

America's Sweethearts

Dir: Joe Roth, 2001

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

The whole idea of *America's Sweethearts* is to have a little fun with the industry of film stars' lives, and the fact that their marriages, breakdowns and breakups have become an entertainment medium of their own. Further to this is the fact that not only does the consumer buy the product of stars' off-screen lives, but so (at times) do stars. Of course, part of the fun of this film is that it just happens to be populated by some very large careers, which makes for good box-office (and ironic) appeal -- with Julia Roberts, Catherine Zeta-Jones, Billy Crystal, and John Cusack as the front-line members of the cast.

Everyone should be thoroughly convinced by now that Julia Roberts was born to play romantic comedy. Those liquid eyes and that blazing smile go directly to an audience's collective heart, and make it leap or ache as required. On the occasions when she steps out of her generic specialty, it's just an embarrassment (for example *Mary Reilly* [1996]); and reminds us that she is not a great dramatic actor -- the Academy Award notwithstanding. However, when Roberts stays within her limits, and does what she is undeniably talented at doing, there's nobody better. She's not the only big-name actress in *America's Sweethearts*, so she doesn't get all the screen time she's accustomed to, but she makes good use of her allotment. However, there are a couple of problems with the premise for her character, Kiki.

To begin with, no one would find it believable that Julia Roberts has ever been obese. Even *my* willing suspension doesn't stretch that far. The flashback scenes, which are meant to show the fat Kiki (so we can appreciate the transformation), do not pad that tall, thin body enough to make an audience see real fat. Overweight, yes, but not sixty pounds of fat. The other problem with the obesity approach to the Cinderella story is that, while the fat Kiki conceals herself behind large glasses and hair falling on her face and crossed arms and all the other body-hiding strategies, the miraculously thin Kiki exhibits none of these behaviours. The single exception is her bingeing scene (probably not so funny for people who actually have eating disorders), during which she reverts to food as a coping mechanism. Here, Roberts gets to wave her arms around and be frustrated in her singular way, which is indeed entertaining, but fatness lingers in the psyche long after it has been cast out of the body, and Roberts exhibits none of those signs. This is far too serious an issue for *America's Sweethearts* to address -- it wants to be a silly, fun movie, and, mostly, it is.

However, don't believe the review, included in ads for the film, which declares that Catherine Zeta-Jones is hilarious. She is not. She's okay. Her purpose is to make Gwen, "the leading lady," a caricature of the utterly self-involved screen personality, and she does that competently. However, I didn't find her particularly funny, let alone hilarious, although my screening companions suspect I might be a bit harsh on this point. John Cusack does his job as "the leading man," by making Eddie a likeable guy with a fragile mental balance, and, as a result, is easily the best of these three main players. The performance weakens at the exact

spot where the role weakens, which is when he suddenly has to translate his obsession with Gwen into "true love" for Kiki -- "true love" of the "I must have been blind, I've loved you all along" sort. The film doesn't allow enough transition time for this revelation and resolution to be convincing, and, as a result, it resembles a Jane Austen-style plot device, where, suddenly, all the characters are united, and paired off, in marriage. However, it must be remembered, at this point, that the film presents itself as fun, and, with this in mind, such narrative gaps should perhaps not be dwelled upon.

Where the fun shows up best is in the second line of characters. Billy Crystal is Lee Phillips, and gives himself some very funny moments as "the publicist" who can seize on anything and spin it to the studio's advantage (notably, he co-wrote the film's screenplay with Peter Tolan). Crystal has wonderful comedic timing, and it doesn't fail him here. However, by far the most solid performances are those delivered by Hank Azaria, Stanley Tucci, Alan Arkin, and Christopher Walken. Each of these, like the front four, is responsible for spoofing a Hollywood type. Azaria is Hector, "the other man" in Gwen and Eddie's break-up. He's not as perfect here as he is in *The Bird Cage* (1996), but he's still extremely funny -- indeed, *this* is where the word "hilarious" should be used. He's flamboyantly protective of his sexual reputation: publicly insisting that there's nothing unfortunate about the proportions of his "penith," and that, on the contrary, it is large enough that he's "had complaintth."

Arkin's character doesn't even get a name: he's Eddie's "wellness guide" at the retreat where Eddie recovers from his post-Gwen breakdown. Arkin is quietly ridiculous, playing it straight and thus treating the scam elements of the wellness industry to derision, as they rightly should. His soft-spoken humility actually exaggerates the foolishness of his lines, and he gets a couple of great ones from Crystal and Tolan. Meanwhile, Christopher Walken gets the mad genius role of Hal Weidmann, "the director" who makes Eddie and Gwen's last film together. Holding the film hostage, and letting no one get a glimpse until the press screening, he sends communiques which consist of his shaggy-haired self in closeup à la Gloria Swanson in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950). It's all very secret, all very hush hush, and we find out why at the screening, which is full of accusations and counter-accusations like a "mystery-of-the-week." Finally, Stanley Tucci plays "the producer," Dave Kingman, to the heartless profit-margin hilt, and gets the funniest line in the film. In my opinion, I laughed so hard my three companions shifted away from me in their seats, though no-one else thought it was as funny as I did, and I admit the line is group specific in its appeal (specifically if a particular audience member has any knowledge of Señor Wences).

It doesn't seem to matter what the film industry does, audiences will consume it like open-gullet nestlings. It can festival itself, reward itself with statues of all kinds and degrees of significance, earnestly examine and expose itself (for example, in *The Player* [1992]), or poke self-aware fun at itself. All of these peripheral activities are followed with tireless enthusiasm by the voracious public, which may in fact be the target of this film as much as the industry itself. Perhaps *America's Sweethearts* points out that no matter how ridiculous Hollywood gets it has nothing to fear and knows it -- the generally indiscriminating public will swallow it whole. At the very least, the industry knows there's a demographic pocket with an appetite for any of the things which can be cloaked as entertainment. As audiences become more sophisticated and educated as readers of film, filmmakers have to become more respectful of the intellectual preparation in the theatre. This particular film is partially a commentary of some kind, but I'm not entirely sure which kind. I just know we went out to see something simple and funny, and that's what we got.

Best in Show

Dir: Christopher Guest, 2000

A review by Kate Egan, University of Nottingham, UK

If the now classic *This is Spinal Tap* (1984) can be described as the film which launched the "mockumentary" genre, then it can be seen that *Best in Show*'s director, Christopher Guest, has built a directorial career on attempting to extend, and possibly better, the original template created by *This is Spinal Tap* in the early eighties. From *This is Spinal Tap* to his last feature, *Waiting for Guffman* (1996), and, onwards, to *Best in Show*, Guest continues to adopt a parodic framework for his films, and, in the process, has assembled a repertory company of actors, who all have clear links to American television and, in particular, American alternative comedy.

Hence, aside from director and performer, Guest (who co-wrote and starred as the legendary guitarist, Nigel Tuffnel, in *This is Spinal Tap*), *Best in Show* is populated with key improvisational actors and comics, many of whom are familiar from *This is Spinal Tap*, and who, largely, have emerged from a tradition of alternative, and highly parodic, modern American comedy (with this tradition arguably stretching from *Saturday Night Live* in the early eighties, to latter day successes ranging from the cult [*The Larry Sanders Show*] to the phenomenon that is *The Simpsons*).

With this in mind, it is interesting that *This is Spinal Tap* can be seen to derive from a *Saturday Night Live* tradition of mocking the self-importance of celebrity, which is mainly enacted through a gentle lampooning of the drug-addled American rock scene. Hence, what *Saturday Night Live* alumni parodied (and in many ways celebrated) in *This is Spinal Tap* and *Wayne's World* (1992) was a new celebrity of "stadium rock," where bands built their reputation on drug-taking, sexual permissiveness, fast living and over-the-top stage shows (in a model of eighties hedonism and excess), and combined this with the imputed "maleness" of being guitar heroes who were "serious," earnest and self-important about the music they were making.

However, times have significantly changed, and if *This is Spinal Tap*'s parodic referent was a wave of late seventies' documentaries which earnestly celebrated and investigated the "on-the-road" antics and carefully orchestrated persona of the rock band (perhaps most exemplified by Martin Scorsese's *The Last Waltz* [1978]), then it can be argued that *Best in Show* takes a step into a new millennium by directly, but, as with *This is Spinal Tap*, affectionately, parodying the new TV cult of "real" people as celebrity -- a modern televisual tradition that stretches from *The Jerry Springer Show* to *Big Brother*. Hence, in *Best in Show*, Guest takes us away from the high-profile celebrity world of rock bands on the road, via the amateur-dramatic wannabes of his last feature *Waiting for Guffman*, to the world of the Mayflower Dog Show and the variety of contestants who devote their spare time to a means of obtaining a "celebrity" of their own -- the honour of their pet dog being named "best in show".

The film introduces us (by a largely absent documentary film-maker) to a cross-section of Mayflower contestants, who exist in a sliding scale of class, lifestyle and likeability -- from the obnoxious, yuppie couple, who reminisce about visits to Starbucks and are plagued by sexual insecurities, to the sweet gay couple who dote over their two pampered shih-tzus, to the amateur ventriloquist Harlan Pepper and his endearing bloodhound. As with *This is Spinal Tap*, but possibly more so, the comedy here is subtle and derives, more often than not, from the eccentricities and absurdities of the character's relationships with each other and their dogs, rather than relying on the often contrived comedy set-pieces of the kind favoured by the Farrelly Brothers -- which move the characters' from one ridiculous situation to another, to keep the narrative moving and the laughs coming.

Here, comic situations derive largely through direct-to-camera interviews with the Mayflower contestants (which, according to the film's press notes, were largely improvised by the actors on set), and it is via these interviews that the film gives us such sweet, but highly comic, moments as Harlan Pepper's attempts to use his bloodhound as a makeshift ventriloquist's dummy, or the physical ridiculousness of an interview with the voluptuous young wife of Leslie Ward Cabot. Here, the glamorous Sherri Ann sits next to her frail old husband, who remains mute throughout the interview, and attempts to explain the nature of her marriage by informing the filmmakers' that "we could not talk or talk forever and still find things to not talk about," while her husband sits expressionless next to her.

However, if comedy can be seen to derive from the physical in this scene, then a more over-riding, but unspoken, gag exists in the film as a whole -- the fact that all the contestants in some ways physically resemble their dogs (from the yuppie couples' sleek but neurotic weimaraner bitch, to Sherri Ann's fluffy, pampered poodle, and Harlan's hangdog bloodhound). It is this comic resemblance between dog and human which goes some way to suggest that these dogs are, in many ways, surrogate children for their owners. Indeed, each dog's health and happiness are shown, throughout the film, to be the primary concern of each set of owners, and it is this concern for the dog which binds the couples together and maintains and perpetuates the relationship between each set of humans. Hence, when the weimaraner bitch attacks a judge and is disqualified at the dog show, the yuppie couple's relationship also begins to break down, and it is a shared interest in the well-being of the poodle, Rhapsody in White, that allows Sherri Ann and her dog handler to admit their attraction for each other at the close of the film.

However, if these trophy dogs, in one way, can be seen to exist as a means of bonding together dysfunctional couples and creating makeshift family units, where conflict and unspoken affection are both mediated through the couples' pets, it is also the case that the dogs exist as vehicles for their owner's status, and a means of obtaining untold success and celebrity. With this notion of a drive for celebrity in mind, it is interesting that the film's narrative structure resembles that of "reality" game shows of a kind most clearly represented by *Big Brother*. Hence, *Best in Show* moves from an opening section, where characters are introduced, and discuss both their lifestyles and their motivation to succeed in the competition ahead; to the Mayflower competition itself, where the contestants are observed under the glare of the spotlight and compete against each other for the ultimate prize; to a gripping conclusion, where they are shown waiting for the winner of the competition to be revealed.

However, as with *Big Brother*, the story of *Best in Show* is shown to not end there, and, as the competition comes to a close, the film fades to black and a caption reveals that it is "six

months later." Here, in a parody of a "where are they now?" reality TV spin-off, each Mayflower contestant demonstrates how they have "cashed in" on the notoriety they have achieved through their success in the competition. Hence, Sherri Ann and her dog-handler lover discuss their new business venture: a magazine for lesbian dog-handlers entitled "American Bitch", while the shih-tzu owning gay couple display stills from their new film-inspired calendar, where their shih-tzus are dressed up to resemble a variety of old movie stars. Most notably, however, in true *Big Brother* style, the Mayflower winners, Cookie and Gerry Fleck, are shown to have become local celebrities, who are embarking on a pop career by recording a tribute CD to their winning dog.

However if Guest, here and throughout the film, appears to be critiquing the instinctive drive in human beings to crave fame and celebrity, and exposes the inadequacies and absurdity of those who seek it, the film consistently remains on the side of the Mayflower contestants and their quest for success. It is true that *Best in Show* does, to an extent, accentuate the class and ethnic dynamics of its characters, and, through this, suggests that they are merely stock stereotypes of homosexual couples, backwater hicks and highly-strung yuppies, who are there to be mocked and laughed at, for their empty dog-obsessed lives and belief in an exploitative world where "anyone can be a star."

Yet the film is always as affectionate as it is savage, and, as with *This is Spinal Tap*, there is a clear sense that Guest is as endeared and fascinated with the world of dog breeding, as he is amused and baffled by it.

Exit Wounds

Dir: Andrzej Bartkowiak, 2001

A review by Francis W. Grady, University of Missouri, St. Louis, USA

According to the 2000 census, Detroit is now the most segregated city in America, having overtaken rival Gary, Indiana ("Detroit secures top spot," read a recent headline in the *Detroit Free Press*). At the very least, then, the city is going to need some extensive public relations help to repair its image, regardless of any work that is actually undertaken to repair the racial divide. Perhaps they could turn to the firm of (Steven) Seagal and (Joel) Silver, whose latest collaboration, the urban action film *Exit Wounds*, offers us a Detroit that is completely integrated, having achieved, through the magic of cinema, a perfect balance between black villains and white villains and black heroes and white heroes. In true genre-film fashion, *Exit Wounds* replaces a real-world racial divide with a melodramatic moral scheme: not black and white, but good and bad (realized stylistically, of course, as cool and cruel). The film applies its moral grid with admirable thoroughness: it seems that every character with more than five seconds of screen time is ultimately revealed to be either completely corrupt or on the side of the angels, and even people who appear to be innocent bystanders or passers-by or extras turn out to be deeply implicated in the film's plots and secrets. Of course, it has to be noted that in the film the role of "Detroit" is actually played by downtown Toronto, but then that's what acting is all about.

Exit Wounds is a film that, unsurprisingly, rewards low expectations; and this fact is made clear via the opening sequence, in which city cop Orin Boyd (Seagal) single-handedly and quite messily saves the Vice President from an assassination attempt. The plot is attributed to "some Michigan militant [sic] group"; and, notably, the Vice President is seen to have just given a speech in which he had lamented the flood of illegal handguns plaguing the nation. You might be tempted to think that this sort of Zeitgeist referencing is designed to give some indication of the film's likely plot, but you would be utterly wrong; the episode exists solely so that Officer Boyd can earn the wrath of the police brass for having saved the day so indecorously, and so that they can exile him to the city's worst precinct, where the actual plot -- which involves shipments of t-shirts impregnated with heroin -- can begin to unfold. It's not just that the opening (typically the scene in which the hero establishes for the audience his supercompetent and ultra-violent credentials) is a red herring in this film, it's like a scene from a totally different movie, thematically recalling Seagal's 1998 direct-to-video offering *The Patriot*.

