

# Bully

Dir: Larry Clark, 2001

## A review by Deborah Shaller, Towson University, Maryland, USA

Kids have been killing kids in U.S. media since the 1980s -- killing, that is, in the overheated spotlight of adult fascination and alarm. To be a teenager in America, many have come to believe, is a predisposing condition to violent behavior, a coming together of sharply attracted affinities. Killer teens are not merely murderous, but are central to the tear in the whole social fabric, the whole civilizing culture so carefully knit together by adults and Republicans, by social conservatives and family-rights folks, by somber white men and God-fearing heterosexuals. Or so goes the precipitous slide from one thing to another that characterizes a great deal of public debate and social policy since the Reagan era, when depictions of teenagers moved from the goofy aberrance of Amy Heckerling's *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982) to the dark alienation of Tim Hunter's *River's Edge* (1987). Within the curve of this particular arc, the construction of the demonic teen not only grounds, but begins to generate conservative narratives that define and guide political life in the United States.

Into this fevered territory, Larry Clark first dropped *Kids* (1995) and more recently *Bully*, a film that explores the lives of a group of Florida teens who kill a sadistic acquaintance. If *Kids* appeared to define an age group, *Bully* broadens interpretive ground to relationships -- to people, to place, to culture and economics, to interpretation itself. By comparison, *Kids*, despite its predictably gritty urban setting, exhibited the kind of acontextuality that allowed it to float into various discourses, all of them crafted to indict individuals, especially those living in cities, having sex, taking drugs, and listening to rap music. At its heart was a morality tale as harsh and simple as it was fatal in consequence: light and dark women, predatory males, virgins and first-time-sex HIV infection. Like *River's Edge* before it, *Kids* suggested that the next generation, learning bad habits at a younger age, will be even worse than this one. Also like *River's Edge*, it depicted out of control or absent parents, a handy construction of social decline that translates easily into blaming working women and single mothers, into reanimating endless discourses about family values and individual responsibilities. The film seems mildly hysterical in spite of its pretense toward unflinching honesty, and the documentary style, imposed on fictional material, continues to feel like a nasty trick, at once leering and prudish, adolescent and paternalistic.

It's possible to argue, of course, that *Bully* yields to the same temptations to place kids at the center of a gaze that exploits them while appearing to condemn their exploitation; or, that by depicting teens in acts of violence, it simply reinvents the killer-teen narrative. However, the specificity of *Bully* argues against either view. It is, to begin with, a more or less true story, told first by journalist Jim Schultze in his book *Bully: A True Story of High School Revenge*. In filming the book, Clark revisited all the key scenes and, in fact, shot many of them in the same places they originally occurred, a gesture that sinks the film deep into the exigencies of place. No mere backdrop, Broward County, Florida is a full-blown character, with its flat,

empty suburban landscape opening the movie and remaining a palpable presence throughout. It is a piece of American territory made up of strip malls, chain stores, and a numbing repetition of sights and experiences. In Clark's vision, its casual affluence transforms the American dream into a torpor, a drugged state of too much leisure time and too little purpose. No one seems to need to go anywhere. To the incantatory, repetitive throb of rap music, the teens have sex, take drugs, talk trash. They toy with violence in a language bereft of substance and full of flattened rage, and in sexual encounters performed without affection or connection. Video games invite users to higher levels of mastery through greater achievements of violence and images so disturbing that they repel and fascinate. Through it all, the sun shines blazingly, unblinkingly.

Only the bully of the title, Bobby, (Nick Stahl) has any direction or momentum, and, unfortunately, he also has enormous problems. Obsessive and self-hating, he mercilessly bullies Marty (Brad Renfro), a childhood friend whose epic passivity paralyzes him so completely that his girlfriend Lisa (Rachel Miner) decides on murder as the only possible relief. With a group of friends, Lisa tries to plan Bobby's death, but the kids of *Bully* are not violent by nature or through parental neglect. They are, in large part, violent by default: utterly unable to act in meaningful ways, completely out of touch with a reality of consequences, they move tottering toward a goal that never becomes real until they are in the middle of it. Always at the edges of action, the group steps over lines they are unable to draw, steps into a violence neither erotic nor lyrical, neither casual nor cool. Clark's camera challenges them -- and us -- to look, to observe how small the gesture that transforms everyday aggressions into exceptional actions, that moves the mundane to the murderous. If there is a redeeming ground explored here amidst a vast unpleasantness, it is surely this vision of violence itself, this interpretation that holds us for a few excruciating minutes at the point where abstractions take corporeal shape.

It is here, in fact, that Clark departs most interestingly from expectation. When the bully dies, for example, we don't cheer his death. While many films create a structure of violence that seduces our participation -- that makes us so angry, for example, that we are relieved when someone on screen acts out that anger -- *Bully* keeps us at a distance exact enough to allow perspective. We may find Bobby's cruelty and casual aggression abhorrent, but we don't seek to avenge it; our rejection of Bobby does not compromise our ability to separate our own desires from the chaotic needs of the film's characters.

Nor does understanding Bobby involve us in a sentimental revision of our own emotions. If Bobby seems human to us, that humanity remains complex and flawed; we do not have to like him to mourn him. It is much to Clark's credit that he can make us feel Bobby's death as the simple, unremarkable thing that it is, both more and less complicated than we imagine, vivid in its very ordinariness.

However, if the killer-kids of *Bully* are not precisely ordinary, neither are they the same overworked fantasies we have seen time and again. They do not suggest a whole generation in decline, their families do not especially need to reconfigure, and they are not emblems of a post-feminist loss of values. What they are most consistently is drugged -- not just by substances, but by the hypnotic power of the flat, hot, Florida day, with its thumping rhythms, its affluent torpor, its vast and glaring absences. In the culture Clark depicts, violence hangs in the air, a persistent and palpable toxin. Within particularities of a single crime, Clark finds a larger diagnosis for what ails America, and for what makes the bully such an apt and expansive metaphor.

# The Gleaners and I

Dir: Agnes Varda, 2000

## A review by Kimberly Lamm, University of Washington, USA

An investigation into the beauty of error, sentiment, and thrift, Agnes Varda's wandering road documentary, *The Gleaners and I*, is most explicitly about contemporary manifestations of gleaning -- the act of gathering what farmers have left behind on harvested fields. But, appropriate to the wandering quality of this subject, *The Gleaners and I* also gathers and examines other subjects it happens to pick up along the way: painting; the law; ageing (and particularly, Varda's fascinated disgust with her own ageing process); the waste endemic to capitalism; filming as a means to document discovery; and, most abstractly, coincidence and chance, patience and time.

Nineteenth-century French paintings of women gleaning frame *The Gleaners and I*, and painting metaphorically informs the way this story of gleaning is told. At the opening of the film, Varda focuses on two famous representations of gleaning: Jean-Francois Millet's *Les Glaneuses* and Jules Breton's *La Glaneuse*. These austere and noble images have become so permanently wedded to the act of gleaning in the cultural imagination that they can be found together in the dictionary as its visual definitions. With her up-beat squeaky voice -- sly, silly, and profound, simultaneously -- Varda announces that she is about to embark upon her own gleaning, and then poses in a tableau vivant as Breton's strong and proud gleaner, replacing a shaft of wheat with her digital camera.

This camera becomes a character in the film, and Varda utilises it effectively to traverse the objects and surfaces that catch her imaginative eye. Stopping to look at the details of Van der Weden's *The Last Judgment* not only announces this film's epic ambitions and the intricacy of its visual story-telling, but this painting -- bright with vulnerable flesh and bloody violence -- highlights the moral questions inextricably tied to issues of gluttony and greed, waste and want. In a lighter moment, Varda frames the grey stains and elaborately layered textures "created" by a leak in her ceiling, so it becomes an abstract Painting -- a la Tapies -- and a playful example of error transforming into beauty. What is unique and so pleasurable about *The Gleaners and I* is the inclusiveness of its vision. Varda brings the same lively gaze to yoghurt cups transformed into tulips at a waste collection center as she does to the found objects of twentieth-century art.

In this sustained act of cinematic gleaning, there are many moments of coincidence Varda mirthfully exploits in order to deepen and shape the thematic texture of this film's unfolding. Varda meets and chats with a wine-grower who is also the great great-grandson of Etienne-Jules Marey. He maintains a mini museum for Marey's pre cinematic innovations, and as Varda's camera combs the tower for documenting birds in flight, we realize that, like Marey, Varda is forging a film that experiments with images of time passing.

Varda also happens upon a meeting with Jean Laplanche -- a winemaker as well as a psychoanalytic theorist. Laplanche, who inherited his father's huge vineyard in Burgundy, regrets the recent French laws that ban gleaning in the vineyards. Before Varda's camera -- which people are quite comfortable in front of -- Laplanche spontaneously recites a poem by Du Bellay that describes gleaning's lyrical charms, and, through Varda's interview with Laplanche and his wife, we learn of his contribution to psychoanalytic theory -- how one discovers the self through the other, how one exists through and in the other.

Varda's cinematic enactment of Laplanche's ideas is immediately evident in the cinematic "portraits" of each person she meets with, and that the interviews spontaneously construct. With a fluid sense of film and her subject, gleaning wanders in and out of Varda's focus, and she is always just as curious about the people she meets, and their presentation of themselves, as she is about gleaning. Varda revels in the unforeseeable peculiarities of the individuals she interviews, and, through them, she discovers the personal and social aspects of her subject.

One of the most poignant of the film's portraits emerges from a conversation with an unemployed truck driver, who gleans two bags of misshapen and oversized potatoes from the tons left by the potato farmers in the fields. His initial answers to Varda's questions are rough and cynical. He tries to answer her and then angle away, but ends up telling Varda the story of his life with a straight-eyed candor. He announces that he has been estranged from his children for two years, and, in order to find an image for this loss, Varda's camera focuses on a row of stuffed children's toys hanging on a laundry line in the trailer park where he lives.

Varda has always had enough courage to simply draw upon images for narrative connections and emotional effects, and the emotions she portrays often border on the sentimental. Perhaps the sentimental, so often and so easily disregarded, is actually at stake in this film dedicated to gleaning. Varda's visual sentimentality is embodied in the heart shaped potatoes that she snags, collects, and then lovingly films, transforming them into pleasures. Everything has treasure potential in this film, and this is what makes *The Gleaners and I* so rare. Whether she focuses on abandoned appliances in the streets, or the Parisians who pick through the produce that is left from the open-air markets, the underlying question of this film remains: what -- and who -- does a culture decide to value, and what -- and who -- does it disregard?

While Varda asks these questions with an innocent candor, she brings an unexpectedly harsh yet playful scrutiny to her visual investigation of herself. Varda, a woman of seventy, charts, with fascination and despair, the physical signs of her age; she combs through her hair to reveal the shapes of grey ruthlessly emerging from her head; she documents the strangeness of her own ageing skin, convoluted by age into a landscape of wrinkles, ripples, and spots. In a scene that is revelatory, because it shows a filmmaker sustaining a measure of inventive and self-reflexive play, despite the sad universality of its subject, Varda impishly poses behind a clear plastic clock without hands. This clock, which she found when gleaning, is newly and grandly placed behind two ceramic leopards. "A clock without hands," Varda announces, "is my kind of thing." By strict definition, gleaning is a rural, pastoral practice, and is therefore increasingly rare. So, as Varda reveals her own investment in gleaning, an important theme of the film becomes an ageing woman's place in contemporary culture.

