Artificial Intelligence: AI

Dir: Steven Spielberg, 2001

A review by Keith McDonald, Birkbeck College, UK

Steven Spielberg is not a filmmaker who is confined to a single genre or style, and yet over the course of his career he has made films that are clearly definable as his own. His work generically ranges from *ET: The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) to *Schindler's List* (1993), *Jaws* (1975) to *The Colour Purple* (1985), with this range of work seeming to suggest that he is attracted to the challenge presented when encountering new ground. In his current release, *AI*, he has perhaps attempted to tackle one of the most enigmatic and impressive sub-genres of film: Kubrickian Cinema. After famously agreeing to complete the project (based upon the Brian Aldiss short story *Supertoys Last all Summer*), that Stanley Kubrick had been developing for some twenty years, Speilberg endeavoured to make a work that is forever bound to engender comparisons between himself and the great director.

Apparently Kubrick thought the subject matter to be more to Spielberg's sensibilities, and his reasons for this judgment are clear. *AI* is set in a world where artificial beings or "mechas" have been developed to assist a human race faced with an overpopulation crisis in the wake of mass flooding, causing limited space. David (Haley Joel Osment) is a prototype mecha-child, designed to simulate unconditional love to his owner, in this case a bereaved mother, Monica Swinton (Frances O'Connor), whose ill son has been cryogenically frozen. The first act of the film involves the strange boy being taken into the family home and forming a strong relationship with Monica, only to be cast aside and abandoned once her maternal son begins to recover and returns home. As such, *AI* is basically a reworking of *Pinocchio* (1940), with David as the artificial boy desperate to find his maker in order to become real, and so find happiness. Visually this film is flawless, and sets new levels of subtlety and style in its use of CGI and special effects. It is a hugely rich visual experience that does not require stock "action scenes" in order to impress.

The film opens with a long discussion, led by David's creator Dr Hobby (William Hurt), on the nature of individuality in the world of the simulacrum, and the responsibility of a creator encountering the love of the created. This discourse is a somewhat more thoughtful and subdued opening to what we have come to expect from a major studio science fiction film, and this sets the agenda for the philosophical and intellectual nature of the experience that follows. The first half of the film is surprisingly sparse of grand set pieces and the dazzling special effects that we have come to expect from much of Spielberg's work. It is, however, stylistically impressive, and genuinely thought provoking.

Much of the first hour is shot almost entirely in the interior, taking place mostly in the Swinton's family home. The home is lit in such a way that it looks almost entirely artificial and sterile, presented as a showroom for the privileged few who can afford such luxuries as a substitute son. Almost every time David is in the camera's gaze, he is seen through a window, mirror or frame, often through shaped translucent glass, so that his image is multiplied. These simplistic yet effective tools give us a strong sense that David is dislocated from the action,

and also that the human relationships within the family are without real depth. Considering Spielberg's tendencies for sentimental dialogue and images, this part of the film manages to avoid portraying David as entirely loveable, and Osment plays him as affectionate yet undeniably creepy, as only he can. This lack of sentimentality is welcomed, considering the introduction of an impossibly cute talking teddy bear called Teddy, who will remain David's companion throughout. Considering the kinds of emotional pornography we could have been subject to in a Hollywood film involving a talking bear, Spielberg is mercifully restrained, preferring to present Teddy as a kind of portable furry version of Hal from *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968).

When Monica eventually abandons David, the second act of the film ensues. This mid-section involves David journeying through an unfamiliar landscape and encountering a world that is against him. Here, the narrative follows a dystopian model, that functions to challenge the viewer to make judgments about contemporary social discourse and practices. David meets Gigolo Joe (Jude Law), a sex-mecha on the run for a murder he didn't commit. They are captured by humans and taken to a "flesh-fair", where mechas are tortured and killed for entertainment in a circus-like ring. They escape and travel to Rouge City, a neon drenched city/theme park where every wish can be fulfilled for a price. This section critiques western mass consumerism -- including such institutions as Disneyland, shopping malls and Las Vegas -- but is primarily a reworking of Dorothy's journey to Oz. The three companions travel to a magical city and find Doctor Know, an automated fortuneteller or sage who will answer any question for money. Doctor Know is characterised as an old man who eventually malfunctions. The scene when the companions meet the Doctor is an obvious nod to *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), and also updates this model to parody the Internet revolution.

This use of intertextuality is by no means confined to this reference, and the film is awash with stylistic references to Spielberg's previous work. Some examples include a scene where David mimics his (new) father's gestures at the dinner table, which mirrors a scene from *Jaws*; David's entrance into the film, which directly resembles the entrance of the aliens at the end of *Close Encounters of The Third Kind* (1977); and the end of the film -- where future beings resurrect extinct humans beings through DNA cloning *a la Jurassic Park* (1993). Although these references nod to Spielberg's earlier offerings, Stanley Kubrick's visual influence is perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of the aesthetics of *AI*. Spielberg has noted that he received Kubrick's concepts for this film in a kind of visual screenplay, made up of a vast array of storyboards, illustrations, and thumbnail sketches. One of the subtle elements that Kubrick will be remembered for is his ability to move away from "naturalness" and embrace the artificiality of film sets as aesthetically stimulating for what they are. Much of *2001: A Space Odyssey* is a celebration of what film can do within the space of film sets, *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) sees Kubrick boldly filming Battersea power station as Vietnam, and *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), while set in New York, expensively and painstakingly re-creates it on a soundstage rather than filming it on location. These techniques may stem from Kubrick's desire to stay near his home, but it can also be seen as a type of meta-filmic awareness that ultimately celebrates the celluloid canvas.

This technique is heavily employed in *AI*, and, to put it simply, this film looks like a film, which thematically emphasises the notion of naturalness and artificiality, and where the environment's pathetic sympathy mirrors David's own sense of dislocation. Furthermore, this film looks like a work celebrating the aesthetic sense of Stanley Kubrick, and this is evident in more than filming techniques -- Gigolo Joe's trademark dance resembles Alex's in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), and one of the huge buildings in Rouge City is clearly based upon

the famous table from the Korova Milk Bar, shaped into a female figure lying on her back. In addition, an image where David is discovered by a group of future beings parallels the image of astronauts encountering the object in *2001: A Space Odyssey*; and, indeed, David's thousand-year encasement in ice is reminiscent of the famous image that ends that film.

The third act begins with David, Joe and Teddy flying to a deserted and waterlogged Manhattan in search of the Blue Fairy and David's maker. They find him only for David to realise that he is simply a substitute for Dr Hobby's own dead child, and is destined to be a true simulacrum, always second best. The main criticism of the film has been this last, frustrating section; where David plunges himself into the ocean, in the first of a number of possible endings to the film, for two thousand years. A voice over -- provided by John Hurt -- narrates this linear leap in the style of a children's storyteller, which begins a shift in the film's tone. The human race ceases to exist, and David is eventually found by a group of strange beings that may be either aliens or advanced androids. They read David's mind and re-create Monica from DNA from a lock of her hair, the romantic twist being that she can only live for one day before eventually dying. The beings communicate this information via a recreation of the Blue Fairy, which resembles an animated Disney character, both aesthetically and in its saccharine nature. This eventual fulfilment of David's wish is presented as a perfect experience and the film closes with David finally sleeping, at peace.

This ending has been held up as evidence that *AI* is truly schizophrenic in nature, with the coldness of the narrative being overcompensated by an ending of pure saccharine. It is true that the sight of the Blue Fairy granting David's wish and the whimsical scenes with Monica are emotionally aggressive, and it is also true that this is not the first time that Spielberg has been criticised for such "emotional bullying". After all, this is the director whose more serious output consists of a film about the Holocaust where the victims escape (*Schindler's List*); a film about slavery where the victims of slavery are repatriated (*Amistad* [1997]); and a film about the Second World War where the individual soldier is rescued (*Saving Private Ryan* [1998]).

This criticism of Spielberg as an emotional "spoon-feeder" is something that is, perhaps, backed up by the ending of *AI*. John Hurt's voiceover, which tells us of David's two thousand years in the frozen waters, elevates this film to pure fairytale, and the ensuing fantasy then fits into this sudden shift in style. However, it is this shift that ultimately destroys the coherence of a potentially interesting work and insults any viewer who has engaged with the film up to that point, feeling, as it does, like a recompense for the bleaker elements of the earlier content. It is true that this recompense may well not have been intentional, but the fact remains that this shift is inconsistent with the more cerebral moments that precede it.

The actual ending works only on an emotive level, which is further problematized by the fact that the "false" ending -- which sees David plunge into the sea -- is powerful enough, but in a way which will allow the audience to extrapolate their own meaning. This is jettisoned in favour of an almost purely sentimental finish that allows no room for intellectual engagement. The closing section of the film seeks to transcend the narrative structure and engage the viewer on a spiritual and philosophical level as seen in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. However, whereas Kubrick was confident enough to leave the viewer with an open ended image capable of drawing multiple conclusions, Spielberg seems unable to end a film without the most alluring yet destructive of American mainstream notions: closure.

The ending of *AI* thus reflects a huge problem facing mainstream filmmakers; think of any major release over the past decade that has not sought to tie up any narrative and thematic strands that may actually challenge viewer response. As such, *AI* is a prime example of a film that seems to assume the viewer is not intelligent or aware enough to deal with ambiguity. While the film is hugely ambitious, and succeeds enough to be far better than most of Hollywood's output, it also attempts unsuccessfully to make a shift from *story* to *fable*, and is overly self-aware of itself as a potentially classic film to be a truly great film. *AI* wants so much to be loved that it eventually descends into a fawning and simpering mess.

Bridget Jones's Diary

Dir: Sharon Maguire, 2001

A review by Stephen Thompson, Freelance Writer and Film Reviewer for the Film Website, *6 Degrees*

I'm going to resist the temptation to write this review in diary form, but nevertheless I have to start with a confession. Most of my critical faculties went straight out of the window because I found *Bridget Jones's Diary* very funny indeed. As humour is so subjective, then anyone reading this must please bear in mind that confession. As there ought to be some rule of thumb guidance on whether you are going to enjoy this film or not, I think it best to say that if you read the original book, then your reaction to that is pretty likely to be similar to that of the film. If you didn't read the book, then you are on your own.

It's an interesting point, though. If we laugh at something, if that thing is giving us pure pleasure, is it then harder to analyse? Should we bother to analyse it? Surely the magic of cinema is to provide escapism, and I don't mean that in a disparaging sense. In these days of instant gratification, it is easy to presume that escapism means running away from, or numbing yourself to, things you don't want to face. Even so, a "serious" film, be it gritty realism, arthouse or whatever, can still provide escapism by taking the viewer into its own world, created from the vision of the director and his team. To give a recent example, Ken Loach's *Bread and Roses* (2000) had me gripped throughout to such an extent that I was provoked into thinking about, and discussing, the issues with which he deals, long after the end of the film.

The trouble with comedy (or thrills for that matter) is that I feel I have enjoyed something and I don't really want to think too hard about how the film managed to give me that pleasure. Cold analysis spoils the fun. I also know if someone else doesn't enjoy the joke of Bridget Jones -- that is to say her character and her lifestyle -- then they won't like the film, which is still not to say it's a bad film.

The key to the success of *Bridget Jones's Diary* is the writing and casting. Usually there would be a cue around here for another long analysis on screen adaptations of books, but with this film there is no need. The book has the structure of a diary and the film has, for the most part, dispensed with that and tells the plot of the book. So it's less Bridget Jones's Diary, and more The Misadventures of BJ. Much has been made about the involvement of Richard Curtis as writer of this film, but he co-wrote it with Andrew Davies, who without doubt excels in adaptations for film and television. On the evidence of this project they make a perfect team, and I'm presuming Davies has looked after the whole (the structure and plot) and Curtis has dealt with the details (the characterisation and one liners).

Apart from voiceovers, which get tedious and clichéd if used to excess, it is hard for a film to get into the head of the character. Film relies on the externals of the actor's face and the spoken script. We know that Bridget is writing a diary at the beginning of the film, and there are a couple of visual gags that remind us of the diary, but that's pretty much it. Stripped to its

bones as you see it on screen, I hadn't realised just what an affectionate parody of *Pride and Prejudice* the book is, as I had read it. Davies adapted the acclaimed version of *Pride and Prejudice* (1995) for the BBC, starring Colin Firth as Darcy -- the very same Colin Firth who plays Darcy in this film. So much for the in-jokes, which I must admit to not liking very much in general, but here it pays off beautifully.

Much, too, has been made by critics of the partnership between Hugh Grant and Richard Curtis. What also amused me about the casting was that from an original cursory glance at the cast list, when I saw that the film was in production, I immediately presumed Grant would be Mark Darcy (the goodie) and Firth, Daniel Cleaver (the baddie). Grant does seem to always play the sympathetic guy, yet I had forgotten how superb he is in Mike Newell's excellent film version of Beryl Bainbridge's *An Awfully Big Adventure* (1995), in which he plays a loathsome character with reptilian ease and does it superbly. In *Bridget Jones's Diary* he veneers a dislikeable character with his usual charm and pulls it off perfectly, suggesting that, in some ways, it is too easy to underestimate Grant's talents. Firth, on the other hand, doesn't have as much to get his teeth into with his character. This is more than compensated for by a combination of his old-fashioned handsome looks, with a slightly rigid deportment, a steady gaze, and a look on his face as if he is just beginning to be aware of a bad smell somewhere in the vicinity.

Interestingly, the film's photography by Jane Campion's three times cinematographer Stuart Dryburgh is fairly understated, but manages to keep its view of London fresh. The score by Patrick Doyle is a selection of pop songs which segue very wittily into the action. The rest of the cast, including Gemma Jones, Jim Broadbent, Celia Imrie, and Honor Blackman are all excellent. Director Sharon Maguire has had a dream team working for her on her debut feature, so in a way it is difficult to assess her contribution (which may be a huge disservice). The film bowls along, and there is no doubt it all hangs together very well indeed. I await her next film with interest.

At the end of the day, the film's success lies in the character of Bridget. I have to admit I was not expecting to like Renee Zellweger in the part, but she won me over completely. Her English accent is perfect, but in a relaxed and natural way, unlike Gwyneth Paltrow's studied perfection. Indeed, my companion didn't even know she was American until I mentioned it after the film. Much fuss has been made of her having put on weight. It isn't so much that she is fat, but like Bridget in the book having the perception that she is fatter than she really is, Zellweger just looks normal -- dare I say it, a real person. Her skin looks pink and at times blotchy, and her body is noticeable because she doesn't look like a stick insect.

While it's clear that Bridget drinks and smokes, less emphasis is put on this than in the book. To have kept in Bridget's regular updates of cigarettes and alcohol intakes would have made her too self indulgent in the film. The book was written some time ago now, and of course was criticised for the character's utter self indulgence. Nevertheless, by the nature of its very popularity, it did hit a nerve with a lot of people. In the film, although there are hints of this (for instance, she has no idea about current affairs) which imply that the idea of finding the right romantic partner in order to solve all life's problems is not a good one to live by, ultimately Bridget wins on her own terms. She may suffer humiliations, but she is very witty and, at times, is in perfect control -- it's a winning combination because the audience continually laughs *with* her.

Like Elizabeth Bennet, by the end Bridget wins her Darcy, while learning the lesson that she must not judge people on their appearances. What she *doesn't* do is to change herself to fit his perceptions. It is the man who learns he loves the woman as she is, and when was the last time you saw that in a film?