Once condemned to the hopeless fifteenth precinct, Boyd steadily uncovers layer upon layer of corruption (and beats up its various representatives). Here, every dirty white cop has an African-American counterpart, just as every Caucasian hero is matched with a virtuous black companion. There are, evidently, only four or five Asians in "Detroit," who appear briefly when they try to boost Seagal/Boyd's truck, with predictable results, and there is an important, if entirely preposterous, role for Jill Hennessy, best known as Assistant District Attorney Claire Kincaid in the television series *Law and Order*. Hennessy plays the

Commander of Boyd's precinct, and seems to be in the film not so much to provide a romantic partner for Boyd -- sparks simply cannot fly in the presence of the congenitally inert Seagal -- but to provide some normative reassurance for the audience that all of the sadomasochistic, bare-chested posturing in the police weight room (indistinguishable from the exercise-yard weight rooms of so many prison films) is just macho fun and games and not in the least homo-erotic. Accordingly, Hennessy occasionally pokes her head into the men's locker room, widens her eyes, and snaps off an order or two. However, once Seagal meets up with his real partner in the film, Hennessy's character is rather brutally and suddenly dispatched.

Five years ago Seagal made *The Glimmer Man* (1996) with Keenen Ivory Wayans, and at the time I took it as a sign of Seagal's realization that he was no longer able to carry a film on his own without the help of either a charismatic villain (for example, Tommy Lee Jones in *Under Siege* [1992]) or a co-star who could help the film appeal to a crossover (in other words, African-American) audience. *The Glimmer Man* was the furthest thing from a blockbuster, but apparently the idea made sense to someone, because in *Exit Wounds* Seagal is paired with the hip-hop artist DMX (who appeared in director Bartkowiak's previous film, the Jet Li vehicle *Romeo Must Die* [2000]). Paired with Seagal (but not partnered), DMX plays the mysterious high-roller Latrell Walker, who appears to be deeply involved in the drug-smuggling plot that Seagal's character is investigating. Of course, he appears implicated only to those members of the audience who have never seen a film like this before, and it's clear from many hints that he's not a *bad* guy, but someone who is "up to something." Indeed, a particular hint of this is that when Latrell and Boyd tussle, as they inevitably do, DMX actually gets to hit Seagal, whose screen characters are typically not vulnerable to the blows of anyone whose name appears below the title during the opening credits.

This crossover strategy has certainly worked as far as the bottom line is concerned: *Exit Wounds* earned \$18.5 million on its opening weekend, by far the best a Seagal film has ever achieved, and, at the time of writing, has grossed \$49 million. Narratively, of course, DMX's role works about as well as anything else in the film. "Latrell Walker" turns out to be Leon Rollins, a dot-com "gazillionaire" who "bailed out just before the bubble burst" ("see how up-to-date I am?" the film asks pleadingly), and who is now using his vast wealth and technical expertise to prove that his younger brother, now in prison, was framed by the dirty cops in Seagal's new precinct. The plan is to document all the corruption with high-tech surveillance equipment -- digital cameras the size of collar buttons and so on -- and then broadcast it over the internet. Evidently, this particular revolution will be televised, as well as underwritten by Generation-X millionaires. In this respect, the fantasy character played by DMX is equal parts Bruce Wayne and Woodward and Bernstein, and is, in turn, underwritten by the assumption that the New Economy is a post-racial one (an assumption that, right or wrong, suggests an interesting analogy between internet-based wealth and the success generated by DMX's real career as a hip-hop star).

Just as the business cycle has burst the internet bubble, however, so the brute fact of America's racist cultural history intrudes, unbidden, on the film's harmonious conclusion. After Latrell/Leon has taken Boyd back to "the Batcave," as it were, and revealed his secret identity, the two team up to put down (and in a couple of cases impale) the bad guys. Boyd's one (white) friend at headquarters, Daniels (Bruce McGill), turns out to be a villain and tries to betray him; and the (black) chief who has been persecuting Boyd throughout the film, Hinges (Bill Duke), emerges as one of the good guys (and shoots Daniels). After the carnage, Latrell/Leon approaches Chief Hinges with his plan to present the evidence of his brother's

innocence, but the chief announces that he has already ordered that his brother should be released, because the courts don't care about tapes (the specific evidence at hand). This evidence convinces him -- after all, he's just seen the corrupt cops in action (surrounded by their t-shirts) -- but he feels that it wouldn't necessarily convince the courts. In one sentence, then, Hinges (played by an African-American actor/director who is well known as a mentor to younger black actors) exposes the distance between the film's fantasy of a color-blind, morally intelligible universe, and a real world in which names like Rodney King and Reginald Denny still come instantly to mind -- and not because they're dot-com tycoons. With this in mind, maybe Detroit should look elsewhere for help after all, or perhaps I'm not being quite fair to *Exit Wounds*.

I have left out two supporting players: Anthony Anderson, who plays T.K., Latrell/Leon's noisy, wannabe player of a sidekick, and Tom Arnold, who plays a Jerry Springeresque daytime talk-show host named Henry Wayne, who attaches himself to Seagal's character at an anger-management class he's been ordered to attend (and which serves, in the film, as a chance for a couple of cheap therapy jokes and for Seagal to rip the top off his school desk with his bare hands). Arnold usually sticks to "over-the-top" characters, playing impulsive, puppy-like hangers-on; and if you like that shtick (and sometimes I do), you might find that it lightens the usual unrelieved gloom of the Seagal universe. However, the most striking scene played by Arnold and Anderson comes during the closing credits, in a kind of out-take, where it is revealed that the publicity-hungry T.K. has become Henry Wayne's co-host. Here, in a five minute scene, Arnold and Anderson riff rudely (and sometimes very amusingly) about race, genitalia, medical procedures, and deviant sexual practices. Ultimately, then, this is the message about race that *Exit Wounds* finally leaves us with: that black folks and white folks can find common ground through crude anti-feminist and bodily humor -- perhaps a worthy debate for the *Detroit Free Press*?

Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within

Dir: Hironobu Sakaguchi and Motonori Sakakibara, 2001

A review by Niran Abbas, Birkbeck College, University of London, UK

In the past few years, computer games have evolved into a highly sophisticated form. The games not only depend on technological advances in computer graphics, but have also increasingly involved a shift away from 2-D cartoonish images towards a more realistic and "filmic" style of representing computer game images. Recently, and equally, the action and spectacle film phenomena has emphasized a movement away from concerns centered around more literary oriented narrative forms, toward an emphasis on narratives that mirror the visuals and stylistics experienced in computer games spaces.

Final Fantasy, the enormously popular role-playing game famous for its state-of-the art graphics, is the latest video game to make the transition to the big screen. The movie is a showcase for the animation technology known as "hyperReal," a photo realistic simulation of space, figure and movement that hopes to one day erase the line between animation technology and live action once and for all. The point of animation is for filmmakers to imagine worlds and characters that they cannot portray in live action films. Director Hironobu Sakaguchi does just that as he presents a vivid, techno-primitive, dreamy vision of a phantom-haunted Earth in 2065. *Final Fantasy*, which took four years to create, is a world that is neither live action nor animation, but some parallel cyberuniverse.

The plot has the typical ingredients associated with a traditional sci-fi quest -- set on Earth (usually New York or LA, this time the former) in the year 2065, cities are deserted, the population is decimated, and the precious few humans who remain must find a way to survive. An invasion threatens to extinguish the remains of mankind and, quite possibly, every living creature on the planet. The fate of all life on Earth relies on one woman's determination (Dr. Aki Ross, voiced by Ming-Na), but time is running out.

The invaders are a phantasmagorical group of aliens disgorged by a Leonid meteor that hit the Carpathian Mountains some thirty-five years ago. The aliens are strange creatures, made stranger still by the film's inconsistency in handling them -- they seem to be physical and conceptual both at once. They defeat humans not by physically attacking them, but by absorbing their life essence, yet they can be blasted to smithereens by the weapons of the paramilitary squad called "Deep Eyes," led by Captain Gray Edwards (voiced by Alec Baldwin, and modeled, seemingly, on Ben Affleck).

Headed by the wise Dr. Sid (voiced by Donald Sutherland, but looking like Vladimir Lenin), a group of scientists have come up with what the film calls a peaceful, organic solution. Sid's idea is that all life forms have individual spirit waves, and he and Dr. Ross engage in a worldwide scavenger hunt to find eight specific waves that, when combined, will form a force strong enough to counterbalance the phantoms. Not everyone on the planet, however, supports Dr. Sid's theory, especially General Hein (voiced by James Woods). Hein will do

anything for the chance to fire the fearsome "Zeus Cannon," an ultimate weapon that Dr. Sid fears will do irreparable harm to Gaia, the spirit of the Earth itself.

Beyond the riveting battle scenes, *Final Fantasy* takes you on a Jungian journey of personal discovery into both real and fantasy worlds, drawing you deep into its characterizations, archetypes and themes of love, friendship, dreams, adventure, life and death. In this world, we face death as we part with our loved ones -- we begin to question what "life" and "love" is, and what is the philosophical definition of the "heart." After all, in this world, science has analyzed life and death, expressing life as a form of energy.

Ironically, the film's greatest strength is also one of its biggest weaknesses. As realistic-looking as the characters are, the flat, expressionless features make them seem emotionally aloof and rather unsympathetic. However, the biggest give-away are the characters' eyes, and the closer the camera gets to the eyes, the more obvious it is that there are no souls. This is in part because current computer-animation technology is better at reproducing texture (cross-hatched patterns on skin, clustered strands of hair) than the complex interplay of facial muscles, and, as a result, the characters of *Final Fantasy* can't convincingly emote. As one critic notes, "too often they resemble people who have succumbed to one too many face lifts and now are almost immobile above their mouths" (cited in Caro, 2001). Compounding that problem is the flatness of the vocal performances which often sounds like standard-issue computer-game programming, examples of which include "Let's get the hell out of here!" "Fire in the hole!" "What the hell is going on here?" and "What the hell is going on?"

However, the cinematography, displaying scorched-earth cityscapes and rural wastelands is breathtaking. Ultimately, this fantasy feels a first-rate script polish away from being truly final -- it has the capacity to inspire awe, but it's still a rough draft. However, *Final Fantasy* will always be seen as the beginning of a new era in computer animation. A special DVD edition of the film will be released designed to "play" the movie as a video game when inserted in PlayStation 2 machines. What Sakaguchi has initiated with this project is the "Holy Grail" of computer animation -- it will enable animators to put virtual humans in, not only animated films of the future, but also in live-action movies. Those steps open possibilities human actors might well worry about, since the performers playing the earthlings in this fable will never threaten a SAG strike. True, their voices are contributed by established actors, but can it be long before synthesized voices do that work too?

The proliferation of simulations into all walks of life -- as news (re)creations, computer games, flight simulators, reality TV and war plans -- has weakened and, in some cases, displaced the representational boundary between the simulation and the "real thing." Driven by the goal of total authenticity and rendered by new scientific methods of reproduction, simulation is leading us into a brave new world. The writer J.L. Borges anticipated this realm in his fable about the cartographers who, when ordered by the emperor to draw the perfect map of the empire, created one that exactly and entirely covered the territory. Jean Baudrillard recounts this story to make a telling point: that we now have the technical means to make maps and models that seem as real as the reality that they simulate (Baudrillard, 1988: 166).

The computer simulation, like the engrossed experience of fiction, is phenomenological, depending for its impact on how it appears to the person immersed within it, how convincingly present and continuous its world *seems*. As well as this, it depends upon the success with which it makes the person forget that there is an outside to this world. For the

duration of the virtual experience, the immersive world must be the only world available. With this in mind it is noteworthy that Ming-Na has been quoted as hoping that she will be at the next MTV awards:

It's my newest fantasy to accept the MTV Award for best screen kiss on behalf of Aki Ross. I understand the kiss is already the talk of cyberspace. / I've never met Alec. I only know his virtual reality counterpart but I can tell you Gray Edwards is no slouch in the hunk category (cited in Hobson, 2001).

The larger narrative inscribed in *Final Fantasy* locates the subject in a changing relation to intelligent machines that points toward looming transformation, or what Howard Rheingold (1991) has called IA (intelligence augmentation) -- arguing that humans and intelligent machines are entering into a symbiosis to which each will bring the talents and gifts specific to their species. In addition, Bruce Mazlish (1993) has called this posthuman era the fourth discontinuity, arguing that it constitutes the latest of four decisive breaks in human subjectivity. *Final Fantasy* is the first film to attempt realistic human characters. As such, it exists in a category of its own, the first citizen taking its baby steps into the new world of cyber-film.

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Harry, Un Ami Qui Vous Veut Du Bien

Dir: Dominik Moll, 2000

A review by Marco Mancassola, University of Padua, Italy

He hasn't forgotten us. He hasn't stopped thinking about us over the years. He has carried on talking to other people about us, and has learnt our mediocre poems by heart. When he bumps into us, he doesn't hesitate. He recognizes us immediately, and doesn't fear to show that he is happy to see us. With a single glance, he can understand our needs and what is the best way forward for us. He worries about our well-being, and the development of our talents. At the same time, because he loves us, he is sensitive and vulnerable to our criticism. He offers himself to our stabs, which are not only metaphoric, and after achieving our well-being, he can disappear -- without leaving a trace.

Harry is all this -- a friend that loves us, to quote the film's title. We might be led to think of such a title as ironic, since the reviews have labeled the film as a "thriller." Thus, because of our familiarity with the conventions of the genre, we could equate the character of Harry, from the very start, with an unsettling element: the threat, the danger to the establishment (who are, here, represented by the serene bourgeois family). However, we would be wrong. At the end of the movie, we would have to conclude that the title should have been taken literally, and that Harry is genuinely a true friend. Until the end, he devotes all of himself to his friend Michel, and, therefore, the film can be read as a meditation on a feeling which we very rarely talk about and practice even less: devotion. Such a feeling is so strong as to appear necessarily false to our cynical eyes. Instead, it is just the opposite. This film is the story of a veritable and complete devotion.

Bewildering. If Harry is not pretending and is, in fact, genuinely Michel's friend, then where is the danger? If the threat is not the duplicity of Harry's feelings, then it has to lie in another trait of his personality. It is apparent that the problem is not in his impulses, but in the boundaries that Harry gives (in fact, doesn't give) to them. In other words: he is opposed to moderation, one of the key concepts of the bourgeois morality, necessary to the preservation of the establishment. Harry, on the other hand, doesn't distinguish any limit or boundary; he fatally exaggerates.

