" video hyperlink, "Oprah on making David and Lisa," which is introduced by the text, "find out why she wants to share this timeless love story with a whole new generation." Oprah's well-intended pop psychology thesis lies in her chosen theme song for the production. This syrupy sweet tune, "Touch is Love," expresses David's longstanding problem with being touched, and how it is cured as he forms intimacy with Lisa.

People magazine echoes Winfrey's good-feeling rhetoric. Reviewer Mike Lipton calls the television movie "a case study in how to rejuvenate a screen classic," and describes "three riveting performances" by Lukas Haas as David, Brittany Murphy as Lisa, and Sidney Poitier as the doctor who monitors their care (Lipton, 1998: 28). The remake is not very different from husband and wife team Frank and Eleanor Perry's film (which also featured distinguished acting). Other than having David call Lisa "disassociative" rather than "schizophrenic" (as he did in 1962), resituating the story in sunny California, and the obvious differences in cinematic equipment dictated by modern lighting and editing, the 1998 television production is annoyingly apolitical, and its "timeless" quality is disturbing.

Frank and Eleanor Perry's *David and Lisa* addressed the psychiatric ideal that existed in mainstream American culture and was depicted in films during the late 1950s and early 1960s. In their book *Psychiatry and the Cinema*, Glen and Krin Gabbard call this period the "Golden Age of psychiatry in the cinema," when movie-based and corporeal psychiatrists were the "authoritative voices of reason, adjustment, and well-being" (Gabbard and Gabbard, 1999: 75). This "Golden Age" ended in 1962, and *David and Lisa* was one of the key threshold films that was released during the transitional period at the end of the Golden Age, immediately before the subsequent on and off screen critique of psychiatry.

As the Gabbards explain:

> made outside the studio system, films such as Robert Wise's *Odds Against Tomorrow* [1959], John Cassavetes's *Shadows* [1959], and Perry's *David and Lisa* attempted to abandon the old Hollywood myths and seriously examine themes of the family, love, and human communication. Although *David and Lisa* appropriates psychoanalysis in the same spirit as the old classic films [...] it nevertheless brought a new, less sensationalized image of mental illness to the screen (Gabbard and Gabbard, 1999: 86).

In comparison to its predecessors, *David and Lisa* was radical because of the way it realistically examined stigmatized lifestyles and psychotherapeutic interactions. The film suggested that health does not arise only as a result of effective clinical practices, but, despite its reflexivity, it ultimately hailed the merits of psychotherapy and psychiatry.

New York Times writer Caryn James remarks that Oprah Winfrey's remake "barely acknowledges the changes that have taken place in the study of psychology in the last three decades," and alleges that the program "like an extension of the 'Oprah Winfrey Show,' […] is television as therapy" (James, 1998). James notes that she does not encourage the "growing Oprah backlash." Instead, she insists that she generally supports Oprah's projects, but questions Winfrey's re-creation of *David and Lisa*, which she claims "comes from the Oprah Winfrey who joins with her audience in group therapy, which is not one of her better roles" (James, 1998).

It is intriguing to think about what ideological frameworks Oprah unwittingly and/or wittingly participated in when she decided to remake and barely change an almost forty-year-old story that commented upon mainstream psychiatry in its early form. Fox Lorber's 1999 VHS release of *David and Lisa*, as part of their World Class Cinema Collection, merits further critical attention with respect to timing and the political economy of reviving a "classic," especially one that assuredly inflects current societal representations, interpretations, and understandings of disability within cinema and beyond.

One particular arena of concern, with respect to contemporary film and television's relationship to ideology, is the way *David and Lisa* showcases gender and gendered stereotypes of madness and recovery. Rubin's fictional account, and these two adaptations, present David as less pathological and less damaged than Lisa. Studying the protagonists, an experienced viewer recognizes a "brilliant but odd" male stereotype and a "hysterical and helpless" female stereotype. David is somewhat rational even in his craziest moments: he is positioned as eccentric, while Lisa is incoherent. Anxious David is wacky, intelligent, creative, detached, aggressive, and is disconcerted by trying to emotionally express himself. Babbling Lisa is petulant, confused, and has infantile communication skills.