The Claim

Dir: Michael Winterbottom, 2000

A review by Douglas A. Cunningham, University of Arizona, USA

With *The Claim* (2000), British director Michael Winterbottom tops an already impressive filmmaking career that began with 1992's *Under the Sun* and continued with (among others) *Jude* (1996), *Welcome to Sarajevo* (1997), and *Wonderland* (1999). Character centered, thoughtfully paced, and stylish (yet always coolly subdued), Winterbottom's films explore the nature of human relationships, and the emotions holding them fast or ripping them apart. *The Claim* is no exception; indeed, as a bold, genre adaptation of Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, this remarkable film succeeds on almost every level. Although not a strict retelling of the novel, the film nevertheless captures the tragedy of Hardy's story while, at the same, establishing itself as an outstanding (if overlooked) entry into the genre of the Western.

The film opens in 1867 in the aptly named Kingdom Come, a remote mining town in the winter grip of California's Sierra-Nevada Mountains. The arrival of Donald Daglish (Wes Bentley), a surveyor and engineer for the Central-Pacific Railroad, causes a stir among the locals in town, most of whom hope the young man and his survey team will eventually bring the railroad to Kingdom Come. No one wants the prosperity promised by the railroad more than Irishman Daniel Dillon (Peter Mullan), the town saloonkeeper, unofficial mayor, and all-around local authority figure. Dillon soon learns that Daglish, while fresh faced and young, will not submit to bribes in exchange for a favorable railroad recommendation. The locals, on the other hand, immediately take to Daglish, and are charmed by his good looks, quick smile, and confident manner. Among Daglish's many admirers stands Portuguese immigrant Lucia (Milla Jovovich), who, while hopelessly devoted to Dillon, nevertheless beams in the presence of the younger man. Daglish earns yet another admirer in eighteen-year-old Hope Burn (Sarah Polley), whose honor he defends against an unruly local immediately after Hope, and her seriously ill Polish mother, Elena (Nastassja Kinski), arrive in town. Supposedly in Kingdom Come to call upon the charity of Dillon, a "relation by marriage," Elena's business actually disguises an old and haunting secret. Eighteen years earlier, when Kingdom Come stood as nothing more than a tiny wooden shack in the middle of an evening blizzard, the ambitious but drunken young Dillon traded his wife, Elena, and child, Hope, to a lonely and disillusioned prospector. The deal, sealed with a middle-of the-night handshake among howling winter winds, secured Dillon with the prospector's lucrative claim, but the loneliness and horror of the hasty decision left Dillon an empty and haunted man.

Elena's reappearance offers Dillon a second chance, and he seizes it. Granting Lucia ownership of the saloon, and then casting her aside, Dillon devotes himself completely to providing and caring for Elena. The estranged lovers re-marry, and Dillon hires the entire town to literally tug a custom-built home for Elena to the edge of Kingdom Come. All efforts are in vain, however, for although Dillon helps Hope nurse the consumptive Elena day and night, the sick woman dies. Dillon takes Hope to the prospector's shack in the woods and confides to her the truth about the drunken exchange eighteen years earlier. Shocked, Hope

abandons Dillon. Meanwhile, Daglish has determined that the town cannot support the requirements of the railroad and that the line will need to pass through the valley below. While the railroad survey team packs its gear, the disappointed Dillon and his sheriff aggressively confront Daglish and his men, and the showdown ends with a firefight in which Daglish guns down the sheriff, with Dillon then murdering two railroad men while trying to mercilessly evict the survey team the following morning.

Lucia, in the meantime, seizes an opportunity to start her life anew. She moves the business of the saloon, with its alcohol, gambling, and brothel, down to the valley below so as to be near the coming railroad line, and the remainder of Kingdom Come follows. Dillon, having lost his wife, his child, his mistress, and the respected authority over the town he built, sets Kingdom Come ablaze. The citizens recognize the smoke from the valley below, and return to search for Dillon, whom Daglish and Hope find frozen to death in the snow. "They're like kings," Daglish tells Hope. "Pioneers. People like Dillon. They came out here when there was nothing, built these towns, and ruled them -- like kings." However, when a lone voice suddenly cries, "Gold!," the searching townsfolk realize that they have found Dillon's private stash of melted gold bars in the burned out vault of the town bank. Crowding desperately around the stash like vultures, the townsfolk trip and scurry over one another as Hope and Daglish walk together in the opposite direction.

As in most of his previous films, director Winterbottom demonstrates an uncanny knack for eclectic casting. Wes Bentley steps perfectly into the role of Daglish, employing the same control, confidence, and intensity he brought to *American Beauty* (1999), while Sarah Polley and Milla Jovovich, offbeat choices for their respective roles, both display a refined maturity beyond their years. In addition, Nastassja Kinski performs well in a relatively small and thankless role, and as a high-profile veteran of yet another Hardy adaptation (Roman Polanski's *Tess* [1979]), her presence serves to bridge the genre gap between Victorian England and the American West in 1867. However, the film's true gem is Peter Mullan, an extremely magnetic actor who manages the difficult task of making Dillon both fearful and sympathetic. The international cast also helps Winterbottom to successfully explore the story's interest in the American immigrant experience, most effectively realized in the somber scene in which Hope recites an all-too-appropriate poem on the perils of emigration to a saloon full of locals. Her voice bleeds over a flashback of Dillon, Elena, and the infant Hope on their perilous blizzard journey, finally returning to the present with the words:

> So hear, you tender maidens!
>
> Ponder well before you go
>
> From your humble homes in Ireland.
>
> What's beyond you little know.
>
> For what is gold and where's the pleasure
>
> When your health and strength are gone?
>
> When you think of emigrating,
>
> Then remember Noreen Bonn.

Mullan's Dillon watches Hope's recitation with pained and ironic fascination. This single moment captures a sense of terrible loss, and Mullan and Polley play it out beautifully.

Of course, Winterbottom's unique directorial abilities extend well beyond his casting. Two previous efforts, *Welcome to Sarajevo* and *Wonderland*, both showcased his talent for minimalist storytelling, and, similarly, there is no spoonfeeding here; with Winterbottom jumping in and expecting his audience to keep up. The tempo of *The Claim* is hardly frenetic, but -- characteristic of Winterbottom -- many key scenes stop a beat or two short of that satisfying, classical Hollywood feel, and flashbacks occur without transition gimmicks. Interestingly, the flashbacks in *The Claim* bring to mind Sergio Leone's mesmerizing opus, *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1969), yet another Western concerned with a fast-approaching future (also in the form of the railroad), and the ways in which no one ever truly evades the past.

The Claim also shares yet another trait with *Once Upon a Time in the West* -- a haunting score. Perhaps in a deliberate nod to Ennio Morricone's mournful title music for the Leone film, composer Michael Nyman (veteran of a number of Peter Greenaway films, *The Piano* [1993], *Gattaca* [1997], and Winterbottom's *Wonderland*) scores *The Claim* with a harrowing central melody. The theme, simultaneously sorrowful and hopeful of the future, makes thoughtful and patient use of both strings and brass (oboe and clarinet, in particular), and Nyman even employs the use of an operatic female alto (as did Morricone) to accentuate the scope of the film's subject matter and the mythical qualities of the storyline (a depiction of a nation in the process of forming itself).

Aside from the aforementioned contributions of Winterbottom and his cast and crew, *The Claim* also owes a great debt to screenwriter Frank Cottrell Boyce. Having closely adapted the novel's central premise, and its five main characters, with relative discipline, Boyce wisely strays from the Hardy path in many other ways. In the novel, for example, we learn Elizabeth-Jane (Hope in *The Claim*) is not the long-lost daughter of Henchard (Dillon) after all, but rather the actual daughter of the man with whom Henchard made his horrid exchange. Also in the novel, Henchard's initial fondness of Farfrae (Daglish) turns to extreme jealousy, whereas in the film, Dillon's contentions with Daglish only concern the pending decision of the railroad route, with a personal relationship between the two men never truly developing.

Such alterations serve the film well, primarily because the changes allow Boyce to focus on the horror at the heart of Hardy's tale -- the exchange -- rather than convoluting that horror with one too many plot twists, as Hardy does. The simplifications also serve the story's new genre backdrop well, allowing *The Claim* enough room to more freely explore its Western chronotopes. Boyce does throw some excesses into the film (how many topless brothel scenes does a Western *really* need before it becomes exploitative?), but the strength of his narrative and his sparse dialogue overcome the stumbles effectively. Overall, Boyce takes the best of Hardy's novel, and uses the material to construct a genuinely moving human drama at the center of a rather rigid genre template.

If the common tropes of the Western are its larger-than-life landscapes, characters, and conflicts, *The Claim* adds to that list a larger-than-life sense of tragedy. Like Oedipus or Macbeth, Dillon stands as the epitome of the tragic hero -- a remarkable, self-made man who, despite his best efforts and intentions, cannot escape the demons of his past. Add to this mix the typical Western theme of changing times, which threaten to leave the unaware behind,

and the result is a film in which director Winterbottom manages to effectively shed melodrama in favor of myth.

Dekha

Dir: Goutam Ghose, 2001

A review by Debanjan Chakrabarti, University of Reading, UK

The word "Dekha" is a polysemic one in Bangla, used variously as a noun (perception, sight etc.), a verb (the act of perception, seeing etc.) and an adverb (e.g. things "seen" or "perceived"). Often, the meaning of the word is determined by the context in which it has been used, and not simply by its syntactic position in a sentence.

Goutam Ghose's most recent film plays on all these shades of meaning, the narrative context summoning, at times, one or many of these meanings. These semantic presences need to be established at the onset precisely because they are obvious absences in the protagonist of the film, who is blind. Ghose resists the temptation to establish a straightforward ironic relationship between the title of his film and the blindness of his protagonist. Well, almost.

Soumitra Chattopadhyay (Apu in Satyajit Ray's *Apur Sansar* [1959] and *Aparajito* [1956]) plays Shashibhushan, the living ghost of a once-famous poet and scion of a wealthy Bengali family, wearing his crumbling ancestral mansion as he clings to his aged body, glaucoma-induced blindness and an old-fashioned printing press run by his trusted retainee. He perceives his present through his finger-tips, lives his past through his large collection of vinyl records, labelled in Braille, and envisages his future through his tenants Sarama (Debashree Roy) and her son Suman. At pensive moments his tempestuous past flashes by with a sliding door effect -- a dream courtship that resulted in a disastrous marriage, the first realisation of his failing vision, his dalliances with hookers -- all captured through the first-person camera eye.

Sarama is thirty-something, estranged from her wayward artist husband, and infatuated by the poet, her father's blue-eyed pupil, ever since she was a teenager. Points where the poet's solitary life intersect that of the mother and her son are few, and are governed by the mores of a fragile conservative social order. The ritualistic existence led by the occupants of the mansion is disrupted when Rima (Indrani Halder), an upstart young girl who edits a "little magazine" (literary magazine brought out by amateur editors and aspiring writers) but cannot meet the expenses, breezes into Shashibhushan's life and threatens to take control.

When Shashibhushan accompanies Sarama and her son on a trip to her parents' place, a new character enters their sequestered lives -- Gagan. Like Shashibhushan, he is blind (but from birth) and has a gifted voice. Sarama is attracted towards this minstrel, and a furtive, intensely physical relationship develops between the two. The blind poet takes Gagan under his wing with the hope that he will be able to make it big in the city.

However, once they are back in Calcutta, Rima interrupts Shashibhushan's life again. What began as a lopsided equation between young Rima, a somewhat flippant admirer of the poet, and Shashibhushan, now just a sceptical spectre of his former self, gradually stabilises into

stronger, if undefined, ties. In a peripatetic turn of events, Rima discovers a long-lost diary of the poet's unpublished poems -- the very last ones Shashibhushan had scribbled with his failing vision. The bond between the two matures into one of a poet and his muse as Shashibhushan starts dictating lines to Rima. The film ends abruptly with an inconsolably sobbing and distraught Sarama, who witnesses Rima hijack her dreams.

The theme of spatial possession is central to the film. The space of the ancestral mansion is the site of several conflicting interests. For the ageing poet, it represents life as he has witnessed it till now. The crumbling walls now whittle away at his world with ominous whispers of change and a new order. If his house and printing press are his home and bread, his garden with its pond is his space for birds. The loss of this territory has multiple significances for Shashibhushan. An estate developer eyes the sprawling lands in the heart of Calcutta greedily. Shashibhushan feebly tries to stop this invasive onslaught of uniform high-rises trampling on a more leisured and heterogeneous world order, just as he tries to keep the cacophonic cloud of crows at bay.

Gagan is transplanted into this space, a human songbird that Shashibhushan wants to nurture. He agrees to this, partly because he cherishes the chimerical dream of becoming a famous singer, and partly because those dreams are warmed each night in Sarama's embraces. For him, this shift in location means new sounds he is expected to emulate (he has unfettered access to Shashibhushan's collection of music albums and cassettes) and a new owner. His fate is no different from that of a caged songbird, since Sarama uses him to satiate her physical desires.

Sarama has a stake in this territory because it is here that she seeks asylum from her mistake of a marriage to give her son a sound upbringing. This is her space as opposed to that of her husband -- the man is hesitant to step into the compound when he comes to apologise his way into her life. She inhabits the house with the assurance that she also inhabits Shashibhushan's soul. She is the woman of the house, the light in a blind man's depths of darkness, the muse who will inspire the dead poet into renewed poetic life -- roles she enjoys playing, roles that have compensated for the rude betrayal of her marriage.

It is worth reiterating here that the film never abandons Shashibhushan's consciousness. We perceive the film's world with him as firm focus. He is there in every frame, taking everything in, and the viewer sees him drinking sensations. There are only two important sequences where the camera becomes Sarama's vision. One is where she is accosted by her husband in the compound of Shashibhushan's house. The other is when she ventures into Gagan's room and arms. However, the first encounter has Shashibhushan appearing on the balcony above to check on the voices below; Sarama's reluctance to talk to her husband results partly from her awareness of the other man above, and she looks up nervously several times. She meets Gagan only in the darkness of the night and in Shashibhushan's ignorance. It seems that Sarama has securely situated herself in the centre of Shashibhushan's consciousness; he "sees" her all the time.

The two sequences mentioned above are the times when Sarama is "unseen" to Shashibhushan, when she is being "seen" by other men. This point is important if we have to understand her when the film ends. Sarama embodies the feminine pivot in several male psyches; besides being her husband's repentance and her lover's mistress, she has also written herself into the poet's unborn rhythm. The film ends with her seeing herself in a new light, "a creature derided by vanity". She walks into her dream of Shashibhushan's poetic rejuvenation

-- "give me a river that will flood out flaccid frailties of life" -- but cannot "see" herself in it. A new woman brings a new wave; Sarama is washed aside, she is rendered unseen. The blind poet now sees the lines she wanted him to write, but he cannot see her.

The blind spot of the film lies in the director's failure to see all the strands of his thoughts to their end. We see a tight narrative unravelling when he takes the film to North Bengal. We lose the musty claustrophobia of the mansion that is the seat of Shashibhushan's psyche and where Ghose is at his surest. While it is a welcome reminder to viewers of the director in Ghose after such forgettable ventures as *Gudia* (1997), the film cries out for the focus of a *Paar* (1984).

Dekha is definitely worth a look, even though this portrait of the poet as an old man pleases only in patches.

Electric Dragon 80,000 Volts

Dir: Sogo Ishii, 2001

A review by Patrick Crogan, University of Technology, Sydney, Austrialia

"undoubtedly a dumb movie, of the disengage-the-brain-at-the-door variety, but it does have one of its own (well hidden)" (KineJapan, 2001).

It was this provocative but ambiguous comment about *Electric Dragon 80,000 Volts* in a recent posting on a Japanese film discussion list that spurred me to begin organising my thoughts and feelings about this extraordinary film. My initial response was to provide a strident defense of the film as being, on the contrary, "intelligent" on a number of fronts.