In *The Gleaners and I*, Varda continues to develop her idiosyncratic body of work, work that possesses those qualities precisely because she doesn't insist on a seamless and perfect filmic shape. Though her first film, *La Pointe Courte* (1956), as well as *Cleo from 5 to 7* (1962) and *Sans toit ni loi* (1985), exemplify a skilled filmmaker's precise visual inventiveness, it seems

as though *The Gleaners and I*'s attentiveness to unplanned discovery and everyday resourcefulness represents a beautiful conjoining of a subject and a filmmaker's sensibility. While Varda has employed film to unveil the visual and political dimensions of many different subjects -- public art in Los Angeles; obsessive love of film; pregnancy; the Black Panthers; the work and life of Jacques Demy; feminism, reproductive rights, and women's friendship in late 60s France -- Varda has always managed to shape material in her own distinctive way, with her own peculiar humor, charm, and poignance. Varda's intelligent charm, which doesn't distract from the seriousness of the subject or her skill, and emerges from her brave willingness to articulate the metaphors, emotions, and ideas that inspire her film making, and then to play them up, gracefully invites her viewers to discover the expansive play of her imagination along with her.

# The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring

Dir: Peter Jackson, 2001

## A review by Alice Mills, University of Ballarat, Australia

*The Fellowship of the Ring*, released shortly after *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (2001), faced the scrutiny of an even more knowledgeable and demanding audience. While Potter readers were looking for the closest possible translation into film of a single novel (mindful of character and plot development in the three subsequent Harry Potter novels so far published), Tolkien devotees in the audience of *The Fellowship of the Ring* were intimately acquainted not only with *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy but also with its predecessor, *The Hobbit*, with Middle Earth's theology, history, geology, genealogies, calendars, geography and languages as detailed in *The Lord of the Rings'* appendices and in *The Silmarillion*, and with a plethora of Tolkien's posthumously released preliminary drafts of *The Lord of the Rings*.

This abundance of Middle Earth material allowed the film's director, Peter Jackson, much more imaginative freedom than was the case for *Harry Potter's* Chris Columbus. *Harry Potter* makes less use than might be expected of specifically filmic techniques of magic-making, in its fidelity to the book's text. As it was plainly impossible to cram all the episodes and characters from Tolkien's first volume of *The Lord of the Rings* into the film (without even considering *The Hobbit* and the rest of Tolkien's Middle Earth material), Tolkien admirers were prepared for the elimination of whole episodes, notably those in the Old Forest and on the Barrow Downs, and whole characters, notably Tom Bombadil and Goldberry. Instead of aiming for a complete filmic rendition of Tolkien's storyline, the film achieves richness in its realisation of the settings on which it lingers: the idylls of the Shire, the delicacy of Rivendell, the Gothic murk of Bree, the abysses of Moria and the unspoilt expanses of Middle Earth landscape.

Tolkien devotees need no introduction to the complex histories of Middle Earth; but the film was also aimed at an audience unversed in Tolkien, devotees of the fantasy film genre, and at those for whom *Harry Potter* was a first taste of wizard-and-quest fantasy. For such an audience, the film-maker's challenge is to orient the viewer in Middle Earth -- to explain such preliminaries as the origin and past history of the Ring, Bilbo's adventures from *The Hobbit*, the ancient ill-will between elves and dwarves, Aragorn's emergence as heir to Gondor, the gradual departure of the elves -- all without burdening the film with over-long passages of exposition. Tolkien solves this problem partly by including lengthy sections of exposition in Hobbiton and Rivendell, and partly by adding lengthy appendices to book three. The film solves the problem by reordering Tolkien's storyline into a fairly straightforward linear narrative after the first spoken words -- Galadriel's lament over lost memories.

The film then begins its story of Middle Earth history -- not quite at the beginning, as given in *The Silmarillion's* myth of creation and fall, but with Sauron's forging of the Rings of

Power and secret making of the One Ring to rule them all, and then the great battle between elves and men on the one side and Sauron and his orcs on the other. Such a beginning has the advantage of exhilarating eye and ear, in contrast to the more muted historical overview provided in the book. Jackson's battle scenes make immediate and palpable the threat of Mordor; while, in *The Lord of the Rings* books, Mordor's might only slowly becomes apparent and is not fully realised until book three. The film's viewer, in contrast, is left in no doubt from the start as to the massiveness of Sauron's power against the vulnerabilities of the Shire.

However, what is lost by the tactic of beginning with battle is not only the convincing nature of Tolkien's slow build-up of threat, but also the close relationship between Tolkien's hobbits and the reader of *The Lord of the Rings* books (something that also occurs in *The Hobbit*). The hobbits Sam, Merry and Pippin know almost nothing of the world beyond the Shire, and Frodo knows a little more, thanks to his uncle Bilbo's adventures. In general, however, the reader learns of the greater world of Middle Earth at the same pace as the hobbits, and, because the hobbits need explanations, the reader can more readily digest quantities of expository prose. Viewers of the film, in contrast, are already put in a privileged position, with respect to the hobbits, in the film's first few minutes, once the forging of the Rings is depicted. Viewers are informed of the making of the One Ring, Sauron's defeat in battle, Isildur's death and Gollum's finding of the Ring long before Frodo learns of these things. As such, the removal of Tolkien's careful pacing of information leads to Frodo's representation as knowing (especially at Rivendell) and Merry and Pippin's representation as ignorant buffoons (again especially at Rivendell). Thus, Tolkien's depiction of characters struggling to comprehend, and to adjust their world view, is sacrificed for narrative clarity and straightforwardness.

Likewise, Aragorn's claim to the throne of Gondor is presented as self-evident in the film. If Jackson's second film remains as faithful to Tolkien as his first, Gondor will be represented as a land ruled by generations of stewards whose stewardship has become kingship in all but name, and who have no knowledge of a northern heir to Isildur's throne. Yet, in the first film, Boromir, son and heir to the Steward of Gondor, unquestioningly recognises Aragorn as having a claim to the throne on Legolas' word. As with the hobbits, there is little depth to Boromir's characterisation with regard to the complexities of Middle Earth history. He instantly rejects Aragorn, saying that Gondor has no need of kings, but in no way disputes his claim; then he has a rapid change of heart at his death-scene, acknowledging Aragorn as his captain and king. This transformation from rival heir to liege is so sudden as to be sentimental, and Boromir's ready recognition of Aragorn sets up a problem for the remaining films in the series, in that Sauron is supposedly ignorant of the survival of Isildur's bloodline among the rangers, yet, here, it seems common knowledge among the peoples of the West.

However, it is in the depiction of Middle Earth itself that the film excels, from the minute details of Bilbo and Frodo's hobbit hole to the (remarkably well-lit) bridges and chasms of Moria, from the grim heights of Sauron's citadel to the ravaged landscape around Sauron's tower. As with the film's opening battle scenes, the scenes between Saruman and his soldiers embody the threat against ordinary everyday life in Middle Earth more completely than the sniffings and stabbings of the black horsemen with whom Tolkien introduces his theme of terror. Tolkien's technique of slow build-up of threat allows for the hobbits' gradual accrual of understanding and resourcefulness and the ever more intense testing of their courage, while Jackson's technique presents the whole threat all at once, like his helicopter shots of the landscape, against which the Fellowship seems very small and vulnerable.

One of the film's innovations is to depict the birth of the first of Saruman's new creatures, the Uruk-Hai. To create these warriors, who can endure full sunlight, he has interbred orcs and goblins, but the warrior is not shown emerging from orc or goblin womb; rather, he takes form in ooze, a pool of amniotic fluid in the depths below Isengard. Saruman looks on as breeder/father, but the only mother appears to be the ravaged earth. This scene of viscous adult birth is reminiscent of the birth of Frankenstein's monster in Coppola's *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994), though less technologically oriented.

A persistent objection to Tolkien's fantasy world has been that it lacks strong female characters to complement the all-male Fellowship of the Ring, with the exception of the wise onlooker Galadriel and, in volumes two and three, Eowyn of Rohan who can only make her mark in the world disguised as a man. In the film, this imbalance is partly redressed by giving a much more prominent role to Arwen, Elrond's daughter and Aragorn's beloved. She proves as capable as Aragorn of withstanding the influence of the black riders, the Nazgul wraiths from Mordor. The film is, however, as vulnerable as Tolkien's trilogy to charges of sexism. Aragorn fights, while Arwen flees.

Two further images of the feminine have been added to the film version of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. In the film's symbolic economy, the birth of the Uruk-Hai from the oozing earth-mother's formless womb is set against Frodo's rebirth from a near-fatal wound. The bed in which Frodo lies recovering in Rivendell is presided over by the carved figure of an angelic female body, emblematic of sanctuary and nurturance (her likely identity and history can be found in *The Silmarillion*). On the side of evil, if the ruined earth of Isengard can be read as a raped woman giving birth to an evil child, Sauron's eye can be read as the despoilment of all Middle Earth. Unlike the human-shaped eye on the original front covers of Tolkien's trilogy, this Sauron's eye is represented as a red, jagged opening, like the earth-channels through which lava and molten metals are poured in Mordor and Isengard in preparation for war. Sauron's eye is thus a symbolic Crack of Doom, like the lava within Mount Doom into which the Ring must be cast. Near-vertical and narrow, this eye is more like that of a cat or goat than of a human being, with implications of black magic and Satanism. However, as my colleague Kate Simons pointed out, its narrow red length also suggests an inflamed vagina. The eye is too dreadful to be viewed by the good characters except in terrified glimpses. While Sauron, as a male warrior in gigantic human shape at the start of the film, can be fought and maimed by a human opponent of normal size, the glimpse of Sauron's eye -- at once male, female, Satanic and bestial -- cannot be sustained, even by the wizard Gandalf.

The assimilation of the ruined land and the raped woman into the eye of evil is the film's boldest symbolic move. Its other major innovation is the fight scene between Gandalf and Saruman, in which both wizards suffer physical injury and Gandalf loses his staff (which can be identified by the intricate carving of its head, and makes an inexplicable reappearance later in the film after his escape from Saruman's tower). As with Sauron's eye, it is the physicality of the wizard's plight that is stressed here, at the cost of some dignity, and a similar exchange of dignity for physicality occurs at Bilbo's birthday party, where Gandalf is glimpsed dancing energetically with a small hobbit child. These two innovations -- Gandalf's strenuous physical fight with Saruman and his vigorous dance -- take away one of Tolkien's effects from volume two of the trilogy, where Gandalf returns from the dead and is said to be more joyful and more simply present, less awesome and other. In the film, he is given only one awesome moment, when he suddenly gains height and the lighting changes as he summons all his power to help Bilbo freely give away the Ring. Ian McKellan is excellent as Gandalf, but the



first film gives him little to work with, in terms of the sequel's concern to show Gandalf as changed, humanised and made more accessible by his ordeals in the mines of Moria.

The film's strengths and weaknesses are thus largely to do with the physicality of Middle Earth and its inhabitants, from the reductive action of Gandalf crashing into the wall of Orthanc to the magnificent realisation of the two giant statues below which small boats carry the Fellowship towards Mordor. However, despite these strengths and weaknesses, Jackson's *The Fellowship of the Ring* is still, on balance, a magnificent achievement.

# Hollywood Ending

Dir: Woody Allen, 2002

## A review by Fritz Esker, University of New Orleans, USA

*Hollywood Ending* is Woody Allen's third straight comedy (following *Small Time Crooks* [2000] and *The Curse of the Jade Scorpion* [2001]) after three consecutive dramas (*Deconstructing Harry* [1997], *Celebrity* [1998], and *Sweet and Lowdown* [1999]). In common with his last two comedies, *Hollywood Ending* is breezily funny and charming, albeit slight. However, while it fails to reach the hilarious heights of such early works as *Sleeper* (1973) and *Love and Death* (1975), it does consistently amuse throughout.