David and Lisa do help each other, but it is David whose recovery is featured in the case study's storyline, and both its film and television adaptations. Put differently, the relationship's recuperative powers are realized in a masculinist narrative that is present in both the 1998 television production and in the Perrys' 1962 classic. David is both mistrustful of psychiatry and indebted to it, and it is he, more than the doctor and therapists, who helps Lisa, even though he ultimately gets more out of the bargain than she does. Importantly, David feels conflicted about institutionalization in both his and Lisa's lives. *David and Lisa* daringly suggests that romantic love can sometimes be more efficacious than medicines and myriad therapies, or at least that affiliations outside of the bounds of psychiatry are essential to mental health, and must work as psychiatry's helpmates in order for a person to approach recovery.

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Gosford Park

Dir: Robert Altman, 2001

A review by Lisa Rull, University of Nottingham, UK

When considering the difference between film criticism and movie reviewing, an almost perfect cliché emerges. Worthy film critics produce top ten lists of the "best-ever films," that remain dominated by European classics such as Jean Renoir's *La Règle de Jeu* (1939). The International Critics Poll, run by the British Film Institute's magazine *Sight and Sound* and conducted every ten years since 1952 (its latest is due in 2002), places Renoir's intricate study of class in its top three in every list bar the first, when it came a "lowly" joint tenth. Contemporary films and current tastes are rigorously ignored -- the most contemporary film included was Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), on the 1992 list. By contrast, when movie fans are let loose on the concept of "the best film," populist logic dictates that the 1970s are a cinematic goldmine, that the life-transforming *Star Wars* (1977) must prevail high in the rankings, and that recent box-office hits deserve recognition. Of the 1992 *Sight and Sound* top ten, half its films -- including *La Règle de Jeu* -- do not make even the wilfully eccentric top 250 calculated by the *Internet Movie Database* (IMDb), a listing much more tolerant of independent features and non-English language films than most movie magazines or online film sites.

It is typical, then, of Robert Altman's own wilfulness and awareness of cinema history that his critical, and to some extent commercial, return to form should be with a 1930s period film that so closely echoes Renoir's analysis of class power-play. As Dennis Lim's *Village Voice* review points out, it is a deft homage, with the films sharing "a nippy November setting, guests braving a downpour, a protracted shooting-party massacre, a celebrity presence, rampant infidelity, [and] after-dinner entertainment interrupted by violence" (Lim, 2001). Both films take a genre and layer it with much more nuance than they are normally granted: *La Règle de Jeu* is ostensibly a farce, *Gosford Park* a "whodunit."

But there are also other issues linking the two films, both less well commented upon, that cause them to rise above their generic origins. Firstly, both films use their dialogue to critique the cultural status and practice of film. Renoir does this in a relatively straightforward manner, although, of its time, it was somewhat unusual. When criticising how "everyone lies," the list of culprits who produce the lies includes cinema as well as the radio and the press. Altman, as ever, uses his trademark technique of simultaneous and overlapping conversation to disrupt any audience expectation that there can be a privileged voice of exposition, and to demand of his audience an attentiveness usually ignored in cinema. In addition, *Gosford Park*'s dinner sequence sees American film producer Morris Weissman (Bob Balaban) defending his popular yet formulaic Charlie Chan movies. Weissman's fellow guests are less than impressed with the relevance or veracity of cinema, especially when his valet Henry (Ryan Philippe) -- who demonstrates both practical ineptitude and unawareness of social protocol -- is revealed to be merely an actor prepping for a similar role in the forthcoming "Charlie Chan in London."

The second theme the two films share is a concern with Otherness, especially Jewishness, in the midst of high society. In *La Règle de Jeu*, the host of the doomed, and eventually darkly farcical, country-house party is the Jewish nouveau riche Marquis La Chesnaye; in *Gosford Park*, it is Weissman who is the exemplary Other. Both servants and gentry raise their eyebrows at his lack of "class" in every sense. They bemoan Weissman's "vulgarity" -- his enthusiasm for money, for the entertainment industry -- and his inability to comprehend or conform to the required social etiquette. However, this response does not merely arise from Weissman's profession: both his behaviour and their disdain are to be read as intimately tied to his identity. He is American, Jewish, and -- at least by implication -- homosexual. He is thus an uncomfortable (queer) Other, an interloper whose presence is only permissible as the guest of another barely tolerated Other -- the party's entertainment provision, Ivor Novello (Jeremy Northam). Novello, a hugely popular and populist matinee idol, composer, and playwright, not only shares Weissman's problematic class origins -- Novello was the son of a tax collector but he is also gay. Julian Fellowes' taut script gives knowing audiences a revealing joke on this Otherness: in response to Weissman's whispered question "How can you stand these people?" Novello replies "You must remember that I earn my living impersonating them."

