About a Boy

Dir: Chris Weitz and Paul Weitz, 2002

A review by Juliette Wells, Yale University, USA

With the exception of the recent (and ongoing) film adaptations of the *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* books, critical discussions of movies don't usually examine closely the necessarily complex relationship between a film and the literary work on which it is based. This doesn't mean that critics completely ignore the fact that a film is an adaptation rather than a wholly original enterprise. Indeed, critics often compare a book to its film adaptation, usually to the benefit of the book, or comment briefly on the overall effectiveness of the translation effort, judging whether the film is prosy or insufficiently cinematic. In addition, they sometimes call attention to any significant differences between the source and the screenplay that are not attributable solely to the twin necessities of compressing a plot and telling a story visually. In all of these cases, however, the critic's mandate is to determine whether or not the film succeeds as a film. If it does, the liberties it takes with its source -- and what those liberties suggest about the motives behind adapting books to film for contemporary audiences -- go unremarked.

Nick Hornby's novels offer an especially fruitful opportunity for examining the implications of adaptation because they seem, in many ways, designed to work well on film. Not only are they full of pithy, quirky dialogue and unusual but appealing characters, but they feature plots that are easy to streamline and plenty of pop music just waiting to go on the soundtrack. *High Fidelity* (2000), the second of Hornby's novels to be adapted to the screen, risked a transatlantic transplantation to a used records store in Chicago, but emerged with its spirit intact, thanks largely to excellent comic acting by John Cusack and Jack Black.

Except for its climax and conclusion, the film version of *About a Boy* (which is directed by brothers Chris Weitz and Paul Weitz, who also wrote the screenplay together with Peter Hedges) doesn't depart from Hornby's novel to nearly the same extent. Both versions are set in London and focus on the at-first-uncategorizable relationships that develop among Will Freeman (played excellently in the film by Hugh Grant, lean and spikily short-haired), a thirty-eight-year-old single guy who lives off the proceeds of his father's one and only hit song; Fiona Brewer (Toni Collette), a struggling mother with ex-hippy fashion and lifestyle sense, who belongs to a single parents' support group that Will joins (under false pretenses) in the hope of scoring a date with a luscious single mum; Fiona's twelve-year-old son Marcus (uneven newcomer Nicholas Hoult), who is tormented at school because of his geeky haircut, terminally unfashionable clothing, and utter ignorance of contemporary youth culture, and whose sense of self-preservation leads him to fantasize about hooking his unstable mother up with the comparatively stable Will; and Rachel (Rachel Weisz), a gorgeous single mother who meets Will at a party and finds him interesting only because of his connection to Marcus, which Will encourages by leading her to believe that he's actually Marcus's father.

The film retains most of Hornby's madcap plot, in which Fiona's suicide attempt causes Marcus to seek out additional adults with whom to bond, Will and Marcus gradually become

attached to each other in spite of themselves, and everyone survives a variety of misapprehensions, many of which are perpetrated by Will in an effort to represent himself as being more attractive than he actually is -- and having less of a terminally empty life than he actually does. Many of Hornby's wittiest lines appear in the screenplay, and the film approximates his alternating third person chapters by switching back and forth between Will's and Marcus's points of view, with frequent voiceovers.

Until the last section of the film, many of the alterations made by the screenwriters are unobtrusive and obviously effective cinematically. They place Will in chichi bars, salons, and shiny megastores, thus emphasizing the luxe of his life rather than the loneliness, and they track his evolution from adamantly self-sufficient to thoroughly interconnected with a running reflection on a literary quotation -- "No man is an island" -- that Will wonderfully attributes to Jon Bon Jovi. Evidently aiming to make the film feel utterly contemporary, they also jettison both Hornby's setting in 1993 and his use of the death of Kurt Cobain as a plot point.

Noticeable, but not especially significant casualties of compression include Hornby's few references to the larger political and social universe, such as a South Asian newsagent who champions Marcus against the school bullies, and Fiona's outraged reaction to a Tory woman on TV who argues that every child needs two parents. Any allusions to (much less use of) marijuana are also absent from the film. More importantly, however, the film divests Fiona and Rachel of explicit careers, whereas in the novel Will's inveterate joblessness contrasts with the women's gainful, meaningful employment (as a music therapist and illustrator of children's books, respectively). This change is particularly detrimental to Rachel, who in the film risks seeming little more than a projection of Will's gorgeous-single-mum fantasy, albeit with a very human capacity for anger and hurt that he probably didn't imagine.

These deviations pale, however, beside the screenwriters' decision to replace Hornby's plot resolution with an entirely invented series of scenes. In the novel, Marcus and his punk not-quite-girlfriend Ellie take the train to Cambridge, which results in Ellie showing her essential unreliability as a friend by getting into trouble relating to the death of Cobain, and Marcus uncharacteristically but maturely telling off his non-custodial father. Fiona subsequently begins to realize that her son is no longer a person whom she can create in her own ideal image: as the novel ends, the once geeky Marcus is getting stylish haircuts, shopping for his clothes with Will, disdaining his mother's taste in pop songs, and no longer inviting ridicule with unguarded comments. Meanwhile, Will and Rachel's future together is not at all assured, or at least not imminent. The only certainty with which Hornby concludes is that Will and Marcus have forged an enduring, mutually beneficial connection.