In his newest effort, Allen plays Val Waxman, a once-famous director who has fallen on hard times and has resorted to directing commercials and living with an untalented airhead aspiring actress (*Will and Grace*'s Debra Messing). His ex-wife Ellie (Tea Leoni) convinces her current husband, Hal, a studio chief (Treat Williams), to give a hot new project to Allen despite the objections of practically everyone else at the studio. Stress during the production causes Waxman to go psychosomatically blind. However, since the film is his last shot at re-establishing himself, Waxman conceals his ailment and directs the film blind. He receives aid at work, at first, from his loyal agent, Al (Mark Rydell), then from his Chinese cinematographer's translator (Barney Cheng), after Al is informed that agents are not allowed on the set. While struggling to make a coherent film in spite of his blindness, Waxman must also fight off Hal's efforts to take over the picture, romantic advances from his leading lady (former *Beverly Hills 90210* vixen Tiffani Amber Thiessen), and a hatchet-woman magazine writer (Jodie Markell) out to destroy the film in an article.

The premise of *Hollywood Ending* has lots of potential, and Allen's script and direction are typically solid. Allen remains a great comic actor, and as a director he gets strong comedic performances from Rydell, Leoni, and George Hamilton as a studio honcho who is constantly on the set but never seems to actually do anything. The film's most pleasant surprise is Cheng as the befuddled translator (a business student at New York University who is the only person around that Waxman and Al can trust not to spill the beans about Waxman's secret), and he works as an excellent straight man to Allen's bumbling director. Fashion designer Isaac Mizrahi also shines in his too-brief role as a production designer who wants to build his own life-size version of Central Park for the movie, and Allen also takes his most satirical jabs at Los Angeles life since *Annie Hall* (1977). In one such scene, Williams' character cuts a phone call short to have a skin cancer removed.

However, while *Hollywood Ending* is consistently amusing, it is rarely laugh-out-loud funny, and, at 115 minutes, it runs roughly twenty minutes too long for such a lightweight effort. The romantic subplot between Allen and Leoni does not ring true, and the film sags in its final third when this storyline takes center stage. While Allen remains a great comic actor, his on-screen romances with considerably younger women, whether it be with Leoni in *Hollywood Ending*, Helen Hunt in *Curse of the Jade Scorpion*, or Mira Sorvino and Helena Bonham-Carter in *Mighty Aphrodite* (1995), are more creepy than endearing. When playing

opposite women closer to his age, like Tracey Ullman in *Small Time Crooks*, or Diane Keaton in *Manhattan Murder Mystery* (1993) and *Annie Hall*, Allen can be a charmingly unconventional romantic lead, and can play the clumsy but lovable underdog as well as anyone since Buster Keaton. In contrast, when he attempts this opposite women like Leoni, his role as romantic lead becomes decidedly implausible. However, Allen, even at his present age of sixty-six, is still an asset as a performer because no one delivers his lines like he does, as John Cusack and Kenneth Branagh proved when they tried and failed to play Allen surrogates in, respectively, *Bullets Over Broadway* (1994) and *Celebrity*. Age has not diminished Allen's exceptional gifts as a physical comedian, either, as he earns what is arguably the film's biggest laugh through an action that could come off as a mere pratfall in the hands of a lesser performer. Slapstick only succeeds when it surprises the audience, and Allen's script uses physical humor sparingly enough to keep the audience on its toes.

It is true that Allen's recent return to lighthearted comedy has been welcome after the steadily increasing ugliness of *Deconstructing Harry*, *Celebrity*, and the excruciating *Sweet and Lowdown*; and, after *Sweet and Lowdown*'s resounding failure, it is clear that Allen needed a change of pace. It has also been nice to see him not try so hard to imitate his heroes (*Deconstructing Harry* being strongly influenced by Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* [1957], with *Celebrity* as Allen's version of Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* [1960], and *Sweet and Lowdown* being an attempt at a remake of Fellini's *La Strada* [1954]). Allen has always been a film-maker who explicitly references filmmaking gods in his work, and *Hollywood Ending* is no exception, with its brief discussion of Alfred Hitchcock.

However, while brief mentions of, or conversations about, great filmmakers are fine, Allen had reached the point where he seemed to be simply remaking the films of his idols. In *Sweet and Lowdown*, not only did the Sean Penn/Samantha Morton romance have too many parallels to the Anthony Quinn/Giuletta Masina relationship in *La Strada*, but Allen practically lifted Fellini's closing shot and inserted it into his film. Somewhere in the *Deconstructing Harry/Celebrity/Sweet and Lowdown* cycle, Allen seems to have crossed the fine line between paying homage to and ripping off other directors' work, and Allen is at his best when he avoids these self-conscious attempts to duplicate the work of others. Mercifully, *Hollywood Ending* does not beg comparison to a Bergman or a Fellini film, with its easygoing, literate humor combined with skillful slapstick being distinctly Allen's.

On the other hand, Allen's three recent films have been remarkably safe and risk-free coming from such an unquestionable talent. In his best work, Allen has always been able to mix humor with more serious themes. *Annie Hall* was a funny, poignant meditation on romance and relationships, and *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), my personal favorite of Allen's back-catalogue, mixed moments of high comedy with moments of heartbreaking pathos, creating a wonderful meditation on the role movies play, for better or worse, in our lives. In addition, *Bullets Over Broadway* successfully made intelligent statements about the nature of art, its creation, and its reception by an audience. In comparison, *Hollywood Ending* settles for being merely funny, and most of the time it succeeds.

All of this may sound like nitpicking of the highest order, and in some ways it is. However slight it may be, *Hollywood Ending* is still fun, entertaining, and worth the price of admission, and this is no small achievement for a director who has been churning out films over such a long period of time. There are countless once-great directors (Francis Ford Coppola, William Friedkin, John Carpenter, to name a few) who now seem incapable of even making a watchable movie, and, as such, Allen could do a lot worse at this stage in his career

than *Hollywood Ending*. His ability to make a unique, well-crafted, engaging film practically every year, despite the occasional slip-up like *Sweet and Lowdown* or *Alice* (1990), is remarkable. But, despite the charms of *Hollywood Ending*, I will still wait and hope for Allen to emerge with a film in the same league as those that have made him one of the United States' most skilled and respected filmmakers.

# Hôtel Terminus

Dir: Marcel Ophüls, 1988

## A review by Anna Norris, Michigan State University, USA

Seventeen years after *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1971), Marcel Ophüls released *Hôtel Terminus: The Life and Times of Klaus Barbie*. This four and a half hour documentary, based on 120 hours of footage, attempts to retrace the life of Klaus Barbie, the first nazi criminal tried in France for crimes against humanity.

The film is a skillful montage of interviews of witnesses who, at some point in their lives, had dealings with Barbie: former neighbours and classmates from his native Germany; victims tortured by Barbie or witnesses whose relatives were tortured in his hands; former friends, neighbours, and politicians from Bolivia; journalists; Secret Service agents and priests who facilitated his escape to South America. Other interviewees include pool players in a café and restaurant owners; all witnesses of World War Two in Lyons, and who answer the central question: is it too late to put on trial a nazi criminal such as Barbie? The interviews are interspersed with archival footage from the seventies, containing interviews by Barbie denying being Barbie, photographs, and historical documents. There are several similarities with the interviewing, editing and montage techniques used by Ophüls in *The Sorrow* and in *Hôtel Terminus*. The witnesses are interviewed in their personal environment -- at home, by their swimming pool, or in their living room -- which personalizes them and makes the interviews more intriguing to viewers. This is even more the case in *Hôtel Terminus* than in *The Sorrow*, since we actually follow Ophüls and his team from France to Germany, the United States, and Bolivia.

Klaus Barbie, the ex-Gestapo leader in charge of Lyons -- France's second largest city and a place of utmost importance in the Resistance movement -- was known as "the Butcher of Lyons". Famous for implementing particularly sadistic methods of torture, which he used to obtain information from Resisters and Jews, he is suspected of killing under torture several Resistance fighters, among them leader Jean Moulin. Further notoriety came from his order to send the Jewish children, who had found refuge in the village of Izieu, to Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1944, along with their teachers. After taking shelter in Bolivia and Peru under the assumed identity of Klaus Altman, he was tracked down by French nazi hunter Serge Klarsfeld, and was eventually extradited from Bolivia in 1983, to stand trial in Lyons in 1987.

One of the reasons for trying Barbie (stated by prosecutor Pierre Truche) was to try and understand how someone became a monster capable of crimes against humanity. Ophüls also asks himself this very question, and therefore attempts to offer a portrait of Barbie since his childhood. He takes us back to Barbie's native village, where both parents were teachers, and films the Catholic seminary where he proved to be an excellent student. We meet his former neighbours and former classmates, obviously in an attempt to try to understand how the then nicknamed "Sonny" became "the Butcher of Lyons". Everything should have prepared Barbie to be a civilized human being, and yet we never quite understand how and why he became such a barbaric individual. The superposition of the highly opposed portraits drawn by his

friends and family, his victims and World War Two researchers are quite discordant: the former seminarist, the intelligent student, the accomplished pianist, the much liked friend, the attentive father and affectionate grand father, versus the sadistic SS officer capable of skinning a man, beating children, and killing a baby in front of his mother's pleading eyes.

The issue of burying the past is the central question of the Klaus Barbie trial, and of *Hôtel Terminus*. Both the making and the release of this film have to be understood in the context of contemporary France's pervasive and opposing views regarding World War Two -- the desire of some to face their past, and the desire of others to bury it. Ophüls carefully mounts interviews of witnesses who feel, Barbie included, that the past should be forgotten, and opposes their views with witnesses who have not forgotten it. If some of the interviewed wish to bury the past, Ophüls' choice of central witness, Simone Kaddouche Lagrange -- whom we follow throughout the film from the steps of the Lyons tribunal, to the old neighbourhood where she was arrested as a child -- leaves no doubt about the director's answer to the questions asked at the beginning of the film: the past should not be erased, it should be confronted. In order to do so, the director skillfully interviews Barbie's victims from World War Two and Barbie's victims from a more recent past, including Bolivian journalist Mirna Murrillo, who was tortured in the seventies for months by Barbie because she was considered an opponent to the Bolivian regime then in place.

Many witnesses seem to have a short memory, and Ophüls enjoys confronting their bad faith by contesting their temporary "amnesia". The administrators of the catholic school Barbie attended until age eighteen do not remember that he was a pupil there; the inhabitants of Barbie's native village deny knowing that he lived there as a child; his former landlord denies renting him an apartment; and Robert Taylor, former chief of the CIC, recruited Barbie as a secret agent but does not recall writing and signing a document where he called him an "honest man" and "a Nazi idealist".

The question of politics and the role of foreign nations in the "disappearance" of Barbie is also a key element in the film. The agents of the American intelligence CIC -- responsible for selecting and recruiting Barbie as a secret agent to fight communism -- not only want to bury the past, but have themselves "forgotten" many details. Ophüls dwells on challenging these witnesses: "really, you do not remember? That is very odd. You signed that document, though". He demonstrates, through the interviews and the use of historical documents, that these witnesses have lied and that they refuse to admit it. He later remarks that "even forty years later, people are still afraid to answer questions".

What becomes clear, through the investigation and the numerous interviews which compose the film, is that although Barbie was clearly responsible for his crimes, he benefited from various accomplices throughout his life: the German authorities which decided not to prosecute him; the American Intelligence governmental organization, the CIC, which used his services after the war to obtain information to fight communism during the Cold War; the Vatican authorities (including Pope Pious XXII and Monsignor Montini, the future Paul VI) who protected him and helped him establish links with the CIC and flee to Bolivia; and the French authorities, who were quite timid about locating Barbie while he was actually giving paid interviews to French television.