Manga/anime, music video clip and narrative feature hybrid, *Electric Dragon 80,000 Volts* plays on and with these forms via an overarching theme of electricity. The retro-manga/US comic book storyline tells how a heavy dose of electricity has fried the rational higher level brain functions of our hero, Dragon Eye Morrison, partially destroying their repressive capability so that the primal, reptilian ("dragon") impulses of his brain always threaten to overflow into his reality and destroy him. The storyline may be less than "serious", "dignified" and "realistic" as per the traditional expectations of live action feature narrative film, but it allows for a film that explores and revels in intense sound-images that try to perform (rather than represent) power overflows, collision, the obliteration of sanity etc. The retro allusion to industrial modernity (machines, electric guitars, steel and sparks and so forth) works well with the dated narrative about electricity, in an age when data flows along optical fibres register the contemporary cutting edge of techno-culture. The film has a wry nostalgia for the poetics of (industrial) power, and its potential for reappropriation, that punk and heavy metal at its best often achieved.

Such was my riposte to the dismissal of *Electric Dragon* as "dumb", in no small part (it must be admitted) a rationalization of my renewed interest in Sogo Ishii, who had accompanied five of his films (including *Electric Dragon*) to the 2001 Melbourne International Film Festival's retrospective of his career, and whom I had been fortunate enough to meet there. Of course the film is "dumb" from a conventional mainstream critical perspective on live action film, as my own comments concede, and subsequent interchanges with the discussion list critic who had described *Electric Dragon* as dumb confirmed that we shared both a liking for the film and some appreciation of its alternative project. The "well-hidden" brain of this film was sketched out by this critic in terms of the "overwhelming sense of fun inherent" in its incorporation of "the superhero elements, the music from Ishii's band [Mach 1.67], the sparse but hyperbolic 'dialogue', [and] Nagase and Asano doing overtime away from the set of *Gojoe* [and] apparently enjoying it…" (Tadanobu Nagase and Masatoshi Asano are both immensely popular music and film idols in Japan and co-members of Mach 1.67. *Gojoe* (2000), another Ishii film released the year before *Electric Dragon*, is an innovative *jidai geki* or "period film" also starring Nagase and Asano).

It would be tempting, and highly legitimate, to extend the elucidation of the intelligence of *Electric Dragon* by considering the metaphorics of electricity in the film in relation to social theorist Tetsuo Kogawa's employment of the same figure to analyze the fortunes of the individual in Japanese techno-culture, in essays such as "Beyond Electronic Individualism" and "The Electronic Body at the End of the State: Ethnicity, National Identity and the Japanese Emperor System". Rather than embark on that substantial project here, however, I would like to trace one speculation that the film's intense and poetic image-sound assault sparked off in me during my (ongoing) rehabilitation from its potent impact on my psyche. I say "assault" to delineate the trajectory of this speculation toward violence, for the film performs, narrates and thematises a violent attack. Indeed, Ishii's understated introduction to *Electric Dragon* was to say that "It is a loud film", and it is true that explosive and metallic sound effects, percussive incidental music and tortuous unmelodic guitar "solos" are staples of the soundtrack.

The guitar performances have a narrative motivation -- they are the only means by which Dragon Eye Morrison is able to "let off steam" and thus contain his explosive, (self) destructive tendencies; while the images combine with these harsh sounds to create emblems of anguish, cruelty but also sublime beauty -- the lights of the city seen in time lapse, and the cascading sparks from a clash between the protagonist and his arch rival, "Thunderbolt Buddha", who wears a metal buddha mask over one half of his face. These images give a romantic flavour to the film that is allied with its retro aesthetics of industrial modernity in the "post-industrial" age of information. This is a further aspect of its commonality with Japanese anime, while the metal/punkoid music recalls Ishii's earlier films, which involved the Japanese punk music scene in the 1980s with which he was closely associated. Ishii was (and is) a musician and his early film career (most notably *Burst City* [1982]) was both a product of, and a cinematic response to, the punk movement in Japan.

Electric Dragon's narrative follows a manga or comic book pathway toward a cataclysmic final confrontation between the two rival "electric" superheroes. This war threatens to obliterate all of Tokyo, evoking the venerable Japanese tradition of imagining the ultimate urban disaster of the clash of sublime destructive energies (*Godzilla* [1956], *Akira* [1988], and innumerable films, manga and anime). *Electric Dragon* is clearly about war and violence. Its narrative presents a functional, if two dimensional, pop psychology discourse about the violent tendencies ever-present in the innermost, most primitive recesses of the human brain -- tendencies which can (and do) return to overrun the rational systems of modern humanity and civilization (in other words, the city). Exquisite montages combining close ups of the "face" of Dragon Eye Morrison's pet Iguana with scenes of human violence operate an uncanny amplification of this discourse, echoing the shots of the pitiless Owl watching over the murder of Tyrell in *Blade Runner* (1982).

As such, then, *Electric Dragon*'s thematisation of war and violence is nothing special ("dumb" even). It presents and performs violence in and as the overflowing of boundaries, and the escalation of intense perceptions and affects. This, in some ways, only reenacts the romantic catharsis of punk and heavy metal (and recalls for aging spectators their youthful exuberance), but for this writer the experience called *Electric Dragon* cannot be reduced to this thematisation, nor even to this nostalgic catharsis. If this is a film about violence, it is about the question of what (of) violence remains after it has been explained and narrated. Furthermore, it is also about the question of the cinema's long term relation to violence, with the film's reflexive hybridity inviting a meta-filmic reflection of the nature of the cinematic.

In the question session after the Melbourne screening, Ishii discussed his interest in exploring silent cinema narrational forms in *Electric Dragon* (the film has minimal dialogue and utilizes intertitles as well as employing "classical" silent cinema techniques such as parallel montage). "This, ladies and gentleman, is CINEMA!" exclaims Tom Mes in his review of the film on his *Midnight Eye* website, celebrating its purity as an "unadulterated brain killer of a film" (Mes, 2001). The implied assertion here is that the essence of cinema is to be found beneath the civilizing overlay of narrativity, in a capacity to assault the senses and mental faculties of the spectator. *Electric Dragon* dwells upon that assertion -- it does not simply affirm it, but its violence does not leave this essentialising discourse untouched either. That is to say, if *Electric Dragon* is a film about violence, and about the violence of film, it is also a violence about film and to film.

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Ghost World

Dir: Terry Zwigoff, 2001

A review by Monique Hyman, University of New Mexico, USA

Last summer's Freddie Prinze Jr. flop, *Summer Catch* (2001), is presumably about a boy who meets a girl and falls in love and maybe her parents don't like him? I don't really know; I didn't bother to see it. *Ghost World*, the new masterpiece of confusion and messiness from *Crumb* (1994) writer-director, Terry Zwigoff, is thankfully *not* this kind of teen movie. Co-written by Zwigoff and Daniel Clowes, based on Clowes' comic book of the same name, *Ghost World* is the precocious stepsister of Doug Lyman's *Go* (1999), the prudish childhood friend of Larry Clark's *Kids* (1995), and belongs in that delightful genre of the self-reflexive and self-deprecating dark teen comic-drama. These films always go over better with the punk rockers of yesteryear than the N'Sync fans of today. So break out your safety pins and hair dye and fall in love with Enid (Thora Birch), the poster child for post-everythingness.

To recent high school graduate Enid, everything nerdy or off-beat from any decade in which she has not lived is extremely cool. She is a (young) woman out of time, trying all at once to discover her truest self amongst the creature comforts of falsity. Her best friend, Becky (Scarlett Johansson), delights in Enid's fascination with people and things she deems pathetic (and, therefore, kinda cool) -- like a poorly dressed and awkward couple at a coffee shop -- and yet desires to grow up and out of such immature gawking. Becky is gleefully along for the ride when Enid answers a personal ad under the guise of being the specifically desired woman, only to sit at a tacky '50s diner as Seymour (Steve Buscemi) awaits a date that will not show. Seymour seems so pathetic to Enid that she is fascinated into following him home. Her fascination soon leads to a friendship with the middle-aged Seymour, which is sparked from this same pleasure. She learns that Seymour collects old 78 records and begins listening to them as well. Seymour is like Enid, but without the postmodern irony. While she delights in the quirkiness of her own collection, Seymour is a straightforward collector, unaware of any kitsch value in his belongings. He lives entombed with his old things that he loves with a careful, clean distance. Seymour is a very sweet and lovable man -- if only he'd venture out to be loved. He tries, perhaps for the first time ever, by placing a personal ad; Enid both squelches his desire to ever put himself on the line again and becomes his closest confidant.

The relationship between Seymour and Enid is at the heart of the film as she begins down her road to self-discovery by making a mess out of his life. She convinces him to go out with the woman from the personal ad when she finally phones, and then is jealous of the time he spends with this other woman. From here the odd relationship the two have built becomes distorted, and what ensues deeply affects both of their lives.

It also affects Enid's relationship with Becky. While Becky is trying to set up a life of her own after high school -- moving into her first apartment, getting a job -- Enid is becoming like the pathetic people that amuse her by doing nothing more than delighting in the follies of others, ignoring her own path to adulthood and causing a rift between herself and Becky (and,

eventually, everyone else in Enid's world). The scenes between Johansson and Birch -- both wonderful -- take a disarmingly real look at what happens to friendships as they suffer growing pains. Thankfully, the tide of their friendship does not rest upon their relationships with boys, as is true of so many teen films. The realness of their friendship lies in its own self-centeredness.

Enid's path to adulthood is doubly stifled by the art class she is forced to take over the summer for having received a "D" in art in high school. Roberta (the always fantastic Illeana Douglas) is a woman firmly planted in the feminism of the '80s (a decade that does not appeal to Enid simply for her existence in it), and is revealed as ridiculous when she finds a student's "found art" project to be wonderful: a tampon in a tea cup. The feminist intentions are clear, although the student spells them out as if she were the first person to ever find a tea cup to be a symbol of traditional femininity, and Roberta salivates as if pondering a Picasso. Enid, of course a post-feminist, gets the joke. She delights in sexuality and short skirts and the unrestricted freedom of the third-wave, and refuses to fit into a black/white feminist mold. She's insightful and smart, just not yet introspective. However, we learn that Enid herself does not create anything; she merely assembles a world of collage that harkens back to a time with no emotional ties to her own life.

Enid is wonderful for all her human faults and teen angst. She is smarter than any girl Freddie Prinze Jr. has ever met in a movie, and yet she cannot figure out that her distaste for falseness has made her a rather false person. Enid briefly dies her hair bright bluish-green in an attempt to further her own sense of individuality. She defends it to naysayers as a harkening back to '70s punk, as opposed to '90s punk-redux. The irony that either is bathed in the same level of falseness is lost on Enid, who considers the original to be authentic and all subsequent throwbacks to be false. She cannot see herself as a throwback; rather, she is an unfortunate victim, born at the wrong time. Regardless, Enid immediately dyes her hair back to its usual black, showing that her individualism is only the stuff of anonymity. To go a step further draws too much attention to her own insecurities. The film's postmodern self-consciousness and flare for irony is much like Enid herself. It exists so surreptitiously as to not draw attention to itself. In this sense, the film is free of the usual distance that occurs in the self-aware film where the filmmakers seem to have no real connection to the characters. Enid is very clearly loved by her creators.

The thematic focus of *Ghost World* is carefully woven throughout the film. Zwigoff and team understand that postmodern irony is a permanent fixture in the life of a millennial teen -- so much so that it applies to anything or anyone other than him or herself. Enid's burgeoning individualism is amazingly unironic, while her fascination with certain things and people is *only* ironic until she learns a personal lesson about humanity through Seymour. The film itself is self-conscious enough to point out Enid's conundrum of being at once hyper-conscious of her surroundings and fairly unaware of her own self-consciousness; it is not, however, a victim of Tarantino-esque self-conscious distance that makes sympathy for the characters a tough proposition. Enid cannot see that the shortcomings she finds so fascinating in others are alive in herself; Zwigoff can, but he keeps her close so that she *does* not suffer the fate of total postmodern ironic distance. Because of this, the audience does see the film's greater ironies dealing with Enid's vision of herself, but it is not inclined to judge her for her confusion.

The film, *Ghost World*, is like its comic book alter ego come to life -- full of bright colors and awkward characters and the stark level of honesty more often found in smaller, inexpensive

media. While film often shies away from the awkward painfulness at the root of teen bizarreness, Zwigoff embraces the full level offered by the comic while employing a fuller, three-dimensional edge that is startlingly human. Enid is a mess, and watching her quietly make a train wreck out of her own life and the lives of others is both depressing and kind of funny, in that "watching the pathetic people" sort of way. Enid's fascination with human awkwardness isn't that unusual. She's just substituted it in place of making decisions for herself. And ultimately, Enid does just that. She's in a rut, a summer-long rut when her life falls apart and needs to be built again. But we shouldn't really worry about Enid. She'll be fine. She has a great imagination and a developing sense of self, which is more than one can say about the characters in most teen films where identity is wrapped up in the getting of the boy or girl of one's choice. So just guess how *Summer Catch* will end and skip it to see *Ghost World*, a film that celebrates loose ends, loneliness, confusion, identity crisis, missed chances, friendship and the weird kind of love only weird people get to share.

Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone

Dir: Chris Columbus, 2001

A review by Alice Mills, University of Ballarat, Australia

Few mainstream film adaptations from a book are aimed at an audience as well acquainted with the book as *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (renamed *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* for the USA market, as the book was). I can think of no other film adaptation for children whose target audience is so well versed in the minutiae of the book, so familiar with the twists of its plot, its dialogue and descriptions of characters, that they can pounce on any discrepancy. Such an educated audience can more usually be found complaining about the authenticity of costumes, settings and teeth condition in film adaptations from Jane Austen novels.

In general, the film of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* follows Rowling's novel closely. Rowling herself exercised strict authorial control over the film's making and demanded faithfulness to her novel, in particular requiring that the film version should in no way be Americanised. The book has a large amount of plot, and, even with some cuts, the film is some two and a half hours long -- although it is notable that none of the children at the sessions I attended seemed to find it over-long.

One significant cut concerns Norbert the dragon. He appears in only one episode in the film, when he hatches and sets fire to Hagrid's beard. In the book Norbert stays with Hagrid for some weeks, growing longer and less manageable, until Harry and his friends engineer his release into the Romanian wild. Leaving out these developments means the loss of opportunities for humour, suspense and the filmic wizardry of special effects. In compensation, scenes in the dining room and classroom of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry are enlivened by episodes in which a child character mismanages a spell and becomes blackened in an explosion. There is some slight basis for this in the novel, but none for the unfunny scene in which a child wizard tries to change water into rum. The potential for scariness, suspense and humour in the discarded dragon episodes, it seems to me, has been lost in favour of much more formulaic -- even silly -- jokes about the accident-prone child apprentice wizard.

Most of the film's cuts and additions can be found in the course of the climactic sequence of ordeals faced by Harry Potter and his friends, Hermione and Ron, as they attempt to protect the Philosopher's Stone from capture by a wicked adult wizard. Here one of the book's ordeals has been completely cut from the film. In the book, the children are faced with a riddle about seven bottles of potion, some lethal, some inert and some that can open the way forward and back. The novel's Hermione excels here, but the film's Hermione gets no chance to demonstrate her powers of logic. I would guess that the potion ordeal was excised from the film adaptation because it lacks the possibilities of exciting action, which are central to such ordeals as getting past the three-headed dog, surviving the attack of a killer plant, or catching a flying key while avoiding impalement by all its companions.

While Hermione's role is diminished, Harry Potter's triumph over the evil wizard at the end is much more fully experienced than in the book. In each of the four Harry Potter books to date, Harry becomes unconscious at the moment of confrontation with the arch-villain Voldermort, so that the exact means of his survival and triumph remain obscure, just like his means of survival as a baby when Voldermort killed his parents. It is clear, for instance, in book one how Harry overpowers Professor Quirrell, the wizard who carries Voldermort's head as part of his own body, but not how Harry survives Voldermort himself. In the film, however, (and thus with Rowling's approval) Harry remains conscious as Voldermort escapes from the destruction of his wizard host body, and he sees Voldermort gather himself into a plume of dust that then billows away -- an effect that reminded me of Sauron's final manifestation at the end of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*.