Altman himself has made a career of impersonating the classics of cinema, taking well-loved themes and genres and turning them on their heads. His best works transcend their potential limitations as wartime comedies (*M*A*S*H* [1969]), westerns (*McCabe and Mrs. Miller* [1971]), film noir (*The Long Goodbye* [1973]), or musicals (*Nashville* [1975]). *Gosford Park* should do the same for the Agatha Christie murder mystery, and, certainly, the requisite parody plotlines and subversions are there. Take one stuffy, largely nouveau riche extended family with layers of sexual intrigue. This would consist of aristocrat Lady Sylvia McCordle (Kristin Scott Thomas) and her industrialist husband Sir William (Michael Gambon), plus assorted sisters, husbands, cousins, and even an aunt (Maggie Smith), all of whom need some favour -- mostly financial -- from "working class, married well" William. Add some nicely observed social detail on the nuances of servant hierarchies, which are no less riven with sexual tensions. These are not just reflections of upstairs. Feisty housemaid Elsie (Emily Watson) is finally provoked to a revealing defence of William when the aristocratic venom too gleefully attacks her master: "that's not fair to Billy." Altman spends more than half the movie setting up the supposedly central murder, and then introduces a ludicrously inept and obsequious police Inspector with an astute and observant working-class assistant. Finally the murder is resolved via the figure through whose eyes we have most consistently watched this strange world: the lowliest untrained maid, the sympathetically naïve Mary (Kelly McDonald).

So why does *Gosford Park* instil such ambiguous feelings of satisfaction/dissatisfaction? Certainly, I emerged from the cinema utterly enthused by the masterful ensemble acting, co-ordinated by such an attentive director. The cast thoroughly deserved their awards from the International Press Academy (Golden Satellite) and the Screen Actors Guild. Helen Mirren and Maggie Smith collected numerous individual nominations for "best supporting actress," and even -- in a few instances -- one of them won out over Jennifer Connolly's emotive resilience as Alicia Nash in *A Beautiful Mind* (2001). Mirren and Smith's performances exemplify how Altman's return to form coincides with a re-established ability to direct women and connect with a female audience, but to some extent the casting is also the undoing of the film. I cannot object to Altman's demand that to be appreciated you have to watch his films several times; that the interactions of the characters cannot possibly be comprehended in a single sitting. However, this is the British cast to die for in this type of

movie, and the familiarity of the faces is such that you fight the compulsion to name and place each of the actors in their respective career history. Moreover, 136 minutes divided between so many quality performances diminishes some actors to almost cameo roles. It is the interactions, the ensemble as a whole, which rescues the audience from possible frustration with this too-perfect cast.

Perhaps the Agatha Christie genre is just an insufficient mode or genre for Altman to dissect? Altman's other satires on cinematic genres were produced when the genres themselves were beginning to come under threat, but surely the moment of the Agatha Christie upper-class murder mystery has long since passed. It seems a nice excuse for a costume drama, but what else is going on? The upper classes are revealed as beastly to their servants, who in turn are revealed as possessing much more savvy and a greater sense of morality than those upstairs. Overall, this is conveyed in some beautifully subtle camera work (many of the interactions between servants and their masters and mistresses are achieved by watching through mirrors, glimpses through distorted glass, with shadowy refraction, in darkly lit doorways), but are we really meant to take this complication of one rank "good," the other "bad," as a cinematic revelation? Is Altman showing his American roots in this examination of that supposedly un-American concept, class?