The film, however, not only emphasizes the changes in Will to the exclusion of the changes in Marcus, but also substitutes cloying messages about togetherness and self-discovery for Hornby's more circumspect, more realistic resolution. There is no train trip with Ellie. Instead, Marcus tries to cheer up his mother, who loves to hear him sing, by performing a torchy song at his school's talent show. Will, anticipating that Marcus's schoolmates will crucify him, rushes to the scene, arguing that people have to make themselves happy, but the boy contends sagely that everyone has an obligation to others' happiness as well as to their own. Rather than let Marcus sing alone, Will grabs a handy guitar and accompanies him. At first, it works -- the sudden appearance of a stylish older man behind the plump-cheeked Marcus silences the kids' derision. But Will, apparently unable to control himself, proceeds to

embark on the next verse alone, and ultimately Marcus has to drag him off stage. Will has saved Marcus, but at the cost of embarrassing himself.

Is Will discovering a latent interest in performing? Is he realizing that amateur singing is a way to shake off the ghost of his father's hit song, an insipid Christmas tune? Is he being punished for his pretense of relentless coolness? Is he displaying his inability to succeed in rescuing anyone? Or has he unwittingly rescued himself? The film doesn't answer any of these questions. Before long, however, Will, Rachel, her son, Fiona, Marcus, and a host of other friends and family gather for a Christmas celebration, where Will reflects that he's still an island, but perhaps part of an island chain with subterranean connections. The camera implies strongly that Will and Rachel are and will remain together, and Fiona is even paired with a promisingly hairy guy Will once met through Amnesty International. Everyone is accounted for, the seeds of new traditional families are planted, and Marcus hasn't even had to grow up -- Will's done that for him.

In a way, of course, Marcus and Will are both the boy of the novel's title, and their oddly similar mixture of maturity and immaturity is what makes their relationship not only possible but compelling. As Hornby presents them, Marcus is negotiating the transition from childhood to adolescence, Will from self-absorbed singlehood to a kind of family man, both with equal pain and success. The Weitz brothers, however, ultimately keep Marcus a child, albeit a wise child; he doesn't even change his awful haircut. In so doing they truncate the crucial parallel between Marcus and Will, even as they clumsily accent it in other ways: Rachel, for instance, comments inexplicably in the film about the physical resemblance between the two. Perhaps the directors, best known for the boy-shags-pastry fable *American Pie* (1999), can't conceive of any kind of plausible adolescence for someone like Marcus to embark on. Or perhaps they're just mired in the sentimental belief -- which Hornby vigorously argues against -- that only by remaining true to the nonconformist self Fiona has cultivated in him can Marcus weather the slings and arrows of the teen years. In any case, this conclusion casts a retrospectively and devastatingly saccharine glow over an otherwise satisfying film.

Asoka

Dir: Santosh Sivan, 2001

A review by Debanjan Chakrabarti, University of Reading, UK

The Hindi cinema box-office has never been kind to biopics, with the possible exception of *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960). Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that *Asoka* fared rather poorly on that front. However, the scant critical acclaim that this visually opulent film on the legendary emperor received in India is surprising, even alarming. Such silence is perhaps more of a comment on the desensitizing effect popular "formula" films have had on critics than on the film itself. This is not to say that Santosh Sivan (*The Terrorist* (1999)) strays into the realm of emphatically art-house stuff, made on shoe-string budgets and aimed primarily at the more "discerning" festival audiences. Quite the contrary. *Asoka* is lavish even by the extravagant standards of Mumbai's (formerly Bombay) filmdom. The script by Saket Chaudhary and Santosh Sivan flits from one formulaic device to another in the course of its 196 minutes of epic narration. The strength of the script is in its intricate braiding of the several stock conventions of popular Hindi feature films in a manner that intelligently suggests a shift from the banal to the epic. A voice-over that disowns any claim to historical fact admits the audience into the film's fictional world. As the words of the voice-over are echoed in writing before the casting sequence begins, it is difficult not to feel a little squeamish about the impending business of rewriting, retelling and retailing of history that we are about to witness. Thankfully, Sivan's breathtaking cinematography and narrative experimentation scarcely allow any opportunity for such academic ratiocination.

The casting sequence uses a shot of one of Asoka's numerous stone edicts that are strewn all over the Indian subcontinent as a backdrop. The names of the cast leap up luminously from the miasma of the Brahmi characters, the script in which most of Asoka's edicts were carved in stone. Since the alphabets leaping up from the edict eventually form a stylised English font, *Asoka* thus displays a lively awareness of its mooring in history, and points to its own deliberate, playful smudging of historical "fact". Sivan uses the same technique to roll the credits at the end of the film, thus achieving a rather neat "quotation" effect. The film tracks the story of Asoka in a relentlessly linear manner within these "factual" parentheses, so that until the credits start rolling at the end the audience is caught between two acts of narration. This feeling of in-between-ness is further fostered by the fact that *Asoka* takes blatant and provocative liberties with history between its historical brackets. This twisted feeling of having watched an extravagant musical and being witness to a chapter of "history" is central to the film's ambiguous genre, and, indeed, the *Internet Movie Database* website lists it severally as drama, action and romance.