In the film, Professor Quirrell's human body turns to stone at Harry's touch, stone that then shatters into dusty fragments. This death by metamorphosis and structural collapse is quite different from Harry's effect on Professor Quirrell in the novel, where his touch causes intolerable burns and the wizard's body remains human as he dies. The film's special effects at this point reminded me of other fantasy films such as *The Mummy* (1999), as the wretched Professor Quirrell watches his hand shatter, and then his whole body disintegrate. Such special effects are no longer joltingly original for child viewers, and I noted no outcry of shock or horror from the eight to twelve year olds who made up much of the film audience at the sessions I attended. In changing the way in which Harry overpowers the adult wizard, the film version of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* exchanges realistic severe pain and physical damage for the fantasy horror of petrification. Possibly the change was made for just this reason -- to intensify the fantasy element of Harry's triumph, and to avoid inspiring any young would-be wizards in the audience with the idea of scalding and burning their way to magic prowess.

The change from burning to petrification can also be understood as a deliberate movement in the film towards a (literally and metaphorically) harder form of violence than the book presents. Another example is the change made in the film to the game of wizards' chess. As played by children for recreation in the book, wizards' chess involves pieces that are alive and receptive to spoken commands, and which even offer advice to the novice player. In the corresponding scene in the film, wizards' chess is a far more violent game, in which the pieces strike blows to knock each other over. One of the culminating ordeals faced by Harry and his friends is a game of wizards' chess with pieces at least as big as adult humans. In the book, the white queen knocks Ron unconscious when he takes the place of a black knight and sacrifices himself so that Harry can get through the game. In the film, the game is much more violent from the start. The pawns here look half-human, half-beetle, and are reminiscent of the beetle warriors of *Starship Troopers* (1997). The blades of these stone chess pieces strike hard enough to shatter their opponents' bodies and set them on fire. While Harry and Hermione take the place of black chess pieces for the game, as in the book, Ron rides his black knight rather than substituting for him. This enables him to survive the attack of the white queen, whose blow shatters his stone knight, while Ron himself is only injured by falling, not by her lethal blade. For the fantasy purist, the laws of Rowling's fantasy world have been broken. No reason is given why only Harry and Hermione should act *as* chess pieces while Ron acts *with* his chess piece; it is a means for the film to accommodate an episode of extreme violence that the child characters can all survive without serious hurt, with Ron being partly protected by the stone chess piece that he is riding.

If the violence here is much harder and more extreme in the film than in the book, the film is elsewhere both literally and metaphorically a softer version of the book version of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. The film's Professor Snape (played with his usual smooth menace by Alan Rickman) is as soft of facial feature as of voice, and Professor Dumbledore (Richard Harris) is a breathy-voiced, silky-haired marshmallow of a wizard, lacking the authority of the novel's Dumbledore as Headmaster of Hogwarts. Instead, authority and firmness seem to have been delegated to the fine-boned, sharp-voiced Professor McGonagall (Maggie Smith). Softness is evident, too, in both the facial features and the behaviour of the film's Harry Potter (Daniel Radcliffe), played as a fairly passive child offering few strong responses to the astonishing and alarming events of his twelfth year. Rupert Grint, playing his friend Ron, conveys far more uncertainty, wonder and courage. Harry's softness is not just a matter of a gently rounded face and a long-fringed mop of black hair, nor of his limited range of facial expressions, but amounts to feminisation. When he uses the cloak of invisibility, he is sometimes represented as invisible from the outside (as in the book's descriptions of him), as a disembodied head or hand, but he is also shown from within the cloak, with an extreme close up of his face through the cloak's almost transparent folds. As with the chess game, there is no consistency in Rowling's fantasy rules here, for Harry should be invisible whenever covered by the cloak, even in extreme close up. Seen through the cloak's folds, his face appears as that of a girl looking through a softly draped veil.

Equally, there is a metaphoric veil of softness and safety between Harry and most of the film's dangerous action. It is Ron who encounters the white queen at the risk of his life, while Harry and Hermione stand safely in their chess squares. It is Ron who nearly dies in the plant's coils, in another of the climactic ordeals, while Harry takes Hermione's advice and relaxes his way to freedom (another change from book to film version). In addition, when Harry performs his one "hard" action, petrifying Professor Quirrell, he acts unknowingly at first, and, according to Professor Dumbledore, it is Lily Potter's maternal love that turns the evil wizard to stone, not any power in Harry himself.

Draco Malfoy, Harry's sneering antagonist among the Hogwarts boys, is also softened physically from the novel's specification that he has a pointed face. Rather than being pointed, he is smooth and rounded of face with sleek blonde hair, and is set as an Aryan villain against black-haired Harry, red-haired Ron, brown-haired Hermione, a cast of dark-haired Caucasian Hogwarts children and one black child. Some critics of the book have deplored the restricted racial range of its magic-wielding characters, supposedly coming from all over contemporary Britain. The film's casting presumably reflects this concern, but hardly resolves it with the inclusion of a single, token black child.

The racially based ideological opposition suggested by Draco's colouring, that of blonde Aryan against dark-haired and black-skinned characters, is a tenable reading of the film; but undercutting this is the trope of hardness and softness. Draco is as soft-featured as Harry, and so too are the sinister Professor Snape, and the real traitor on the Hogwarts staff, Professor Quirrell. Even the threat posed by Fluffy, the three-headed dog, which guards the trapdoor that leads to the Philosopher's Stone, is soft and liquid. Lulled to sleep by music, he wakes as the children are about to jump into the trapdoor opening, and rushes threateningly at them, snapping his many teeth. However, the only physical contact that he makes with the children, once he is awake, is to salivate largely and viscously on Ron's shoulder, an act that the children find disgusting rather than terrifying. As a result of this, the white queen's power to kill in the subsequent wizards' chess game is far more threatening than the attack of the three-headed dog.

Instead, it is the adult females of the film's wizarding world who best exemplify hardness in its various aspects: the murderous white queen, the authoritative embodiment of justice that is Professor McGonagall, and Harry's dead mother whose love turns flesh to stone and then shatters it. Harry's aunt Petunia, in the Muggles world of those without magic capabilities, melts into indulgence towards her own son, but her behaviour towards Harry is as hurtful as her features are sharp. In contrast, the film's male characters are associated with softness -- the dog drools, and Dumbledore's eyes always twinkle benevolently. Even Harry's living quarters in the Dursley household, in the cupboard under the stairs, contain a plump, clean, comfortable white pillow. At the end of the film, Voldermort's face is sharp-featured, but those features are blurred into softness by the garment-like folds of Quirrell's skin.

Such effects suggest a different set of oppositions in the film from the obvious oppositions between the forces of good and evil, or between the Aryan and non-Aryan. The three most powerful women of the wizards' world are each closely associated with a man who is represented as much less powerful. Lily and James Potter, Harry's dead parents, are said to have been two of the best and strongest magic-wielders of their time, but in the film James' role is only to smile and wave at Harry, while the dead Lily's love is impregnated into her son's skin and destroys his opponent, Professor Quirrell. Equally, the deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts, Professor McGonagall, is associated with the Headmaster from the film's first scene, and it is she who seems to be the school's real power for discipline and order, while, in the chess game, the white queen moves and strikes while her consort stands and waits for his overthrow.

A psychological reading of this pattern (which is much more pronounced in the film than in the book) can be proposed in terms of Bowlby's theory of infant attachment and loss. Bowlby talks of the infant's complete dependence on mother (or mother substitute) for survival, food, warmth and comfort, and theorises that the child experiences the mother's absence or inattention as threatening death. In Bowlby's universe, the mother or mother-substitute is the all-important figure to the very young child, and the father is a background figure in comparison. Every child experiences at least a momentary sense of being abandoned by even the most loving and attentive mother, according to Bowlby, and so experiences her as terrifyingly powerful, and able to kill. The book version of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* has much more of the Dursleys in it, and can be understood as a study in child abuse, but the film concentrates less on these realist, abusive parental figures and more on the fantasy adult women who hold power of life and death, and of exclusion from the fantasy world, over the children. The psychological patterns that are being activated here, in Bowlby's model of the psyche, would thus be those of the infant helplessly dependent on an unpredictable, sometimes terrible, and potentially lethal mother.

Thus, power, in this film, lies in the hands of the mother-figure rather than the father-figure. There are two nurturing mothers, Mrs Weasley who helps Harry through the boundary to Hogwarts and knits him a Christmas present, and Hagrid the gamekeeper (splendidly played by Robbie Coltrane) whose eyes brim tears and who identifies himself as Mummy for the new-born dragon. These two alone provide the kind of nurturing that Bowlby says is essential for a child's psychological and physical well-being. Harry's pseudo-mother, his aunt Petunia, offers him food, clothing and shelter but no love; Harry's birth-mother, Lily, can kill through his hands but not touch her son; and the white queen, whom I read as Lily's double and opposite, strikes a murderous blow at a child.

The child's lack of love, the child's yearning for love, and the physical and psychological abuse of a child by a mother or mother-substitute, are seldom given such multiplied attention in a popular film for a child audience. As a result, even though *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* is promoted as a film about a small boy's overthrow of a powerful adult male, and the delights of his apprenticeship as a wizard, I believe that the audience's rapt attention may have been held not by these largely male concerns, but by the film's threatening representations of the power of the terrible mother over the vulnerable child.

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La Lengua de las Mariposas

Dir: José Luis Cuerda, 1998

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

It was comforting for a compulsive list-maker like myself to see *High Fidelity* (2000) a few weeks ago. The character played by John Cusack, a record shop owner and pop-rock music fanatic, draws lists of top songs according to the particular circumstances in his life. Today, when writing this review, two of José Luis Cuerda's films made it into my list of top ten Spanish films: *Amanece que no es poco* (1988, *To See The Dawn is Enough*) and *El bosque animado* (1987, *The Animated Forest*). Unusual, quirky characters populate these two films. The former recreates the life of a very peculiar manchego village where people grow like cauliflowers in allotments, where the teacher delivers his lessons to the rhythm of gospel, and where villagers are democratically elected to the public roles of priest and whore. An absurd comedy in which Cuerda creates his own Macondo or Calabuch, the film establishes a new genre defined by some critics as "surruralist". *The Animated Forest*, based on texts by the Galician writer Wenceslao Fernández Flórez, recreates a world where magic and everyday life overlap: the landscape in this film is recognisably Galician, and one senses the presence of literary influences such as magical realism and the symbolic association, within Galician literature, of landscape and identity.

Both of these films draw on the Spanish literary tradition of "esperpento"; characterised by black humour, absurdity, the grotesque, and a tragic sense of life meant to reflect Spain's deformed or backward situation with respect to Europe. While *La Lengua de las Mariposas* (*Butterfly's Tongue*) relies on neither surruralism nor esperpento, the use of both Galician and Spanish traditions in Cuerda's latest production poses a number of questions about cultural identity. *Butterfly's Tongue* weaves together three stories from the Galician writer Manuel Rivas' collection *Qué me Queres, Amor?* (*What Do you Want From me, Love?*, 1995), which won the National Narrative Award in 1996. José Luis Cuerda, in collaboration with the scriptwriter Rafael Azcona, has incorporated two other stories into the narrative of Rivas' original "A Lingua das Bolboretas" ("Butterfly's Tongue") -- "Carmiña", a tale of bestialism as read by Rivas, and "Un Saxo na Néboa", a story set in 1949 in A Coruña where a fifteen year old teenager, still learning to play the sax, joins the Blue Orchestra on their weekend tours to village festivals.

In his choice of a Rivas story, Cuerda returns to Galicia again, and, as in *The Animated Forest*, he is more interested in a certain aesthetics than in exploring socio-political issues pertaining to Galicia. There is no attempt to address the situation of Galicia at the time -- the most backward Spanish region. The potential politics of the film are only gestured: the motif of the spiral, a mythical and political symbol within Galician culture, as well as the name of Rosalía de Castro, a figure associated with Galician nationalism, are inscribed within the film but are never explicit.

These obvious references are lost within a certain image of Galicia as picturesque and romanticised on the one hand, and a Hispanicizing of the film on the other. The mode of adaptation, a political choice of sorts, distances itself from the question of language which the film's title, *La Lengua de Las Mariposas*, might be said to gesture towards.

The question of Portuguese-Galician and Spanish-Galician linguistic borders is passed over by Cuerda's depiction of a polarised Nationalist and Republican Spain. Set in Galicia in the months preceding Franco's fascist uprising in July 1936, the film traces the relationship between an eight year old boy, Moncho (Manuel Lozano), and his Republican teacher, Don Gregorio (Fernando Fernán-Gómez). Don Gregorio nourishes the hope that the Republican project, established in April 1931 with the overthrow of the Spanish monarchy, will allow the new generation to grow up in a free and tolerant Spain. Education was at the centre of the Republican programme as the fundamental means of modernising Spain politically, economically, socially and culturally, and the school was to be the ideological arm of the democratic revolution -- the transmission belt, carrying civic values to the furthest corner of rural Spain.

The film foregrounds some of the everyday aspects of Republican teaching formed under the Instituto Libre de Enseñanza -- a modern pedagogy and excursions to the countryside as part of the learning process -- and the way in which teachers were considered by the population. To the eyes of many, Moncho's father argues that "teachers don't earn what they should be earning. They are the lights of the Republic". However, the casting of Fernando Fernán-Gómez as a Republican teacher does not respond accurately to the teacher present in Rivas' story. There, the teacher is much younger, and the relationship between teacher and pupil is not as close as the one suggested in the film.

One reason for the overall "Hispanicizing" of the film may be its conformity to certain cinematic conventions, as Cuerda has clearly cast for a European audience with the conventions of European art cinema in mind. For instance, it seems that the role of Moncho's mother was going to be played by Carmen Maura, best known for her work with Pedro Almodóvar and, more recently, for her success in the French film industry, but this fell through. Associated with the Madrid comedy of the 1980s and labelled as "chica Almodóvar", her casting would have brought to the film a whole series of intertexts related to Almodóvar's cinema -- an image of an hyperliberated Spain, issues of gender and representation, and, mainly, the portrayal of complex women. Her casting would have also breached "a secret law". As Andrew Pulver asks, in a review of the film published in *The Guardian*, "is there a secret law that says that in order to achieve significant international distribution, a European film must point up a central relationship involving a cutie-pie kid and a wise older man?" (Pulver, 2000: 7). Here, Pulver clearly aligns *Butterfly's Tongue* with the Italian *Cinema Paradiso* (1988), the 1998 Roberto Benigni film *Life is Beautiful*, and the Czech *Kolya* (1996). It is true that the tender bond that develops between the little boy and the enlightened teacher in *Butterfly's Tongue* reminds us of the moving, wonderful performances in *Cinema Paradiso* and *Kolya*, but the film is also to be located, of course, in a tradition of film-making on the subject of the Spanish Civil War.

The Spanish Civil War, its pre- and its after-math, is one of the fundamental recurring themes in contemporary Spanish cinema; of the nearly 300 historical films produced in Spain since the 1970s, more than half are set during the Second Republic (1931-1936), the Civil War (1936-1939), and the dictatorship of Franco (1939-1975). This tradition has been termed "Cainismo", and Cuerda references the Cain myth explicitly in *Butterfly's Tongue*, when a

pupil reads a poem by Antonio Machado. A Galician or a Spanish audience might recognise the ambiguity of the reference to Machado, whose literary persona has been appropriated by both Nationalists and Republicans.