Ultimately, I think some of *Gosford Park*'s problems stem from an inescapable comparison to *La Règle de Jeu*. Whilst the latter was a critique of its period -- indeed its uncomfortable prescience regarding fascism was part of the reason it was submerged for nearly two decades -- the former merely seems interested in critiquing the *representation* of that period. *Gosford Park* seems too fascinated by its setting in 1932, that historically transitional year -- before Hitler's rise, after the economic crash -- to live up to the nuances of Renoir's astute social commentary. For all the hints towards the interwoven businesses of finance, war, and entertainment, *Gosford Park* deals with such matters only superficially. Indeed, the most accurate term to describe the film and its concerns would be "surface." There are great costumes and wonderfully forgettable music (Novello's songs are mostly unmemorable twee ditties); and, beneath the surface of this delightful party exterior, there are repressed emotions and suppressed secrets. No wonder Stephen Fry as the bumbling snobbish Inspector jars so badly, as if he has wandered in from the wrong movie-set: he must surely be there to remind us that this is a film, that what the audience has become consumed by is yet another surface. It is a two-dimensional projection, all surface, light, and mirrors. The human frailties are all there, but they are only performances of human frailties.

So we are left with a qualified "hurrah," pleased by the fact that this is not -- thank goodness -- another *Dr. T and the Women* (2000), but perhaps a little disappointed that both the individual parts and their sum do not quite produce the whole product we would wish for. Maybe we prefer to have the surface revealed in a more obviously post-modern fashion these days, or maybe it boils down to Altman being too subtle for our own good.

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Hannibal

Dir: Ridley Scott, 2001

A review by Kendall R. Phillips, Syracuse University, New York, USA

It seems oddly fitting that Ridley Scott, the director who ushered postmodern film into mainstream cinema with *Blade Runner* (1982), is the one to oversee its implosion. *Hannibal*, Scott's remarkably successful adaptation of Thomas Harris's novel of the same name, is an excellent example of the postmodern horror film and its limitations. While it is likely that many of the postmodern thematics and aesthetics that Scott helped to popularize will continue, *Hannibal* gives a clear example of how these trends can collapse under their own weight. Indeed, Scott's rendition of the exploits of the culturally ubiquitous cannibalistic psychiatrist, Dr Hannibal "the Cannibal" Lecter, seems markedly consistent with the most notable aspects of *Blade Runner*: a world of amoral chaos; a reckless citation of previous works; and, an aesthetic based on pastiche, appearance, and exteriority.

Hannibal begins ten years after the events of Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). The end of Demme's *Silence* left our protagonist, Clarice Starling (portrayed by Jodie Foster in Demme's film, but replaced by Julianne Moore in Scott's), precariously balanced between the patriarchal authority structure of the FBI, embodied by her superior Jack Crawford (Scott Glenn), and the now unleashed consuming passion of Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins in both films). By the beginning of *Hannibal*, however, Starling is no longer the celebrated hero, but the object of resentment and controversy. Starling's fall from grace is seized upon by the film's true villain, one of Lecter's surviving, albeit horribly disfigured, victims named Mason Verger (Gary Oldman). After Verger's goons fail to seize Lecter in Florence, where the good Doctor was living as temporary curator of the Carponi Library, Starling's plight is used to draw Lecter back to the United States. When Lecter is captured by Verger, it is Starling who must come to his rescue, stopping Verger from his planned revenge of feeding Lecter alive to enormous boars. In the rescue, however, Starling is shot and nursed back to health by Dr Lecter. In the film's last act, she joins him for one of the most bizarre dinner parties ever committed to film, the main course being slices of the brain of one of Starling's resentful superiors, Paul Krendler (Ray Liotta); a main course enjoyed by Krendler himself. Eventually, the police arrive, thanks to Starling's efforts, and Lecter escapes, fleeing the country on an airliner where he shares some of his recent "meal" with a young boy on the flight.

In this brief review of the film, I'd like to suggest not only that Scott's *Hannibal* pursues the postmodern trajectory he began in *Blade Runner*, but that these postmodern features ultimately prevent the film from working as horror. To fulfill this purpose, I'll address first the postmodern milieu of *Hannibal*, next, the film's citation of its predecessor, and, finally, the aesthetic texture of Scott's film.