A bourgeois family

When Michel, thirty-four years old and the father of three daughters, goes to the toilet in a service station on the motorway, he is obviously not expecting to bump into an old schoolmate. While he is washing his face, he wonders who that man staring at him is. The man is smiling, as if experiencing great and unexpected pleasure. It's been twenty years since the last time that Michel saw Harry and he doesn't remember anything about him. Admittedly, he has had other things to think about: family, jobs, money -- but Harry remembers everything about Michel.

Outside the aseptic context of the toilet, in the car park, the sunlight crudely foregrounds the differences between the two. Michel goes towards a wife who is edgy because of the hot weather, three restless daughters, a ramshackle car with no air-conditioning, and a long journey to a country house (bought some time ago thanks to a mortgage), to spend the holidays and gradually restore it. Harry, on the other hand, walks towards a young and subdued girlfriend, who seems to be taken out of a calendar for *Men Only*, a powerful car, and all the freedom you can ask for. Harry and his girlfriend are planning to go to the Alps, but have no ties whatsoever.

To Michel, it is clear what should come next: to take his leave and carry on with the journey. However, to Harry, it would be a pity not to take advantage of this meeting and to have a quiet chat. So he suggests, stating beforehand that he doesn't wish to impose on them, to follow Michel and his family towards their destination. If the suggestion is inconvenient, Michel and his wife don't show it. There is not a shadow of impoliteness on their faces that are still young, a bit tired, and shaped by years of political correctness. Their objection is merely pragmatic in character, as, for Harry and his girlfriend, the deviation would be a long one. One of the founding contrasts of the film is, thus, already apparent: between the kind but largely practical attitude of Michel, and that of the enthusiastic Harry. The two cars set off -- the typical family, neurotic but united, a small autonomous kingdom (substitute of normality, common sense and, of course, moderation); and the young man who is too free, too rich and too keen to enter other people's lives.

A hole in the garden

There is a hole in Michel's garden. It's an old open well that Claire, Michel's wife, considers dangerous. Michel tries to reassure her and fills it with earth, but he cannot cover it completely. There is a chasm that hasn't yet been filled, and which is a clear threat to stability. When Harry leans out of the well, he observes it as a rat would look at a pipe through which it could sneak into a house. Yet, Harry does not feel as an intruder in Michel's life -- he has known his friend well before he started his family, and he remembers some old ambitions of his that even Claire doesn't know of. When Harry hints at the unfinished novel by Michel, he reacts with irritation -- just old dreams, nothing important, there are other priorities now. Clearly, Harry disapproves of this renunciation. As for Claire, she seems intrigued, but also anxious. She has discovered a truly unexpected side to her husband, and it is something that she finds unsettling...

Harry does his work, to support his friend towards his gradual self-fulfillment -- a new car is given as a gift, and there is an offer of economic help -- but the proposal to be paid to write clashes with Michel's proud and independent personality. Yet, when Michel's parents, who are unbearably intrusive, die in a mysterious *accident*, Harry can smile to himself: finally, he has managed to give his friend a useful present...

Complicity?

Throughout the movie, Michel seems to resist Harry's offers; yet, it is apparent that something is going on in his mind. He starts again on his old novel, albeit with no initial results, and he finds it difficult to communicate with his wife. The thought of everything that he has given up for his family -- freedom, self-fulfillment -- seems to hang in the air, as heavy as sultry heat. It is Harry who expresses this thought, but this is not what makes Michel surrender. It is, instead, the erotic attraction for Proude, Harry's girlfriend, which finally

achieves that convergence between Michel's and Harry's worlds. It is this act, and this convergence, which makes clear the unavowed attraction for each other's lifestyles, and which reveals the identification of Michel's most repressed and narcissistic side with Harry's hedonism. At last, Michel's creative powers are unleashed.

Past this breaking point, beyond which any reference to the common, daily, *bourgeois* life seems to lose any meaning, we catch a glimpse of a possible complicity. Michel, his face expressionless, takes the knife, that Harry is giving him, into his hands. It's time to achieve the most extreme project, and Harry gives the order: "you take care of Claire, I take care of the children." It is just a second. Then, as if the mechanism has reverted, it is Michel who decides what to do, regaining his own autonomy. Now that he has finally reconfigured his own life, resolved his repressed conflicts and found the path to a new harmony, Michel can eliminate the person who has triggered the catharsis of his way of life. The catharsis, though, is a completely different matter from simple destruction. Harry dies without wailing. His corpse will, at last, fill the hole in the garden.

The establishment triumphs

Harry ends with a triumph. Michel manages to obtain two goals that seemed irreconcilable: regaining his own creativity, and maintaining his familial and social status quo, and he also gets to keep the new car that he didn't want to accept to start with. The epilogue seems to be the precise opposite of *Funny Games* (2000), the film by Michael Haneke that showed the complete extermination of a family and the weakness of "normality" when faced with external attacks. Moll's film, on the other hand, holds the lower middle-class family as an invincible and immutable system. It's a system that is not only able to resist attacks, but is also able to use them to its own advantage, to then crush and forget them. It's a bulldozer kind of system with which it is impossible to interfere, and is capable of neutralizing and recycling subversive pulls, like Harry's extreme form of friendship, which are too eccentric a tie compared with the familial order.

An outdated movie?

As far as rhythm, acting, and structure are concerned, *Harry* is flawless. Dominik Moll weighs suspense as a cook weighs salt, and the influence of Claude Chabrol is highly apparent.

However, a doubt remains: doesn't a film on the invincibility of the middle-classes run the risk of being outdated, when, presently, those classes appear exposed to violent economic transformations? Maybe. If *Funny Games* seemed to suggest the idea of a bloody, inevitable extinction, *Harry* plays instead with a similarly inevitable and immutable conservation. In this sense, it is difficult to say which one of the two hypotheses is the most unsettling.

Highlander: Endgame

Dir: Doug Aarniokoski, 2000

A review by Marion Muirhead, University of Waterloo, Canada

Anticipated by Highlander aficionados as the intersection between the original *Highlander* movie, starring Christopher Lambert as Connor Macleod, and the original series, starring Adrian Paul as Duncan Macleod, *Highlander: Endgame* continues the familiar narrative formula of frequent historical flashbacks, prolonged sword fights, and the spectacle of special effects juxtaposed with vast architectural and natural spaces. The valorisation of social values such as loyalty, mentorship, and social responsibility are present in both the series and the film, but the series, rated PG, possessed a stronger focus on Adrian Paul's character, Duncan Macleod, as a role model for young people. In contrast, *Highlander: Endgame* is rated for adults, with slightly more graphic violence, and a few additional graphic centimetres of Adrian Paul; and lacks a significant amount of the tension between Manicheanism and nihilism responsible for the darkly profound texture of the series, in which Duncan Macleod is staunchly consistent in battling evil, while his friend Methos, an older immortal, avoids violence mainly out of a desire for economy.

The concept, created by Gregory Widen in the original *Highlander* film (1986), concerns a secret society of individuals called "immortals" who can die only if beheaded. If an immortal decapitates another immortal, the energy and power of the dying immortal, including the energy absorbed from her or his past kills, is acquired by the victor in the process of "quickenning." This is "the game" in which immortals defeat each other, increasing in strength with each victory. Wounds, other than beheading, heal quickly, and the immortal appears to come back to life after an apparently mortal wound; while immortals study the martial arts because "in the end there can only be one." However, a fundamental conflict exists in the knowledge that the bond between mentor and minion may one day be broken -- in a dominance struggle made inevitable by the predatory premise of their existence. Some older immortals develop the attitude of a weary martyr, drained of vitality as a result of watching their mortal loved ones grow old, sicken, and die. Immortality seems to be a genetic trait (the Macleod clan has produced a few), although immortals cannot reproduce.. Another secret society of "watchers" has kept records on immortals and their activities for centuries, because immortals can be useful as a repository of historical information, but the watchers' creed does not allow them to interfere in immortal activities. Some of this information is summarised in passages of clipped repartee between Duncan and Connor in *Highlander: Endgame*. The Highlander concept applies both to the original movie and to the original series.

Three of the more apocalyptic episodes of the series, "Archangel" (directed by Adrian Paul), "Avatar," and "Armageddon," feature Ahriman, the personification of evil in Persian dualism, who is allowed to leave his domain every thousand years and to enter the world in order to fight an immortal who must win the battle if the world is to be protected from a thousand years of Ahriman's dominance. Duncan Macleod is foreordained to fight this battle, as was his clansman at the previous millennial transition, but the academics who have studied

Zoroastrian demonology are being destroyed by Ahriman before they can impart their essential knowledge to Duncan. While engaged in a sword fight with the demon, who appears in many guises from Duncan's lengthy past, Duncan unknowingly beheads his student whom he has nurtured and taught to fight, believing at that moment that his opponent is Ahriman, taking the physical form of his student in order to confuse him. After this tragedy unfolds, Duncan goes into seclusion in a Buddhist monastery for one year, then returns to fight again. Eventually, he realises that the demon gains strength from the fear and loathing of its opponents, and so goads its opponent into confusion and rage by appearing as his most hated enemies. Thus, Duncan defeats Ahriman by perfecting his Zen detachment.

Highlander aficionados might have expected a similar narrative, based on a profound social value or ancient philosophy, but *Highlander: Endgame* is based on the more typical plot frequently found in the series, which develops out of the grudge of a powerful enemy. Kell is an enemy from Connor's early life, who has devoted his immortal existence to destroying Connor's loved ones. He wishes to keep Connor alive so that he may torture him with grief, and targets Duncan as the means for causing another poignant loss in Connor's life. Kell does not follow the rules of the game (for example, fighting is not allowed on holy ground, and peaceful meetings between immortals can therefore be assured in churches and cemeteries), and exhibits no love for his minions. His character represents nihilistic social disruption: he forms no bonds of loyalty, compassion, or altruism, and thus his motives are purely exploitative. Connor is Duncan's mentor, and the solution to defeating Kell, the most powerful immortal they have had to overcome, becomes an oedipal drama between Connor and Duncan in which personal losses must be suffered for the sake of maintaining the social order.

Profound ethical issues are paralleled in scope by settings that evoke a sense of immense scale. Opening scenes of the peaks and valleys in the Scottish highlands make use of wide-angle effects that lend a sense of suspension in time to the narrative. This vastness of space creates a texture in the opening scenes that suggests time extending into the infinity of immortality; while the immense duration of the past, for the immortal characters, constitutes a burden and a wonder. A traditional Scottish ballad, sung by Bonny Portmore, enhances the sense of poignancy of time and loss for the immortals. (In the sense that Connor has lost his mother, his wife, and an adopted daughter.)

The wide-angle effect is also deployed in a vast Roumanian museum gallery, warmly lit with the glow of historical ambiance, but the richness of these scenes is not structured upon a web of associations in the semiosis of cultural history, as they would have been in the series. Here, historical references have become a formula, rather than an index to cultural meanings. The flashbacks, with their historical settings and rich costuming, develop the relationship between Connor and Duncan as mentor and minion over a period of centuries, but do not create a philosophical, artistic, or rhetorical subtext. With this in mind, the film is best described as "spectacle" with little redeeming social value, but, nevertheless, can be appreciated as required viewing for any Highlander aficionado or anyone interested in the lore.

Moulin Rouge

Dir: Baz Luhrman, 2001

A review by Elizabeth Abele, Temple University, USA

Moulin Rouge is not for the faint-hearted. As fans of Baz Luhrman's *Strictly Ballroom* (1992) and *Romeo and Juliet* (1996) might expect, *Moulin Rouge* is a direct assault on eyes, ears, and expectations. However, this film's courage and audacity successfully breathes new life into the "courtesan with tuberculosis" plot, pop tunes, and the Hollywood musical, making a cliched song lyric -- "the greatest thing you'll ever learn is just to love and to be loved in return"-- resonate with poignancy and truth.

Baz Luhrman immediately announces his bravery just by entering the highly volatile arena of the contemporary musical. Generally speaking, the movie musical has developed a reputation as "box-office poison." New productions of movie musicals are rare -- and the few that are made may be coy about identifying with the genre. Though early press coverage of the Coen Brother's *O Brother Where Art Thou?* (2000) described the project as a musical, pre-release trailers and publicity presented the film as a comedy, rather than a musical comedy. After some positive word-of-mouth, new advertisements praised the "music," and showed George Clooney lip-synching, but still avoided the word "musical." *Tarzan* (1999) marked Disney's move away from the animated musical, with Phil Collins' songs scoring the film rather than being sung by the characters, and though *The Lion King* (1994) was a huge hit for Disney, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996) and *Hercules* (1997) were commercial disappointments. With this in mind, it seems that the studio blamed the genre rather than the material. The film version of the decades-running off-Broadway musical *The Fantasticks* (1995) sat in the can for five years, before being released straight-to-video last year, and though Alan Parker's *Evita* (1996) was a critical success, it took more than twenty years for this hit Broadway musical to reach the screen, while to date there has been no screen version of the long-running *Phantom of the Opera*, *Les Miserables*, *Miss Saigon* or *Rent*. In sum, it is hard to know for sure if the movie musical is still a viable form when producers and studios are so skittish of even beloved and well-tested material.

However, Luhrman and the Coens may prove that the Hollywood musical is not dead, and that it is just the form that has changed. Purists may complain of Luhrman's use of late-twentieth century music to score a late-nineteenth century period film, but that may be exactly what audiences now expect. Instead of the previous standard of characters perfectly singing whole songs that few if any people know, characters here burst into songs that have seeped so totally into the popular consciousness that they seem a natural and realistic expression of an emotional moment.

An example of this technique is fellow Australian director P.J. Hogan's production of *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997). Though no one dared to describe this romantic comedy as a "musical," the film opens with a production number ("Wishin' and Hopin'"), and characters sing on four different occasions. These songs all function in the way that songs in a musical are supposed to, developing the characters and/or forwarding the action. The standout

sequence "I Say a Little Prayer for You" allows George to parody his presence as Julianne's "fiancé." As the entire cast joins in, they each have the chance to reveal more about themselves and their feelings toward romance, while Michael (the best friend) reveals as much about himself by not singing, as his jealousy over Julianne becomes evident to himself and the audience. What this example reveals is that a true musical number is more than musical accompaniment or an interlude; it is a plot device, working indirectly like this "I Say a Little Prayer" sequence.

I personally refer to films like *My Best Friend's Wedding* and *O Brother Where Art Thou?* as "stealth musicals," since they hide their generic inclinations from the audience until they can unexpectedly drop in production numbers like bombs. Even then, the numbers seem so "natural" to the action of the film that many people will leave the theatre without realizing what has hit them -- they just know that they were entertained.

Though his technique is related to these "stealth musicals," Luhrman raucously celebrates his adoption and transformation of the musical, and, in particular, the sub-genre of the backstage musical, which allows for some purely theatrical numbers and helps justify the fact that everyone in the story can sing and dance. Not coincidentally, the first musical number occurs when a band of Bohemian artists are trying to write a song for an Alpine goatherd and nun that begins with the words: "The hills are alive with..." When Christian (Ewan MacGregor) successfully fills in the correct phrase "the sound of music," he proves himself a poetic genius, and is adopted by lead bohemian Toulouse Lautrec (John Leguizamo).