Fernando Fernán-Gómez (Don Gregorio) had already appeared as a Republican in Fernando Trueba's Oscar-winning *Belle Epoque* (1993). This film portrays the euphoric months of freedom and utopianism leading up to the Republic of 1931 -- a joyous celebration for an imaginary Republic of personal and sexual freedom in a Republican Spain that never was, but might have been. *Belle Epoque* has been critiqued for its sentimentalism, a charge which *Butterfly's Tongue* has not escaped. Indeed, it could be argued that any explicit political reference in Cuerda's film is lost to a nostalgic and idyllic representation of the past. However, one could say that the film's sentimentalising strain is powerfully, if only partially, redeemed in the closing scenes, where Cuerda captures the cruelty and hatred about to explode in the peninsula. Moreover, a contemporary European viewer might be reminded of the ethnic and fratricidal conflicts in Africa, Asia or Europe presented, and still present, in our daily news during the 1990s. Here resides one of the virtues of Cuerda's filmic adaptation, since the reception of the film -- whether in Galicia, the rest of the peninsula or other European countries -- opens up different readings.

However, the review must return to the demands of my list. The film's lack of engagement with Galician and Spanish historical reality, its polarised, oversimplified vision of the Spanish civil war conflict, its simplistic references to writers and its pleasing aesthetics places *Butterfly's Tongue* with other films by Cuerda that have not made my list. To name but a few, *Pares y nones* (*Odds and Evens*, 1982), *La Viuda del Capitán Estrada* (*Captain Estrada's Widow*, 1991) and *Tocando Fondo* (*Touching Bottom*, 1993) are other films that do not display the complexities of Cuerda's more masterful work.

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Mulholland Drive

Dir: David Lynch, 2001

A review by Valerie Holliday, Louisiana State University, USA

Mulholland Drive is in many ways classic Lynch. Like Lynch's *Twin Peaks* (1990), the viewer is left with the feeling that gaps in the plot somehow *mean something*, but is just not sure what. I found myself searching for reviews of *Mulholland Drive* online in order to get some kind of anchoring point for my own response to the film. Indeed, the feeling is, in the reviews I read, unanimous: what the hell is going on in this film? Reviewers seem to agree, myself included, that Lynch is making an acidic comment about Hollywood. For me, though, the film functions at other levels as well.

The film is divided into two distinct parts, and the division seems to map somewhere on the scene in the bizarre Silencio Theater. Rita asks Betty to go to this theater at 2:00 in the morning. When they get there, the host walks out on to the stage and announces, "No hay banda! No hay orchesta! It is all a tape." The Silencio show is meant to illustrate that all performances are fake -- nothing is "real". After the Silencio Theater scene, the film slips into a dizzying dream-like sequence that continues all the way to the end. Betty Elms is no longer Betty Elms -- she is in fact Diane Selwyn. Rita is not Rita -- she is Camilla Rhodes. These shifts in identities make reading the first half of the film a near impossible task. The narrative sense of the first half is completely and intentionally undone in the second half. It is impossible to determine definitively whether the first half is dream and the second reality or the reverse, and whether there is any temporal relation at all between the two parts. This indeterminacy is fully part of the film's agendum -- clearly, the world of performance and the world which sells performance is in the business of trickery at all levels of its discourse.

It is not so much the indeterminacy of the film that I want to interrogate as much as the way female friendships and lesbian desire bring on that indeterminacy. Indeed, I was quite surprised by the lesbian sex scene -- not so much that it is included, but that it is not violent or repulsive. In fact, I found the scene quite tender and erotic, and not just for men (recall Mulvey's gaze). As another critic noted, it is one of the few scenes, if not the only one, in the Lynch oeuvre where sexuality is not violent, repulsive, or disturbed (Kenny, 2001).

The lovemaking scene immediately precedes the Silencio Theater scene, and marks the first overt indication that there is an attraction between Betty and Rita. Immediately after the lovemaking, Rita lies awake in bed repeating the word "Silencio," over and over; then she asks Betty to go somewhere, the theater, with her. I take from this moment that something about sleeping with Betty brings to mind another memory for Rita, this time the memory of the theater. The lesbian lovemaking precipitates the trip to the Silencio Theater. From there the film slips into its dream-like segments where identities and temporality slip, perhaps irrevocably.

The lesbian sex scene precipitates, in fact propels the story to, the final dizzying indeterminacy of the film. Is Betty really Betty, or is she Diane? Was Betty a dream, or is Diane a dream? Is the second half of the film a flashback, or not? Is Rita Camilla Rhodes, or is Camilla Rhodes the actress in the photograph presented in the studio executives' meeting? Or are the stable subjectivities the actresses, Naomi Watts and Laura Harring? The answers to these questions matter less than the fact that the film intentionally raises them, almost playfully. The film may not be so conscious, though, of the implication of linking lesbianism to double and disseminated identities. Once the two women sleep together silence is invoked (both by Rita and by the name of the theater), then identities refract. Lynch intentionally frames the film as a disorienting foray into Hollywood culture. I have to wonder, though, if he means to associate this disorientation with the very provocative and empathetic portrayal of a lesbian affair.

I'm suspicious of Lynch because his past work, most notably *Twin Peaks* (both the series and the film) and *Blue Velvet* (1986), are so virulently misogynist. The whole television series of *Twin Peaks* is predicated on the investigation of a murdered, and thus silent, woman, Laura Palmer. Laura Palmer is never once seen as a living person, and yet the entire series is centered on her violent murder. Images of violence against women are plentiful in Lynch's oeuvre, but I hesitate to accuse him of homophobia, or of taking a heteronormative view of lesbianism in *Mulholland Drive*. I have several reasons for this hesitation.

First, quite simply, there are no images of women violated at the hands of men in *Mulholland Drive*. The central disturbing image is of the woman who has been dead for some time in Diane Selwyn's apartment. It is a provocative image, but the film doesn't linger on it. Moreover, if it is, in fact, Diane Selwyn dead on the bed, we discover later that Diane Selwyn has shot herself in the head, and has not, in fact, suffered a violent death by murder.

However, Lynch's move to disseminate the narrative makes it untenable to conclude that the woman on the bed is, in fact, Diane Selwyn. For one thing, the actress who plays Diane, Naomi Watts, also plays Betty Elms, and it is unclear if she is playing the same person or two entirely different people. Betty and Rita find the dead body together. So, it's unclear if Betty is finding her dead double, or if the dead woman is, in fact, someone else altogether. Moreover, at the time Betty and Rita discover the body, they are under the impression that this apartment may actually be Rita's, and thus that Rita may actually be Diane Selwyn. So, when they walk in and see the body, it feels for an instant as though they are looking at Rita's dead double.

And yet, Lynch presents a masturbation scene that includes a pure point of view shot. Diane Selwyn masturbates on her sofa while crying desperately over Camilla Rhodes' jilting. Lynch cuts from a frontal close-up shot of Diane to a blurred view of the stone fireplace at which Diane is looking. The camera goes to black as she is blinking teary-eyed, and the image is what Diane sees as she cries, blinks, and comes. It is a bland but packed image. The viewer is placed in Diane's point of view. Considering Mulvey's critique of the gaze, this shot is quite interesting.

But I must refract again, in much the same way that, and because Lynch refracts the narrative. In the dream-like second half of the film, the cowboy is seen opening the door to Diane Selwyn's apartment and speaking to her as she lies, quite alive, on the bed. Then, he opens the door again (or closes it?) and she is dead. There is nothing to prevent one from suggesting that the cowboy has something to do with her death, even though the way she dies

is not, strictly speaking, represented. Because Lynch refracts the narrative, it is not conclusive that the Diane Selwyn who shoots herself while in her bed is the same woman who is dead for over a week on the bed in Selwyn's apartment. The viewer must make a conspicuous narrative connection between the dead body in Selwyn's apartment and Diane Selwyn shooting herself in order to arrive at the conclusion that they are the same person. The film does not give this connection easily -- in fact, not at all.

So, given these refractions, what can I conclude about *Mulholland Drive*? It is the refraction precisely where I must begin and end. The film is a refracted view of the Hollywood entertainment industry. But it is also a refraction of narrative that is intended to displace our expectations. The displacement of the two leading characters' identities ends the love story of Betty and Rita without ending it. If we take the Lacanian perspective on this "ending", perhaps this is not such a bad thing. If the drive toward pleasure is also a drive toward death or the ending, then there is a sense in which Betty's and Rita's pleasure explodes the possibility of death. Their pleasure is what it is, and it need not confront its own impossibility or its ending. Lynch evades confronting the end by disrupting temporality. With this reading in mind, I cannot dismiss Lynch's film as a silly, plot-twisting, mind-bending romp, but a comment on the possibility of homoerotic love. His inclination to defy narrative, to defy the story, lends itself to a radical reading. A radical reading of *Mulholland Drive* demands that we suspend our expectations of Lynch.

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The Score

Dir: Frank Oz, 2001

A review by Brent Andrew Bowles, James Madison University, USA

Frank Oz, previously known for directing such bright and caustic comedies as *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* (1988) and, most recently, *Bowfinger* (1999), takes his first stab at helming a thriller with *The Score*, a heist drama starring Robert DeNiro, Marlon Brando, Edward Norton, and Angela Bassett. Oz stocks this film with such an extraordinary cast, perhaps because of his own insecurities about directing a suspense piece, and with a group of such acclaimed performers, deficiencies in the film's technical adeptness might be overlooked by both critics and audiences. Although Oz may have indeed intended these actors' presences as the proverbial "Get Out of Jail Free" card, their presence actually serves to accentuate, rather than deflect, Oz's sedate yet not unaccomplished direction.

DeNiro delivers a winsome and fetching performance as Nick, an accomplished professional robber itching to leave behind his thievery and live out his days as the owner of a classy Canadian jazz club. Oz, in fact, spends so many lovingly slow camera shots on showcasing the performers at Nick's club, that it's hard for the audience not to sympathize with Nick's desire to spend nights lounging here rather than cracking safes. Like many an antihero before him, Nick finds himself pulled back into the "business" again, thanks to, firstly, a slick youngster (Edward Norton) planning to lift a bejeweled scepter from the Montreal customs house, and, secondly, his fey sponsor and Nick's longtime partner (Marlon Brando, who spends most of his slight screen time hulking around in an amateur-night impression of Truman Capote in *Murder By Death* [1976]).

As is part and parcel with this genre, the first act of *The Score* follows Nick's rejection but eventual acceptance of Norton's naïve yet ingenious plan; with act two then depicting the heist itself, and the eventual, none-too-surprising, double cross rounding out this two-hour picture. Not even the last-reel betrayal is a shocker to anyone with at least half of their attention tuned to *The Score*, but it's that exact ignorance of innovation that makes this movie so delightfully old-fashioned. Ingenuity often gets in the way with a first-time director, but Oz has been directing for nearly twenty years (not to mention demonstrating a great deal of whimsical creativity as one of Jim Henson's pioneering "Muppeteers"). This kind of movie, however, is so far a-field of anything he's yet attempted that it is certainly not unfair to expect him to throw in everything save the kitchen sink, for the sake of proving he's technically skilled enough to create genuine suspense.

Oz surprises, though, by letting panache carry the film rather than flare. Rather than swaggering through even the sequences that meticulously document the technical details of Nick's profession, DeNiro strolls -- speaking lines as if he's improvising, tossing quips which nip rather than sting, and winning the game in a manner that is solemn rather than boastful. After his crisp self-parody in *Analyze This* (1999) and *Meet the Parents* (2000), and his cartoony garishness as Fearless Leader in *The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle* (2000),

DeNiro's appearance in John Herzfeld's trashy *15 Minutes* (2001) seemed a lazy decent into the stereotypical "DeNiro role" (as seen in such recent movies as *Men of Honor* [2000] and *Ronin* [1998]), rather than the kind of maturing rejection that his efforts at self-aggrandizing comedic acting had suggested. At first, *The Score* presents DeNiro with just such a sluggishly banal role: a wizened old pro forced against his will to work with a cocky young partner, but eventually coming to respect the energy of youth and detect the antiquity of his own perceptions. DeNiro responds, however, by playing it with slothful expertise.

Even Norton, an incredibly talented young actor with a great deal of energy in front of the camera (and behind it as well, as he ably demonstrated in his satisfying directorial debut, the romantic comedy *Keeping the Faith* [2000]), keeps the showy cockiness of his character calmly in check; playing off DeNiro rather than against him. Indeed, not even when he's outwitted by Nick does Norton demonstrate the kind of hyperintensive brazenness he brandished so successfully in *American History X* (1998).

In contrast, the dramatic fireworks between DeNiro and Norton makes Brando's presence all the more distracting. Moments shared by, arguably, the three greatest actors of three different generations of the craft should crackle with the electricity of DeNiro's and Al Pacino's diner chat in *Heat* (1995); but, instead, they fizzle with the forced laughs of a bad Mel Brooks movie, with the exchanges between DeNiro and Brando, notably, being about the only pretentious moments in this movie. When the time arrives for Brando's character to become tragic rather than wily, the reported on-set strife between Brando and Oz seems none too farfetched; and what Oz clearly intends as solemnity verges on the eccentric. In sum, Brando insists on playing the portentousness of his character to comic proportions anathema to the tone of the film.

The Score is a success based mostly upon Oz's take on the story. Plot does not command this thriller; and, although it is impossible to tell if this *laissez-faire* approach derives from personal insecurities or cinematic perceptiveness, Oz's direction keeps this film comfortably old-fashioned. The final forty minutes, which illustrate the climactic heist at the Customs House, are Oz's most obvious opportunity to announce his ability to crank up suspense rather than laughs. Instead of being pretentious and showy (as so many of these music-video-reared first-time directors are prone to do), Oz is as mature and sedate as DeNiro's performance. The music score, by sorely underappreciated composer Howard Shore, consists primarily of performances by a jazz combo; and even the action sequences, sprightly orchestrated with hand-held camera and claustrophobic production design, rate low-key suspense music instead of bombast.

The Score is a solid thriller; it makes no effort to deviate from the traditions of the genre, nor does it feel the need to offer up the sort of digital eye candy with which moviegoers tend to be bombarded during the summer movie season. It would certainly be easy to dismiss the picture's general unoriginality as a mark of both threadbare screenwriting and a nervous director. But, in fact, *The Score* wears its plainness so proudly that one cannot help but see it for exactly what it is -- a reminder that genre *can* sometimes play second string to acting. For most commercial movie releases, particularly during the summer movie season, studios are looking to fulfil not the moviegoer's desire to see a certain performer, but rather the desire for "an action movie," "a comedy," or a "special-effects-filled science-fiction adventure!!" Even the briefest glance at print or television advertisements demonstrates that studios and producers are more concerned with straitjacketing a movie in a particular easy-to-digest nugget, rather than receive the financially deadly label of "art film" or "character study."

The Score is a proudly unvarnished movie that never champions itself as an innovative entry into the genre of the heist thriller. Rather than spending tens of millions of dollars on updating a genre with high-end visual effects, and the visual enthusiasm of a twentysomething ex-music-video director, *The Score* lets the actors be the rejuvenating special effects.

Earlier in the summer of 2001, Sony released writer-director Brian Helgeland's *A Knight's Tale*, putting a "new spin" on the medieval adventure stories of old by having its characters speak with contemporary colloquialisms, while heavy-metal rock music is both blared in the background and occasionally sung on-screen. However, in contrast, Oz never seems to feel the need to find a visual accoutrement, in order to make his entry into the heist thriller genre something audiences have yet to see. Instead, he lets the actor's inject an unforeseen element into their performance -- diverting the audience's attention away from the physical trappings of the genre, and surprising them with unusual and unexpected character arcs.