Few definitive facts are known about Asoka's personal life, the principal source for which are the rock and pillar edicts, initially deciphered by James Princep in 1834, and a second century book, *Asokavadana*, translated into Chinese by Fa-Ch'in in AD 300. It was only in 1915 that all the edicts were definitively attributed to Asoka. He was probably born in 304 BC, grandson to Chandragupta Maurya, the founder of the Mauryan empire, ascended the throne

in 270 BC after a protracted and ruthless fratricidal war, and conquered Kalinga in 262 BC after one of the bloodiest battles documented in ancient Indian history. The war emerged to be the turning point in Asoka's career. Repulsed by the bloodshed, he embraced Buddhism and embarked on the conquest of the hearts of his people by espousing non-violence and putting in place an administration run on Buddhist principles. He sent his son, Mahendra, and daughter, Sanghamitra, to Sri Lanka to preach Buddhism. The Asokan edicts mainly reveal the sincere aspirations of a repentant soul, and are mostly concerned with the minutiae of Asoka's administration and statecraft. The sparse personal facts the edicts yield have been drilled into generations of Indians in school and offer little scope for drama, let alone the kind of picaresque melodrama that Sivan lets loose on his unsuspecting audience.

The film takes up the story of Asoka as a boy when he sadly watches his beloved grandfather, Chandragupta Maurya, renounce his throne of Magadh and walk away from his world as a Jain hermit. The boy picks up the sword cast away by the former warrior and, somewhat enchanted by its phallic connotations, vows to live by it. It is a completely amoral world that Sivan portrays, its cloying atmosphere of backstairs intrigue resonates with the epic values that compel parallels with the *Mahabharata* and the *Iliad*. Indeed, Asoka lives Achilles' dream, choosing an hour of crowded glory to a lifetime without fame. The ablest general among his brothers, unlike countless mainstream Hindi film protagonists, Sivan's Asoka does not ooze the milk of human kindness and makes his designs on the throne quite clear. This brings him in direct confrontation with his eldest brother, Sushim, and, to avoid bloodshed, Asoka's mother, Dharma, intervenes and asks him to undertake a long journey and live the life of a common man. The Oedipal Asoka (and this is one formulaic trait Asoka shares with hordes of Hindi film heroes) relents, which allows Sivan to introduce the picaresque tale that forms the core of his story as the prince sets out on his adventure.

Asoka falls in love with the princess of Kalinga, Kaurvaki, who along with the crown prince Arya, is also wandering the forests, guarded by their trusted general, Bheema, and hounded by royal conspirators who assassinated their parents. While Asoka woos Kaurvaki, much to the consternation of the taciturn Bheema who has a soft spot for the princess, a bond also develops between the boy, Arya, and Asoka. Like most other boys of his age, Arya demands to be entertained with stories, and Asoka fulfils this demand by re-telling his own tale in a thinly-disguised manner. Asoka's storytelling sessions are interrupted by all manner of adventures expected in a picaresque tale. The story Asoka relates to placate Arya is formulaic in a folksy way. The way Sivan unfolds the romance of Asoka and Kaurwaki for his audience fulfils all the conventions of Hindi popular cinema, including lavish song-and-dance sequences that have little to do with the development of either plot or characters. But it is to these moments of intersection of various narrative modes that the film owes its distinctness. This narrative strategy allows Sivan the freedom to rearrange historical evidence. In the process, Sivan raises interesting questions about history and historicity. By stressing orality as a valid form of transmission and preservation of history (interestingly, that is how Asoka's legend was remembered in India and Sri Lanka before historians formally put together the evidence in 1915), Sivan's film underscores the mythic nature of all history and all texts, and, in the process, his initial nod to his source becomes ironic, subsumed within the framework of the larger folk tale.

Just when Kaurvaki marries Asoka, news from Magadh takes our prince home. When Arya is miffed at the prospect of losing his entertainer, Asoka vows to return with a thousand elephants and horses, a promise loaded with proleptic irony. Soon after, Kaurvaki and Arya narrowly escape being killed, but Bheema ensures that Asoka gets the news of their "death".

With no beloved to restrain his elemental passions, Asoka plunges headlong into the tussle for the throne of Magadh, and succeeds after killing all his brothers except Sugatra and Vitasoka. Incidentally, the film suggests, but doesn't make obvious, that Vitasoka is Asoka's own brother while the rest are step-brothers, and thereby legitimises their murder to an extent. Sugatra escapes only to take refuge in Kalinga, where now the young Arya has been reinstated. Asoka's return to Magadh signals the end of the narrative's escapist, bucolic retreat and triggers off a seemingly endless sequence of murders, intrigues, counter-plots and blood-letting that sometimes stretches the logic of plausibility. The chain of violence culminates in the battle for Kalinga where the fantastic and the historical threads of narrative come together once again. Asoka's repentance is given a personal touch when Prince Arya dies in his hands, skewered by arrows, and being reunited with Kaurvaki brings Asoka no joy, so momentous is the destruction all around.

However, while Sivan's interpretation clubs the dream of empire with sexual fulfilment in an impressive way, it is his attempt to use comic interludes in an overtly Shakespearean manner that doesn't work at all; these gags throw little light on the life of the common people, and neither are they humorous. The episodes only add interminable minutes to an already long film, slacken its pace and often dispel the sense of grandeur, mystique and doom that Sivan's camerawork and choice of locale sculpt carefully around its protagonist.

Shahrukh Khan, often criticised for his broad-brush acting, finds his metier as the over-vaunting hero. His smouldering, yet somewhat androgynous good looks convey the right degree of vulnerability that is masked by battlefield derring-do in *Asoka*. Kareena Kapoor exudes the sensuousness her role demands, but it is Suraj Balaje as Prince Arya who turns in an outstanding performance in a somewhat cameo role.