Several revelations uncovered in the interviews will undoubtedly upset viewers: Barbie's escape from Europe to South America organized by the Vatican; his hiring by the American Intelligence Agency, the CIC; the fact that French officials knew where he was hiding but

never bothered to arrest him. Ophüls' skillful art of interviewing elicits outrageous comments from diverse interviewees. Robert Taylor, former chief of the CIC who knowingly hired Barbie and views him as "an honest man", states: "I never got the impression that he was guilty of any atrocities". Steingritt, former adjunct of Barbie, refuses to answer Ophüls' questions and cries out: "Leave me alone... Whatever happened to human rights?" Madame Hemmerle, condemned in 1945 for national indignity, compares the horrors of World War Two to the horrors of all wars, and to the burning of Joan of Arc by the English. Albert Bosset, one of the leaders of the French extreme right party "le Front National", disagrees and feels that Barbie should be put on trial, claiming that "All this leads to a resurgence of anti-Semitism, such as the election of Kurt Waldheim in Austria, as a backlash", to which Ophüls lashes out: "So it is the fault of the Jews?" We are also shown footage of Jean-Marie Le Pen, leader of "le front National", stating that the fact that six million Jews were murdered during World War Two was just a detail. Finally, we are also reminded that French President François Mitterrand, who was Interior Minister during Vichy, stated that the Vichy government was not collaborationist, but just "soft".

Ophüls has a tender spot for common people, and some characters are particularly memorable in *Hôtel Terminus*. Disfigured farmer Julien Favet, one of the only living eye witnesses of the round up of the children of Izieu, recalls in detail these awful events; and Simone Kaddouche Lagrange, one of the most moving witnesses present at the trial whose experience is related in Charlotte Delbo's book *Auschwitz et après*, tells Ophüls about her arrest with her family at age fourteen, and her beating by Barbie in front of her parents.

However, a few questions tackled by *Hôtel Terminus* seem a little out of place in this film. For example, a large part of the beginning of the film is dedicated to the still obscure question of treason within the Resistance movement, and involves the trial of René Hardy, whose suspected betrayal led to the arrest of leaders such as Jean Moulin and Raymond Aubrac by Barbie. In addition, a large portion of the second part of the film discusses the shady past of extreme-left lawyer and defender of Barbie, Jacques Vergès. Although both individuals raise interesting issues, these scenes seem somewhat incongruous.

*Hôtel Terminus* is also less successful in the omnipresence of Ophüls within the film, whose interviewing style is here less subtle than in *The Sorrow and the Pity*. While in *The Sorrow*, he used archival footage to contest dubious statements made by those interviewed, in *Hôtel Terminus*, he uses archival footage but also directly reformulates with the interviewed the outrageous statements they make, and in most cases with obvious impatience and sarcasm. It is somewhat odd that the interviewed, in all cases, did not perceive Ophüls' agenda and mockery of them.

However, despite these particular drawbacks, *Hôtel Terminus* is an exceptional and important documentary, which never contains a dull scene, and which is successful at many tasks: denouncing the international conspiracy which led Barbie to escape from Europe and to live as a somewhat free man in South America; the issue of anti-Semitism; and the question of France facing its past.

# Legally Blonde

Dir: Robert Luketic, 2001

## A review by Sue Lewak, University of California, Los Angeles, USA

Once upon a time, a young girl was drawing water from a nearby well when she was approached by a shrivelled crone who begged her for a drink. The young girl immediately cleared a small place for the crone to sit and drew a large cup of water for her. Now, the crone was actually a fairy in disguise who was testing the girl's ability to show kindness without judgement. Pleased by the girl's actions, the fairy commanded that diamonds and rubies would fall from the mouth of the girl with each word she spoke. Or so we are told by literary folklorist, Charles Perrault in his short tale *The Fairies*.

It is a common image within folklore: the Norse gods Odin and Gefjon, the Inca god Viracocha and the Hindu god Siva, each wandering the earth as beggars, in search of those who possessed "second sight," (the human ability to see beyond the illusion of the material world). It is a trait neither limited to the purely divine (Odysseus returning to Penelope disguised as a beggar to test her love for him) nor to mortals ("The Beast" being an enchanted disguise which tests "Beauty's" ability to love him -- a disguise bestowed upon him due to his own inability to recognize that a beggar he had turned away was a fairy). Indeed, Perrault's 1694 tale *Donkeyskin*, (considered by many folklorists as the primary oral source for later versions of the literary, and sanitized, "Cinderella,") is less a tale of a helpless young woman enabled by a fairy, than that of a prince who possesses the ability to "see."

*Donkeyskin* tells the story of the beautiful daughter of a King driven insane by the premature death of his wife. When the young woman learns that her father has decided that she will replace her mother as his wife, she is aided by the guidance of her godmother, a fairy who lives in the nearby woods. The fairy commands her to beseech her father for fine dresses and gold, which are then hidden in a trunk which the princess is able to make appear with the aid of a magic wand. She is then given a hideous cloak, the skin of a donkey, to wear in public. Thus disguised, the princess lives as an object of ridicule, but rids herself of her father and his desire for her. Sometimes, when she thought no one was watching, *Donkeyskin* would remove the cloak and adorn herself in the fine dresses buried within the trunk. It was on one of these occasions that she was secretly spotted by a prince, who was able to comprehend both her material, as well as her spiritual, beauty.

If, as mythologist Joseph Campbell wrote, all myths and fairy tales must be reinvented for each new generation, first time Australian director Robert Luketic has done so marvellously well in the 2001 feature film, *Legally Blonde* (now available as an MGM special edition DVD). "Cinder-elle-a," is presented to us as "Elle-Woods" (Reese Witherspoon), who, in contemporary postmodern sensibilities, both represents and inverts traditional themes. Reminiscent both of the French fashion magazine *Elle* (or "She") as well as H. Ryder Haggard's *She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed* (in her power to convey presence in a room), Elle is both an object of desire as well as of ridicule.



As with Perrault's young girl who draws water from the well, Elle is a kind hearted and good natured young woman, whose natural instinct is to befriend and help those around her. At the same time, as a product of twenty-first century "Angelino" culture, Elle is the very blonde and fashionably hip daughter of a wealthy Beverly Hills family. She is also the president of her sorority, and, as we are told in one of the DVD outtakes, was "the most popular month in the CULA calendar" (an imagined hybrid of USC and UCLA).

Elle (as well as her sorority sisters) believes that her steady boyfriend, Warner Huntington III (Matthew Davis) is about to propose marriage, and thus embarks on a Rodeo Drive shopping spree to prepare for the event. When a sales clerk, classifying Elle as "a dumb blonde with daddy's plastic," tries to deceive her, Elle's sharp intellect and cutting wit is revealed: "it's impossible to use a half loop top stitching on low viscosity rayon," Elle tells the clerk, "it would snag the fabric. And you didn't just get [this dress] in. I saw it in the June *Vogue* a year ago. So, if you're trying to sell it to me at full price, you picked the wrong girl."

Warner, however, is incapable of "seeing" Elle's true nature, which, she states later in the film, is often hidden by her appearance: "all people see when they see me is blond hair and big boobs. No one is going to take me seriously." Indeed, Warner's intent that evening is to end his relationship with Elle. He is about to embark on a career at Harvard Law school, he explains to her over dinner, and is thus in need of a "Jackie, not a Marilyn," as a wife.

Elle is initially so distraught by the news that she (as noted by friends) neglects her daily manicure and hair maintenance. She later reveals her strength of character, however, through a remarkable decision: applying to Harvard Law school herself, much to the astonishment of everyone around her ("oh sweetheart," her father tells her, sipping a martini, "you don't need law school. Law school is for people who are boring and ugly and serious, and you, button, are none of those"). She perseveres, however, sacrificing a number of social events to pass the LSATs, promote her 4.0 GPA in Fashion Design, and to make a video statement which so astonishes the Harvard admissions committee that she is accepted as part of the "diversity" quota.

Once at Harvard, however, Elle's beauty and "California-Cheerful" nature becomes a liability, as she is (re)constructed within the New England paradigm. Newly engulfed in a culture which rewards both bodies unadorned with the latest fashion, as well as "serious" conversation (constructed through years of training at Prep School), Elle becomes "Donkeyskin," draped in pink leather. Ridiculed by Warner and his "blue-blood" fiancé, Vivian Kensington (Selma Blair) as well as by the harsh professor, Margaret Stromwell (Holland Taylor), Elle runs to a nearby bench, confused and distraught.

She is befriended by the handsome intellectual, Emmett Richmond (Luke Wilson) who is charmed rather than annoyed by her. Indeed, Emmett (as with "Donkeyskin's" prince) is the only Harvard student who is able to truly "see" her. The other individual gifted with "second sight" (and who shares Elle's cultural conditioning) is the manicurist Paulette Bonafonte (Jennifer Coolidge), who offers Elle friendship, counsel and support.

When Elle is cruelly tricked by Vivian into arriving at what she believes is a costume party, Warner's true character is revealed. While discussing a coveted summer internship (and being informed by him that she isn't smart enough to win it), Elle tells him: "I'm never going to be good enough for you, am I?" Spurred to achieve by this moment, Elle turns to study and proves herself within the classroom, winning the internship along with Warner and Vivian.

The remainder of the film is dominated by a murder case, involving a former sorority sister Brooke (Ali Larter), a murdered millionaire, and a cameo by Raquel Welch as his former wife. During this time, Elle, like "Donkeyskin," outwits the sexual advances of a father-figure, Professor Callahan (Victor Garber); is given "magical aid" by the archetypal "shape-shifter" Professor Stromwell, who (as with Odin, Gefjon, Viracocha and Siva) has been testing her all along; and, through her actions, enables others around her to finally realize her penetrating intelligence.

Previous reviewers of *Legally Blonde*, who have positioned it as a "lightweight" version of the 1995 hit *Clueless*, failed to understand its position as contemporary folklore. If *Clueless*' Cher, also a beautiful Beverly Hills blonde, was a (re)imagined vision of Austen's Emma within a contemporary setting, Luketic's Elle is a similar reinvention of Perrault: an examination of Hollywood Simulacra which both encourages and suppresses feminine sexuality through the image of the "Blonde Bombshell."

This myth of the blonde, however, is powerful, as one of the DVD documentaries ("The Hair that Ate Hollywood") demonstrates. Reese Witherspoon's hair was restyled forty times throughout the film, and carefully constructed as a major component of Elle's personality. This, in itself, thematically comments upon the enormous pressures which encouraged Elle to construct herself as "blonde" (and which apparently influenced the Hawaiian singer, Hoku, daughter of singer Don Ho, to dye her hair blonde for the film's music video "Perfect Day," which also appears on the DVD). Indeed, the author of the original book, *Legally Blonde*, Amanda Brown (interviewed in the second documentary, "Inside Legally Blonde,") is a blonde who decided to attend Stanford Law school because of the great nearby mall. In a case such as this, the question is no longer, "Is she smart," but rather, "Why would a woman who is smart enough to get into Stanford Law School make a joke like this?"

This question becomes the major thematic issue of Luketic's film -- the incredible pressure Elle finds to hide her intelligence under layers of mascara and blonde hair. Elle may be mocked in the film, but the very real issue of eating disorders among American teenage women support Luketic's contention that Elle-as-Blonde is an imposed construction rather than a desired choice.

If Perrault's original tales were written as part of the seventeenth century interest in female virtue as opposed to overt sexuality, Luketic's twenty-first century version asks the question "why is the hiding of intelligence through overt sexuality considered a virtue?" If Perrault's "Donkeyskin" gains freedom when her virtue is revealed, Elle's freedom is gained through permission to take off the mascara, stop curling her hair, and exhibit her powerful intellect. Indeed, *Legally Blonde* is not so much a film about "dumb blondes," but rather a film about a smart woman who subverts the pressure of Hollywood to become simulacra.