In a cinematic market that seems more intent on recycling the precise successes of a particular genre in order to secure a firm financial return, *The Score* perfectly fits the mold. It rigidly follows the plot devices inherent to a heist film, presents an archetypal antihero, gives him a thankless romantic subplot and a hostile relationship with a young challenger, drops the obligatory twist into the final reel, and eventually brings him out on top. In his direction of this feature, however, Oz reminds the viewer that, with attention to the right details, even the most pedantic genre piece can still be successful entertainment. Oz turns his attentions to the actors, letting them invest in cardboard characters with the kind of improvisatory tics that only great performers like DeNiro and Norton can offer, and refusing to let visual trickery outshine their work. In sum, *The Score* works on nearly every level because of its steadfast, and unfashionable, refusal to do anything out of the ordinary.

Shadow of the Vampire

Dir: E. Elias Merhige, 2000

A review by James M. Skidmore, Waterloo University, Canada

It is hard to know what to make of E. Elias Merhige's *Shadow of the Vampire*. At times visually intense, yet with a story that is at best stale and at worst illogical, this film ultimately fails to achieve the higher purpose to which it aspires, succeeding to hold our attention only thanks to Willem Dafoe's eerie impersonation of Max Schreck.

The idea of the film is novel enough. It is the early 1920s, and Friedrich Murnau (John Malkovich) is filming *Nosferatu*, his version of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. He has hired an unknown actor, Max Schreck (Willem Dafoe), to play the fang-toothed villain, and the entire film crew travels to Czechoslovakia to meet with Schreck, who has gone ahead in order to soak up the local flavour, as it were. Murnau warns his crew that Schreck is to be addressed only as Count Orlock; as his leading actor plans to stay "in character" for the entire shoot. The crew's stay in Czechoslovakia is marred by trepidation and mishap and, before you can say "I vant to drink your blood," the viewer realizes that Max Schreck *is* Nosferatu.

Malkovich's Murnau is a drug-loving genius who has the foresight to take filmmaking out of the studio and onto location. Schreck is his greatest realist coup: a vampire playing the part of an actor playing the part of a vampire. In order to get Schreck to agree to the deal, Murnau has promised his star two things: everlasting life, and Greta, the film-within-a-film's heroine. It is never explained how Murnau is going to come up with the former (aren't vampires the living dead and therefore eternal?) The latter is of course evident: in the final scene on Helgoland, the count approaches the heroine's bed, and Greta, a star who prefers theatre because the audience gives her life whereas the film camera "merely takes it away," notices that Schreck casts no reflection in the mirror. Murnau sedates her with a large shot of heroin, and the scene can be filmed.

Shadow of the Vampire ends with a twist that is best left unmentioned, in case the reader is still hoping for some suspense, but don't get your hopes up: it's not that difficult to figure what's going to transpire. The film has some witty and insightful moments, yet they only serve to demonstrate that the director is not really sure what type of film he is trying to create. Generally speaking, there are three types of horror films: "high-art horror films," such as Murnau's *Nosferatu*, (1922) take themselves seriously as works of cinema; "low-art horror films," the slasher flicks, which tend to appeal to raging teenagers, and which forsake originality or depth for spine-tingling suspense, blood-curdling gore, and/or gratuitous violence; and "horror comedies" that parody the genre and poke fun at our society or our own gullibility (the original *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* [1992] is one of the best examples of these). *Shadow of the Vampire* has elements of all three. The best bits are the soberly delivered comedic lines that ridicule filmmaking. At one point Murnau tells Schreck that he may not consume the entire film crew, as it is not part of their bargain; but Schreck is still famished, and has his eyes on another victim, warning that: "I don't think we need a writer any longer."

In response, Murnau makes a comment which could have come straight from *The Player* (1992), telling Shreck that: "I don't expect you to understand this, and I am loathe to admit it myself, but the writer is necessary. All my crew is necessary."

However, despite such rich moments, there are times when you don't know whether or not you should laugh at certain scenes. After Schreck has sated himself on Greta's neck, he falls asleep, and we see him snoring softly, his head resting on Greta's bosom. Is this horror? Comedy? Misplaced directorial intention?

The horror of the film also falls short of being truly horrific. This is partly due to the film's predecessor. Anyone who has seen the original *Nosferatu* will not be surprised or appalled by Schreck's first appearances, for they imitate, in a clever fashion, the original film. Moreover, Dafoe's Schreck is a marvel to behold. He is a vampire conflicted with desires, and not at the top of his powers. When faced with a difficult decision, his fingers begin to fidget, which causes his atrociously long fingernails to chatter. If he dislikes something that Murnau says, he snorts in such a fashion to intimate that he has fangs, but without showing them, much the way one would imagine a wolf would before grabbing at a fallen carcass. Watching Dafoe, you begin to believe that Schreck is a vampire.

But the story is really about Murnau, or at least tries to be. The director wants to make the most realistic art possible. As he puts it early on in the film: "Our battle is to create art, our weapon is the moving picture. Because we have the moving picture our paintings will grow and recede, our poetry will be shadows that lengthen and conceal, our light will play across living faces that laugh and agonize, our music will linger and finally overwhelm because it will have a context as certain as the grave. We are scientists engaged in the creation of memory. But our memory will neither blur nor fade." This is all well and good, as far as it goes, but how far does it really go? Murnau is played in Malkovich's usual style of precise diction and precious speech patterns; as he portrays the manic realist who will let nothing, and certainly not morality or an ageing vampire, get in the way of creating the ultimate in realist film (what we would today call a snuff film, if truth be told). At the end, though, when Murnau starts ranting about the "blasphemer monkey vase of pre-history," well, you just have to wonder what the point of the whole exercise is.

Despite Murnau's centrality to the film, he actually seems to be curiously absent from the plot (at least as far as moving the plot forward is concerned). How can this be when he is, in most scenes, the man who hired Schreck, and is the director of the film-within-a-film? The main problem lies in the film's murky portrayal of Murnau's goal in making films, and of the film's avoidance of the question of why is he seemingly so captivated by the possibility of celluloid. Other than his speech at the beginning, and his babbling at the end, the question of whether film can improve reality, or supersede memory, rarely surfaces. Murnau is essentially a flat character who directs his actors, delivers blood to Schreck and then gets angry with him, or shoots up heroin. As a result, we do not have any reason to care about his quest because we know so little about it (and what we do know -- such as the rant about the "monkey vase of pre-history" -- is nonsense, albeit intriguing nonsense). We know that he is supposed to be a scientist "engaged in the creation of memory" (he wears a white lab coat, after all), but we don't really learn what this is supposed to mean, and neither can we be expected to tease it out of a film that fails to offer clues or visual thematic pointers. Somewhere along the line -- perhaps during the writing or editing -- this higher thematic purpose was lost, and a shell of a film remains.

The film's failure to hold a thematic focus that makes sense causes the other minor irritations to chafe even more. The island "Helgoland" is misspelt, and a variety of German accents, none of them convincing, are used by various players. One person calls Murnau Friedrich, while another calls him Frederich, and the viewer finds himself wishing that a dialect coach had been hired. The writer on the shoot (Aden Gillett) is filled with horror at the thought of what Schreck might be, and in one scene seeks to prove that he is a vampire by finding his coffin. In the next scene, however, Schreck is on a hotel landing, trying to break into a crew member's room to replenish his supply of blood, when the writer happens upon him, and displays not a trace of fear, horror, or emotion. As a result, this scene simply does not make sense, and such disconnected motivation appears in many scenes, thereby diminishing any hope that the film might have something of interest to say about the relationship between cinema and reality. Given the lack of motivation for the actions of the central characters, however, it is perhaps unjust to demand the same of supporting roles.

Shadow of the Vampire could have been a film dealing with the question of realism in film, but its own confusion about what kind of film it is prevents this from happening. The film wants to be much more than a horror film and ends up being even less than that.

The Sorrow and the Pity

Dir: Marcel Ophüls, 1971

A review by Anna Norris, Michigan State University, USA

The Sorrow and the Pity (re-released on videocassette and DVD in 2001) is a four and a half hour documentary, which tackles the still controversial topic of French collaboration and the Resistance during the Occupation of France by the Germans during World War II. The film is subtitled *Chronicle of a French Town under the Occupation* and divided into two parts, *The Collapse* and *The Choice*. Clermont-Ferrand is the occupied town featured in the chronicle, and is representative of many French towns, with its share of Marshall Pétain supporters and Resistance fighters. Indeed, it is a crucial place for the French Resistance and its underground network "Auvergne".

The film had originally been commissioned by French Television, the now defunct ORTF, during the presidency of the Gaullist Georges Pompidou. When Ophüls presented his finished product, the ORTF refused to air it. Those responsible obviously felt that 1971 France was not ready to face its painful past and Ophüls himself commented that it suffered from "a particularly crafty form of censorship, censorship by inertia." The film opened in a tiny Left Bank movie theater, and, subsequently, a few other art cinemas screened the film, but overall, it was very poorly distributed in France. However, audiences were able to see it, as it made its way through the "unofficial" network of French universities and avant-garde cinemas, and it was very well received by these audiences. Needless to say *The Sorrow and the Pity* has become a cult film, probably benefiting from its status of a banned film. It was finally aired on French television in 1981, during the first presidency of the socialist François Mitterrand, and, on an international level, the film received an Oscar nomination for Best Documentary and has a recurring homage in Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* (1977).

The documentary, conducted by Ophüls and co-producer André Harris, is a montage of contemporary testimonies of eye witnesses to the Occupation: French, German and British; resisters, collaborators; aristocrats, bourgeois, farmers, ordinary people; politicians, communists, socialists and conservatives. The interviews are not presented in separate segments; but are interspersed with archival footage and film clips from the Occupation period, encompassing French propaganda along with Nazi propaganda. The film is a masterpiece, at times very funny, in spite of its serious subject matter. What makes this documentary particularly exciting is the choice of those interviewed, the uncompromising and direct questions asked by Harris and Ophüls, and the crafty montage and intelligent editing operated by Ophüls and his editor Claude Vajda. Ophüls's biases and partiality have been noted by French historian Henry Rousso, but they are exactly what makes the film exciting. Ophüls knows where he wants the interviews to go, and often probes the witnesses: expecting precise answers to precise questions. If he finds the answers too vague or elusive, he makes his questions more specific or adds personal statements which always elicit precise responses. The topics discussed are then completed by newsreels, photos, and popular films and songs of the period.

The film opens with two scenes which precede the credits: a wedding in a small German town and comments around a dining room table made by pharmacist Marcel Verdier, about his belonging to the "Résistance" movement. As the film unfolds, Verdier and Helmut Tausend, father of the German bride, become some of the central characters. Tausend, now a businessman, talks about his experience as a former Wehrmacht captain when stationed in Clermont-Ferrand. He describes the German soldiers as behaving very appropriately, claiming that the Clermont people came to understand that they were not "the wicked enemy" and goes as far as saying that the French became reassured by the German presence. In response to these comments, we get a very different point of view from resisters Verdier, Alexis and Louis Grave, all former members of the Auvergne maquis.

All those interviewed are seen in their natural environments: around a dining room table, in a living room, in the fields, in a wine cellar, in an office (politicians), and in the castle of Sigmaringen (collaborator and right-wing volunteer in the Waffen SS). The use of personal contexts by Ophüls, as opposed to a studio environment, personalizes the witnesses who look completely at ease even when asked challenging questions, and makes the interviews more interesting for the viewer.

All questions and themes discussed are presented with opposite points of view, which creates a sense of impartiality, although the use of archival footage often concurs or differs from the given responses. For instance, after Tausend tells us that the German soldiers were not perceived as enemies and that in a way, their presence was welcome, we hear Verdier explain the reasons for his engagement in the Resistance, and the hardships endured during the German occupation (such as lack of food and restrictions). Finally, we see footage of closed markets. When the Count René de Chambrun, former son-in-law of vice Prime Minister Pierre Laval, attempts to prove Laval's innocence in the deportation of Jewish children, Holocaust survivor and researcher Claude Lévy testifies, and proves that the Germans did not request the deportation of Jewish children but that Laval volunteered to organize it.

The Sorrow and the Pity shatters several myths, in particular France's self image as an undivided nation of resisters, a myth still alive and well in 1971 and hardly contested. Although the destruction of this myth was probably the film's most disturbing factor to the French establishment and the French population, the portrait of collaborators that emerges challenges our received idea of them. Ophüls opposes the still pervasive image of the "evil" collaborator often portrayed in French fiction cinema. Without being sympathetic to these collaborationists, we begin to get a sense of the forces which contributed to their political and ideological choice: upbringing, media manipulation, latent anti-Semitism and Anglophobia.

An important question that *The Sorrow and the Pity* addresses and tries to comprehend is the motivation behind collaboration, and what led individuals to become active collaborators. Like some active collaborators, Christian de la Mazière now understands that he was raised in a right-wing family where anti-Semitism was prominent and where the German army inspired great respect from his family. Others, such as Madame Solange -- a former hairstylist accused and convicted of collaboration who was tortured and imprisoned after the war -- continue to consider Marshal Pétain a hero, and Solange never questions her blind trust in him and his political actions.

Another central question that the film poses concerns anti-Semitism and the application of anti-Semitic laws by the Vichy government. Former "Président du Conseil", Pierre Mendès-France, himself imprisoned unlawfully during the war, explains the climate of anti-Semitism

and Anglophobia before the war, and that France has a history of anti-Semitism which is often quick to resurface, given the use of media manipulation and propaganda. This important comment is followed by the inclusion of scenes from the anti-Semitic and racist film, *Jew Süss* (1940) (dubbed and presented to the French audience as a French film during the Occupation), and the shocking newsreels of an anti-Semitic Parisian exhibition on Jews which teaches the French how to recognize Jews, "crossbred from Mongols, Negroes, and Aryans".

The question of social class is also an important theme in the film: and it is true that there is a much more sympathetic portrayal of working class people here, than of the bourgeois and aristocrats. Indeed, it is noteworthy that the French working class have not often been portrayed in films on the Resistance movement, which usually focused on the work done by the social elite of the French population. For the former head of the Resistance movement, Emmanuel d'Astier de la Vigerie, Resistance was the only experience he ever had of a classless society, but the film, in a way, pays homage to the numerous farmers who were part of the Resistance movement, and to the working class people who took risks -- those "silent resisters" who were never honored for their courageous actions. As Denis Rake, a British secret agent who parachuted in Occupied France, points out, French workers "would give you their last cent if you didn't have money... The bourgeois didn't help much; they had much more to lose". The Grave brothers are, without doubt, the most endearing characters interviewed. These two farmers, Resistance fighters, who sip wine with Ophüls in their cellar, were sent to the Buchenwald camp on a letter of denunciation from a neighbor, and shrug their shoulders at the idea of revenge.

The film not only serves as a documentary of the past; it also wants to serve as a warning about the future. Colonel Gaspar, former head of the Auvergne maquis, states that fascism and neo-Nazism are on the rise, and that he agreed to appear in the film to warn against such evils. Pierre Mendès-France reiterates this opinion, and stresses the importance of educating young people about the dangers of fascism, stating that: "when certain tendencies and demagogy are nourished, they revive". In addition, a most interesting statement, given by Sir Anthony Eden, concludes the film, as he argues that: "If you have not experienced the horrors of the Occupation, you cannot judge".

Marcel Ophüls's other documentaries, *The Memory of Justice* (1976) and *Hotel Terminus* (1987), Alain Resnais' s *Night and Fog* (1955), and Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985) have incontestably given French cinema, and world cinema, some of the most important films on this subject, which can help us begin to comprehend this historical period and the Holocaust. *The Sorrow and the Pity* is a powerful and courageous film which unveils the political and social complexities of this period, and, with this in mind, one can say without doubt that documentaries, as opposed to fiction films, have shown the most courage at exploring the question of responsibility.