In its refusal to relate Asoka's story beyond the battle for Kalinga and its immediate aftermath, the film elides the obvious and evades the patently historical, though the voice-over at the end makes a feeble attempt to outline the rest of Asoka's career in less than a minute. It is a bold statement from a director who refuses to entertain anything that is not ripe, lush, colourful, blood-soaked, passionate, visually awe-inspiring or simply shocking. Like the ethos by which his protagonist lives, Sivan's cinematic credo is the unlife-like and the fantastic, and betrays a daring to look a little beyond the realm of plausibility. He mostly succeeds in his bravura attempts, and somewhere along the way the director merges with his subject. This is at once Sivan's strength and weakness. As someone who started out as a cinematographer and turned to direction late in his career, he sometimes tends to get carried away by the picturesque. At times it is evident that he is too much in love with the images his camera has captured to sacrifice them on the editing table. For instance, early in the film, Asoka survives an assassination attempt while bathing in the river. Left to stand by itself it is a breathtaking clip, but for the purpose of cinema, too many visual clues remain unexplained. What purpose does Asoka's nervously shifting, neighing horse serve? Why doesn't Sugatra kill Asoka with an arrow instead of the assassin he had set on him?

For the conservative historiographer, such slovenly violence on pristine evidence could well be gut-wrenching, but it is in large measure due to his cinematography that Sivan walks away in *Asoka* with spectacular murder.

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The Butcher Boy

Dir: Neil Jordan, 1997

A review by Shirley Peterson, Daemen College, USA

Some readers have called Patrick McCabe's 1992 novel, *The Butcher Boy*, a dark comedy, others see it as tragic, and still others find its power in the disturbing blend of both genres. The 1997 film adaptation of McCabe's novel by Irish filmmaker Neil Jordan (screenplay by Jordan and McCabe) has received similar responses. For instance, Edward Guthmann of the *San Francisco Chronicle* attributes the film's power to its achieving the book's odd blend: "Jordan mixes domestic tragedy with fierce gallows humor and the stark horror of a Goya painting". (Guthmann, 1998) Jordan presents the plight of young Francie Brady (played by Eamonn Owens) in stylized images of cold war era Ireland that visually link the nuclear menace abroad to Francie's paranoid village community, what Guthmann calls "parochial grotesques", and his own rapid mental deterioration. Francie's whimsically flippant tone, particularly in the voice-over, amplifies the discordance both externally (in the global context) and internally (in Francie's mind). The problem is that the horror McCabe achieves through Francie's alienation from and loss of the nuclear family is undermined by the farcical elements in the film, making it more amusing but less disturbing than the novel that inspired it.

Through visual and verbal irony, the film caricatures Francie's two worlds: the real and the imaginary. In a review of the Galway premier of the film, *The Irish Times* praised Jordan for "precisely catch[ing] the repression and hypocrisy of an Irish town at a time when the lace curtains of the squinting windows were kept firmly drawn against anything that shattered the cosiness of the superficial contentment of daily life" (Dwyer, 1997). The "real" setting of the story is 1962 in the homely Irish midlands (shot in McCabe's Clones, Co. Monaghan), where as "a young lad twenty or thirty or forty years ago", Francie Brady quips, "they were all after me on account of what I done on Mrs Nugent". During the opening credits, the soundtrack enhances Francie's outlaw pose with "Mack the Knife", a jaunty allusion to one of many anti-heroes evoked in both novel and film. Comic-book style illustrations accompany the credits and then dissolve into reality, foreshadowing Francie's initial, if petty, crime -- stealing *Green Lantern* comic books -- and its consequences. These allusions to what *Time*'s Richard Schickel calls "crud culture" (Schickel, 1998) both insulate Francie from his severely dysfunctional family and community, and provide a distorted lens through which he interprets his community role.

At first, viewers are inclined to dismiss Francie's belief that others are out to get him as just fanciful exaggeration, or at worst paranoia fuelled by a fertile imagination steeped in pop culture. But the disjunction between past and present implied in "twenty or thirty or forty years ago" suggests otherwise. The film effects this disjunction through the voice-over, that of the adult Francie (Stephen Rea, who doubles as both Francie's father and the adult Francie, who speaks to us from a mental hospital a few decades in the future). Disturbingly, Francie's older voice reflects little change or development; in fact, except for sounding deeper, it could express the thoughts of young Francie who, for all his faults, is the embodiment of Irish wit

and charm. However, what's entertaining in a twelve-year-old is irritating in a middle-aged man. This could just be the fault of the voice-over itself, always a strained technique that is not successful here. The opening scene places us in yet a third temporal point in the story, *in medias res*, and introduces Francie as the enigma he really is, covered from head to foot with gauze bandages, lying in a hospital bed while police officials hover above him pleading, "Why, Francie?". As the camera closes in on the sole eyehole in this mummified form (reminiscent of David Lynch's opening in *Blue Velvet* (1986)), we enter into the dark world of "the amazing Francie Brady", a world that is, on many levels, a very scary place.