From that moment on the film becomes a true postmodern musical, continually sampling from pop and rock anthems -- for instance, it is amazing what absinthe can do to the anthem "The Sound of Music." However, where postmodern art (think Andy Warhol's soup cans) is about using repetition and fragmentation to represent the loss of meaning and the authentic, *Moulin Rouge* is about finding new meaning in an old story and old songs. Baz Luhrman describes the concept of his "Red Curtain" Trilogy (*Strictly Ballroom*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Moulin Rouge*) as:

a simple, even naïve story based on a primary myth is set in a heightened or created world that is at once familiar yet exotic, distant. Each of the "Red Curtain" trilogy has a device which awakens the audience to the experience and the storyteller's presence, encouraging them to be constantly aware that they are in fact watching a film (www.clubmoulinrouge.com).

The theory behind the "Red Curtain" technique is that the hyper-theatrical paradoxically intensifies emotion, allowing viewers to return to stories that may seem "trite", but where the theatrical device acknowledges that these stories and theatrical elements have been "overdone," precisely because of their resonance. For *Moulin Rouge*, the myth is the story of Orpheus, the heroic poet who travels to the Underworld to attempt to save his true love; the familiar yet exotic locale is Montmartre, Paris at the turn of the last century; and the ultimate theatrical device is the musical number.

This is a triply-framed narrative: first a conductor leads the overture and a red curtain parts to begin the film; Toulouse Lautrec then introduces the protagonist by plaintively singing, "There was a boy..."; and thirdly the disheveled "boy" Christian (Ewan MacGregor) sits down at his typewriter to tell his tale of love -- the story of Satine and the Moulin Rouge.

(Notably, Luhrman shows his thorough grasp of theatrical devices by closing all three of these frames at the end of the film).

The camera invites the audience down Montmartre's hallways with a jerky navigation reminiscent of video games. The palettes and visual styles of *Moulin Rouge* vary widely from vintage, tinted photographs, to funhouse colours and pacing, to pure fantasy scenes, to a gritty documentary of bohemian life. What keeps the mishmash of forms, songs, genres, and tone, unified is the driving force of the simple narrative, combined with the fact that each move, no matter how outrageous, has an intuitive connection to the whole, creating a tribute to love that is organic. What turns this theatrical artifice into a touching love story are the performances, particularly Ewan MacGregor who has a penchant for portraying innocence that is not only untouched by the tawdriness of his environment, but renews and refreshes the tired souls around him. Nicole Kidman as Satine begins as a cartoon-like courtesan -- a technicolor Betty Boop -- that becomes more dimensional and compelling as the film progresses, while Jim Broadbent as Zidler has the charismatic presence of a circus ringleader, with a touching concern for his prize canary, Satine.

In Woody Allen's musical film *Everyone Says I Love You* (1996), non-singer actors sang Gershwin songs, breezily sung in their entirety, utterly respectful of Gershwin and romance. Most of the musical numbers of *Moulin Rouge* are actually medleys, with parts of songs chosen for their emotional value, and edited and/or modified to intensify their passion. Few of the songs could be referred to as "covers," but are re-interpreted with truly original arrangements. "Sparkling Diamonds" merges Madonna's "Material Girl" with Monroe's "Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend" in a way that removes the songs' breezy innocence and scores their crass manipulation. Similarly, the empty metaphor of "Like a Virgin" is revealed as it is transformed into a raunchy duet between the panderer Zidler and the wealthy John (Richard Roxburgh), as they try to justify Satine's reticence and their questionable transaction. As a result, this production number is as likely to be someone's favorite or most loathed, since it embodies the visual and metaphorical excesses that Luhrman is prone to.

Though these numbers are campy fun, the most moving musical moments are those where new intensity is brought to old favorites. Jacek Koman as the "narcoleptic Argentinian" brings a raw passion to his portion of "El Tango de Roxanne," Jose Feliciano's transformation of the Police classic "Roxanne." As the Argentinian sings a particularly nihilistic and rough rendition of "Roxanne" and dances the tango, Christian sings more soulfully of his pain in counterpoint. Not surprisingly Queen's "The Show Must Go On" adapts well to full orchestration, as an all-company production number from seamstresses and stagehands to stars featuring Zidler, as he resolutely pulls himself and his company forward.

This film is so packed with eclectically creative moments that not all are going to work. Perhaps it is impossible to experience this two-hour film without for some moments experiencing a period of sensory overload. Yet *Moulin Rouge* is unquestionably an achievement in originality, courage, and passion, that may lure other talented directors into the minefield of the contemporary Hollywood musical. Hopefully, their results will prove as rich and entertaining.

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Nightbreed

Dir: Clive Barker, 1990

A review by Jay McRoy, University of Wisconsin, Parkside, USA

The August 21st 2001 DVD release of Clive Barker's *Nightbreed* marks an important moment in the history of horror cinema. Following close upon the DVD release of the unrated director's cut of *Lord of Illusions* (1995), it completes the transfer, into a digital format, of the entire cinematic output of one of film's most under-rated directors. With 1987's *Hellraiser* now being readily available, and with Barker's two experimental short films, 1973's *Salome* and 1978's *The Forbidden*, accessible on a single DVD courtesy of Redemption Films International, film viewers can now re-familiarize themselves with the vision of one of the most daring and provocative artists to ever step behind a camera.

More importantly, the DVD release of *Nightbreed* provides the opportunity for audiences to experience something that is, unfortunately, all-too-rare: a truly progressive horror film. Rather than positing "monstrous" embodiment as something against which "normality" is measured and, frequently, re-inscribed, *Nightbreed* rejects the conservative momentum that has marred far too many of the genre's offerings in favor of presenting a myriad of posthuman bodies that, by revealing a multiplicity of alternative and variable identities, stymie traditional notions of social and physical cohesion. Barker's film does not disavow these alternative identities, nor does it attempt to re-territorialize them within a Western capitalist master-narrative that robs them of their oppositional thrust. Rather, the *Nightbreed* of the film are splattered and splattering figures; they are monsters doing monstrous things, and many audiences may be glad for this and the options that the *Nightbreed*'s contingent physiognomies allow.

Before elaborating further upon *Nightbreed*'s space within the history of horror film and the cinematic representation of monstrous embodiment, a brief description of the film's plot is in order. Based upon his short novel, *Cabal*, Clive Barker's *Nightbreed* tells the story of a young man named Boone (Craig Sheffer) who is troubled by disturbing nightmares about belonging to a race of creatures that dwell in a mysterious place called Midian ("...where the monsters go"). While undergoing a steady diet of psychoanalysis and hallucinogenic drugs administered by his psychiatrist, Dr. Decker (played with obvious enjoyment by fellow director and body horror practitioner, David Cronenberg), Boone is convinced that he is guilty of a series of gruesome murders that were actually committed by a grotesquely masked Dr. Decker. Framed for these murders, Boone escapes into the Canadian wilderness, where he discovers "Midian," an old gothic graveyard filled with elaborate crypts and mausoleums. Wandering amongst the marble structures after nightfall, he is confronted by two monstrous entities who first reject him and then physically attack him because he is a "natural" and stinks of "meat". Boone escapes from the graveyard, only to be met by a small army of police officers and Dr. Decker, whose fallacious claim that Boone is armed precipitates Boone's death in a cloud of gunfire. Boone's body is taken to the morgue, where shortly afterwards he rises from the dead, walks out of the hospital, and returns to Midian. Once again among the

crypts and mausoleums, Boone is accepted as Nightbreed, one of the "last survivors of the great tribes" of "shapeshifters" and "freaks" that Western cultures have "nearly driven to extinction."

Soon after Boone's body is reported missing, Boone's lover, Lori (Anne Bobby), drives to Midian to search for answers to the many questions she has regarding Boone's last hours and the subsequent disappearance of his corpse. Unknown to her, she is followed by the murderous Dr. Decker, who we learn hates the Nightbreed and wishes to destroy them. While wandering among the marble graves, she saves a child of the Nightbreed that was trapped out in the sun and, upon returning it to its mother, discovers that Boone is, in fact, a member of that ancient race. Rejected by the Nightbreed and frightened by the various macabre images she encounters in the labyrinthian tunnels beneath the graveyard, Lori flees into daylight, only to be attacked by a masked Dr. Decker. Against the advice of Lylesburg (Doug Bradley), one of the elders of Midian, Boone returns to the surface and saves Lori. Dr. Decker is driven away, only to return to Midian in the film's final scenes, accompanied by a fascistic local police chief named Eigerman (Charles Haid), an alcoholic priest named Reverend Ashburn (Malcolm Smith), and a collection of rowdy, right wing locals. A gory battle ensues, and although the Nightbreed prevail, the ancient race, led by Boone (now a messianic figure named "Cabal"), leaves Midian to find a new location to "rebuild" what has been "destroyed."

So, how does *Nightbreed* separate itself from many of the other horror films literally spilling out of the bins of your local video rental franchises? What makes this gory offering from the mind of one of horror's most celebrated practitioners particularly "progressive"?

Much of *Nightbreed*'s oppositional thrust originates from the various "monstrous" bodies that constitute the title characters. Like many film monsters, the Nightbreed frustrate narratives of physical and social cohesion. Sporting a variety of "non-human" features, from poisonous quills and razor sharp fangs to twisted horns and tails, these entities obscure the boundaries between human and animal. They are bodies in perpetual transformation, shape-shifters frequently adorned with intricate scarifications, piercings, and other forms of postmodern body modification that function to further denote their corporeal and cultural difference. Additionally, as more or less "undead" physiognomies, the Nightbreed are similar to Pinhead and the other demonic entities that populate Clive Barker's *Hellraiser* and its many sequels in that they confound the distinctions between the living and the dead. As a result, they also interrogate the cultural significance attached to these, and other, categories. For the Nightbreed, death is not an ending. Rather, it is a joyously welcomed beginning of a new form of corporeality. In this context, where notions of origins and culminations are nebulous at best, "dead people," to quote Clive Barker in his introduction to the original VHS release of *Nightbreed*, "can be heroes."

Furthermore, the bodies of the Nightbreed are flexible spaces upon which the signifiers of multiple cultures and identities exist simultaneously. Although the main parallel that the film articulates is between the Nightbreed and Jewish culture (allusions to the Kabbalah and the "great tribes" abound; Stars of David and *chaim* decorate the walls of Midian's subterranean corridors; flashbacks link the Nightbreed and their leader/Moses-like lawgiver with the victims of bloody inquisitions and crusades), the Nightbreed also invoke a multiplicity of other identities. Some Nightbreed, as critic Harry Benshoff has pointed out, are positioned as queer (Benshoff, 1997: 260-4). Likewise, some are black, while others are white; some are female, and others are male, and yet they also possess the ability to morph, mutate, and

transform into vapor. In short, the Nightbreed are bodies that emerge at the intersection of a plurality of cultural codings. They *resemble* without ever firmly *representing* a specific culture or collection of cultures. Their collective and individual variability frustrates attempts at privileging one identity over another, thus providing for the realization of new identities, and proliferating comprehensions of what it means to be "human."

As *Nightbreed* positions these resistant yet inclusive bodies in conflict with "traditional" representatives of morality (religion), order (the mental health professional) and power (law enforcement), the film also functions as a critique of these institutions, exposing them as the repressive apparatuses of a heterosexist, racist, and normalizing culture. This is achieved largely through the representation of these "normalizing forces" as "monstrous" caricatures that are themselves grotesque in their excess. Of course, questionably moral priests, twisted psychiatrists, and over-zealous cops are not uncommon within the horror genre; even the most casual fan can name at least one or two films in which one of these character types appear. Nonetheless, by having the Nightbreed face off against a small but intolerant army led by representatives of three of the more recognizable social forces dedicated to maintaining the illusion of cultural and ontological stability, Barker locates the denizens of Midian as positive alternatives to the repressive ideological and state apparatuses at work in late capitalist culture.

Thus, unlike horror films in which monsters, with their disordered and disordering physiognomies, are either ultimately depicted as destructive, or in which their perceived threat to the status quo is nullified -- if only temporarily -- by the forces of constancy and discipline, *Nightbreed* does not allow for a last-minute repudiation of monstrosity. Rather, audience sympathy is aligned against the momentum of a conservative (in)humanity. Indeed, viewers are encouraged to cheer for Boone, Lori, and the shape-shifting Nightbreed as they dispatch the agents of prejudice, law, and order during the film's violent climactic battle. This observation, however, is not intended to impose a binary where none exists. Indeed, the Nightbreed function as progressive entities in that they are both *resistant* and *inclusive*, therefore troubling simple either/or distinctions. Embracing multiplicity, the Nightbreed, with their varied and variable physicalities, posit a myriad of alternatives to those identities prescribed by conventional society without ever discounting the "conventional" as a viable subject position. After all, Boone's girlfriend, Lori, is "human," yet her allegiance to Boone and the Nightbreed position her as a body to be destroyed by the marriage of church and state aligned against them. Her identity is merely one among the many potential identities represented by the Nightbreed's collection of posthuman bodies.

The Nightbreed, then, are bodies that elicit fear, but they are also bodies that hold tremendous promise for those wishing to escape stifling cultural paradigms. As such, it is the sincere hope of this film scholar and horror fan that the long-overdue DVD release of this groundbreaking film will introduce a whole new generation to Clive Barker's monstrous "heroes" and re-familiarize film audiences with one of the horror genre's most important (and frequently overlooked) visions. *Nightbreed* will hopefully remind directors and film critics alike that horror texts have the potential to advance an oppositional politics, that allows for the realization of alternative economies of identity which both contain and exceed those all-too-frequently designated as "acceptable," "normal," and "human."

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The Philadelphia Festival of World Cinema, 28th April 7th May 2001

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

Over the years, the Philadelphia Festival of World Cinema has lived through growing pains and threats of death throes, but in its tenth year, it rose phoenix-like -- to attract the largest audience since its inception. After the departure of two artistic directors (Linda Blackabye, the founder, and Phyllis Kaufman, her successor), this year's managerial responsibility fell to Ray Murray, owner of TLA (a chain of successful video stores) and curator of the popular Philadelphia Gay/Lesbian Film Festival.

A new feature -- added to the usual parties, panels, cine-cafes and spotlight guests (actor/director, Morgan Freeman, was "Lifetime Achievement" honoree) -- were award ceremonies (with jurors) for: best feature film (*How to Kill Your Neighbour's Dog* [2000] by Michael Kalesniko); best documentary feature (*Startup.Com* [2001] by Chris Hegedus and Jehane Noujaim shared the award with Barbara Kopple's *My Generation* [2000]); best first film (*How to Kill Your Neighbour's Dog*); best director (Polish filmmaker, Krzysztof Krauze, for *My Debt* [2001]); and audience awards for best feature (*Stranger Inside* [2001] by ex-Philadelphian, Cheryl Dunye); best documentary (*The Turandot Project* [2000] by Allan Miller) and best horror film (*Wild Zero* [2000] by Tetsuro Takeuchi). There were also cash awards for the "Festival of Independents," a traditional showcase of shorts and features by Philadelphia-based filmmakers.