Hannibal resembles, if nothing else, a Hieronymous Bosch triptych: the world upside down; chaotic, and devoid of moral center. Indeed, in this regard, the Lecter of *Hannibal* is

exemplary of the postmodern monster. Unlike the classic monsters of, say, Universal Studios, who represented a chaotic threat to a stable society, postmodern monsters, "inhabit a society that is chaotic. This makes them heroes, in the sense that, while we are confused, denied simple answers and distinctions in a bewildering cultural condition, monsters are not" (Budra, 1998: 194). The Lecter of the previous two films seems more in line with the modernist version of the monster, a being of corruption and chaos, always threatening to escape into our carefully, if precariously, ordered world. One is drawn to look at this caged monster precisely because of the potential for chaos, but the seductive nature of this imprisoned evil is lost in *Hannibal*. Lecter, free and roaming the world at will, somehow loses the tension evident in both Michael Mann's *Manhunter* (1986) and Demme's treatment. In those earlier films, Lecter represented a yawning abyss of narcissistic desire, much in the literary tradition of *Dracula*. It is precisely because the vampire is only let loose in the dark of night that his evil is threatening, with the potential that the world might be consumed by his thirst. In *Hannibal*, the viewer is not threatened by the abyss so much as cast into it. Without any sense of moral order -- a dawn, within which to feel threatened -- *Hannibal* can only cast us about in its own chaos.

The world of *Hannibal* is made in the image of its eponymous hero, a sense established early in the film where, after a perfunctory prologue connecting to *Silence*, an opening montage of jumpy, blurred black and white surveillance images climaxes with Lecter's face formed by a flock of pigeons. This opening montage establishes the tone -- Lecter is everywhere, his unnatural passion has infused the world. In the first filmic representation of Lecter, Michael Mann's *Manhunter*, Lecter explains to the film's protagonist that if one wants to become like God, then one must do what God does, namely kill. In *Hannibal*, Lecter has achieved his goal. He is omniscient and omnipotent, and no plot to undo him can succeed.

In this regard he has achieved the same role as Freddy Krueger, possessing "macabre wit, ingenuity of murder technique, and, above all, stamina" (Budra, 1998: 195), with, for instance, Lecter dispatching one of his victims with an "Okey-dokey." Indeed, the film's ending, in which a badly wounded Lecter, having cut-off his own hand to escape Starling's handcuffs, seemingly disappears without a trace, is more reminiscent of John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) and its many spin-offs, than either Demme or Mann's prequels. Lecter's omnipresence and omniscience, as well as the almost inevitable sequel, is established again in the film's final seconds as the scene slowly fades to black, with the last remnant of the shot being Lecter's eye.

Operating as postmodern monster, Lecter moves easily amid the norm-less chaos of his world. His paired opposite, Clarice Starling, however, does not fare so well. Demme's Starling struggles to find balance in a world dominated by patriarchal authority and carnivorous desires (Phillips, 2000), but Scott's Starling, in contrast, is adrift in a world without moral compass. The FBI offers neither support nor solace. The few sources of support from Harris's novel -- an aging Jack Crawford and the female housemate and friend, Ardelia Mapp -- are removed. Starling is not even provided with *Silence*'s idyllic flashbacks to her childhood, a source of strength and comfort in that film. In *Hannibal*, Starling is surrounded by only those who resent and desire her, bereft of support or direction, left with only the anxieties, frustrations, and pains that sated Dr Lecter during their sessions in *Silence*. Starling, like the audience, is adrift in an amoral postmodern condition -- a condition rendered in the likeness of Lecter and well-suited to his tastes -- and, in a way, she/we cannot help but be charmed by Lecter, his macabre wit, his ingenuity, and his freedom and confidence amidst the chaos.

The nature of the attraction to Lecter, particularly for Starling, is rendered very differently here. Where Demme's *Silence* portrayed Starling's feelings for Lecter ambiguously, a hint of attraction wrapped in a general repulsion, Scott has inverted the portrayal. As a result, Lecter becomes more object of desire than object of pursuit.