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# Memento

Dir: Christopher Nolan, 2000

## A review by Jerome de Groot, University of Huddersfield, UK

All of a sudden you can't move for reverse narratives: "Redrum", a recent *X-Files* episode, portrayed a judge living a key part of his life backwards in order to atone for a crime and have a "second chance"; the final season of *Seinfeld* harvested the rich comic potential in the innovation (including a brilliant visual gag involving the reverse expansion of Kramer's lollipop). It would appear fairly clear that both these instances of the reverse narrative owe a substantial debt to *Memento*. Furthermore, both examples show how the key issues that the film raises are distinctly contemporary: perfect for a culture in which paranoia and indecisiveness are rife, on the one hand, or in which irony, pastiche and narrative disruption are commonplace. These narratives show a marked difference from the fantastical circularity of *Groundhog Day* (1993) or even the mawkish reliving of the past and present in *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946); a challenge to the audience and a distinctly postmodern emphasis on how we know and experience the world. They feed a newly populist sense that closure is contingent and wholly inconclusive, and that the closed and comfortable narrative arc inscribed in the conventional or mainstream is purely arbitrary and aspirational. The success of *Memento* demonstrates the growth of a sophisticated audience keen to engage with knotty generic and narrative challenges -- the same kind of audience that appreciated the tangled and unknowable conclusion to *The Usual Suspects* (1995) (or even *Mulholland Drive* [2001]), for instance. Indeed, in playing fast and loose with the rules of film noir, whilst staying rigorously close to its spirit, *Memento* is something of a companion piece to *The Usual Suspects* in its complex structure and ease with multiple meanings. Perhaps what both these films give us is an updating of noir's concerns: truth, justice, experience, evil, trauma, all spun through a keen sense of the collapse in signification and representation key to postmodern readings of the contemporary world.

*Memento* tells the (backwards) story of Leonard Shelby (Guy Pearce), a man suffering from a rare syndrome which does not allow him to make new memories. As he explains, even if you sit and talk to him for too long he "won't remember how we started". He got this syndrome from an injury sustained during a brutal attack on his home in which his wife was raped and murdered, the last thing he remembers. One of the narrative tricks of the film is to place us in his shoes -- we know what has happened, but we don't know why. This is due to the film's great formal innovation, the reverse narrative. Rather than being just an eventually annoying trick, the narration is a motif for the concerns of the film, encapsulating how issues such as representation, understanding and truth are ultimately subjective and contingent. Shelby's trauma searches for ending but finds none. How will he ever know if he gets the guy? "Maybe I'll take a picture." Has he got him? Despite the fact that we know all the way through that he shoots *somebody*, we are never sure who this man is, despite his being given several names throughout the film. How do we know who anyone is? Like Shelby, we are dependent upon slippery images and words to search for the truth, and the film delights in showing us that we really don't understand the world around us quite as well as we think we

do. Ultimately, *Memento* reminds the audience that truth, reality and understanding are all contingent and ultimately illusory things, particularly in the darkness of the cinema. Brilliantly inverting the noir movement from chaos to resolution, Nolan creates a continually bifurcating narrative that perversely tells you what happens, but undermines your sense that you understand what happens, comprehend what happens, and have any kind of overview of what happens. Like the growing lollipop in *Seinfeld*, the trick is to show the audience the end of the scene and make them try and work out how things got to this stage. It is not simply a meta-fictional trick, but a complex interrogation of our consumption of film, engagement with the world, and notion of coherence and meaning.

In *Memento*, there is a strong sense that the traumatic event gives Shelby a sense of purpose which simultaneously inscribes a lack of knowledge or understanding. He wants to embrace and know the trauma, but simultaneously his brain rejects the traumatic reality by not allowing him to make new memories. He is doomed to relive and repeat, continually cycling around an ultimately unknowable reality and truth. Shelby attempts to find solace in the word and the image, but all the things he tattoos on his body or writes on his photographs are subject to erasure, absence, and change. A key moment in the text occurs when he himself scores out some information about Natalie (Carrie-Anne Moss) that might have led him down a different path. He surrounds himself with clear, objective, rational schemes of organisation and categorisation ("you've got to have a system"), yet is still in thrall to the play of meaning and the slippage of signification he attempts to obviate. He only knows what he writes down, but this is contingent and does not lead him to ultimate truth or reconciliation -- although he thinks it does, and the film brilliantly demonstrates the anxious desire for reconciling chaotic, proliferating experience (particularly in relation to language) with an ultimate "meaning", "answer", or object. Perhaps the sanest voice is Natalie's, as she reminds us "you can never know anything for sure". That said, as a modern day *femme fatale*, even this relatively simple statement is in thrall to a wide variety of motivations and agendum.

I'm a recent convert to DVD and so I was really looking forward to *Memento*, despite the fact that even the director admits it is "a much better experience on the big screen". The quality of the DVD renders the black and white sections of the film with great depth and clarity, whilst the colour sequences retain the slightly bleached, toneless surface I remember from the cinema. Fortunately, the DVD also avoids the standard panoply of irrelevant extras. The marketing of the film was remarkably intelligent, and this continues with the DVD presentation. The "Otnemem" website refused to explain the film or render any standard information, choosing rather to give further fictional context to the film and refusing to admit that it actually *was* a film. Like *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), this was a movie that manipulated the web in far more intelligent a fashion than is the norm. So, rather than extra commentary, or "making-of" documentaries, you get a new set of problems, occluding any nerdy sense of cataloguing completion you might get from your conventional DVD. You're presented, instead, with the slightly odd experience of "Memento mori", the film rearranged chronologically. Quite why you'd want to rearrange the film in this way is unclear, but it argues a healthy happiness with disrupting the filmic experience on the part of the director. There is also a complete shooting script, and an interview section in which Christopher Nolan elegantly elaborates on pretty anodyne questions. Both segments present *Memento* as an experience multi-faceted and ultimately proliferating in meaning. Far from offering conclusions or answers, Nolan emphasises how he is as keen as possible to increase the "confusion, uncertainty and paranoia" of the audience.

# Spider-Man

Dir: Sam Raimi, 2002

## A review by Will Brooker, Richmond, the American International University in London, UK

Meanwhile, events are unfolding pretty much as they did in *Amazing Fantasy* #15, August 1962, where editor Stan Lee had promised that readers would find this newest costumed character "just a bit...different". Nerdy Peter Parker is tagging after his college class at a science exhibit; he's bullied by Flash and crushing hopelessly on Mary-Jane, and with one nip from an escaped spider, his life is going to be put in a spin. The school geek becomes an unlikely hero, discovering the abilities to cling to walls and thwip webs from his wrists; there's a brightly-coloured costume, a gaudy villain and some mid-air fight scenes, while, back in the domestic sphere, Peter faces family trauma and romantic entanglements.

You know the drill, and in many ways the film is remarkably faithful to the 1962 original; whole woggles of Stan Lee's rhetorical captions are incorporated into voiceover and dialogue, while the performers have been carefully styled to match Steve Ditko's visuals, with Aunt May and J. Jonah Jameson in particular looking like they stepped out of the funny pages. Even the nicknames are authentic. Mary Jane calls Peter "Tiger", he calls her M.J. and reduces his nemesis, the Green Goblin, to "Gobby" in a characteristic bit of mid-fight banter. Of course, this is 2002 and things are just a bit...different: Peter's teacher is African American, for instance, and the spider that causes all the trouble is a mutant crossbreed -- genetic modification is more of a contemporary concern, perhaps, than the radioactivity that glowed around the original story's arachnid. Macy Gray's guest appearance at a city festival, on the other hand, can only be explained in terms of multi-platform marketing.

On the whole, though, *Spider-Man* clings not only to its comic-book inspiration but to the familiar template of hero movies from *Superman* (1978) to *X-Men* (2000). After the protagonist's origin comes that of the villain -- in this case Dr Osborn's transformation into the Green Goblin -- and then the creation of costume and nom de guerre, with the hero baptised, in this case, at a wrestling contest. The evolution or discovery of powers is often tempered with personal trauma -- here, Peter fails to save his uncle from a perp, and learns that with his great abilities come great responsibilities. Then comes a point where the hero's gone a few rounds with generic muggers and creeps, the run-ins becoming so one-sided and routine that they merge into montage, and needs a new challenge: enter the villain, who's been preparing his own costume backstage. Now the crime-fighter meets someone on his own level, and we finally see him reeling from a punch and staggering against a wall in a shatter of masonry: each blow echoing around the block like thunder, and with citizens gazing up in fear under a Stan Lee strapline "As Titans Duel!"

Laid over this skeleton plot, which will do for the first hour at least of this type of film, is another framework of what would have been ethical ambiguity and intriguing pop psychology if we hadn't seen it in every *Batman* film of the last decade. Spider-Man is declared a vigilante, and constructed as a potential threat by the media. The heroine falls for

the hero in his charismatic costumed persona, and gushes about him to the hapless civilian alter ego, who can't tell her they're one and the same guy. There's the suggestion that masks serve as a spiritual totem, with Osborn, who keeps tribal headdresses on his walls, psychically enslaved by the Goblin casque; and the constant threat of discovered identity -- the near-misses and quick changes as the hero struggles to keep his secret life concealed and so protect those he loves. In this case, at least, we have a reminder of why this last lesson is so important: Osborn makes the link between Parker and Spider-Man, and, in the next act, both Aunt May and M.J. are smartly used as bait and targets. A few intertextual in-jokes and cross-references are thrown into the mix, as if to acknowledge the familiarity of this fable -- Parker cries "Shazam" in an attempt to get his webs flowing, Aunt May warns him "you're not Superman", and Danny Elfman's theme music broods and soars just as it did for Tim Burton's *Dark Knight*.

So far, so blah. So why did this film break weekend box office records in the US, its popularity spreading -- largely by word of mouth -- to threaten even *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones*' (2002) dead-cert status as the blockbuster of May 2002? Firstly, the hero's age gives the old story a new slant. Peter and his buddies are teenagers, and the drama of transformation -- of growing into the hero's role and duties -- is neatly tied into the traumas of adolescence. Most obviously, there are knowing parallels almost but not quite made between Peter's mutation into a Spider-Man and the sticky moments that accompany male puberty: an embarrassing accident with his web in the school cafeteria, a mess all over the sheets as he experiments with his newfound abilities, a bluster of excuses when his aunt knocks on the bedroom door. He was exercising, he explains, prompting Uncle Ben to offer him a homily on "the years when a man changes." There's a good handful of nudges, fairly clever and never crude, along these lines, and some original moments, such as Peter's unashamedly narcissistic admiration of his new, beefed-up torso in the mirror.

Having a teenage hero also enables, and to an extent excuses, the film's repeated morals about learning maturity and becoming the person you're destined to be. Self-searching that would be ludicrously self-indulgent for a thirty-year-old like Bruce Wayne is more justified when the protagonist and his buddies are all recent high school graduates finding their way through part-time jobs and short-term romances. What we have here, at times, is the Marvel Comics' version of *Dawson's Creek*; characters blinking and blushing at each other as they exchange wry little shuffles of dialogue. "You're taller than you look," M.J. tells Peter as they stand in their neighbouring backyards, avoiding each other's glances, then letting gazes meet for a second. "I hunch," he murmurs. "Don't," she tells him. There's a lot of heavily-loaded, shyly delivered stuff like this, and whether it comes off or not depends on the performances. Luckily, Tobey Maguire and Kirsten Dunst carry it with enough natural panache to make you adore them both. Maguire's smile creeps up like a timid kitten, prepared to be slapped at every moment and curling happily at the slightest kindness; and Dunst does a particularly fine job of making Mary-Jane equally unsure despite her prom-queen position, a little girl in a sleek shell. She's imprisoned by the school cliques just as he is, and her shift from vulnerable backyard confession to the brash party whooping that's expected of her when the guys call comes across as a minor tragedy. This is some of the best teen angst acting since *The Breakfast Club* (1985).