Categories of films were more extensive and wide-ranging -- with separate sections for films from Eastern Europe, Latin American and Iran. Two slots were definitely for the "screenage" midnight-movie generation. "Action Asia" (inspired, no doubt, by the success of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* [2000]) featured action-thrillers, brutal gangster flicks, road movies and other dazzling pyrotechnical feats from countries like Thailand (*Bangkok Dangerous* [2000] by the Pang Brothers), Korea (*Barking Dogs Never Bite* [2000] by Bong Joon-Ho); and more than ten other films from Japan. While "Danger After Dark" featured creepy horror films like *Wendigo* (2001, Larry Fessenden), and edgy risk-takers like *A Real Young Lady*, the film by daring French anti-feminist feminist, Catherine Breillat, which scandalised France in 1975 and was shelved until the transgressive sexual experiments of its teenage protagonist, Alice, seemed bland compared to the hardcore artiness of Breillat's later controversial films, *36 Fillette* (1988) and *Romance* (1999).

The festival opened with *Dinner Rush* (2000), an amiable film likely to please all ages, and whet all tastes. Set around a trendy Tribeca restaurant, it was directed and written by Bob Giraldi, who is a noted New York restaurateur and an experienced director of TV commercials. The "rush" of the apt title refers not only to the eager diners who crowd the latest restaurant sensation, but also to the great energy of the multi-plotted script and the terrific balletic sequences of mouth-watering food preparation. Despite a clichéd father-son conflict and the inevitable "mob" connections that go with the territory, the film is enriched

by colourful supporting actors, a winning performance from Danny Aiello as the restaurant owner, and a star-turn by comedienne, Sandra Bernhard, as a ruthless, food guru/critic demanding special treatment.

The array of foreign films from every part of the globe was impressive, if not daunting for the casual viewer. There were plenty of upbeat comedies -- in particular, *Waiting for the Messiah* (2000, Daniel Burman), a "lite" heartwarming portrait about growing up Jewish in Argentina. It takes place during a recession, and the failure of a major Argentine bank, which affects many in the large close-knit Jewish community ("El Once") in Buenos Aires. Twenty-something Ariel Goldstein, who videotapes weddings and bar mitzvahs, is en route to take over his father's business and marry his Jewish girlfriend, when recession obliges him to look for a job. Working for a TV talk show, he falls for a bisexual "shika." After this foreplay foray into foreskin fields, the prodigal son returns to his Oedipal ethnic roots.

The Big Animal (2000), a winsome adult fairy tale, is the fourth film by Polish filmmaker, Jerzy Stuhr, a veteran actor in Kieslowski's films (*Camera Buff* [1979] and *Three Colours: White* [1994]). Adapting an unfinished script (1973) by his "best friend" Kieslowski, Stuhr himself plays the lead role as a humdrum clerk who adopts a dromedary to escape boredom, and thereby incurs the jealousy and rejection of his village. The "big animal" (not a familiar household pet), takes on allegorical significance, representing the intolerance and the rigidity of banal bureaucracy. In sum, *The Big Animal* pleases as a whimsical modest adult fairy tale.

When the typically droll wit of Central Europe is good, it is very good, as in *Marshall Tito's Spirit* (1999, Vinko Bresan), a low-budget political satire with pseudo-realistic grainy images and wry, ironic charm. On an impoverished Croatian island, covert communists emerge to make "capital" of the presumed sighting of the ghost of Tito, at the funeral of a Yugoslav soldier. The superstitious townspeople are gripped by gleeful greed at the prospect of exploiting the "ghost," in order to promote what the mayor euphemistically calls "socialist" tourism. Overall, *Marshall Tito's Spirit* is a low-budget political satire with pseudo-realistic grainy images, and wry, ironic charm.

The oddball premise of the German film, *Undertaker's Paradise* (1999, Matthias X. Oberg), turns on the exploitation of the business of death. Two unlikely characters are brought together in a small Welsh town populated by ageing retirees. A downbeat clarinetist (Ben Gazzara), and a young German undertaker's assistant join to establish a funeral home, called "The Last Paradise." The task would appear simple in a town noted for the "highest mortality rate in the UK," but Gazzara employs his own conspiratorial methods to help his young friend achieve success. Mildly satirical, leisurely paced and scored with lively jazz, *Undertaker's Paradise* is an engaging black comedy.

The festival also boasted a large assortment of international arthouse dramas, with impressive performances. *Life as a Fatal Sexually Transmitted Disease* (2000, Krzysztof Zanussi) is a Polish film about Tomasz, a cynical middle-aged doctor, who is facing his own impending death. Played with ironic dry wit and appropriate solemnity by Zbigniew Zapasiewicz, Tomasz sets out to challenge the beliefs of an ambivalent monk and the romantic illusions of a young couple in love. Like his colleague Kieslowski, Zanussi is an idealist who pursues issues of moral choice, faith, and the yearning for evidence of God's presence. The film suggests that the old Zanussi is back again, using exquisite cinematic means to explore religious themes, and reconcile the human soul to the inevitability of death. Despite the

gravity of its musings about the human condition, *Life as a Fatal Sexually Transmitted Disease* is witty and never ponderous.

Death, in a different way, plays a major role in *Under the Sand* (2000, Francois Ozon), an elegant film about mourning. In a great performance, Charlotte Rampling plays Marie, a middle-aged bereaved wife who struggles to come to terms with the disappearance of her husband. In the midst of Marie's efforts to resume her old life, the friendly ghost of her missing spouse returns to haunt her, and the viewer is left to ponder on his unexplained disappearance. This sober drama represents a departure for French filmmaker, Francois Ozon, best known for hard-edged shockers like *See the Sea* (1997), *Sitcom* (1998) and a stylised adaptation of an early Fassbinder play, *Water Drops on Burning Rocks* (1999). For all its meditative and elegiac mood, however, *Under the Sand* still displays Ozon's skill in portraying ambiguity in the motivations of his characters, with this engrossing psychological drama perhaps best being described as Kieslowski's *Three Colours: Blue* (1993) meets Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975).

Rampling has a smaller role in *Aberdeen* (2000, Hans Petter Moland), a taut road movie about a desperate attempt to reform an alcoholic husband/father, and restore the unity of a dysfunctional nuclear family. Swedish actor, Stellan Skarsgard (*Breaking the Waves* [1996]) is superb as the rummy whose neurotic drug-addicted daughter (Lena Headey) pulls him kicking and screaming from London to Oslo to Aberdeen, to rejoin his estranged wife (Rampling). Headey alternates between insistent determination and vulnerability, while Skarsgard is by turns recalcitrant and consumed with self-loathing. A superb musical score by Preisner (Kieslowski's composer) enhances the exceptional performances and compelling story.

The King is Alive (2000), a first feature film by Danish filmmaker Kristian Levering, is the latest Dogma 95 film (following Von Trier's *The Idiots* [1998], Vinterberg's *The Celebration* [1998], and Kragh-Jacobson's *Mifune* [1999]). With an exotic locale and a cerebral script, the film is about eleven disparate tourists whose bus breaks down in a remote desert in Namibia. The enforced close relationships gradually reveal the characters' sexual peccadillos and neurotic inclinations; and, like survivors from an actors workshop who find themselves in an outward bound story, they then try to divert themselves by rehearsing *King Lear*, whose sanity was similarly jeopardised by disorientation. Despite a somewhat clichéd premise, *The King is Alive* presents involving self-revelations, and engrossing ruminations about life, played in a stark doom-laden setting. Actors like Janet McTeer, Jennifer Jason Leigh and Romaine Bohringer contribute to a solid ensemble piece about the terror of inner truths that emerge in a life-threatening reality, and about the crucial need for artistic self-expression to make life bearable. The film is a noble Dogma-directed dramedy that strips filmmaking and performance to bare bone essence.

Like *The King is Alive*, the German film, *Falling Rocks* (2000, Peter Keglevic) is an omnibus survivor story, but it takes the form of a more linear murder mystery, and is less concerned with psychological character motivations. Gleefully leaving civilisation behind, a six-pack of young friends take off on a trek through the uncharted mountains of South Africa, where, as Alexander Pope notes, "every prospect pleases and only man is vile." The exquisite beauty of the surrounding landscape does not allay the greed of one member of the group, who systematically murders his colleagues for a cache of valuable diamonds.

Concerned with Italian Jews, *The Sky Will Fall* (2000, Andrea and Antonio Frazzi) is graced with able performances by Isabella Rossellini and Jeroen Krabbe, the same duo that starred in Krabbe's *Left Luggage* (1998). Adapted from an autobiographical novel by Lorenza Kazzetti, about her own experiences in World War Two Tuscany, this family tragedy brings out all the personal and historical factors of that time: the gullibility of many Italians who were misled by Mussolini; and the naivete of others, who became apologetic and secretive about their Jewishness. Set in a luxurious campagna and a privileged world, the film is reminiscent of De Sica's *The Garden of the Finzi Continis* (1970), a far more accomplished evocation of the plight of affluent Italian Jews caught in the maw of Fascism. However, *The Sky Will Fall's* beauty and earnestness does offset some of its predictable melodramatic cliches.

A number of films reflected the marginalisation of diasporal populations in postcolonial societies, as they encounter prejudice, impoverishment and cultural deprivation. *The Back of the World* (2000, Javier Corcuera) from Peru, is a gripping three-part portrait of the silent, unseen and disaffected at the "back of the world," who have been stripped of their human rights. Focusing on despair and resilience, this gritty documentary exposes the dark side of globalisation. One section concerns a ten-year old Peruvian boy who, as the sole breadwinner of his family, works at backbreaking stonecutting. In the second part, a Kurdish writer, a persona non grata in Turkey, is living as a political refugee in Sweden and aching to rejoin his Kurdish wife (the first woman member of the Turkish Parliament), who has been unjustly imprisoned for political activism. A third affecting story is about the horrors of waiting for execution in a Texas death row. In sum, these three raw tragedies challenge our complacency.

The fragmentation of families that stems from diluted ethnic identities takes its toll on the characters of *Maryam* (2000, Ramin Serry). A first film, made by an Iranian-American, it takes place in a suburb of New Jersey, and as it explores the community's xenophobia, it also reveals an internal family conflict and its political origins. During the hostage crisis, a young Iranian comes to the US to attend school with his sixteen-year old cousin, Maryam, and, suddenly, she and her peers are embroiled in politics, sexism and their own family-orientated feud. Although over-extended, in its awkward attempts to incorporate personal and political complications, this timely film succeeds in telling an involving multi-cultural story about the effect of remote political events on family and community relations.

The Swedish film, *Before the Storm* (2000), is also a first film by an Iranian and has a similar theme -- third world politics that come to haunt the apparently carefree first world. Written and directed by Reza Parsa, who has lived in Sweden for twenty years, it concerns an emigre taxi driver who tries to live a normal family life in Sweden, until his Middle Eastern career as a terrorist catches up with him and he is forced to undertake a dreadful mission. Things get more involved when he befriends a twelve-year old boy (the director calls him a "miniature DeNiro"), who has to marshal his own courage to confront a vicious bully. Although the film is florid towards the end, with overly-familiar thriller sequences, *Before the Storm* is a fine accomplishment for a debut film.

In *Confusion of Genders* (2000, Ilan Duran Cohen), everyone acts out their libidinous urges. Alain, an attorney, is turned on by every boy- and girl-toy he encounters and, yet, cannot quite profess his bisexuality. By the time this garrulous film is over, desperate Alain has played footsie with Laurence, his pregnant law partner whom he reluctantly marries; Christophe, the nymphomaniacal kid brother of a former girlfriend; Marc, a despotic client in jail for murder; and Babette, Marc's erstwhile girlfriend, who ends up with another convict. Convolutions are aided and abetted when a boy is born to Laurence, its ambivalent mother,

who promptly suggests him to be "parented" by the rambunctious Christophe. Typical of other sexually explicit French roundelays, the sex may not be fun but it is, at times, funny. However, although *Confusion of Genders* can be praised as bravely honest, it is also ultimately masochistic and vapid, with what appears stylistically jejune slipping all too readily into just plain repetitious.

Brazilian dramas are often raw but intense, and, with this in mind, two festival films from Brazil are worth acknowledging. Noted for his large-scale historical epics, Sergio Rezende launches into a distinctly new mode with *Almost Nothing* (2000) -- a neo-realist trilogy that is apparently about "almost nothing," but which builds cumulatively into devastating portraits of little people with grand passions. Made on a shoestring budget, based on true stories, and set in rural impoverished Brazil, this dry, terse documentary-style drama follows three men who are prompted by jealousy and fear to commit crimes of passion. Without any didactics, a third world horror emerges, governed by culturally deprived inarticulate people who must resort to violence to express their repressed feelings.

The other Brazilian film, *Maids* (2001, Fernando Meirelles), based on a successful play, intersperses interviews with the stories of five cleaning women who voice their dreams and endless struggle with poverty, racism and sexism. Quiteria drifts from job to job because she breaks everything; Creo scours the city for her teenage daughter who ran away with a rapper; Cida copes with an indifferent husband; Roxanne enrolls in a modelling course that turns out to be a euphemism for prostitution; and Raimunda takes up with a deadbeat who even fails at petty thievery. Ending with the words: "Is this a life?", this docu-drama humanises the unseen servants of the bourgeoisie, and does it with innovative visuals and upbeat Brazilian rhythms.

There were also two interesting specimens of the Iranian New Wave. Scarcely the kind of film that would be bought by distributors in this country, *Daughters of the Son* (2001, Maryam Shahriar) is for those who like their cinema straight and have the patience to persevere. Like so many Iranian films, it is relentlessly slow, deliberately austere and elliptical. In its longeurs, it forces the viewer to look carefully at every detail of the daily tedium and unexpressed emotions of an impoverished population: a single gesture, a telling glance, glimpses through tiny windows or narrow passageways, and most of all, the desperate loneliness of women in servitude. The slim, almost silent, narrative, told in black-and-white, concerns a *Yentl* (1983) style role-reversal plot that is quite daring for Iranian society. Aman, looking as if she stepped out of Dreyer's *Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), pretends to be a boy in order to get a weaving job with an abusive employer. Another weaver unwittingly falls in love with her/him, and this gender dilemma further complicates the general mood of despair.

In the high contrast black-and-white Iranian film, *The Legend of Love* (2000, Farhad Mehranfar), a young female medical student wanders courageously among nomadic Kurdish tribes looking for her fiancé, who has set off to tend the wounded in a town besieged by Iraqi attacks. This minimalist narrative thread becomes an elegy about wartime separation and the sadness of the bereft (much like *The Trojan Women* [1971]). Wherever she goes, the young lover's lament is accompanied by the remnants of a unique disappearing ethnic culture: "legends" of the loss of homeland and heroes; an ancient Kurdish love song; and a frenzied ritual dance by whirling dervishes. This underlying contemporary (albeit universal) story of the collapse of archaic customs in the face of warring political forces, is conveyed with little drama but with rich ethnographic exotica.