The flashback to Francie's fall from innocence begins appropriately enough in a garden where he and best friend Joe are stealing apples when fellow classmate Phillip Nugent appears with the coveted *Green Lantern* comic books. The scene then cuts to the front of Francie's home where we get our first glimpse of Francie's nemesis and Philip's angry mother, Mrs Nugent (the wonderful Fiona Shaw). Mrs Nugent is clothed throughout the film in the apple green color that links her both to Francie's "fall" in the garden and later to the space aliens with whom Francie associates her (Dwyer, 1997). While Francie's mother, Annie Brady (Aisling O'Sullivan), stands by helplessly, browbeaten under Nugent's verbal assault, his father, Benny Brady (Rea), staggers drunkenly down the lane toward them. The Bradys are "pigs!", Mrs Nugent screams, a vituperative condemnation she will reiterate but learn to regret in a series of increasingly ballistic retributions by Francie, who gradually embraces the role, acting more and more bestial.

The film brilliantly captures Francie's mutation from cheeky youngster to alienated and homicidal youth through the tropes of 1960s pop culture, nuclear apocalypse, and science fiction, particularly that of the alien invasion popularized in such films as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956). Francie already imagines the local gossips who hang out in the grocery shop as the "three headed woman", while Mrs Nugent's signature green clothing immediately marks her as chief alien. In fact, at first Francie's "alienation" of Mrs Nugent seems a logical -- even poetic -- rejoinder to her dehumanization of the Bradys into pigs. It's only later, when Francie begins to think of her as the alien responsible for what he sees as the "body snatching" of Joe, that we understand how dangerously far Francie has internalized his own alienation, and how contemporary cold war hysteria becomes the external equivalent of Francie's ever deepening psychosis.

When Francie runs away to Dublin after another fight between his parents, we see how the alien theme popularized in American sci-fi films is easily conflated in his mind with the rising mass hysteria over nuclear war. In Dublin, he wonders if the fast pace on the streets is due to a bomb threat. Taking refuge in a movie theater, he watches a space alien -- inside it was really Mrs Nugent -- and encourages the humans to retaliate, "C'mon, you bastards. One bomb is all it takes!". The linking of Mrs Nugent, at this point, to the space aliens reflects the very real alienation Francie feels in his own community and, increasingly, even within his own family. Like the Soviets, perceived in the American imagination as alien invaders from outer space, Mrs Nugent/alien invader comes to embody everything that Francie fears is destroying his family, bleak as that is. And like the American fear of Communism that led to the excesses of McCarthyism, his fear and hatred is displaced and paranoid.

If nuclear madness informs one part of Francie's imagination, religious mania in his village seems another extension of his own troubled mind as his family degenerates into madness, suicide, and abandonment. After an encounter with a paedophile priest (Fr. "Tiddly"), Francie witnesses mass hysteria in the streets over reports that Our Lady (played ironically in the film

by papal scourge Sinead O'Connor) will be making an appearance to local children. As villagers scurry around the "holiest town in the world" to find the visitation site (Jordan owes much here to *La Dolce Vita* (1960)), their own *enfant terrible* quietly slips into the Nugents' home, kills and butchers Mrs Nugent in her apple green suit, "the greatest alien of all time". Afterwards, he blithely wheels her remains through town to the brock heap where he dumps her, hardly noticed in the general clamor over Our Lady's failure to appear after all (except to Francie, who's been getting regular visitations for some time). His subsequent attempt to immolate himself and the family home to the tune of the "William Tell Overture" returns us to the point at which we entered Francie's mind in the hospital. Badly burned and headed to an asylum, this Lone Ranger will not ride again.

The utter destruction of Francie's mind is wonderfully realized in one particular scene in which a badly hallucinating and broken-hearted Francie fantasizes a nuclear apocalypse that fuses the three central themes: aliens/religious frenzy/nuclear madness. To the tune "Where are You?" by Frank Sinatra, Francie and Joe witness a nuclear explosion, the externalization of Francie's madness. Wandering through the remaining scorched wasteland, they encounter the dead "pigs" of their village and a priest on horseback, now mutated into an insect-like alien. Family, community and religion have all failed Francie, leaving him bereft of human kindness but for that retained in the recesses of his own mad mind.

Would that the film had left us with the apocalyptic horror of that lost innocence rather than with a farcical revision of the novel's ending. Whereas the novel leaves Francie with tears of joy at finding another friend like Joe in the asylum where he'll spend the rest of his days, the film's Francie (Rea, looking somewhat clownish with bright orange hair) is poised to leave the asylum, even though he still has visitations from "Our Lady". His psychiatrist reassures him that "As long as we anticipate all of the problems, then everything should be fine". This comment is intentionally hollow, but the retreat from Francie's "vision" into irony diminishes the impact of his story. We might see the same strategy worked to a better end in Jordan's *The Crying Game* (1992), which retains the vision of its marginalized characters without losing the pathos of their situation. Fortunately, the farcical conclusion of *The Butcher Boy* detracts only slightly from an otherwise brilliant adaptation.

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East is East

Dir: Damien O'Donnell, 1999
My Son the Fanatic

My Son the Fanatic

(Dir. Udayan Prasad, 1997)

A review by Chi-Yun Shin, University of Exeter and Sheffield Hallam University, UK

The late 1990s saw two interesting British Asian features, *My Son the Fanatic* and *East is East*, both of which explore the idea of belonging and generational conflict but from very different perspectives. In *My Son the Fanatic*, written by Hanif Kureishi and directed by Udayan Prasad, Om Puri plays Parvez, a cab driver, originally from Pakistan, living in the grim Yorkshire city of Bradford (or "Bradistan", the idyllic destination of a day trip in *East is East*). Unlike savvy fellow Pakistani immigrants, Parvez has missed the opportunity to prosper, although he seems willingly acclimatised to life in England. The film begins with the meeting between Parvez and his wife Minoo (Gopi Desai) and the parents of Madeleine (Sarah Jane Potts), a white middle-class girl, to whom their son Farid (Akbar Kurtha) is engaged. To Parvez's dismay, however, Farid breaks off his engagement on the grounds that a mixed marriage will not work ("you can't mix keema and strawberries"), which leaves Parvez perplexed and enraged. The film follows the transformation of Farid from would-be accountant to fervent fundamentalist through the eyes of Parvez.