The movie's other key difference from most of its generic predecessors -- as was the case with the original comic -- is its location in a real city. This isn't Gotham, Metropolis or Central City; this is New York. The villain's base is a block from the Chrysler Building, while the Daily Bugle offices are in the Flatiron, and New York is a city that barely six

months ago was physically and emotionally ripped open. I saw the film at Loews Cinema on thirty-fourth and eighth, in mid-May 2002, in the middle of Manhattan. The rest of the world, I think, doesn't realise how wounded New York remains by what they call 9.11. The sympathetic flags and flowers have long since vanished from my hometown, London, but New York is still plastered with defiant "United We Stand" posters, with Stars and Stripes, with tributes to the NYPD and NYFD, with flyers begging, way beyond the point of last hope, for searchers to find a lost husband or sister. The city is still hurting. This is surely the first attempt at a New York hero movie since 11th September; the first film to show disaster and rescues against the backdrop of its skyscrapers. A set-piece showing the Twin Towers was, according to rumour, swiftly cut, but there's still one shot of Spider-Man crouched on a gargoyle, head bowed, with the World Trade Center standing in the background. He's mourning his uncle, but, of course, we see him as mourning the three thousand.

This shot serves as a twin tombstone, but there's still the fact to be dealt with that this is a comic-book adventure about bombs going off and people almost falling to their death, set in a real-life location that not long ago witnessed the real thing. The scenes of exploding grenades, crumbling balconies and tumbling citizens walk a very fine ledge; it all seems uncomfortably reminiscent, and, at the same time, uncomfortably pat, with its brightly coloured saviour swinging in to scoop up the girl mid-fall and its grenades hurled by a theatrical villain in a Halloween mask. Perhaps as a late addition and deliberate attempt to counter this unfortunate jarring, Spider-Man is himself bailed out by a group of New Yorkers in what *Time* recognised as a "Let's Roll" show of camaraderie. "You mess with one of us," a Joe Shmoe yells at the Goblin, "you mess with all of us." Similarly, any complications between Spidey and the police are quickly resolved, with the cops soon recognising him as a hero and Spider-Man showing the officers due respect, warning them he's going to flee the scene and never engaging them in combat. While Batman has often run foul of the law, the NYPD are America's real-life heroes right now, and any costumed character clashing with them is going to lose the audience's sympathy pretty quick.

Finally, the film faces another challenge through its setting. New York has been shot from virtually every angle, shown so often on-screen that you know the city even if you've never visited. You would have thought it was impossible to depict it differently, to make it seem new. *Spider-Man* -- and this is perhaps its greatest feat -- does just that. This is a bright city, a playground for a teenager with amazing powers; all gleaming canyons, spires and towers, every shining point another node in the network Parker spins. He shoots and swings, connecting block to block, and we follow him helplessly, pulled along behind him as the camera leaps and sticks, then leaps again. The experience is unlike anything else in cinema; a fluid but erratic journey, our viewpoint snapping like elastic round corners, tilting back to follow Parker's arc and swinging round scrapers, chasing him. It's joyful and breathtaking as it should be -- this is a kid with an incredible gift -- but the final scene gives his flight a new connotation, weights it with tragedy and, as such, makes the very last shot, a wild city tour, even more powerful.

Peter has just told Mary-Jane that he can never be with her; he's unable to tell her the reason - that he fears she'll be hurt through him -- and the girl he's loved since childhood is crying as he walks away. "The ones I love will always be the ones who pay", he announces in voiceover with an awful matter-of-fact certainty. He's a man who's come to terms with his destiny, discovered its accompanying pain and driven it inside him where it can't harm anyone else. Then comes the last shot, a bravura race down avenues, over rooftops, round corners, the camera on Spider-Man's tail like a tracer bullet, a homing missile. It's a

bittersweet victory, pyrrhic, semi-tragic and astonishingly sad for this kind of teen costume caper. We sense that Peter's exhilarating workout, swinging and swooping around the Empire State, is an attempt to beat down despair as well as exercise uncanny powers, and we're left psyched up and drained as he is, witnesses to his desperate ecstasy.

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# Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones

Dir: George Lucas, 2002

**A review by Philip Anthony Pirrello, Mercyhurst College,  
Erie, USA**

Movies evolve with every new summer blockbuster or quietly released art house pic. Their creators and storytellers, for the most part, get caught up in their craft and do a good job of telling a worthwhile story. Leading this evolution is George Lucas, a great ideas man, with a lot of stories to tell. But is he telling them as well as he could? Has he forgotten the elements that are essential to any method of storytelling -- believable dialogue, fleshed out characters, a flowing narrative, and substance over style? After watching *Episode II*, one might find themselves scratching their heads in an attempt to answer that question while avoiding the answer they know in their hearts: No.

This latest entry, while fast and furious with Jedi combat and marvelously paced action sequences, is slow and sloppy in its execution of the key elements to good story telling. These elements are there; we see apparitions of them in-between CG wizardry and elaborate digital space battles, but they only hint at what Lucas should have done, leaving the audience wondering if Lucas has gone too far over to the Dark Side of film-making, satisfying the desires of a digital manipulator over those of a universal storyteller.

Unfortunately, *Episode II* is bereft of a constant appearance of the three aforementioned elements, forcing one to wonder if the art of storytelling using the cinematic medium has gone by the wayside, favoring digital caricatures comprised of 1s and 0s over human characters made of flesh and blood. Lucas and Company have vastly improved upon *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (1999), starting this movie with a bang rather than an annoying Jar Jar. The saga continues with our introduction to an older, authority-be-damned Anakin Skywalker (Hayden Christensen in "Teen Beat" pathos mode). He and his master Jedi teacher, Obi-Wan Kenobi (an entertaining Ewan McGregor), have stopped an assassination attempt on Natalie Portman's Queen Amidala and have begun to investigate the uprising of Republic separatists led by Count Dooku (Christopher Lee swimming in villainy), a shady Senator Palpatine (Ian McDiarmid), and a legion of clone troopers spawned from the new cult-favourite, Jango Fett.

These various plot threads are pleasantly interrupted by subtle, yet dramatic, turns to the Dark Side by Anakin and John Williams' sure-to-be-nominated score. The most fleshed-out of the human characters is McGregor's Obi-Wan. What began as an impression has become a homage to Sir Alec Guinness, the originator of the role and a presence still strongly felt with every mannerism and gesture McGregor evokes. In addition, an interesting, unintentionally funny, uber-lightsaber battle between Yoda and Dooku is worth the price of admission alone.

However, despite all the kudos for Lucas' brazen handling of adrenaline rushed scenes, the "romance" between Anakin and Amidala is perhaps where the movie truly flounders. This particular subplot is void of any meaningful exchanges and it seems to be Lucas's sorest spot:

he can make a Wookiee roar convincingly, but can't give his star-crossed lovers anything better to do than smile and recite banal, cheesy dialogue, such as an exchange which has Anakin comparing the Queen's soft skin to his homeworld's coarse sand. These scenes are laughingly awful, insulting even, with such schmaltz being more suited to Hallmark cards or *Degrassi Junior High* episodes, than the *Wars*.

If Lucas wants us to believe that these two characters are Romeo and Juliet's galactic counterparts, then he has to find another way to convey this love outside of what fans know from the general mythos (they give birth to the original trilogy's Luke and Leia.) In addition, Lucas may want to find someone else, maybe a Cameron Crowe type, to collaborate with if he intends to go down the lovey-dovey road again. Crowe knows how to sell love, loss, and all the memorable stuff in-between. Lucas and his cast are not at that plateau yet, and, after watching the romantic leads' performances, it looks like they still have a long climb to go. Portman can act, but there is no evidence of craft here, unless she is going for a Strasburg approach equivalent to the cardboard cutout her visage appears on at Toys 'R Us stores worldwide, while Christensen has something, something that allays him to the darker path that we can't wait for Anakin to walk down.

However, despite the lack of anything worth pulling at our heart strings, despite the fact that Lucas's dialogue is awful and his narrative is more concerned with set pieces than character development, he does succeed at wanting us to care about our lead Jedis whenever they are in combat. Such instances provide Lucas with this new trilogy's best moments: allusions to events in the original trilogy and little symbolic gestures here and there that really bring a sense of wonder to the story. (The best example being Obi-Wan's line to Anakin, soon-to-be Darth Vader: "You're going to be the death of me.")

What Lucas lacks in overall narrative execution, he makes up for with believable, exciting action sequences, the true pulse of this piece and the sole reason why the narrative and plot does not collapse. The thought of a lightsaber duel in the dark, or a Normandy-like assault on Jedi knights by enemy droids, is enough to sit back and take in the "awe" of the movie going experience. However, while the effects are Biblical in scope and nothing short of fantastic in their execution, they are just manipulated polygons without a good story, and no heart to warrant our apathy -- something *Episode II* seems to have left back at Skywalker Ranch in the wake of Hollywood's digital takeover.

Lucas bares this burden alone. He is the one who insisted on digital technology all the way with *Episode II*, putting theatres in a panic with his request that they must convert to digital projection if they wanted the Force of box office dollars. It's all impressive, but his demands for all film-based projection houses to convert to digital must be met if we want to see *Episode III* -- and at \$100,000 each for these yet-to-be standardized digital projectors, the Force of the All Mighty Dollar better be with exhibitors. Whether this will occur or not, it is clear that Lucas is aggressively backing his notion to wipe live action film off the earth in a way similar to the baddies' attempt to eliminate the Jedi during *Episode II*'s engrossing climax.

However, is Lucas also planning to wipe out quality storytelling? Perhaps, instead of trying to revolutionize the movie business with a mediocre and still unproven product, he should work out all the kinks first, and rediscover the buzz of what it is like to truly create something never before seen, or, more specifically, never before seen by us. Storytelling is something no computer can create, no SFX expert can conjure. You either have it or you don't, and *Episode*

*II* desperately needs it. Worse yet, the filmmakers seem conscious of this. Such self-consciousness is not entirely satisfying to the viewer who sits there and spots all the moments suffering from a case of the "shoulda, couldas," such as scenes that take us into the Jedi HQ, promising insight into these lightsaber diplomats but ultimately ending up as story filler, or the sequence where Amidala lets go of her duty and follows her heart before the film's climatic scene. There is no motivation in this latter sequence, and, as such, no "You complete me" unification of her love and Anakin's. Such gaps are disappointing and the director and writers (Lucas, collaborating with Jonathon Hales) should have caught such errors before putting film to print, or in this case, pixel to film.

But the *Star Wars* movies, and I stress *movies*, were never the type of entertainment striving for mass critical and Academy acceptance. They embrace the camp and fun of *Flash Gordon* serials, albeit with a more elevated savvy, and such a method of storytelling is what Carter-era movie goers found solace in. Today's generation, however, who use e-mails as currency and Cliff's Notes as scripture, need more than hammy one-two exchanges and nifty set pieces the internet has already cheapened by revealing them prior to a film's release date. Even *Flash Gordon* had elements necessary to guarantee viewers would "tune in next time." All Lucas has, in regard to that same guarantee, is a twenty-year-old brand name used to warrant return viewings and water-cooler chit-chat.

Ironically, that brand name's genesis came from the same man who is now wearing it down. No one should ride confidently on their own coat-tails, especially ones as in desperate need of a tailor as Lucas's.