Swordfish

Dir: Dominic Sena, 2001

A review by David Turner, University of Kent, UK

An accurate, although ineffective, marketing pitch for *Swordfish* can be made in four words -- Joel Silver, Dominic Sena. The pitch is accurate and ineffective for the same reason: the collaboration has resulted in an offspring with remarkably predictable failings.

It is the producer, Joel Silver, who is the more compelling half of the pitch, having already produced two action films that have become franchises: *Lethal Weapon* (1987) and *Die Hard* (1988), with a third, *The Matrix* (1999), already on its way to franchise status. In contrast, the director, Dominic Sena, is probably best known for that commercial and critical failure, *Gone in Sixty Seconds* (2000); with the problems of that film having somewhat undermined the reputation he created with the competent, if uninspired, *Kalifornia* (1993).

Unpacking the pitch further is a simple process. The film has the big budget and big explosions of a *Lethal Weapon* or *Die Hard* film, without the comparatively precise narrative of either. While such films often appear to be based on the notion that thrilling and exciting cinema is a product of densely compiled excessive events rather than effective storytelling, *Swordfish* seems designed to test the notion, so heavily is it relied upon.

To put it another way, everything in the film is intended to give the greatest sensory impact possible: from the frenetic soundtrack (provided by "superstar" trance DJ Paul Oakenfold), to the chases, shootouts and women (Halle Berry reportedly earning five hundred thousand dollars for her first topless scene), not to mention a thirty-second long explosion. This deliberate excess helps render the plot -- involving Stanley Jobson's attempts to commit massive computer fraud on behalf of Gabriel Shear (John Travolta) -- a peripheral concern. Characterisation is typically gratuitous; the motivation for Jobson's criminal endeavours is not greed, but the need for huge sums of money in order to win custody of his daughter from his decadent and rich ex-wife.

The fact that Jobson (X-Man Hugh Jackman) faces a hefty jail term if he's caught even operating a computer again, yet decides to commit computer fraud on a stranger's behalf for a fraction of the total proceeds, makes the plot somewhat implausible. However, this implausibility is almost irrelevant -- the film's narrative is not well enough realised for its vague intention to be plausible to feel remotely sincere.

If *Swordfish* is indeed based on the notion that excess rather than exposition is the pathway to exciting cinema, it is necessary to question the validity of the notion in order to assess the film. At first glance the notion seems plausible. After all, the purpose of an action movie is presumably to provide action rather than insight, which is why the form has a long history of discarding elements prized by other, and past, forms of Hollywood filmmaking. The crucial matter here is to determine which elements can be discarded without diminishing the type of experience such a film seeks to deliver.

In order to determine this it is vital to define more precisely the nature of *Swordfish*'s ambition. The idea that an action film exists to depict exciting action is too simplistic to suffice for the remainder of the review. Some specific estimation of the audience's expectations and demands for the film needs to be made. Audience expectation has often been thought of in terms of genre. The action film is a strange case, in this respect, in that it arguably crosses genres itself (western, sci-fi, mafia) which in turn have been variously interpreted. *Swordfish*, however, has a more specific lineage outside of genre: it is a "high concept" movie.

Richard Maltby summarises Justin Wyatt's description of a high concept film in his article "Nobody Knows Everything". This summary identifies some of the high concept films' defining characteristics as being a simplification of character and narrative, a use of music that is closer stylistically to MTV than classical Hollywood, and a visual emphasis that has much in common with contemporary advertising (Maltby, 1998: 38). In short, according to Wyatt, high concept films are characterised by "the particular configuration of 'excess' on the one hand, and drained characters and genre on the other" (Wyatt, 1994: 60). This could have been written with *Swordfish* specifically in mind.

Wyatt continues:

> The modularity of the [high concept] films' units, added to the one-dimensional quality of the characters, distances the viewer from the traditional task of reading the film's narrative. In place of this identification with narrative, the viewer becomes sewn into the 'surface' of the film, contemplating the style of the narrative and the production. The excess created through such channels as the production design, stars, music, and promotional apparatus enhances this appreciation of the films' surface qualities (Wyatt, 1994: 60).

Wyatt has here identified a quality that arguably unifies the "modular" nature of such films: a consistent, stylistic "surface". In *Swordfish*'s case, this consistency is likely to be of particular importance due to the absence (rather than merely "distance") of a satisfactory narrative, and the unifying quality such a narrative provides.

To evaluate the film's stylistic surface we need only look towards the thirty-second explosion that opens the film, and that reportedly cost nine hundred thousand dollars. This moment is of particular importance because, Halle Berry's breasts notwithstanding, it has been the film's most persuasive promotional device, its Unique Selling Point -- Travolta's stardom having declined once more, and Hugh Jackman remaining a comparative newcomer.

The explosion was filmed using "bullet time" -- a technique that makes the camera appear to swoop around a slowly evolving, or frozen, moment. In *Swordfish* it is used to provide a microscopic study of an explosion -- flying cars and bodies, peppered by slowly rotating ball bearings, are rendered in forensic detail. Like other action film innovations, such as Peckinpah's exit wounds, or the visual exposition of a bullet's journey through Mark Whalberg's body in *Three Kings* (1999), the thrill is in seeing what really, physically, happens. Here though, not only is the use of bullet time abandoned for the remainder of the film, but the implications of its use are also discarded. The plot of the film moves away from the physical world, centring on Stanley Jobson's attempts to break into highly protected

computer systems, and this shift in narrative focus almost inevitably leads to a lesion in the film's surface.

An attempt is made to enhance the depiction of the "virtual" action through excess: Jobson (and at times the audience) has half a dozen computer screens to stare at, rather than the usual single monitor. But the panoply of screens themselves display a manipulation of retro wire-frame geometric shapes that manage to bear no relationship to the reality of computer hacking, while remaining an unexciting antithesis to the established surface-style.

Sena attempts to counterbalance the narrative's emphasis on such "virtual" events by action that takes place in the physical world. However, not only is the majority of this action little above generic, with no hint of the grotesquerie of the opening explosion, but the requisite shoot-outs and car chases inevitably feel redundant. After all, even an implausible narrative will lead an audience's expectation, to a degree, as to the type of drama that is about to unfold and the arena within which it will take place. In *Swordfish*, this expectation, generated by Jobson's quest to gain custody of his daughter, is subverted, and, instead, his quest (the spine of the film) leads, by way of a domestic drama, towards cyberspace. As a result, Sena thwarts this expectation, clumsily diverting the quest through an urban warzone of little narrative or stylistic relevance to the rest of the film.

However, is the redundancy of the action truly caused by the incoherency described above -- in particular the changing texture of the film's stylistic surface -- or on the film's fundamental emphasis on excess rather than narrative? To explain fully why I think it's the former I shall compare *Swordfish* with *The Matrix*. I have chosen the Wachowskis' film for this comparison for two reasons. Firstly, because it shares the same fundamental emphasis as *Swordfish* yet delivers, in my estimation, a considerably more satisfying experience, and, secondly, because bullet time was also used in its construction -- the joint use of the technique giving a direct point of comparison between the two film's stylistic surfaces.

Unlike *Swordfish*, not only did *The Matrix* give a narrative motivation to the technique, by loosely equating the fictional manipulation of the world with bullet time's visual effect, but it embedded the technique so effectively into the film's surface it and the film were, for a time, practically indistinguishable. This was not just due to bullet time's novelty -- it had, after all, been used in a feature film before (*Buffalo 66* [1998]). It was, I argue, also due to a marrying of the technique's implications with the complementary implications of other techniques.

The Wachowskis' use of the Peter Pan wire-work pioneered in Hong Kong martial art films, combined with an extensive and consistent use of bullet time lends a specific kind of unreality to *The Matrix*. Space, time and gravity, which are themselves related concepts, become malleable through these different, but stylistically compatible, devices. In this way the audience experiences an almost complete transcendence of everyday physical constraints through, largely, the film's surface -- the joy of a flying Keanu having as much to do with the elegance of his flapping leather jacket as anything else. This could not have been achieved without the film's surface being stylistically coherent, thereby binding each moment of "excess" into the creation of a unique, unified experience. In contrast, *Swordfish*'s explosion fails to transcend its use as a promotional device, with the sensuous effect of the visual manipulation being somewhat contradicted and deadened, rather than enhanced, by the rest of the film.

I conclude from this comparison that the notion exciting cinema is, or can be, a product of densely compiled excessive events must be qualified to take into account *Swordfish*'s failings. The qualification I suggest, which derives from Wyatt and my brief analysis of *The Matrix*, is that the notion requires a unified stylistic surface if it is to provide a basis for a film that is more than the sum of its parts.

However, despite its inadequacies, *Swordfish* was a commercial success, albeit in a summer of unremittingly feeble blockbusters. With this in mind, perhaps the notion *Swordfish* truly tests has less to do with "exciting cinema" or "compelling experiences" and more to do with the cinematic bare minimum necessary to acquire a profitably large audience.

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Wonderland

Dir: Michael Winterbottom, 1999

A review by Jeongmee Kim, University of Nottingham, UK

In *Wonderland*, what we see through 108 minutes is one weekend -- from Thursday night to Monday morning -- of three sisters living in London. Nadia (Gina McKee) is living alone, working in a café, and trying to find somebody to fall in love with through the lonely-hearts column. Her older sister Debbie (Shirley Henderson) is a single mum with an eleven-year-old son Jack (Peter Marfleet), and the youngest, Molly (Molly Parker), is awaiting the birth of a baby with her partner Eddie (John Simm). Meanwhile, their parents, Bill (Jack Shepherd) and Eileen (Kika Markham), are keeping up their loveless marriage, while suffering from their son Darren's (Enzo Cilenti) departure from home.

If you are a Londoner, and you see *Wonderland*, you may perhaps feel that your own life is being projected on the screen. You would see every place and street which you pass through everyday, and you might feel that the film is asking you what you are doing in London -- a city with the most expensive cost of living among the EU countries, with the most diverse languages and with a population of seven million people.

However, *Wonderland* does not only project the life of London. While the city in *Wonderland* is specifically London, it is also, more importantly, representative of the city in general, and it is through this space that the solitude of the film's characters is projected. Thus, what the characters (Nadia, Debbie and Molly) feel is reflected in the space that they exist in. In doing so, the film generically reconstructs the representation of the space of London through stylization, and, in this respect, *Wonderland* has a lot in common with the contemporary Hong Kong cinema represented by Stanley Kwan and Wong Ka-Wai.

As the film's director, Michael Winterbottom, has acknowledged (Jeffries, 2000: 12-13), *Wonderland* is, in many ways, influenced by Wong Ka-Wai's *Chungking Express* (1994). In both films, the simple story line and melodramatic elements are integrated into the visual style, and this grainy style is dominant over the story line. By using these techniques, the lost and aimless desires of characters in the big city become apparent. There are three sisters in *Wonderland*. One is a single mum but still enjoys nightlife and going out, another is looking for somebody through the lonely-hearts column, and the other is nine-months pregnant but has trouble with her partner. These are typical characteristics of soap opera, but, in *Wonderland*, they are more obviously represented through strong images and stylization than through conventional narrative development.

For instance, the film occasionally uses slow motion effects, which can also be found in the work of Wong Ka-Wai. When Eddie is aimlessly fooling around in the street, after he sets off from home, he is lit artificially and his actions are shown in fast and slow motion. This does not particularly develop the narrative in this scene, but it helps to show Eddie's feelings of homelessness and confusion. Thus, even though Eddie is technically blurred into the image of

the London street in slow motion, Eddie's feelings of loneliness and confusion are clearly conveyed.

Thus, both Winterbottom and Wong Ka-Wai create a universal space in their films through the dominant characteristics of contemporary international cinema (Orr, 1998: 3-6). In doing so, the specificity of space, which is London and Hong Kong in *Wonderland* and *Chungking Express* respectively, is less significant, and the specificity of emotion is emphasized. This emotion is constructed through stylistic illustration and, for the viewer, can be perceived through the film's style and form rather than, primarily, being described through the narrative.

However, while there are similarities between these directors' techniques, a major difference is that they show a different engagement to objects in space. In *Chungking Express*, for example, a sandwich box, soap, empty cans or minor characters have their own implication when expressing characters' emotions, and, even when projecting a hidden emotion, particular objects have particular implications. By contrast, in *Wonderland*, characters are disengaged with objects in space such as cafes, pubs and random people. Such differences may result from different themes dealt with in the respective films. Whilst *Chungking Express* is more concerned with existential solitude, *Wonderland* deals with the accumulated emotions caused by the loneliness of relationships.

In addition, this difference could stem from the fact that *Wonderland* is referred to as a new kind of documentary style film. For instance, in the film's press kit, *Wonderland* is promoted as a new genre which is termed "docu-soap". To some extent, the film technically employs a documentary style, through such factors as location shooting, the lack of boom mikes, hand-held camera work, a small crew and so on. Indeed, the director did not even use clapperboards during shooting, and used radio mikes instead of a microphone to record the noise in pubs or cafes, which was then mixed down. As a result, background noise in pubs often cuts across the conversations of the film's main characters. However, while this type of sound mixing is used to bring out everyday atmospheres, *Wonderland* ironically claims to be documentary even though stylization (influenced by a contemporary international style) takes an important role.

This contradiction between documentary techniques and stylization in *Wonderland* suggests how cinematic form is understood in contemporary cinema. The use of grainy 16mm film stock in *Wonderland* and *Gladiator* (2000) can be used as an example here. In *Wonderland* the use of rough grainy film stock (the result of blowing-up the image from 16mm to 35mm) projects the impression of documentary. For example, Eileen gets a phone call from Debbie asking her if she will look after Molly when she is in labour, and she then gets a severe response from Bill when she refuses to communicate with him. After this incident, Eileen's movement on the way to the hospital is shown dimly in rough grainy close-up through the car window, and, as a result, it is not clear whether she is crying or not, as we perceive the image as if we are looking through a private video camcorder.

In comparison, *Gladiator* uses film stock in a different way in the film's opening sequences. Battle scenes are stylized through grainy images, with this stylization being used to promote the brutality of the battle, and the heroism of the characters, as elements of spectacle. *Wonderland*, on the other hand, clearly uses such visual techniques to project the atmosphere of everyday life.

However, what the films have in common is the pronounced use of visual techniques, such as grainy film stock, in order to privilege the image, and, regardless of the different purposes for employing it, stylization seems to become the dominant characteristic of contemporary cinema of this kind. As can be seen through this example, the use of such types of cinematic style is not limited to certain types of film, but rather it is characteristic of contemporary cinema in general and works to deconstruct prior stylistic norms and conventions.

Wonderland won the Best British Film prize at the British Independent Film Awards in October 1999, despite the fact that the film is financed by Universal Pictures International and BBC Films. This irony, that a film produced by two major companies can be considered as a British independent film, raises a question: what can be considered as independent in contemporary filmmaking? It might be difficult to draw out the conclusion to this question. However, if being independent still implies a potentially inventive form of filmmaking, *Wonderland* might deserve to be considered as an important British independent film. Equally, by combining the documentary style of *Welcome To Sarajevo* (1997) and the stylistic experimentation of *I Want You* (1998), *Wonderland* can also be considered as an important moment of transition in Winterbottom's filmography.

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The Wounds

Dir: Srdjan Dragojevic, 1998

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

Yugoslavian director Srdjan Dragojevic's *The Wounds* (*Rane*) is, as the opening titles inform us, "dedicated to post-Tito generations," a sign that however generic and predictable the film's content becomes, we should foreknowingly frame that content within a sympathetic understanding of post-communist, postnational politics, and politely transmute the film's mildly ironic plays on genre into profound, scathing indictments of civil war and the collapse of nationhood. Indeed, the easiness of this opening dedication will foreshadow the easiness of the entire film, which, in its attempt to juggle political critique with the hip nihilism of a cutting-edge gangster satire, ultimately succeeds only at the latter -- and succeeds at that against its own best interests. Ultimately, the only thing *The Wounds* really demonstrates is how easy it is to generically concoct a sexily amoral underworld saga, and how difficult it is to create an individualistic political satire that does not resort to prefabricated nihilism.