In *East is East*, set in the working-class Salford district of Manchester in the seventies, Om Puri is George Khan (Genghis to his children), the Pakistani proprietor of a fish-and-chip shop, who lives with Ella (Linda Bassett), his (second) white wife, and their six sons and one daughter. With the exception of one pious son who has been dubbed "Gandhi" by his siblings, George and Ella's children have avidly embraced their English upbringing, while George intransigently adheres to Muslim traditions, imposing Arabic lessons, traditional clothes, circumcision and arranged marriages on his mixed-race children, which inevitably leads to constant conflict. When his eldest son, Nazir (Ian Aspinall), who we later learn is gay, jilts his bride at their wedding, George cuts him off and descends quickly into tyranny. With the protection of their mother, however, the children manage their dual lives. The film, for instance, begins with the young Khans participating in a Catholic procession behind their father's back. Far from studying engineering, as George believes, Saleem (Chris Bisson) is really at art school, while Tariq (Jimi Mistry) is a regular at a local disco. When George is not around, they munch forbidden bacon and sausages and try their best to dodge Arabic lessons. It is clear that they do not see themselves as "Pakis". For them, Enoch Powell's 'assisted repatriation' speech provides a perfect chance to "have a whip round and have Genghis repatriated", as Tariq jokingly says.

As such, the narratives of both films are structured around the opposition and conflict between father and sons (and a daughter) compounded by each father figure's relationship with the white woman in his life. Parvez, though seemingly an "assimilated Asian", regards Farid's broken engagement as a filial disobedience, a challenge to his position as master of his own home. His position within it is further jeopardised when Farid invites a *maulvi* (an Islamic holy man) and his acolytes over from Pakistan, and they consequently take over the house. In the midst of all this, Parvez is liberated and comforted by his loving protection of a white prostitute, Bettina (Rachel Griffiths), who, along with her colleagues, is attacked by his son's Islamic sect. George, meanwhile, has the devoted Ella, whose loyalty is often torn between her husband and her children. The family drama reaches a climax when Ella determinedly takes sides with her children after the family faces an awkward social encounter with the Shahs (the family of the brides-to-be), which leads to an emotional and physical confrontation between George and the rest of the family. The infuriated George beats her up, but it is Ella who brings about his catharsis.

Apart from their plots driven by generational conflicts, *My Son the Fanatic* and *East is East* make a curious double bill in their representation of Islamic traditions. In *My Son the Fanatic*, Islamic fundamentalism is pursued by the young, British-born Farid. The film's writer, Hanif Kureishi, said that the idea of the film was provided by his thinking about the *fatwah* against Salman Rushdie announced in February 1989: "Muslim fundamentalism has always seemed to me to be profoundly wrong, unnecessarily restrictive and frequently cruel. But there are reasons for its revival that are comprehensible." As Kureishi points out, "it must not be forgotten that the backgrounds to the lives of these young people includes colonialism…[and] racism -- being made to feel inferior in your own country.…Without a doubt it is constraining, limiting, degrading, to be a victim in your own country. If you feel excluded it might be tempting to exclude others." As such, whereas Islam is essentially bound up with youth (as a signifier for the modern), in *East is East* it is the older generation George who insistently imposes the Islamic customs on his children. Thus, somewhat problematically, Islam itself is presented as antiquated and oppressive, and, more importantly, the marker of the irreconcilable difference between a Muslim father and his British-born children, which in turn presents the young Khans as the victims of backward Muslim prejudice.

Perhaps rather predictably, many of the images and themes in *East is East*, the portrayal of a violent Muslim patriarch in particular, have drawn much criticism that the film operates within the logic of racist assumptions and stereotypes about Islam and the East. For instance, Ali Nobil, writing in *Third Text*, complains that "George's completely unsympathetic, one-dimensional character encourages the audiences to reinforce their view of a foreign villain, by which they can dismiss domestic violence as a quintessential characteristic of other societies or part of the backwardness of other cultures". In defence of his characterisation of George, Ayub Khan-Din, the film's scriptwriter argues, "I'm sure some Pakistanis will find the character offensive, but it is a fairly accurate portrayal of the man, and the times we lived in. He was not a Pakistani 'Everyman'; he was my father, and these were the choices, right or wrong, that he made." Indeed, the film that is described by Khan-Din as "semi-autobiography" should be understood as a piece of personal history, which is neither "wrong" nor "negative". However, there is a degree of justifiable criticism of the film in that it does not really engage with or invest in showing the value of the traditions to which George clings. Because of such indifference to George's motive -- despite the fact that Om Puri masterfully balances between playing a sometimes hateful, sometimes sympathetic character -- George never completely becomes the film's anti-hero. Instead, the film focuses on offering an

insight into life for the white woman who married into Pakistani culture and the non-threatening aspirations of the young Khans.