It will take more than a Yoda-centered lightsaber battle to quell the audience's rebellion if *Episode III* sidesteps the average ticket buyer's standards in favor of a beeline to the avid fan's expectations. Lucas needs to go back to the days of *American Graffiti* (1973), back to a time where story and content were more important than presentation and style. If he can't find the director we know he can and wants to be, then a travesty will occur: movies will have turned into an entity more concerned with box office than merit, CGI instead of TLC, and the pressure of a competitive industry in the wake of a digital democracy.

# State and Main

Dir: David Mamet, 2000

## A review by Damon Miller, University of East Anglia, UK

David Mamet's recent films seem to indicate that he is currently struggling to meet the high expectations which his previous work and reputation have created. The co-scripted *Hannibal* (2001) was not the psychological chill-fest audiences and critics expected; nor, despite its intentions, is *State and Main* a biting satire on a par with *Speed the Plow* or *Wag the Dog* (1997).

What can we expect from *State and Main*? According to the press pack, a "part screwball comedy, part showbiz satire" with "antic pacing, egalitarian view of human corruptibility and tender love story" in the tradition of Preston Sturges' films of oddballs, cranks and crooks, with Mamet attempting an American gang-comedy style. For a number of reasons, Mamet fails both in the combination of screwball comedy and showbiz satire, and in his attempt to reproduce the Sturges style. Perhaps this was too small a project for such lofty ambitions, and the final result is only a slightly whimsical take on the film-within-a-film, Hollywood-Meets-Small-Town genre, of which there are many, and better.

Measured against these ambitions and against his previous work, perhaps Mamet was bound to fall short. However, *State and Main* is not a bad movie. As with all Mamet screenplays, the beauty is in the small details. Unfortunately, just as keen observation pays off with the identification of a pearl of wit, said small detail is writ large upon the screen. The pointers are obvious and laboured; there are some classic pieces set up in the opening scenes (traffic light, pot-hole), but they double clumsily as plot mechanisms, detracting from their otherwise subtlety. The link between Hollywood and local amateur dramatics is raised repeatedly in a number of ways that rapidly become tired. There are surprising problems of continuity, the Mayor's party being a case in point -- the change in date is incorrectly entered into the filming schedule, meaning its use as a turning point in the plot fails. That said, some cul-de-sacs leave you wondering "What about..." at the end, having been cheated of spotting something key. The running fire incidents and the founding of the local football team are shrouded in mystery, giving the sense of something more sinister beneath the picture postcard town, but this is never heightened beyond vague speculation.

Beautifully filmed (Oliver Stapleton was also Director of Photography on *My Beautiful Laundrette* [1985], *The Van* [1996], and *The Grifters* [1990]), and without a weak link in the cast, the patchwork plot does work well. Although starting and ending with a one-liner -- despite an inner movie entitled *The Old Mill*, there is no mill present on location -- this provides a springboard for a number of parallel story-lines. The reason for the lack of mill is due to an unscheduled change in location caused by an unmentioned occurrence, most likely due to the almost paedophilic activities of Alec Baldwin as star Bob Barringer (in a juxtaposition of casting in the vein of Leone's casting of Henry Fonda in *Once Upon a Time in the West* [1969]). The need for a rewrite leads Philip Seymour Hoffman's floundering, fish-out-of-water scriptwriter Joe White on a personal quest for principle and typewriter, via local

Amateur Dramatics director and prospective local newspaper proprietor Ann Black, who fulfils the dual role of love interest and moral authority. Local politician Doug MacKenzie, her fiancé, appears to be the only local against the invasion of the movie-makers, but sees a cynical opportunity for boosting his prospects from "this close to a step away from a possible Senate nomination".

Despite the claim of being a "story of a big-budget production that wreaks moral havoc in a quaint New England town", the evidence on screen is to the contrary. *The Old Mill* is not a big-budget movie the like of which we have become accustomed to in any Dreamworks or Disney movie; and the locals mostly appear unfazed as they abandon an amateur fundraising play to attend auditions for bit-parts in the film, save for Sherry, the wife of Mayor George Bailey, who proceeds to wreck their home in a pointless but suitable refurbishment. And yes, "George Bailey" is supposed to be a homage to *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946); you are literally told this, when a local states that she sees *The Old Mill* as their town's version of the original film. Hammering home the point (again), the movie producer even runs his newspaper along the white picket fence upon his arrival.

Despite *State and Main*'s recognisable cast -- Baldwin, Hoffman, Sarah Jessica Parker, Charles Durning, William H. Macy, Patti Lupone, David Paymer and a host of others -- there is no particular stand-out performance. While testament to the abilities of those Mamet has gathered around him -- the majority of the cast and crew worked previously on *The Winslow Boy* (1999) and *The Spanish Prisoner* (1997), indicating Mamet's aim to build a repertory company in the mould of Woody Allen and Preston Sturges -- this has the unintended consequence of failing to provide a strong character with whom one can identify or engage. If there is a strong role, it is that of Macy as director Walt Price (ironically one which is grounded in his "pathetic" role in *Fargo* [1996]), who attempts to keep in the eye of the storm while all else is buffeted around him. However, this, and his position within the plot structure, is not enough to truly fulfil this requirement.

In addition to this, Mamet fails to engage sufficiently with his subject, which leads to the plot, while carried by his trademark rapid-fire, convoluted dialogue, ultimately losing its way. The subtext of the film, being the quest for purity and its destruction through that same quest, becomes the overt text, subsuming all else, with the players bobbing along on the stream of inevitability. Is the invasion by Hollywood a bad thing? Is the town fundamentally changed by its experience? What do the characters think is happening? What does Mamet himself believe? These questions are key to the subject addressed, but remain unanswered, leaving a feeling of disillusionment, not just with the film, but with all those involved in its production.

This should be a better film, given Mamet's previous work and the quality of the cast and production team, but, ironically, it is the assured, sharp, acidic wit of the dialogue and its execution which leads to the lack of need for any screwball antics. Other than the accident on Main Street, all the action is contained within conversation. There are no immediately recognisable cranks, crooks or oddballs; everyone is just too nice, even when nasty -- at best, they could be described as unorthodox, or a bit peculiar, but they are not out of place or disengaged with their situation. The film is not fast paced, but lapses into the easy-going rhythm of life in small-town America, rather than running headlong into it. Precisely because Mamet and the cast succeed in delivering the lines and script so well, and the production team successfully engineer a believable setting, the film thus fails in its two chief ambitions. Indeed, there is an over-riding sense of harmony, evident in the multi-tasking of some of the

cast and crew (Patti Lupone also provides vocals for the title song), which spills over from the making of the film into its content, thus leading to ultimate disappointment.

However, this is still recognisably Mamet in terms of ideas and dialogue. The furore over whether Parker's Claire Wellesley should reveal her breasts becomes pure genius with the *coup de theatre* of the final scene. How do you product-place a computing company in a movie set in the nineteenth century? Again, the unexpected answer is in the final scene, and is an inspired one too. There are films which you instinctively know you should stay until the very end of the credits for, and, spurred on by these final moments, this becomes one of them, with the sharp closing credit content and accompanying soundtrack being worth the wait. Thus, despite *State and Main*'s separate successes ultimately becoming its overall failing, this remains a film rooted at the centre of Mamet's repertoire, and one which hopefully marks the bottom of Mamet's rut, out of which the recent revival of his play *Boston Marriage* can only assist him.

# Die Unberührbare

Dir: Oskar Röhler, 2000

## A review by Lisa Rull, University of Nottingham, UK

Whilst it would be foolish to deny the powerful big-screen appeal of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), its 2001 Oscar success absolutely proved that the voters for Best Foreign Language Film are no less prone to seduction by spectacle and romance than those for any other Academy Award category. (Perhaps it had more in common with the crowd-pleasing *Gladiator* [2000] than many would care to admit). Though the final nominees included the disturbing violence of *Amores Perres* (2000), Germany's uncompromisingly bleak submission -- *Die Unberührbare* -- unsurprisingly did not make the shortlist to compete with Ang Lee's glossy epic.

The title translates literally as "The Untouchable One", yet the English language title adopted by the film's distributors -- *No Place to Go* -- is entirely appropriate to *Die Unberührbare*. This black and white film about the despair and eventual suicide of a writer was never designed to entertain a multiplex audience, and, instead, is an intimate, wry, and meditative study of one woman's realisation that she is "untouchable".

It is a pity that the film's distribution has been largely restricted to film festivals, such as those in Chicago, San Jose (Cinequest), and Istanbul. First screened in Britain as part of the December 2000 Third German Film Festival, and shown again on limited release at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London in June 2001, the film has struggled to gain slots even at cinemas ostensibly supported by the British Film Institute as "art house". Yet *No Place to Go* was garlanded with awards at almost all of its festival showings, with special commendation for the central performance of Hannelore Elsner.

The film is certainly worth seeking out just for Elsner's heart-rending performance. A veteran actor from over 120 German-language film and television roles, she appears in virtually every frame and the emotional range with which she imbues the character of Hanna Flanders is a privilege to view. The film has its flaws, but *No Place to Go* is overall a thoroughly rewarding cinematic experience. Hagen Bogdanski's stunning cinematography avoids noir-ish black and white in favour of appropriately washed out greys (this is a film with no certainties on offer except death). In addition, the film rejects a typical classicaesque soundtrack, preferring instead a haunting and minimalist piano score by Martin Todsharow alongside nostalgic pop, with Can's "She Brings the Rain" being used to particularly good effect.

Writer/director Röhler's previous works have attracted limited critical or popular enthusiasm even in Germany, and almost all the reviews of *No Place to Go* praise his shift of tone to more serious and reflective film-making. Perhaps the hitherto unseen talent demonstrated here derives from the emotional investment Röhler brings to the subject matter, for the central character of Hanna is based on that of his mother: West German writer Gisela Elsner (no relation to the lead actress). It is to Röhler's credit that, whatever emotion inspired the

work, he nevertheless succeeds in conveying incredible critical distance for this most intimate portrayal of his parents.

The narrative begins abruptly in 1989 with the televised destruction of the Berlin Wall. From a black screen the soundtrack crackles with the noise of its collapse, juxtaposing the physical demise of the Wall with Hanna Flanders' own personal disintegration. On the verge of suicide, she weeps at the "betrayal" demonstrated by East Germany, a country to whom she has clearly dedicated her intellect and creativity. Since the GDR was the only state which would publish her left-wing novels, its demise means that Flanders loses not only her ideological foundations but also, crucially, any possible income. In a frantic attempt to perhaps try and single-handedly turn back the tide of capitalism, she decides to sell up and move from her luxurious Munich apartment to eventful Berlin. In disturbing close-up, we watch as she enacts her daily transformation from fading belle into a pseudo-self-assured glamorous 1960s icon (her younger self?) with heavy black eye make-up, a tight-fitting dress, and a terrifyingly huge black "Cleopatra" wig.

In this disguise, as this "not self", her behaviour begins to make sense. This woman is ruled by delusion and artifice, her senses and perspective deadened by alcohol and prescription drugs. She finally chooses to make the East her home at precisely the moment when the belief system she has espoused for so long is abandoned there. Further evidence of her deluded life is shown in a phone call to her publisher/boyfriend Joachim (Michael Gwisdek) in the East. Hanna is distraught and bewildered that his previous offer that they might live together should be rescinded. Echoing her romantically fantasised version of life in the East, this divorced, middle-aged woman with a grown-up son has clearly believed the oldest lies and promises a man can make. She takes a taxi to the nearby Christian Dior store where she is immediately fawned over by the two assistants, who are obviously more than familiar with her lavish taste. She never realises their flattery depends on her spending power, and equally never questions the incongruity of condemning the East's rush to "candy bar" capitalism when she so obviously relishes designer-label dreams. This scene is both touching and nauseating, with Elsner perfectly capturing the tentative actions of a woman masking emotional uncertainties with material goods. She seems to float around the store, her touch tenderly alighting on various items, but her heart instantly setting upon a garishly patterned fur-collared coat -- a coat which will ultimately become the symbol of her "fall". (At the end of the film, heart-broken and penniless, back in Berlin with no dreams and left to die, she attempts to persuade the store to buy it back at half price. The store assistants react with icy contempt at her reappearance and, following their refusal, she abandons the coat in disgust).