Finally, the festival deserves a commendation for programming the Dutch film, *The Sea That Thinks* (2000). Gert de Graaff's aesthetic film essay of exceptional beauty is replete not only with its own interactive website, but with an innovative narrative structure about a screenwriter, whose words evoke his real life as they unfold. At first blush, it might appear curious that the film received the documentary award at the Amsterdam Film Festival this year. Yet, there is enough visual experimentation and tweaking of the thin line between art and illusion here (with each one influencing and informing the other), to warrant such an award. Overall, *The Sea That Thinks'* metaphysics and surreal playfulness puts into question the nature of categories like documentary and fiction.

Next year's Philadelphia Festival of World Cinema, according to energetic director Murray, will be even bigger and better, lifting Philadelphia's rather moribund movie public into greater acceptance of screen gems that transcend the banality of the multiplex syndrome.

Planet of the Apes

Dir: Tim Burton, 2001

A review by Geoffrey Weiss, University of Kentucky, USA

The new *Planet of the Apes*' inclusion of unnecessary dialogue from the 1968 film seems calculated to allow the thirteen-year-old movie connoisseur to lean over to his friend and point out the dialogue's source. This precocious reflexivity frequently marks recent Hollywood adaptations -- John Forsythe voices Charlie in last year's *Charlie's Angels* (2000), while Dr. Evil in *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* (1997) activates the "unnecessarily slow-moving dipping mechanism" that so often allowed James Bond's escape. Unfortunately, however, superfluous references are the least irritating aspect of *Planet of the Apes*.

The most irritating thing about the new *Planet of the Apes* is that it so strongly feels put together by 20th Century Fox's marketing department. Cast and crew seem chosen for their name recognition rather than for any artistic contribution they might make to the movie -- there is no trace of Tim Burton's sense of whimsy or Tim Roth's offbeat menace, actors David Warner and Helena Bonham Carter disappear behind their make-up, and Ape City is an indistinct pastiche of *Batman's* (1989) film noir Gotham City and an Anisazi cliff dwelling. In sum, this movie has no personality of its own.

Burton's *Planet of the Apes*, itself a sales pitch for official merchandise and a sequel, must have sounded like a great idea in producer Richard Zanuck's office. Four sequels, a live-action series and a cartoon series followed the original film, Zanuck himself had given producer Arthur P. Jacobs the go-ahead on the original film with the condition that Jacobs cast Zanuck's then-girlfriend, Linda Harrison, and Tim Burton is well known as the kind of stylist who might bring quirky vision to a remake. With all this in mind, it must have seemed natural to want to make lightning strike twice, but, unfortunately, box office lightning doesn't guarantee quality or depth.

The movie contains a checklist of Hollywood action clichés -- an original cast member (Charlton Heston) in a remake, shaking camera movements and quick cutting, recognizable stars, and a pointless opening which sets the stage for a "surprise" ending. However, if all these factors have been ticked off the checklist of standard action clichés, the filmmakers still forgot to check whether the movie was entertaining or thoughtful.

The first *Planet of the Apes* (1968) addresses social questions in the "apolitical" and therefore "safe" generic sci-fi form. This form of political criticism worked for Gene Roddenberry on TV's *Star Trek* series, which was cancelled for economic rather than political reasons. Making the case for the power of denial, Richard Zanuck, interviewed for the documentary *Behind the Planet of the Apes* (1998), denies making a political film, preferring to believe that *Planet of the Apes* was a simple "action-adventure movie."

Yet, the film was originally released in 1968 at a time of political turmoil in the United States. Taylor's (Charlton Heston) initial musing that he "can't help thinking that somewhere there has to be something better than man," opens contemporary questions about human society's place in the universe that a planet of talking apes and mute humans is uniquely suited to address. Like Swift's Gulliver, Taylor finds himself in a situation that forces him to reconsider his assumptions and, as Heston puts it in an interview, to "defend" humanity, for the apes make the same assumptions about humans that humans have traditionally made about apes and other animals. Explaining the temporarily mute Taylor's attempts to communicate in pantomime, an ape guard in the human zoo remarks, "You know the old saying. Human see, human do." *Planet of the Apes* ends in keeping with the streak of pessimism about the human race present in the endings of late sixties films like *Easy Rider* (1969) -- just after Taylor outsmarts his ape captors and takes warm leave of his ape friends, holding out the promise of peaceful coexistence, he encounters "his destiny," the iconic final image of the fallen Statue of Liberty. The film ends with Taylor kneeling on the beach and screaming, "You finally did it! God damn you all to Hell!" as he realizes that he's been on a post-apocalyptic planet Earth all along.

In contrast, the *Planet of the Apes* remake feels as if, embarrassed by the first film's ideas, Zanuck determined to remove any cogitation at all, to open no questions about what it means to be human or other than human. This decision is nowhere more evident than in the choice to invest humans with the power of speech. Had humans been mute, as they were in the first film, the ape debate over "human rights" might have commented on or even satirized the contemporary American debate over animal rights. Instead, having humans talk negates that argument -- humans talk, apes talk, and the only marker of interspecies difference is ape make-up. Mark Wahlberg, in the Charlton Heston role, becomes a one-dimensional barometer for moral rectitude -- the ape activist Ari (Helena Bonham Carter), who sympathizes with Wahlberg, is good, General Thade (Tim Roth), who is out to destroy Wahlberg, is bad -- and the movie never rises above this simple dichotomy, which, in an American culture obsessed with celebrity, seems more and more to structure major films.

Ironically, Charlton Heston, the only actor in *Planet of the Apes* with real studio-era-style star power, is also the only actor to transcend both the ape make-up and the script's banality, producing the simulacrum of depth in his two-and-a-half minute cameo as Thade's dying father. Heston reveals to Thade that humans once ran their planet, and that their technology is what made them dangerous. He offers as proof a gun, stored for generations of Thade's family, and urges Thade to continue oppressing the humans, growling, "Damn them! Damn them all to Hell!" Heston, with the power to credibly play mythic heroes like El Cid and biblical patriarchs like Moses, is one of the few actors alive who could invest the sound of writer William Broyles Jr.'s dialogue with any weight of meaning. However, the moment turns out to be "idea lite," and the spectacle of ape armies soon overwhelms any conjecture that "there has to be something better than man."

Not that there's anything wrong with spectacle. Heston built his reputation on spectacles like *Ben-Hur* (1960) and *The Ten Commandments* (1956), and *Planet of the Apes* is, after all, a Hollywood summer movie, but the notion of spectacle implies something spectacular, remarkable and impressive, which *Planet of the Apes* is not. Industrial Light and Magic produces its standard digital spaceship effects and tired alien worlds, and, while the ape make-up is impressive, it grows commonplace once the initially impressive effect wears off. Arguably, what made *Ben-Hur* a great film, that movies like *Planet of the Apes* lack, was the

fact that it was based around a story about real human beings living in a difficult and contradictory world.

Again, I hold the marketing department responsible for *Planet of the Apes'* unspectacular spectacle. Major studio marketing departments aim for two related things in a movie: lots of flashy images they can use in pre-release trailers, and big grosses on the opening weekend. With this in mind, it appears that marketing departments often have enough authority within the studios to get their way in the film's final look. These days, trailers feature two or three cuts-per-second of shots alternating between close-ups of the major stars and panoramic spectacle, with loud music and a few meaningless slogans, and marketers seem to hope that the adrenalin these trailers generate can overcome the negative reviews generated by the films themselves. Unfortunately, it usually does -- leading to large opening-weekend grosses. For studios, large grosses the first weekend provide two advantages: number one at the box office one weekend translates into free publicity and bragging rights for the next weekend, and studios typically take the largest percentage of the film's gate receipts in the first and second weeks of a run.

So, as is usually the case in Hollywood, *Planet of the Apes'* shortcomings come down to money: too much money spent on special effects and advertising, too little money spent nurturing the creative storytelling spirit, and too much desire to make money at the box office without alienating the largest amount of potential patrons. Born of greed, Hollywood's creative timidity strips movies of challenging ideas or any acknowledgement of human difficulty.

John Ruskin once wrote in "The Nature of the Gothic," that imperfection was the glory of gothic cathedrals, evidence of the humanity of its imperfect creators. Zanuck, Burton and company seem to have forgotten human imperfection, producing a movie that looks and feels produced by the Hollywood machine, produced to fit a narrow set of specifications known as the "Hollywood summer blockbuster."

Pollock

Dir: Ed Harris, 2000

A review by Lisa Rull, University of Nottingham, UK

Cinema has long revelled in stereotypical representations of the male artist. (The portrayals of women artists constitute a separate but equally problematic genre). The artist is driven and self-destructive: witness consistent interest in Vincent Van Gogh from *Lust for Life* (1956) to *Vincent and Theo* (1990). Such a tortured genius must also suffer scandal and personal demons, as with the reckless *Basquiat* (1996), or the masochistic Francis Bacon of *Love is the Devil* (1998). Painting is the preferred medium: photography, with its place in the prehistory of cinema, is more often a documentary practice rather than a fine art, whilst sculpture appears too solid, too slow for the moving image. Depicting painters allows the camera to explore dynamism, gesture, and texture: elements that are especially, if not exclusively, embodied in modern artists. The influence of Abstract Expressionism, with its experimentation with line, colour, and application of paint, has thus provided exemplary models for film artists -- whether fictional, peripheral, or central to art history. Thus we see Tony Hancock in the comedy *The Rebel* (1961) mocking abstract and conceptual art by riding his bicycle through paint across the canvas; we see the virtually unknown talent of early Beatle-bassist, Stuart Sutcliffe -- tragically killed by a fatal brain-tumour -- express his tortured genius in bright and expressionistic impasto paintings (*Backbeat* [1993]); and now we have the iconic "Great American Painter": Jackson Pollock.

Initially Jackson Pollock's life and times appear to tally perfectly with these stereotypes. He was a violent drunk. He was part of an artistic crowd in 1940s and 1950s New York, and was married to painter Lee Krasner. He was a painter whose gigantic canvases, splattered with dribbles and skeins of paint, were presented by the media as encapsulating modern art and the cultural prowess of America. He died violently, tragically young (only forty-four), his career already on the rocks, in a road accident which left one passenger dead, and another injured.

All these elements are in *Pollock*, but the film also highlights the fundamental problems inherent in the artist bio-pic formula. Paul Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) was rarely, if ever, capable of painting when drunk -- alcohol was a block to his creativity, not an assistant. The relationship he shared with Krasner was intense and complex. Certainly, she vigorously promoted Pollock's career and committed herself fully to providing the domestic stability required to enable him to keep sober and paint. However, this was a period when women artists struggled to gain widespread public attention, and although Krasner may have decided to taste success through her husband, this did not mean that she accepted her secondary position lightly. According to friend and fellow artist Cile Downs, Krasner "resented, deeply resented, that people only paid attention to him." Moreover, Krasner was no meek housewife: she was "plenty feisty... she called him Pollock." The film's allusions to these tensions in Pollock and Krasner's relationship may be too subtle for many in the audience. What does appear, I would resolutely credit to the deserved Academy Award winning performance of Marcia Gay Harden as Krasner, who perfectly embodies the poise, manner, and tone, if not the impossible-to-replicate looks, of her character.

Additionally, the film supports the mythology of Pollock's spontaneity in creating his canvases -- that somehow the first drip was an accident, that his work was, in the title of a Pollock biography, *Energy Made Visible* (Friedman, 1972). However, this profoundly disguises the impact of the artist's formative artistic experiences. Pollock trained with the social realist Thomas Hart Benton, and yet also struggled continuously with the burdensome influence of Pablo Picasso. The Federal Art Project was another key part in Pollock's early career, enabling artists as diverse as Pollock, Mexican muralist David Siqueiros, and Armenian-born abstractionist Arshile Gorky to work on government sponsored projects during the Depression. Dealers like Julien Levy and, later, Peggy Guggenheim, who exhibited the automatist and psychoanalysis-influenced work of continental Surrealism, also affected Pollock's experimentation with symbols, gesture, and mark making in painting. None of these crucial backstory elements, which relate directly to Pollock's art, are even referenced in the movie. As Cile Downs has said, Jackson Pollock's story has everything: "drunkenness and violent death and sex and art -- all attractive to the public with the exception of art."

Other excluded issues are Pollock's experiences with Jungian analysis, and, perhaps most curiously, any ambiguity about Pollock's aggressively masculine heterosexuality. Although Harris's directorial debut produces a remarkably measured lead performance -- the temptation of endless histrionics might have easily waylaid other actors -- we rarely see Pollock as anything less than a fully masculine, macho, carousing womaniser. The roughhousing and wrestling that accompanied Pollock's Cedar Bar drinking, that might have indicated a homo-erotic aspect to his sexuality, is absent from the film. Nor is his attraction to, and dependence on, strong women (his mother, Krasner, Guggenheim) with definite ideas for his future, fully explored.

It is unfortunate that, throughout the film, supporting cast members struggle with underwritten parts that flit so fast across the screen that even the thoroughly knowledgeable cultural historian struggles to keep up. Bud Cort captures the enthusiastic cajoling of the influential Howard Putzel, Guggenheim's assistant, but is horribly under-used. John Heard also works hard to add depth to his portrayal of sculptor Tony Smith (incidentally, we never see any artist except Pollock actually working, only socialising). Harris's wife, Amy Madigan, does a spectacular job as a frizzy-haired caricature of Guggenheim: the first sweeping shot into her Art of This Century gallery drew gasps from audience members familiar with photographs of the grande dame of the art world. (But the role is let down by a plotline that Pollock and Guggenheim had a sexual relationship -- an idea that merely reinforces the latter's reputation as a free loving heiress-about-town).

Of these supporting roles, the vapid characterisation of Ruth Kligman, Pollock's last girlfriend (Jennifer Connelly) causes the most frustration. (Kligman was the injured party in the car-crash that left Pollock and Kligman's friend Edith Metzger dead). By her own admission, Kligman was primarily attracted to Pollock's celebrity status: "I think I fell in love with him the first time I saw a painting of his." Moreover, elsewhere you get a far greater sense of her role as yet another strong woman in Pollock's life. For example, in *Love and Death on Long Island* (Teresa Griffiths, 1999), a BBC documentary that included Harris commenting on his then "in-production" movie, Kligman comes across as a woman who pursued what she wanted with a vengeance. Filmed in a sunlit field, she is the first interviewee, and appears dressed in heavy black velvet hat, coat and long gloves. The visual metaphor is clear: with Krasner dead, Kligman is the ultimate (black) widow, who cannot resist the lure of celebrity. "He [Pollock] is a great American icon. He's like Marlon.... [Pause] Brando...I knew Marlon early in my life."

The eventual undoing of *Pollock* is perhaps Harris's passion and centrality to the project. Harris is producer, director, and lead actor, and was inspired by Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith's mammoth biography (1989) -- the main source for the screenplay. Yet little remains of the complex biographic narrative that drew Harris to his subject. Instead: "I approached the role of Pollock intuitively" (Harrison, 2000: xvi). The resulting film consequently hovers between art-house art-flick and conventional sensationalised bio-pic. For example, when Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock go to bed together for the first time the scene has absolute minimal diegetic sound -- barely a creaking floorboard and no dialogue for several minutes. Is this an aural emphasis of the doomed artist's inability to communicate with women? Is this subtle or merely clichéd?