Despite the criticisms that the film received for making a mockery of Islam, mainly from the Asian press, *East is East* attracted a huge audience and went on to become one of the most successful British films of the decade (earning over £7 million in the UK and a further $4 million in the US), while *My Son the Fanatic* slipped into obscurity. The film's wide appeal lies first and foremost in the fact that it is funny. As many commentators have pointed out, much of the film's humour comes from slapstick visual gags, which often centre around the youngest member of the family, Sajid (Jordan Routledge), a parka-wearing bottom of the pecking order character (who also evokes *South Park*'s (1997) Kenny). For instance, in a point of view shot for Sajid we see the world framed by the fluffy periscope of his parka hood. After his belated circumcision, George carries Sajid to their house, only to forget to turn Sajid sideways, thereby walloping his head on the door frame. The combination of door and parka humour continues when Sajid accidentally gets the toggle of his parka stuck in the door and almost chokes himself. There is also a memorable scene where the tomboy, Meenah (Archie Panjabi), accidentally slams a football through a neighbour's window on which is a poster advertising a town meeting with Enoch Powell. When angry Mr Moorhouse (John Bardon) looks out of the window, his face gets framed by what remains of his poster, forming an end-of-the-pier style image.

Along with slapstick humour, the film also draws on a range of codes and conventions, mostly associated with traditional British comedy such as *Carry On* films, in its portrayal of gender conflicts and particularly in the unsympathetic and almost inhumane ways it depicts unattractive women. For instance, Stella (Emma Rydal) attempts to play Juliet to Tariq's Romeo ("I'll never let your father's colour come between us"), while Tariq is obviously not interested in any steady relationship. In addition, there is a chubby girl named Peggy (Ruth Jones) who accompanies her best mate Stella wherever she goes, even to the alleyway where Stella and Tariq have a regular snogging session. In fact, during most of her screen time, Peggy watches Stella nearby, and is portrayed as a caricature of the 'fat slag' who is not just unattractive but also sexually desperate and shameless. Thus, when Tariq tries to bargain away free chips for a week after calling her "fat arse", Peggy demands a bottle of coke as well and a snog from his brother Saleem. With the exception of Meenah, who is half-English, the film is also dismissive and unsavoury in its treatment of Pakistani women. In particular, two daughters of the Shahs, who are virtually silent, have no function beyond being ugly and being referred to as "Laurel and Hardy".

As with gender conflicts, *East is East* also incorporates the tension between different classes in a tradition of British comedy that shares roots with and maintains the allegiance of a predominantly working-class following. This is most obvious in the sequence in which the Shahs pay their visit to the Khans with their daughters, intended brides to Abdul (Raji James) and Tariq. The class difference between the Shahs and the Khans is highlighted from the beginning when the Shahs arrive in their brand-new car. Their appearances clearly reflect their relative wealth: the women of the Shah family are heavily made up and dressed in lavish costumes while Mr Shah is clad in gold jewellery. Through Meenah, the film already makes fun of Ella's efforts to speak in a posh accent, but what the film seems to despise most (hence inviting the audience to despise) is Mrs Shah's snobbery and that of George who is taking her side. Mrs Shah first comments on how similar all the small houses look and proudly points out that their daughters have their own bathrooms. Therefore, when Saleem's latex life-size replica of a vagina, complete with pubic hair, comes whirling through the air in slow motion

and falls into Mrs Shah's lap, there is almost a sense of justice. The punishment of being 'snobbish' and calling the mixed-race children 'mongrels' is further inflicted on Mrs Shah when a randy dog jumps on her.

Problematically though, the different affinities to class depicted in the sequence are linked to the racial or ethnic difference of the characters, putting the patronising Shahs and George on one side, and Ella and her children on the other. In addition to class difference, Ella and her children's northern working-class accents differentiate them from George and the Shahs (whose probably British-born daughters are conveniently silent here). This northern-ness of the young Khans, in fact, works as a powerful factor that reduces their "Asian-ness", effectively offering a means to comprehend the film's transformation into a genuine, or at least an honorary, British film. Indeed, the film successfully lifts itself out of the category of "British-Asian" film, mainly due to a conscious attempt by the filmmakers to package it as part of the "mainstream". For instance, Khan Din commented that he deliberately went for a non-Asian director so as to avoid the film being turned into a "Screen Two", choosing Irish first-time feature film director, Damien O'Donnell.

However, it has to be noted here that the production of *East is East* initially faced financial problems due to its being seen as essentially an "Asian" film. After putting £500,000 into script development, the BBC pulled out of the project because they thought it to be too risky. It was hardly a surprising attitude towards an 'Asian' film set in the seventies with uncertain international appeal and with no stars, considering the increasingly commercialised climate of filmmaking practice during the 1990s. The project was then rescued when Film Four put up £3.5 million. As part of their effort to turn what would have been a specialist release into a mainstream event, FFD (Film Four Distributors) earmarked a hefty promotion and advertisement spend and organised numerous test screenings. The advertising campaign ranged from the sports pages of tabloid newspaper *The Sun* to the left-wing broadsheet *The Guardian* to prime time television spots on parent broadcaster Channel Four. The strategy continued on the satellite channels and included setting up a website featuring a virtual dating game. Along with preview screenings, the distributor also aimed to build word-of-mouth by platforming the film on seventy-two sites in the UK and seven in Ireland. The film then expanded to 132 sites in the UK and sixteen in Ireland, with a total of 227 prints. This was also backed up by strong sales world-wide at Cannes following a US deal with Miramax Films.