The story is framed in extended flashback. In 1991 Serbia, two teenage hooligans, the ironically monikered "Pinki" and the brutish "Kraut," dream of making it as big-time gangsters as the Serbo-Croatian war of ethnicity that was yet to make the Western headlines hovers in the background. However, images of the war are seen only on risibly propagandistic news broadcasts, and ethnic resentments are mainly limited to loudmouthed neighbors on apartment balconies profanely airing their prejudices along with their laundries. Occasionally, Dragojevic will abruptly splice in documentary video footage of the withered elderly in bread lines to remind us that the film is connected to reality, or at least with the realism generically signified by the appearance of documentary footage. The film's first half delineates Pinki and Kraut's mercenary yet happily raucous milieu; the cast is populated with colorful, sub-Felliniesque archetypes, including Pinki's wild-eyed, Tito-era father and Kraut's pot-smoking grandmother, whose drug-induced hallucinations supply the film with scattered dreamlike imageries. The film is further leavened with cutely symbolic details: Pinki is born the day Tito died (the corpse of Tito's communism gives abominable birth to the violent, postnational, tragic gangster capitalism Pinki will come to represent), and he begins jerking off exactly when the Yugoslav army invades Vukovar (ethnic nationalism is indeed masturbation).

Pinki and Kraut become infatuated with "Dickie," their neighbor and a petty gangster whose Versace suits and Americanized, street-smart sadism appeal to their youthful ambitions. Soon, Dickie will mentor them in the ways of crime and rape, and ritualistically brutalize them into manhood, until the fateful day comes when Pinki and Kraut must, though amorally and guiltlessly, usurp father-figure Dickie's place in the underworld. Indeed, there is a good deal of unsubtle Freudian symbolism here, though, unlike the surrealists of the 1920's, this slightly surrealistic film takes Freud not as an abstract inspiration but at face value, as run-of-the-mill Freudian symbolism. Dickie, whose very name parodies masculinity, must be defeated by the two boys whom he puts through sadomasochistic rites of criminal

socialization. The boys are even given sex lessons by Dickie's slutty girlfriend, who becomes a mother figure.

But although Dickie will actually be killed by his rival, that the boys, who burn cigarettes into Dickie as he lies drugged-out over a tombstone, say they will "graduat[e] by killing their teacher," keeps the Freudian idea intact. Because the boys' real parents are Tito-era communists, their morality is useless in the postnational era -- they aren't worth usurping or even having an Oedipal complex over. In fact, Pinki's communist father will actually seek the approval of his own son, pathetically pleading with Pinki to let him join the new capitalism of Dickie's gang. When Pinki refuses, the father blows his brains out: the father's inverted Oedipal complex becomes suicide, and a replay of the death of the Tito generation. As the Freudian themes continue, the boys will later become infatuated with and fight over a second mother-figure, a media whore who hosts a surreal, *Network* (1976)-style tabloid news show -- sponsored by "Democracy Light" -- that celebrates and salivates over the lives of famous local gangsters.

With Pinki suffering five stigmatic bullet wounds and dangling crucifixes figuring prominently throughout the film, there is also much Christian symbolism here that I refuse to validate, for I have made it a point to no longer recognize the putrefied cliché of Christian symbolism as a meaningful form of signification. (If these symbols always mean the same thing, as they inevitably do, what is left to learn from them, even as ironies?) In fact, as the boys' crucifixes are meaningfully fixated upon in a finale in which they turn their aggressions on each other, it seems it is not the protagonists but the film itself that is lobbying to become a Christ figure, as *The Wounds* conveniently presents itself as the suffering Christ film for a generation torn between the sins of a fading communism and the equal sins of a rising capitalism.

Yet as the old wars of communism give way to the new wars of gangster capitalism, old hostilities are kept alive within the new form. Dickie claims the crimes he commits are for the good of Serbia, and is declared at his funeral to be a patriotic Serb, defending the tombs of the elders. The film's commentary on Serbian post-nationalism and the persistence of ethnic regionalism in the absence of a nation-state, however, is generally limited to such superficial one-liners, and the film's unsubtle ironies are really no more politically enlightening than the tabloid media the film ham-fistedly satirizes.

Sadly, what *The Wounds* is really interested in is (unimaginatively) toying with American pop culture, and demonstrating how transnationalized American culture becomes a psychic substitute for nationhood, or becomes, in yet another example of ho-hum postmodernism, an immaterial nation substituting for a material one. But if anything, it becomes too clear that Dragojevic is commenting on how cultural imperialism and pop culture capitalism have replaced the centralized nation-state. The boys' taunting, childish game of "Who's the Croation?" is not merely the Serbo-Croation variant of the American game of "cowboys and Indians" by accident, for Dickie even refers to the kids as "Indians…on a reservation."

The film further bombards us with a catalogue of American pop culture references, whose unoriginality and predictability robs them of the scathing irony that is surely intended. Dickie, spaced out on an inextricable mix of drugs and Hollywood films, insipidly quotes from *Dirty Harry* (1971) and *The Godfather* (1972), and, leaning against the prophetic tombstone mentioned above, prematurely speaks his own epitaph: "…Bogie, Cagney, Clint…and Dickie…will always be cowboys." However, I must confess that sometimes I am

unsure how ironic *The Wounds* is intended to be. Because Dickie's infantile references to American films are so witless and painfully obvious in their ironies, it is not clear if we are supposed to be nihilistically laughing *with* him, or critically laughing *at* him.

Regardless of this, not only are these references boringly generic, the very act of making them becomes boringly generic. The curse of Americanism means that even our ironies become boring, and the film's political outcry is sabotaged by the impotent love-hate relationship with Hollywood that frames it. The film's tacit position of "America-is-evil-but-irresistible" is no longer sufficient, and was probably insufficient even when *Cahiers du Cinema* overenthusiastically championed Hollywood's whaledreck along with its buried treasures. The international director's love-hate relationship with Hollywood was an auteurist cliche four decades ago, and there is nothing left that can be gleaned from it, even if it is now dressed up in the allegedly cutting-edge garb of Serbian postnationalism. Arguably, we have had enough of this decadent love-hate relationship, enough of these little homages, and perhaps if you want to hate Hollywood, then you should just hate it -- unreservedly and unapologetically.

As *The Wounds* reaches its midpoint, and begins to regress from a wild, energetic, if rather familiar *bildungsroman* into a combination of *Scarface* (1932) and the self-impressed genre-riffing of Quentin Tarantino, my attention flags, and I become depressed that Yugoslavia's postnational dilemma is going to be allegorized in the moldy terms of the nihilist, conservative Tarantino aesthetic. While the marketing blurbs of the U.S. video box promise a "hot-splicing of Kusturica and Tarantino," it seems, rather than "hot-spliced," Dragojevic's tone distinctly moves away from the tragicomic, war-is-hell-on-earth carnival of Kusturica's *Underground* (1995) and more towards Tarantino's pop gangsterism, as soon as Dickie is murdered and the boys take his place, thus setting the stage for a mock-Hollywood, rise-and-fall crime saga. (That said, a milder strain of Tarantino-ism had already infected Dragojevic's more politically ambitious *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame* [1996]).

When Pinki's schoolteacher tells him in total futility that Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* will go "down in history as American film never will," we are then to understand that the tragically European *The Wounds* is convinced it must become an American film to, in effect, prove Pinki's teacher wrong. That is, it would be futile for the film to resist its commercial fate as a European content trapped in an American form, for soulful Dostoevskian tragedy can be replaced with soulless Tarantino-ism as easily as the former nation-state of Yugoslavia can be replaced with frustratingly postmodernized American pop culture.

Though the film's surrealism is mild and only occasional -- for instance, the flashback flight of Kraut's grandmother from the Ustashis is represented by her fleeing across garbage bag waves under a green-cheese moon -- and while its adolescent nihilism stands in the way of any leftist politics, there is a temptation to place *The Wounds* somewhere within the cinematic tradition of Eastern European anarchic surrealism. Indeed, the film's textual Freudian themes and symbolisms go against the grain of the original surrealist project, but seem more in line with the politicized Czech and Yugoslav new waves of the 1960s. Unlike later surrealists, such as Dusan Makavejev, the original surrealist project was apolitical and anti-symbolist, intending to challenge the structures of the assignation of conventional meanings, rather than play with the politics of meanings themselves. Yet it was easy for Bunuel, Breton and the early surrealist camp to be apolitical -- they were spoiled aesthetes, well-fed game-players who despite their elitist affectations believed in romantically, naively

humanist principles such as automatic writing, the liberating power of dreams, and, for that matter, the transcendentalism of film itself.

However, in Eastern Europe (which has bestowed upon the English language the word "Balkanized" as an undying symbol of its seemingly continuous political instability), artists often had no such luxury of being apolitical. As a result, that particular kind of Eastern European surrealism exemplified by the Czech new wave turned surreal symbolism into a nearly utilitarian -- as opposed to self-congratulatory -- aesthetic of political opposition, in films such as Zbynek Brynych's *The Fifth Horseman is Fear* (1964) or Juraj Jakubisko's *The Deserter and the Nomads* (1968). Recently, in the post-new wave era, a number of postcommunist films have resurrected some of this surreal anarchy, from leftist films such as Pavel Lungin's *Luna Park* (1992), Lucian Pintille's *The Oak* (1992), and Emir Kusturica's *Underground*, to more American-influenced, nihilistic films such as Dragojevic's and Goran Paskaljevic's overpraised *Cabaret Balkan* (1998), whose derivative Tarantino-ism blurs the line between slavishness and undergraduate plagiarism.

Yet even at their most political, the best of these films are often tinged with a kind of nihilism -- not necessarily the American nihilism of pop culture-ism, but a more sincere expression of defeat, the (debatable) notion that in the post-new wave era the cinema cannot be the political instrument it once was. For example, with its final surreal image of the land beneath its characters breaking free and literally becoming "Balkanized," Kusturica's *Underground* does a balancing act between political and nihilist surrealisms. As the characters merrily dance as the ground tears away, it seems something like a nihilist plague dance, a whirl of resigned exhaustion in the face of powerlessness, and a sign that even the political filmmaking of this very film is doomed to futility because "politics" is now just another aesthetic game for the film festivals.

The nihilism of *The Wounds*, however, is clearly of the adolescent, pop culture variety -- more Tarantino than Kusturica. The question, then, becomes whether or not Americanism and generic Tarantino-ism deflate the anarchic aspirations of *The Wounds*, and, for that matter, why Dragojevic doesn't draw more upon the bolder traditions of Eastern European surrealism instead of the Western pop culture-ism he is claiming he can't resist. Simply, if Dragojevic has earned real wounds from the Yugoslavian civil war, why tidily bandage them with the easy, *unearned* sadisms of Tarantino-ism? I am not suggesting that Dragojevic should attempt to rebuild a lost nationalism by rejecting Americanism, for nationalism is even worse, the very template of all political evils. But what is Dragojevic's limp love-hate relationship with Hollywood, but a mainstream rejection of the more pointed and less self-congratulatory political filmmaking that Eastern Europeans in the 1960s proved was at least somewhat viable?

As Tarantino-ism continues colonizing other countries -- or, in this case, other non-countries -- we must now vocally oppose its influence as forcefully as we myopically encouraged it in our own country. However, to complicate matters further, some attempts to critique the adolescent masculinity underlying pop culture-ism have been worse than the problem itself. For example, Michael Haneke's one-joke *Funny Games* (1997) winds up making the self-evidently simplistic and conservative point that the MTV generation is alienated from reality -- which means that, if the medium really is the message, this film, too, will only further alienate them.

Furthermore, it is hard to believe in *The Wounds*' claim to subversive anarchy when "McDonald's" and "Fruit of the Loom" make prominent appearances as sponsors in the end credits, effectively shattering the spell of desperately impoverished politico-economic insurrection that any rare Serbo-Croatian film is expected to bring with it. But how else but though Big Mac sales does one pay for slick cinematography? Dragojevic may try his hand at political satire by joking that the heartless, exploitive tabloid news show in *The Wounds* is sponsored by something called "Democracy Light," but how much better is it that his own film is sponsored by the "democracy light" of McDonald's? We can laugh about this, because we think there is nothing else we can do but laugh, just as Dragojevic thinks there is nothing else he can do but reluctantly embrace American culture. But the price of this postnationalism isn't funny, as corporations fund films only pretending to critique, as Americanized genre-riffing replaces political ideas, and as the "hippest" political films we can invent exist only to prove how hip they are, or, in other words, how successfully they can conform to bourgeois expectations of genre, auteurism, marketing, film festival hype, etc.

However, it is not only the fact that *The Wounds*' Tarantino-ism plays perfectly into the hands of film festival hipsters that negates its subversive intentions. It is well and good -- and necessary -- to criticize the critics and festivals that foster the unearned sadisms of Tarantino-ism, but we must also constantly criticize ourselves, lest it seem as if we have no power, as if we are masochistic sheep paying money to be force-fed the sadisms of complete strangers. Perhaps we should instead be talking about the "wounds" of audiences -- now there is a subject for a film!

In his well known and once influential 1965 manifesto "An Esthetic of Hunger," *Cinema Nuovo* figurehead Glauber Rocha spoke of a cinema of poverty, a way of filmmaking that persisted under and fed off Brazil's miserable economic conditions --where "hunger" was not a pale allegory for suffering but a very literal condition of economic oppression that forced Brazilian filmmakers into a cinema of anti-colonial violence (Rocha, 1982: 69). Therefore, Rocha's *Antonio das Mortes* (1969) is a deliberately ugly film that has no mixed feelings about, and no decadent, impotent "love-hate" relationship with, the Hollywood Westerns it satirizes.

But even though this cinema of poverty was not intended to be commodified (as are Dragojevic's films), Rocha eventually had to admit that the strange "tropicalism" of the Brazilian new wave could still be colonized by First World audiences who perceive *Cinema Nuovo* as a merely playful surrealist aesthetic. In 1970, the year that marked his exile and the decline of the Brazilian new wave, Rocha wrote another essay, "From the Drought to the Palm Trees." As he argued, "the phrase 'political cinema' comes cheap…Our bourgeoisie has been colonized by Neo-Realism and the Nouvelle Vague. Fox, Paramount, and Metro are our enemies. …But Eisenstein, Rossellini, and Godard are also our enemies" (Rocha, 1982: 88).

While the grouping of Godard with Eisenstein and Rossellini may at first seem odd, Rocha is ultimately talking about the cultural imperialism all First World filmmaking holds over nations still developing or in turmoil. How I wish Dragojevic, and a thousand other would-be political directors, would take Rocha's words to heart, and understand that, if one truly wants "political filmmaking," it *should* not come cheap in a figurative sense, but should come cheap in a very literal sense, at the expense of all the indulgently professional trappings of First World cinema.

The political cinema is not a moderately seasoned dish to be served up to film festival aesthetes, but a bitter dish, defying ingestion. The cinema of self-congratulation and hip posturing is now the enemy, the preening instrument of the status quo (it is candy for children). As a result, for a film to insurrect, it must remake the cinema wholly -- proving to us that film can exist apart, not only from corporate interests, but from the aesthetics of conformism and acceptability. However, in the case of *The Wounds*, what we are left with is the same sugared placebo of Technicolor that Rocha decried decades ago. It is all the sadder, then, that today's political filmmakers can no longer even distinguish the status quo placebo from the revolutionary drug.

References:

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