In conclusion, besides the lead performances, what redeems *Pollock* are two important moments that are foregrounded, and (unconsciously?) critique the relationship between the artist and mass media. The film opens with fans proffering the famous August 1949 *Life* magazine article, "Is he the greatest painter in the United States?" for autograph. This article simultaneously thrust Pollock into the mass media spotlight, and alienated him from New York's artistic community. Soon after, Hans Namuth began filming for his documentary that demanded Pollock endlessly perform the processes of painting as a repetitive pantomime. This soul-destroying experience led Pollock to stalk Namuth around the post-production party hissing "I'm not a phoney, you're a phoney" -- a scene of genuine menace in *Pollock*. Perhaps, finally, the impossibility of capturing Pollock's complexity was unwittingly summed up by Harris's remark in *Love and Death on Long Island*: that Pollock "had a tough relationship with celluloid -- didn't do him any good that's for damn sure." As with the article and 1950 documentary, perhaps this film is only ever able to catch glimpses of the "act" of Pollock: a fragmentary and fragile creature frozen in the glare of the media.

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Shrek

Dir: Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jensen, 2001

A review by Rebecca Farley, University of Cardiff, UK

It's rare, in the entertainment industries, that corporate competition emerges as crisply as it has in Disney and Dreamworks' race to dominate computer-generated animation (CGA). In the 1930s, Disney engaged in a similar competition with Fleischer studios, which was, oddly, also based around technology. Instead of emphasising different styles or experimenting with different genres, they competed in terms of technological advantage -- Disney's multiplane camera vs. Fleischer's 3D models -- to both studios' cost, and Fleischer's ultimate demise (Langer, 1992). The difference, this time, is that everyone wants computer animation. Since 1994, when the entertainment industries' research budget first exceeded the military's, expanding the capacity and potential of computer technology has been big-budget cinema's holy grail.

Knowing what to do with that technology, however, is a different matter. John Lasseter, who at Pixar made several of the most enchanting short computer-generated animations, started with lamps and tin toys. The first uses in feature films were spaceships, aliens, ghosts, dinosaurs -- things with no referent which couldn't, therefore, look "wrong." When Pixar collaborated with Disney to produce the first fully computer-generated feature, *Toy Story* (1995), they sensibly stuck to material the technology could handle. The toys' flat planes, limited textures, stylised faces and segmented bodies were ideally suited to CGA's underlying wire-frame structures, but Disney's input meant the film also had celebrity, comedy, warmth and wit wrapped round characters that were a marketer's dream. Its unexpected success -- according to the trade papers *United Press International* and *Forbes*, the \$85m film cleared \$245.7m at the box office and is estimated to have grossed \$700m total -- took even Disney's master marketers by surprise and alerted others to the hitherto under-estimated potential of the medium. New producers entered the ring in droves, including the heavyweight Stephen Spielberg, with money, motivation, and the not-inconsiderable advantage of animation production experience.

1998 brought the competition into the open, with PDI-Dreamworks rushing *AntZ* (1998) out a whole month before Pixar-Disney's *A Bug's Life* (1998). The similarity in content (both stories are about threatened ant colonies) led inevitably to rumours of plagiarism; with miffed Disney executives pointing accusatory fingers at former boss turned Dreamworks partner Jeffrey Katzenberg. For a moment, it seemed that PDI-Dreamworks might ignore the competition and target a different, older audience. However, press criticism centred once again around the technology, asking questions such as: "who had made the best use of its capabilities?" or "whose film looked better?" Instead of focusing on *AntZ*'s Woody Allen-inspired humour and worldly storyline, critics wondered whether its animation and backgrounds weren't a little rough. Clearly PDI-Dreamworks have taken that criticism to heart.

Shrek, their new release, looks *fantastic*. PDI have really worked at the technology, developing software to let them tackle "organic" textures (hair, fur, velvet, grass) so that some shots -- the molten lava surrounding the dragon's lair, clouds, a field of sunflowers -- are eye-catchingly beautiful. Not every scene, of course, achieves this, but overall the film reaches new heights for animation's hyper-realist aesthetic and stays there. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the film's rendering of characters' faces, where human faces are *hard*.

Toy Story's clever use of toy-point-of-view allowed them to cut the heads out of most shots, and those that made it into frame were the least attractive parts of the film. *Shrek* probably hasn't perfected faces -- *Final Fantasy* (2001), out by the time you read this, will no doubt make *Shrek* look like a bunch of Barbies (some of the lesser characters already do) -- but the main characters' faces have an expressive mobility that certain human actors can only dream about. Reviewers have duly marvelled at the software allowing 300 separate facial movements. If animators' understandable desire to show off this technology means they sometimes fall into the trap of "over-animation" -- a term coined by Jules Engel to describe CGA's tendency to maintain interest by continual, often unnecessary, movement (Furniss, 1998: 80) -- mostly it just means that the characters' faces shimmer with every passing emotion, making them as appealing as puppies.

Some reviewers have protested about this. Shrek, after all, is supposed to be ugly, and Fiona's dark secret is that by night she, too, is an "ugly" ogre. Quasi-academic complaints have taken two forms: firstly, that neither Shrek nor Fiona-the-ogress are "really" ugly; and, secondly, that it's not very "politically correct" for Fiona to take Shrek's form in order to live happily ever after. Arguably, both such criticisms are misguided. Firstly, computer-generated animation is *never* going to be really ugly, because really ugly means deformity, asymmetry, irregularity and *dirt*, whereas computer-animated figures are, if nothing else, generated with mathematical precision and cannot help being *neat*. In addition, when considering that this is a Hollywood production, the characters have to be cute enough to move merchandise and lots of it. Secondly, this is a fairy-tale (the least "politically correct" genre ever), and is produced by the master of mass-market movie-making himself, so anyone expecting this ultra-mainstream movie to come over all feminist is rather missing the point.

Another misconception revolves around those who think the moral of this tale is that it doesn't matter what you look like on the outside. Of course it does matter, and this is especially the case in animation -- *especially* when you have a rival to show up. If there must be a moral, then it is about learning to share and being prepared to break-out of the script society writes for you. Shrek discovers it's okay to be nice, to show his soft side and make friends with folk instead of scaring them. At the same time, Donkey discovers that inter-species lust is acceptable; Fiona discovers that it's okay to go with her belching, kick-boxing, Sophie Dahl-sized side and the guy she really likes, instead of the one she thinks she's supposed to; and they all discover that eating weed-rat in the swamp can be preferable to living in a perfect world.

However, this moral is something I'd only admit to if I was being arm-twisted by one of those killjoys who think there has to be a deep meaning to everything. It just so happens that the moral I've proposed also describes what I think is the real point of this film: namely, rubbing Disney's nose in it. *Shrek* is the first non-Disney animated fairytale to come out of Hollywood, and its producers are promoting it as "the greatest fairytale never told," a clear statement of intent to beat Disney at their own game.

Thus the opening sequence begins, as so many fairytales do, with an unseen narrator "reading aloud" from an "Olde-style Story-booke." However, when the narrator reaches the part in the story where the Prince and his rescued Princess live happily ever after, he scoffs "What a load of..." before tearing the page out, with a cut to an external shot of an outhouse and the sound of flushing. The agenda has been set: this film is about irreverently busting every convention of the genre. It absolutely relies on the intertextual frame through which all viewers see the film; and its jokes work because they are precisely those things we have come *not* to expect from fairytales. Indeed, since fairytales on the big screen means Disney, *Shrek* constitutes one long raspberry.

The message is hammered home through the preposterous villain Prince Farquaad. As if making the Prince the villain wasn't naughty enough, this one is a control-freak intent on building the perfect world, and I'm sure we can all think of a certain famous animation producer who had a similar reputation and pursued the same goal in his films, amusement parks and posthumous planned community, Celebration, FL (Ross, 2000: 16-24). Making the ogre the hero gives PDI-Dreamworks the chance to reintroduce the "dirt" inevitably missing from such places. While the slime and maggots in the title sequence are about as disgusting as toys, provoking a delighted "yeuch!" rather than real disgust, it is still the disruptive thought that counts.

Thus, so much of *Shrek's* appeal lies in the gross-out factor: the toothpicked eyeball in Shrek's martini, his method of killing fish, his earwax candle. Though such vulgarities have featured in television and independent animation for years, this is their fairytale debut. Still more appeal comes from the film's wilful pop tone. *Shrek* makes more nods to TV -- ever the counterpoint to cinema's sanctimony -- by referencing everything from *Sale of the Century* to Dickens, *The Matrix* (1999) to the Macarena (with the bird-bursting scene acting as a tribute to Marv Newland); while *Shrek's* characters bop through their candy-colored world to a bunch of tunes that are never going to make it to VH1. Even the ending's mandatory group musical sequence is a rockin' Eddie Murphy version of a Neil Diamond song, with not a trace of Sting-inspired piety in sight. As a result, like getting off a fairground ride, you leave the cinema with a big, sugar-rush grin that dissipates with the sunset.

For what it is, then, *Shrek* is a great little film. Some people probably won't go and see it because they think that it's a kids' film marketed under false pretenses. (If so, then this marketing approach is working -- with box office grosses showing that *Shrek* is reaching a *lot* of people). Such people probably want art, or at least a moral, and it is true that the film doesn't change anything; but that's not the point. *Shrek* is about wisecracks, the exuberant showing-off of new technological tricks, and the sensual delights of colour, music and texture over meaning and politics, and it thumbs its nose at propriety every step of the way. Bearing all this in mind, perhaps those who think *Shrek* is merely kids' stuff deserve to miss it.

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Sweet and Lowdown

Dir: Woody Allen, 1999

A review by Bill Davis, Temple University, USA

Ever blurring the boundary between art and reality, Woody Allen offers us another mockumentary with *Sweet and Lowdown* -- this one, however, more erudite than such previous Allen farces as *Take the Money and Run* (1969) and *Zelig* (1983). The film is about the life of Emmet Ray (Sean Penn), a fictional jazz guitarist who flourished briefly during the 1930s. The little-known Ray collectively represents, and resembles, many of the jazz musicians of the 1930s and 40s. Ray obsesses over a better-known guitarist, the great (and very much real) Django Reinhardt, who has been hailed as the most important jazz guitarist in history. Ray's idol for his talent as well as his persona, Reinhardt was known to sometimes not show up for his performance at all, much like the unpredictable Ray.

Against the backdrop of this flourishing Jazz-scene era, the film follows various drunken bouts and melodic performances by the irresponsibly obnoxious, yet superbly talented, Ray -- a man who dreams of fame and fortune, while attempting to spread this form of American art to audiences who were beyond the reach of mass media, such as radio and recordings. (Originally blazing a trail of this kind were such men as Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington). Ray's journey takes him from New Jersey to Chicago, Detroit and California, through a brief tour of Europe, and finally, back to New Jersey.

The entire soundtrack, arranged by Allen veteran Dick Hyman, encompasses Allen's musical passion, jazz. Performing a swinging new set of recordings of classic jazz standards are Hyman-recruited top musicians of the day, such as guitar legend Bucky Pizzarelli and Ken Peplowski, one of the most gifted clarinetists to emerge in the 1990s. Despite the snubbing of this marvelous musical accompaniment, Allen's twenty-eighth film does feature two Academy Award nominated performances, and rightfully so, for Sean Penn (Actor in a Leading Role) and Samantha Morton (Actress in a Supporting Role).

Ray's heavenly guitar playing (actually beautifully played by Howard Alden, and less brilliantly faked by Penn) ostensibly repents for his wicked mistreatments of those around him, and his clashes with musicians, gangsters and women, combined with his part-time status as pimp and bizarre hobby of shooting rats, are all predicated on his belief that a true artist can't worry about who gets hurt along the way. Where exactly Ray is going, he nor we know -- but both enjoy the trip. Weaving factual tidbits with his faux character (where, much like previously mentioned Allen mockumentaries, various expert talking heads comment on Ray, including the director himself), Allen concentrates this film on a central character in front of the camera rather than on the humorous idiosyncrasies, compulsions and obsessions of the man behind it. However, it could be argued that viewers will not be able to help but make connections to Allen's much publicized, and often ostracized, personal life and relationships, and his talent for filmmaking. This film is as much about the beauty of art as it is about the ugliness of humanity, and it seems incredible that a fabulously talented man like Ray can both produce beautiful music and offer such a hideous demeanor. Ray has ostensibly

mastered the guitar, but has yet to learn the art of kinship, and, as a result, treats both objects and people as the same.

As arguably the most dramatically serious film Allen has made to date, *Sweet and Lowdown* is, however, anything but devoid of comedy, as we often laugh both at, and with, Ray with an ambivalence of pity and scorn for his actions and attitudes. Ray's indignant treatment of Hattie (Samantha Morton), a mute New Jersey laundress -- his (and for that matter, Allen's) complete antithesis, with whom he travels to California and with whom he feels comfortable -- is epitomized by his inability to bear his true feelings, for fear of becoming vulnerable and losing his gift. Typical of Allen's comedies, the most ironic conjunctures double as the funniest, as neither character can express him or herself verbally (figuratively for Ray and literally for Hattie, which, interestingly, echoes the sentiments of the 1930s silent era in film). As a result, both must overcome this obstacle by compensating with a well-developed nonverbal talent -- for Ray, his guitar playing and for Hattie, her animated facial expressions.

Ray's utter disregard for Hattie's feelings is evinced in two particular scenes -- one in which he strums his guitar while Hattie changes a flat tire on his car, and another in which he suddenly abandons her one morning, leaving nothing but money on the table. These collective events prove, ostensibly, to be innocuous, as Ray continues his misadventures, eventually returning to New Jersey a man devoid of any emotion and seeking a second chance with Hattie.

However, for Allen, cinematic revenge is sweet, and the film concludes with a bittersweet, ambivalent, self-destructive ending, that suggests Ray's deserved fate, while simultaneously portraying a sympathetic and uplifting milieu -- as the humanity of this lowdown, pathetic person is finally revealed from behind the hideous demeanor.

This is Spinal Tap

Dir: Rob Reiner, 1984

A review by Paul Binnion, University of Nottingham, UK

This is Spinal Tap is one of those films that you can probably quote every line of. If you can't, watch it, and suddenly all those strange overheard pub conversations will magically make sense. For those who don't know the film, the plot is simple: a British heavy metal band embark on a comeback tour of America to promote their new album "Smell the Glove." The tour starts badly and goes downhill from there; the band play on the same bill as a puppet show, are forced to perform a jazz odyssey when guitarist Nigel Tuffnell walks out during the middle of a performance of "Sex Farm," and, to cap it all, their drummer explodes on stage. They split up and discuss solo projects (a musical about Jack the Ripper called "Saucy Jack" amongst others), but thankfully the final scene sees them come back together for a tour of Japan.