When Hanna moves to Berlin, a feeling of intense dislocation takes over the film, as she discovers she has "no place to go", and that her masquerade as an aloof radical is easily shattered by human contact. This sense of being "out of place" is mirrored in an ambiguous time frame: do the events following her move to Berlin take place over days, weeks, or months? Child-like in her trusting and expectation of human nature, Hanna becomes more and more introspective and incapable of sustaining or understanding human contact -- either emotional or physical. She reaches out to an apparently sympathetic and charming young man at the plush bar of the Excelsior Hotel. When they retreat to her room for sex, he casually asks for his 400 marks payment. Emotionally numbed, or embarrassed, Hanna meekly complies and his seduction seamlessly continues.

Her money draining away, she wanders into her former publisher's office and also into Joachim, only to find them still drunkenly celebrating reunification and more than happy to



be free to deride her as a "spoiled Western bitch". Publishing assistant Grete (Nine Petri) offers an apartment to reduce Hanna's spiralling living expenses, but the place is a damp hovel at the edges of the East Berlin projects. Hanna then seeks respite from sleeplessness in a bar amongst joyful East Berliners, and is recognised by Dieter (Bernd Stempel), a young teacher. However, his "praise" swiftly turns to contemptuous criticism when she rebuffs his sexual advances ("You've really let yourself go... you wrote nothing but shit for twenty years"). These moments are typical of Röhler's command of the narrative: holding out possible redemption before revealing Hanna's trust as false hope.

At a low ebb after Dieter's assault, the compassionate Carmen (Claudia Giesler) and her extended family take Hanna in, and welcome her to join with their delight at "freedom". Bewildered at their criticisms that "freedom and truth were buried" under the old regime, Hanna admits her confusion -- that for her "communism was perfect". They gently mock her ("but you had a passport"), yet they nevertheless embrace her as "one of us". Hanna runs away, horrified that she has let them see her vulnerability (symbolised by the removal of her wig), and instead takes the masochistic decision to head to her parents in Nuremberg. This truly distressing encounter with her hostile mother and quietly affectionate father in their luxurious house is far bleaker than all the other attacks from strangers or so-called friends.

Running away yet again, she meets her ex-husband, Bruno (Vadim Glowna) at Nuremberg train station, and, fuelled by alcohol and musical nostalgia, they attempt a doomed reconciliation. Reminiscing about their political and personal happiness -- both long destroyed -- they find little comfort in each other's ageing bodies and soon part. (The scene also provides an exchange of darkly poignant humour: Bruno asks Hanna to remove her wig but she refuses, replying that it would be "the ultimate nakedness". "And if Lenin asked you to?" he responds; "Then I'd take it off"). Now totally alone, Hanna's suicide seems inevitable, and soon comes.

In its confrontation with personal and political consciousness, *No Place to Go* vividly recalls the works of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, rejects fashionable postmodern narrative structures, and doesn't feel obliged to wear its technical heart on its sleeve (with its notable absence of fast cutting). This is not *Run, Lola, Run* (2000), and Röhler's own weaving of the personal and the political has unsurprisingly riled some popular critics -- for example, *Variety*'s Derek Elley criticises it for harking "back to a type of Teutonic cinema that was all the vogue thirty years ago". However, by contrast, left wing commentators such as Bernd Rheinhardt on the *World Socialist Web Site* have praised it for exactly this reason. I agree with Rheinhardt that this is precisely what makes the film so vital and relevant, especially since few European directors appear happy to engage with issues in this way. (Under more restrictive regimes, subtle explorations of such matters are obligatory: witness the excellent and challenging material from Iran in recent years).

*No Place to Go* has its faults: approached in the wrong frame of mind, Elsner's performance -- especially when the ludicrous excess of her "Cleopatra" wig frames her beautifully ageing face -- may stir giggles rather than empathy for her lost foundation of identity. Moreover, without some knowledge of Gisela Elsner's life and work, the audience must work hard to contextualise the host of characters and events depicted on-screen. But, overall, the theme of loss of self and certainty will surely ring true with most viewers. Most of us have, at some point in our lives, invested (far) too much in a singular identifying person, activity, or ideology -- only to find they are as fragile and fallible as any other element.

One final note: this is a cautionary film for those still lamenting the screen death/dearth of chain-smoking characters. Flanders spends much of the film speeding anxiously from one cigarette to the next, constantly wreathed by the wafting smoke she exhales and illuminated by lighting that emphasises its photogenic qualities in stark black and white. But smokers should not get their hopes up too soon, for these are the movies post-*The Insider* (1999), and few can remain unaware of the implications of long-term smoking. Here, the final straw that leaves Flanders with "no place to go" is the threat of leg amputation(s) due to vascular disease. Unable to face her poverty or the collapse of ideological certainty without nicotine, she creeps into the toilet cubicle and smokes one last cigarette. Then, having climbed to perch on an open window-ledge high in the hospital building, she gently falls into the startling whiteness of infinity, and lets the credits roll on another dead smoker.

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# Zoolander

Dir: Ben Stiller, 2001

## A review by Christine Haase, University of Georgia, USA

*Zoolander* is the latest creation by Hollywood success story Ben Stiller. This raucous and silly, yet hard-hitting, comedy, released in the US in October 2001, was co-written (together with Drake Sather and John Hamburg) and directed by Stiller, who also stars as the movie's eponymous hero, male supermodel Derek Zoolander.

Derek, famous for his signature facial expression "Blue Steel" (a cross between Marlene Dietrich's sunken cheeks and the mimic limberness of the Terminator), becomes unwittingly entangled in a plot to assassinate the newly elected President of Malaysia. Said President has vowed to rid his country of exploitative work practices like child labour and sweatshops, much to the chagrin of a mafia of internationally renowned fashion designers, who fear seeing their profit margins shrink to the lousy proportions associated with first world labour. In an attempt to stem this unruly wave of democratisation and anti-colonialism, the group conspires to kill the President. They force their minion Mugatu (Will Ferrell), a self-obsessed, tantrum-hurling designer under their sway, to come up with a plan. Mugatu, after having dismissed Fabio as too smart, zooms in on his weapon of choice: Derek Zoolander. Subsequently, Derek is abducted, brainwashed in a scene that pays hilarious homage to *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), and then sent back into his world of MTV sound and fashion fury to await his involuntary deployment.

Derek faces many challenges during the film, none of which is made any easier by his supreme self-centredness or his utterly sincere denseness. There is, for example, Hansel (Owen Wilson), who unseats Derek as the world's number one male supermodel during a competition at the beginning of the film. This defeat hurtles our hero into a crisis of identity and meaning, forcing him to take a hard look at himself and to ask whether there is anything more important in life than to be really, really, really good looking? This quest/ion is one of the movie's *leitmotifs* in various ways. Even though many of the film's elements are worthy of discussion, I will limit myself to an analysis of its most blatant, but at the same time most entertaining, aspect: the clear-sighted critique of much of popular culture and its relentless ways of taking itself and its surface reality seriously.

This critique, wrapped up in a Hollywood movie with all the star fetishisation and beauty cult, commercialisation and profiteering these films usually entail, is an Escheresque illustration of the delights and the dilemmas surrounding pop cultural products that take on pop culture. The question always remains: who appropriates whom? Does the mass entertainment culture a) get a witty beating by a renegade artist, or b) co-opt and use him to conceal its flaws and failures by tolerantly sporting him and his critique as a subversive feather in its cap? Does the writer/director kick pop culture's shallow (if super slim) behind, or does he exploit a faux gesture of opposition to make a buck, according to the old adage: do as I say, not as I do?

One obvious answer to this question is: who cares? As long as the film delivers seven dollars worth of entertainment (and this film delivers about twenty dollars worth of it), who cares? The other obvious answer, however, is that answer number one is symptomatic of precisely what the film is criticising, and, consequently, someone who enjoyed the film should care. This ambivalence (clearly experienced by Ben Stiller himself as evidenced by the rabbi he played in 2000's *Keeping the Faith* who, at the actor's insistence, was clad in Prada throughout the film) is partly what makes the movie so delectable: it mocks, but it doesn't preach; it has no pretensions, but some convictions; it is full of critical energy without a trace of the Oliver Stone brand of self-obsessed righteousness.

The brilliance of *Zoolander* lies in the simplicity of its references and analogies. *Zoolander's* send up of our culture's obsession with visuals, appearances, and surface reality on the one hand, and profit maximisation on the other is as hilarious as it is dead on. After Derek's downfall as the world's leading male model, Mugatu, spinning his web of intrigue, offers him a job as the spokesmodel for his new fashion line: Derélicte. The line is based on the "style" of vagrants and homeless people, and advertised before a backdrop of cardboard boxes and burning trashcans. Derélicte will make you feel as free as the wind and as unbound as all other welfare recipients. The merciless exploitation of poverty and suffering for the purpose of selling tattered rags at haute couture prices seems so plausible that one is surprised nobody has tried this yet. Clearly, it's a rather small step from the commercialisation of punk by way of selling platinum safety pins and designer torn jeans, to the smut-streaked faces of the Derélicte models.

During the process of re-evaluating his life, Derek decides to leave a mark on the world by making it a better, and not just a better-looking, place (a distinction whose meaning he has great difficulty grasping). He finally comes up with a suitable project: the "Derek Zoolander Center For Kids Who Can't Read Good, And Who Can't Do Other Things Good Either". When Mugatu, his new-found benefactor, presents an architectural model of the center to Derek in his office, our hero is outraged: "What is this, a center for ants? How can we expect kids to learn how to read, if they can't even fit into the building?" The tendency of pop culture and its aficionados to judge things according to their surface reality, and to (mis)take appearances for the "real thing" is cleverly satirised in this scene. Derek's reading of the "model" (!) as the actual center is a brilliantly simple joke that sums up our culture's propensity to equate the look of something or someone with their meaning and accomplishments (as evidenced, for example, in the semi-god status supermodels or boy groups have achieved).

Hence, it is in strict accordance with the film's logic that the obvious place to settle a conflict and to prove the stuff you are made of is the runway. One of *Zoolander's* silliest and most hilarious scenes is a showdown between Derek and Hansel. In a sequence that is part *High Noon* (1952), part *Fight Club* (1999), and part *Dumb and Dumber* (1994), the two confront each other in a "walk-off", where they try to outdo their opponent by putting on ever more eccentric moves on the catwalk. Again, the film's strength is the wide-eyed literalness with which it builds its analogies: if looks and fashion rule the world, then models and designers run it, and the battles are fought in magazines and on runways. Obvious, isn't it? Well, of course not. It is much more complicated, and less fun. Yet there is a savant part to some idiocy that guides its finger to the sore spot with such precision that, in the end, one isn't so sure any more who is naïve here and who isn't. Derek, of course, ultimately redeems himself and foils the evil plan. During the victorious showdown, he also finally unveils his new facial expression (something he has been working on for a very long time), the successor to "Blue

Steel": "Magnum". However, as with a lot of mass cultural phenomena, the two are effectively indistinguishable. What separates them is a name and the hype and anticipation that accompanied "Magnum". Other than that, it is sucked-in cheeks meets Arnold. This repackaging of the same old, same old in order to resell the same ideas over and over is an element of commercialised culture that is, luckily, not necessarily an integral part of it. *Zoolander* demonstrates that with gusto. It also proves that sometimes you can bite the hand that feeds you, and have it too.