Recasting the Starling-Lecter dynamic is not the only way that Scott goes against the grain of Demme's film. Despite its strikingly different tone and character, *Hannibal* cites quite frequently from its predecessor. Of course, being a sequel, there are necessary points of citation, characters, plot lines, etc. Other instances of citation, however, are more noticeable in the way they continue this inversion of the earlier film. For example, the opening sequence of *Silence*, in which Starling jogs in the dark woods, is repeated here. However, where Demme's film confounds our generic expectations by revealing a strong Starling in no peril, in Scott's film Starling is followed by a menacing figure. The tone of this citation is striking in that it inverts the work of Demme's film, which desexualizes violence and places its heroine outside the sexual economy of male violence. In *Hannibal*, Starling is highly sexualized, a fact borne out by the choice of the more glamorous Julianne Moore to play the role, and, just as Starling's sexuality is more overt, so too are the sexual offenses she must suffer. Where Demme's film represented the subtlety of patriarchal oppression -- the off-hand comment or leering gaze -- Scott's version of patriarchy is a gross caricature of spectacularly offensive sexual harassment. The "father-figure" of Jack Crawford, and even the blundering come-ons of Dr Frederick Chilton, are replaced by the grotesquely lecherous Paul Krendler, who describes Starling as "corn-pone country pussy."

Another example, an attack on a female nurse described in *Silence*, is shown here in all its graphic detail; indicating that where Demme's film chose to suggest violence, Scott's film revels in the graphicness of the display. A third example, the conversations between Lecter and Starling that formed the center of *Silence*, are repeated here, though with two important differences. First, the female voice is now Julianne Moore's and, second, there are new, additional lines of conversation. These additional lines are interesting for two reasons. Firstly, there is nowhere, within the plot of *Silence*, a point where such additional conversations could have taken place, and, secondly, they function to further destroy the ambiguity of the Starling-Lecter relationship. Where Demme left the nature of their connection to the audience's imagination (perhaps, Lecter's lust or Starling's incorruptibility or her innocence or his pain), Scott lays out this relationship in its more lurid form. On the tapes Lecter hisses, "Jack Crawford dangles you in front of me, then I give you a bit of help. Do you think it is because I like to look at you and imagine how good you would taste?" Starling then replies timidly, "I don't know. Is it?" The ambiguity shattered, it is clear that Lecter lusts for Starling and that she will become helpless to his advances.

Throughout *Hannibal*, Starling affects an almost nostalgic interest in Lecter, like the longing for an old friend. Whatever complex motivations drove Lecter and Starling through the first film are here made both simpler and more overt. In sum, then, the various references to *Silence* made in *Hannibal* both extend and externalize. The dramatic tension of *Silence* is now made dramatic spectacle, a crucial theme in *Hannibal*.

Indeed, this "aesthetics of the exterior" is the final theme worth comment here. *Hannibal* is all about surfaces. Consider the villain of this film, Mason Verger. In many ways, Verger plays the part that Lecter played in the earlier two films. Like Lecter, he is confined, though by physical malady rather than incarceration, and, also like Lecter, he compels the plot through his spider-like manipulation of the various strands of the plot's web. Indeed, in

another scene paralleling *Silence*, Agent Starling also interrogates Verger, trading information with another psychopath. Yet, where the horror of the first two depictions of Lecter stemmed from the duality of his nature, as both sophisticated gentleman and devouring beast, there is little doubt of Verger's monstrousness; his horribly deformed face an external badge of his twisted nature.

In addition, not only is the heroine more visually attractive (even wearing a revealing evening gown in the film's last act) and the villain more visually monstrous, the film leaves nothing to implication or imagination. In this way, Scott departs quite dramatically from both his predecessors. Michael Mann's *Manhunter*, the film that introduces Lecter, seems very much about the visual, indeed voyeuristic, aspects of violence, but the film renders its own voyeurism problematic by paralleling the audience's viewing with the murderous gaze of the killer (Phillips, forthcoming). Demme then broadened this concern to encompass the implications of the more ubiquitous patriarchal gaze. But where both Mann and Demme imply violence through depictions of its aftermath, Scott lingers over the scenes of bloodshed and dismemberment. Victims lie in rapidly expanding pools of blood, and an Italian detective is hung and disemboweled (complete with a shot of the bowels striking the ground), and this lack of restraint is evident throughout the film. When the angry boars turn on their master, Scott cannot stop at showing us the beasts about to bite but must culminate the act. Throughout the film, a simple maxim seems at work: it must be seen, a maxim which has served Scott well in such films as *Alien* (1979) and *Gladiator* (2000).