A plot summary cannot begin to explain how funny this film is. Performed with a rudimentary script and mostly improvised, every line is a classic. However, does this become the case after repeated viewings? In common with other cult classics such as *Withnail and I* (1987), *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) and TV series like *The Simpsons*, *This is Spinal Tap* seems to get funnier with every viewing. Lines that pass you by the first forty-five times suddenly become hilarious the forty-sixth, and for someone new to the film, viewing it with a fan is an interesting, and often frustrating, experience. The fan is guaranteed to either laugh before every joke instead of after it, quote along, or even more annoyingly, explain why comments like "the Boston gig's canceled, but don't worry -- it's not a big college town" are so funny, because, you see, Boston actually *is* a big college town. Thus, a non-fan is immediately excluded from the pleasures of the film.

This is Spinal Tap has recently been reissued as a double DVD. It features a full-length commentary by the cast, in character as Spinal Tap. The picture has been digitally remastered into full 16:9 ratio, and, of course, the music sounds better than ever in 5.1 surround sound. The second disc contains over eighty minutes of extra material, and this is why Tap fans will be desperate to own the disc, with the out-takes having been edited together into a continuous narrative which compliments the film. What is puzzling is why this material was left out of the original cut. Maybe it's because I've seen the film hundreds of times and (obviously) know every last line, but the deleted scenes are every bit as funny. Clearly the producers, not knowing the kind of cult success the film would have, were wary of over-extending the joke, and the film clocks in at a trim eighty minutes. Many of the deleted scenes add depth to the original narrative: the chauffeur, who derides Tap as "fucking limeys, what do they know about Frank [Sinatra]'s life?" is given drugs in the band's hotel room and ends up singing in his underpants; and when Nigel leaves the band, his replacement is fired because he's a better guitarist than David. However, the briefest (and funniest) extra scene is a fan having his copy of "Smell the Glove" autographed, with black marker on a black cover.

The extra scenes privilege the fan who is already aware of the original film, and although they form an independent narrative, they are best understood in the context of fandom's fervent desire for more information. The DVD commentary also adds to the fans "knowledge" of the fortunes of Spinal Tap, since the film was made as they bitch and moan their way through the narrative, providing backstage anecdotes and updates on the fortunes of characters. Along with album releases and sporadic live appearances (ironically enough, including the Monsters of Rock festival in Donnington), these extra-narrative elements add to the cult appeal of the band (and film) as the fictional reality of the film spills over into the real world.

The question is, why has this film become such a cult? One possible answer is that every line rings true. Ask anyone who's been in a band, and they can empathise with the inflated egos, the interfering partners of band members, the inter-band rivalry, the onstage disasters and all the rest. What is amazing is that Metallica released an album with a cover identical to "Smell the Glove" ten years after *This is Spinal Tap*, and that U2 visited Graceland and the grave of Elvis in their "rockumentary" *Rattle and Hum* (1988), seemingly unaware of Spinal Tap's mockery of this rock pilgrimage. Maybe they were being ironic? In a recent ITV documentary on The Spice Girls every scene was straight out of Spinal Tap: the moronic comments, the studio arguments, the inflated sense of self-esteem and the belief that they were serious artists. In addition, Metallica's on-the-road documentary *A Year and A Half in the Life of Metallica* (1992) featured a scene about sandwiches backstage, which echoed Nigel Tuffnell's complaints about backstage catering. Were Metallica being postmodern, ironic and winking at the audience? Or is this really what rock and roll is about?

Maybe the Radiohead film, *Meeting People is Easy* (1999), presents a more accurate picture of life on the road. Offstage, the band do not conform to rock and roll stereotypes, they are a group of miserable sods who complain about receiving awards and want to be tucked up in bed ten minutes after they come off-stage. Although this may be a truer picture of grueling tour schedules, and the endless promotional activities major bands are forced to endure, this film does not give the fan the same kind of privileged information that they have come to expect from rock documentaries. Fans want their music framed by excess, arguments and incident, especially in the world of heavy rock.

This explains part of the enduring appeal of *This is Spinal Tap*. Although the band are stereotypes, they are believable. Some of this is clearly due to the audience's empathy with the band: it is impossible to watch the film and not love them. Yes, they are ludicrous caricatures, and, yes, they are vain, stupid and wear tight spandex trousers with courgettes stuffed down the front, but somehow they manage to remain lovable. Maybe it's the music -- who could resist the majestic splendour of synth rock epic "Stonehenge," or the seedy thrills of "Tonight We're Gonna Rock You" and "Sex Farm"; or, even better, the spot-on spoofs of sixties psychedelia "Cups and Cakes" and "Listen to the Flower People"? What is amazing, or maybe frightening, is that these songs actually get better with repeated viewing. Although the lyrics are ludicrous ("Big bottoms, big bottoms, talk about bumcakes my girl's got 'em" for example); the music overblown and bombastic, and the guitar solos twiddly and screechy, the fact remains that the tunes are catchy enough to stay in your head.

Still, this film is the perfect antidote to the anodyne chart music of today, and maybe that is part of its continuing appeal -- it reveals the essential frivolity and shallowness of popular music. Westlife may come across as sincere as they sit on their stools tapping their knees and crooning; and Robbie Williams may think he invented irony with his perpetual knowing wink

and trademark "cheeky" grin, but at the end of it all, Spinal Tap show us what rock music is about. In the words of keyboardist Viv Savage, "Have a good time, *all* of the time."

Asked what they would do if they weren't in the band, lead singer David St Hubbins answers "I'd be a full time visionary"; while Nigel, on the other hand, would like to work in a shoe shop. These comments deflate the mist of adoration which rock stars usually try to create -- ultimately they are entertainers, nothing more. Radiohead accept this; and U2 try to avoid it, by recording with Bob Dylan and BB King and traveling to Graceland in search of inspiration at Elvis' grave. In contrast, Spinal Tap do not find Graceland a moving or inspirational experience: it is just a grave, and, as such, it reminds them of the inevitability of death. As Derek Smalls comments, "well this is thoroughly depressing"; while, for David St Hubbins, the grave puts life into "perspective, too much fucking perspective."

In much the same way, *This is Spinal Tap* puts the self-importance of popular music into perspective. Eighteen years on, the satire is still relevant, the trousers remain too tight, and the guitars too loud. This feature-packed DVD reissue will ensure that film fans will be singing along to "Tap" for years to come.

Tron

Dir: Steven Lisberger, 1982

A review by Will Brooker, The American International University in London, UK

The Electronic World enmeshes the Earth, and reaches beyond it. Information is moved through the computer systems and processed by the artificial intelligences. [...] The arena was...hundreds of feet across. The soaring walls that enclosed it were perfectly smooth, divided into rectangles by lines and panels of bright illumination. The floor was composed of precise squares marked off by a glowing meshwork (Daley, 1982:1-2).

The matrix has its roots in primitive arcade games...in early graphics programs...a graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the non-space of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding...(Gibson, 1984: 67).

It should have been a hit. It could have been a cult. It might even have become one of those sci-fi texts which finds a place in the film studies canon, earning courses and chapters devoted to itself. Instead, *Tron* is regarded as a flawed, dated kids' movie, a fantasy adventure very much in keeping with Disney's live-action projects of the late 1970s -- *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* (1971), *The Cat From Outer Space* (1978), *Return From Witch Mountain* (1978) -- in which "normal" life is clunkily invaded by special effects. *Tron* has never, to the best of my knowledge, been celebrated in revivals or re-screenings, whether on mainstream release or late-night arthouse circuits, in seminar rooms or on television. Yet this was a movie which showed us cyberspace two years before William Gibson's *Neuromancer* described it in print, which brought us speeder bike chases while *Return of the Jedi* (1983) was still in production, which did for video gaming what *Trainspotting* (1996) would do for heroin: that is, admit the obvious truth that addictions, as well as being terrifying, are also glorious. As such, it achieved something that no CGI cinema even attempted until *The Matrix* (1999) -- unlike the gloomy cyberspaces in *Johnny Mnemonic* (1995), *The Lawnmower Man* (1992) and *Strange Days* (1995), it captured the sheer joy of playing computer games. As with Neo in *The Matrix*, we and the protagonist Flynn are supposedly caught in a dystopia; but the twist is that once Neo and Flynn start learning the rules, they love it.

So it's 1981 or thereabouts, back in the ancient history of "new media", and home computing has just seen the quantum leap from the Sinclair ZX80 to ZX81, a black-and-white, "lo-res" machine with a touch-sensitive panel instead of a keyboard, and a standard 1k of memory. The Atari games machine is doing well, but even its graphics are only a step up from *Pong* -- blocky shapes which stand for tanks and people, rather than representing them in any realist sense. You can play versions of *Space Invaders*, *Frogger* and *Centipede* at home, then, but for the real deal in gaming you have to go to an arcade. The arcade is to the home console what the fashion catwalk is to the high street. Here you find the state-of-the-art innovation and gimmickry -- the multiple sprites of *Defender*, the speech synthesis of *Gorf*. The new

machines hold pride of place, manned by bigger boys and their admiring fans; you watch them master the strategies and wait for them to move on to the next arrival. Here, as John Fiske noted, is a whole culture, the hierarchy of the "machinist"; a world where young men can get away from family, work and school, where they can be good at something and earn the respect of their peers. It may be a sphere of fantasy, but the mastery feels real.

In some arcades you find the 1980's equivalent of the previous decade's pinball wizard, the guy so immersed in games that they've virtually become his life. A guy like Flynn. Flynn's pals, a nice couple called Alan and Lora, think he's wasting his time playing space cowboy, but there's a backstory involved -- and backstory between Flynn and Lora, just to make things interesting. Flynn doesn't just play games, he writes them; nothing world-shattering like *Centipede* and *Scramble*, but games you've heard of and lost a few quarters to. The one with the Recognisers, for instance; the machine which holds pride of place in Flynn's arcade.

"You invented *Space Paranoids*?" asks Alan.

"*Paranoids*, *Matrix Blaster*, *Vice Squad*, a whole slew of 'em. I was this close to starting my own little enterprise."

Alan can believe this; he used to work alongside Flynn, before Flynn quit programming, lost himself in the arcade and surrounded himself with fourteen year-old fanboys. Flynn was the young hotshot at the multinational Encom, working on video games after-hours in a private file. One day he logged on to his machine and found the programs missing; three months later, another software engineer named Dillinger presented a package of five games to the company. "The slime didn't even change the *names*," Flynn says in disbelief. Dillinger's now a senior executive, while Flynn's a console jockey, and now Flynn wants his games back.

It could have been a kiddie version of *Hackers* (1995), *Max Headroom* or *The Net* (1995) -- frenzied tapping away on keyboards, screens of code, running down corridors trying to elude security -- except for the fact that Steven Lisberger, who wrote the story and screenplay as well as directing, somehow hit on the visionary idea which would, by coincidence, make William Gibson's reputation. There's a world behind the screen, where information is represented in virtual, visual form as cityscapes and plains of data. Flynn doesn't know it, but when he sends his program CLU through the Encom system, an avatar called Clu is searching the maze of files. When CLU is busted by Encom's resident Artificial Intelligence, the Master Control Program (MCP), Clu is howling as he's physically "de-rezzed". The video games in Flynn's arcade also have their counterpart in cyberspace as deadly gladiatorial tournaments; and just as, in the real world, individual programmers like Alan and Flynn struggle to keep ownership in the face of Encom's consumerism, so the electronic sphere is split into factions. The Red Elite, agents of the MCP, have the upper hand, while the Blues, the "User-Believers," who hold faith in people like Alan, are scorned as "religious nuts" and imprisoned until they can be wiped out in the tournaments.

If you write a program, it's in here, and it believes in you: Crom, designed to calculate compound interest, tells his guards Mr Henderson will get him out. Alan's security algorithm, Tron, is also being held in detention while the MCP assesses the threat he poses to Encom. Dillinger and Lori have their echoes in the Red champion, Sark, and the enslaved worker Yori, and, of course, when Flynn goes a little too far, infiltrating the company late at night, the MCP decides to teach him a lesson; it digitises him and sends him into the virtual world

to replace Clu. "They're going to make you play video-games," Ram warns when Flynn turns up in the cell. "Hey, no sweat. I play video-games better than anybody."

Tron is an intelligent account of cultural power and the information society, and a fascinating commentary on our capacity for emotional investment and physical immersion in computer software, whether utilities or games. It is often witty, as well as intelligent: Flynn is accompanied by a Bit which can only communicate in binary variants on "yes" and "no," while Tron is scandalised by a blasphemously casual reference to his User, when Flynn comments that: "Thank God Alan stayed awake".

It is also, perhaps above all, a beautiful film. The electronic world, though it glints with blue and red neon highlights, is predominantly a muted, pastel environment. The inhabitants' skin is rendered soft grey, recalling the pale faces and dark features of early cinema make-up; and making the film uncannily, but appropriately, resemble a hand-coloured *Metropolis* (1927). Ram, Tron and Flynn are strangely delicate warriors, then, and the games are equally elegant constructions: with concentric rings, handheld cesta, and flying discs. Even the motorbikes are "light cycles" which throw up a wall of sheer colour behind them, creating their own deadly maze. Rather than clumsy hardware, the cycles -- like the tanks and Recognisers -- are pure energy generated around a single concrete item, whether handlebars or steering column. The sound design is just as subtle, creating an environment of modulated engine hums and faintly metallic echoes, and the music is oddly haunting, driving up tension through repeated keyboard motifs and then calming to a background ambience. The film's decision to keep all violence to the stylised arena, and its willingness to let chases subside into more reflective moments, results in scenes which remain gently touching, as when the wounded Ram asks Flynn to pause their escape and attend to him. Kneeling at the other man's side and clasping both his hands, Flynn confirms that the Users still exist, and in close-up we watch their faces as they smile at each other.

Despite its lack of critical attention, commercial success or cult following, *Tron* served an interesting cultural function. It found its niche as an inspirational text in the place that inspired it; it became the new video machine at the centre of the arcade. With sweet irony, Flynn's fictional games were combined on one games showcase called simply *Tron*; and while the film itself never earned a sequel, the game was followed by *Discs of Tron*, a fresh challenge for the machinists. *Light Cycles* proved hard to adapt to the home computer, and we may never know what Flynn's *Vice Squad*, *Matrix Blaster*, *Warp Factor* and *Circuit Masters* were all about; but I found a game for my ZX Spectrum sometime in the mid-1980s which looked just like *Space Paranoids*. It was called *Vectron*, and I dig it out occasionally. These days you can download it on a PC emulator: the line graphics are dated and the sound is one-channel, but you still find yourself ducking when a Recogniser swings at your head.

Tron missed its mark back in 1982 -- *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) and *Return of the Jedi* got the audience and merchandise, while *Blade Runner* (1982), eventually, got the dedicated critical attention; but perhaps that's part of its appeal, almost twenty years later. Like an old computer game, it retains its charm partly as a nostalgic object, forgotten by most and still obscure enough to feel like a personal favourite rather than a shared choice. You can leave it for years, then dig it out for an afternoon and discover that it still has the power to thrill, and to inspire wonder.

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