Hannibal, therefore, seems a logical extension and culmination of the film aesthetic Scott realized most fully in *Blade Runner*. The amoral creator embodied by Eldon Tyrell in *Blade Runner* is replaced by the amoral devourer, Hannibal Lecter. While *Blade Runner* might be seen as Scott's Genesis, *Hannibal* can be seen as his Revelations (the end is here). Where Tyrell creates life without thought to its consequence, Lecter takes lives with the same flippant disregard. There is at work here a disconcerting cinematic theology, one not unlike Descartes, meditations on the possibility of a wicked, deceptive, demonic god and the possibility of knowledge in a world of intentional norm-less chaos. Ridley Scott has enacted this possibility in his cinematic creation, a world with surfaces but no interiors, chaos but no order, with spectacle but no meaning. Tyrell and Lecter, then, become the diegetic agents of Scott's "demonic" aesthetic vision. The ultimate "prime mover" behind both films, Scott creates in *Blade Runner* a world of artificiality, exteriority and appearance and in *Hannibal* he consumes it.

Yet, whatever thematic consistencies this film has with Scott's broader oeuvre, the result is generally unsatisfying. Collapsing under the weight of its own spectacular superficiality, its own ambivalent dependence on *Silence*, and its own amoral chaos, *Hannibal* can offer its viewer little. It is not a horrific film, except in the graphicness of its violence, nor is it a particularly philosophical work, in this way departing from its source-novel. Harris's novel takes great pains, albeit none too subtly, to explore the interior of Hannibal Lecter -- to understand his pathology, his intellect, and his motivations. However, in Scott's *Hannibal*, we are afforded none of this interior view. Lecter is as Lecter does, in dramatic spectacles of bloodletting. Harris's *Hannibal* seems to aspire to being a meditation on the nature of evil, but Scott, to the contrary, seems to argue that the nature of evil is empty and meaningless as, presumably, is the nature of good.

In his influential meditation on horror, Noel Carroll suggests horror works for most of us because we are drawn to see the disclosure of what we expect will be repellent (Carroll,

1990: 186). It is this central tension that makes us peek through our hands to see what we know will be horrific. *Hannibal*, however, like the postmodern splatter films of the 1980s (Arnzen, 1994), cheats us of this tension. Yet, where the splatter films of George Romero or Sam Raimi made up in playfulness what they lacked in thematic or narrative tension, *Hannibal* offers only a ponderous spectacle. In this way, the film succeeds in rendering a world in the image of its eponymous "hero," a world without center or motive and, therefore, without horror. The film, thus, fulfills all of its postmodern conceits, but, in a move reminiscent of Baudrillard, collapses under its own weight, leaving us with only a few whirling scraps of the horrific amidst an amoral maelstrom of indifference.

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The House of Mirth

Dir: Terence Davies, 2000

A review by Kenneth R. Morefield, Toccoa Falls College, USA

Despite garnering strong reviews (including a review on its theatrical release in an earlier issue of *Scope*, and with one major entertainment magazine having it listed among its top two films for the year 2000), Terence Davies's *The House of Mirth* failed to acquire either the sufficient art house buzz or mainstream commercial success necessary to parlay its initial reception into viable Oscar consideration. The recent release of the film on DVD provides viewers with an opportunity to decide for themselves whether the film was underappreciated or overpraised during its initial release. *The House of Mirth* stands up to repeated viewing, but its flaws, in terms of its status as an adaptation, begin to show through as well.

The plot is relatively faithful to the novel, in which Lily Bart (played here by Gillian Anderson) negotiates the expectations, spoken and unspoken, of turn-of-the-century New York society. In this version, Lily's search for a way to maintain both happiness and comfort in the face of increasingly narrow personal choices is presented less as the naturalistic social commentary Wharton intended, and more as a prototypical early feminist dilemma. Wharton's novel came at the tail end of American Literary Naturalism, was influenced by it, and, arguably, participated in it. Naturalism was a literary style or movement undergirded by a belief in various forms of determinism, and it is this philosophical foundation that both gives the film its interest and robs it of much of its power. Certainly, the most interesting parts of the film consist of watching an individual try to exercise free choice in an environment which, despite its luxuriant surface, is highly restrictive. Lily does not want to marry for money, but neither does she wish to sacrifice the material comforts to which she has grown accustomed. Since we live in an age that values and believes in personal freedom, Lily's lament that she is not only a "useless" person but has been trained to be one, loses much of its resonance. To a generation weaned on a steadfast belief in upward mobility and personal freedom, Lily's eventual suicide can appear more defeatist than tragic. I overheard one young woman exclaim at the theatrical screening: "Give me a break. She tried one or two jobs, and when neither one worked, she kills herself?"

Perhaps this comment reflects an audience that rejects the assumptions of the literary naturalists and is more comfortable with those of their predecessors, the realists. In its literary form, realism often attempted to keep the pessimistic despair of deterministic naturalism at bay by insisting that individuals could make meaningful moral choices, even in the face of extreme environmental pressures. The decline-and-fall plot structure of *The House of Mirth* centers around Lily's loss of material status, but, much like the protagonist in William Dean Howells' novel *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, she grows morally by refusing to allow her material circumstances to lead to a key moral compromise. Still, while the realists (at least some of them) saw an escape from determinism through moral perseverance, the naturalists, by the time Wharton wrote, were already beginning to see such gestures as futile. *The House of Mirth* is one of Wharton's darker books; she can't bring herself to allow Lily's refusal to

blackmail a key rival, who has injured her reputation, to earn her any type of deliverance from her suffering. She dies in a state of moral superiority (perhaps), but she dies nevertheless. The knowledge that she could alleviate her material suffering through moral compromise does, to be sure, add a layer of pathos over her deterioration; but one senses that Wharton feels the hope provided by selling out was a false one anyway. The fact that she is able to choose one avenue of failure over another does not lessen the air of fatal resignation that hangs over the latter half of the novel or, consequently, the film.

The audience's ambivalence about naturalism's assumptions creates an artistic dilemma for the film's makers that is never totally solved. Faithfulness to the novel (both in plot and tone) is generally regarded as a desirable trait. Here, however, it seems to keep the audience at a distance, never allowing Lily's tragedy to transcend its time and place and take on a more universal significance or even a significance relevant to our time and place. We may even be tempted to see Lily's tragedy in historical rather than personal terms, to sympathize with her having to live during "those times" rather than drawing connections between her situation and our own. Perhaps it is expecting too much from the film to ask it to stay faithful to the book and make Lily sympathetic to contemporary audiences. Yet, to the extent that it emphasizes the former rather than the latter, it keeps the audience at arm's length and makes us ambivalent about Lily rather than sympathetic towards her. It is hard to root for Lily when we are continually told that she is destined to fail and can do nothing to help herself.

From a technical standpoint, the tension between whether the film wants to be an example of naturalism or realism is seen most in the casting. The look of the film is fine; the photography is luxuriant, creating a world which is beautiful on the surface but teeming with hidden ugliness. *The House of Mirth* reminded me of *American Beauty* (1999) in its use of that visual symbolism. The acting is strong but not outstanding. Anderson does a fair job of making you forget Agent Scully from *The X-Files*, and Dan Ackroyd and Laura Linney are above average as Gus Trenor and Bertha Dorset, friends of Lily who turn out to have hidden streaks of cruelty. Most of the early criticism surrounding the film's casting focused on Eric Stoltz as Lily's love interest, Lawrence Selden. Stoltz does seem miscast, but, in his defense, the film's indecisive tone means it cannot decide whether it ultimately wants to make him a co-victim (like Lily, unable to fly in the face of societal expectations despite his love for her) or a co-conspirator (like Gus and Bertha, willing to use Lily for his enjoyment but unwilling to stand by her when it is not expedient). Fans of the book may also balk at the casting of Anthony LaPaglia as Sim Rosedale, a character whose Jewish identity is a much emphasized part of the book. The film eliminates the majority of the book's anti-Semitism through this casting, and, in doing so, it makes Lily's rejection of Sim a matter of personal dislike rather than racial disgust instilled by a racist society. Works such as Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* or James Baldwin's *Going to Meet the Man* were able to generate more sympathy for less sympathetic characters precisely because they emphasized the universal nature of deterministic influences. The treatment of Rosedale and Selden here belies the weakness of *Mirth*'s more feminist attitude. Lily must be always put upon and never putting. She must be alone in her suffering. The result is that one feels sorry for her, but she never acquires the representative status of a truly tragic hero.

There is much to praise in Terence Davies's film, but, like films based on naturalist or realist novels, the excellence seems more technical than emotional, leading to an artistic appreciation of a finely drawn character or situation instead of a moving experience.

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