As such, *East is East* has been promoted and embraced as a "British" comedy, and the plethora of reviews have hailed the film as a legitimate successor to *The Full Monty* (1997). For example, *The Daily Mail* hailed it as "the funniest British film of the year" and "the next Full Monty"; *Total Film* called it "the Brit hit of the year …a possible Brit classic-to-be"; *Time Out* labelled it an "eclectic English comedy", and *The Times* said, the film "promises to be the next *Full Monty* -- but way, way cooler". The list of rave reviews includes one from the more high-brow film magazine *Sight and Sound*, in which Liese Spencer made a strong reference to *The Full Monty*, claiming that "this funny, feel-good film…looks set to do for race relations what *The Full Monty* did for unemployment". As for his inspiration, Khan-Din said that "I was influenced by the bittersweet northern films of the 1960s like *A Taste of Honey*, *Spring and Port Wine*, *This Sporting Life*. Although people try to marginalise films like *East is East* as 'Asian', for me it has always been a northern comedy in that tradition". Indeed, from its re-articulation of working-class identity through its relation to locality, *East is East* demonstrates its close affinity to a recent cycle of popular films that explore the problems of unemployment and social exclusion faced by working-class people. In effect, the

film explicitly displays life in a small and crowded terraced house in a northern England setting for mass consumption.

It has to be said that the high profile commercial success of *East is East* has made a difference to assumptions about British Asian films and the sort of market that they may have. The cross-over success of a small British Asian comedy is certainly a cause for celebration, but it nevertheless has to be acknowledged that the wide appeal of the film stems at least in part from the successful repackaging of the culture clash both within and between communities. This signals a risk of going hand-in-hand with the prevailing climate of generic and formula-based filmmaking, therefore producing a particular type of discourse. More importantly, there is a greater risk of ignoring the complexity of contemporary British Asian identities, which have provided an important creative source for much of British Asian film.

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Josie and the Pussycats

Dir: Harry Elfont and Deborah Kaplan, 2001

A review by Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, Australia

Who would have thought that *Josie and the Pussycats*, a candy-colored film updating of the seventies cartoon series would interrogate the values of the John Hughes generation? Not its directors, certainly, who seem blithely unaware that the movie's villains, "Lithping Litha" Snyder, aka "Fiona", and "Whiteass Wally", aka Wyatt Frame, demonstrate the beginning of the end, or at least the redefinition of the classic high school freak as constructed in scores of teen movies since the 1980s.

The plot is simple. The Pussycats, Melodie, Valerie, and Josie (Tara Reid, Rosario Dawson, and Rachael Leigh Cook), a struggling girl band from Riverdale, are whisked into megastardom by the sinister Wyatt Frame (Alan Cumming) of MegaRecords. Frame needs a new "best band ever" to replace "DuJour", the boy band he manages, the members of which have perished, or so it seems, in a plane crash. But the Pussycats' new found superstardom is not all it seems: beneath their cheerful lyrics, MegaRecords' evil CEO, Fiona (Parker Posey), is using subliminal messaging to create, as Josie puts it, "an army of mindless teenagers to make them buy things". The Pussycats uncover and thwart Fiona and Wyatt's evil plan (with the help of DuJour, who have survived the crash) moments before "Operation Big Concert" will brainwash the youth of America. They then perform for their enthusiastic fans, exhorting them not to be followers, but to "decide for [them]selves" what they like. Fiona and Wyatt, who have been revealed to be "Lithping Litha" and "Whiteass Wally", high school rejects turned monomaniacs, watch sourly from the sidelines.

Like the music scene that the movie satirizes, the subliminal message beneath the movie is only revealed at the end. That message is to be found in the villains, Wyatt and Fiona, high school freaks and geeks who have reinvented themselves into successful record producers only to be unmasked as quivering frauds at the end of the film. "So, what's the moral, here?" asks Alexandra, a nasty minor character, as Fiona and Wyatt rip out their false teeth and wigs and rush into each others' arms. "Freaks should only date other freaks?" Josie hastily suggests that the real moral is that we should instead be happy with who we are. In this moment, however, the movie, which ostensibly celebrates free will and individualism, undercuts itself, underlining its rootedness in the world of cartoons, by its insistent essentialism: freaks can only be happy with other freaks, because they can never be anything else. Fiona can cap her buck teeth, diet herself to a wisp, claw her way to the top of the corporate ladder, and swathe herself in designer-icon clothing, but she will always be overweight, unpopular "Lithping Litha" Snyder from Huntington High School. Wyatt can suck in his gut, fake an aloof British accent, and cover his albino complexion with pancake makeup, but he will never shake off the spectre of "Whiteass Wally." No matter how many "pretty and popular" bands the two of them kick around or manipulate, the loneliness and hatred that fuel their drive for world domination can never be assuaged, or so the movie would have us believe.

Initially, though, as Wyatt explains to the uncomprehending Pussycats, success is the best revenge for high school social rejects like himself: "What's the point of being famous if the people you hated at high school don't want to kiss your ass? You're lucky. Most people have to wait till their high school reunion for that kind of revenge." He and Fiona avenge their misery by brainwashing teens into spending their babysitting and lawnmowing money on an ever changing assortment of trendy items. They do it by preying on their fears: beneath the music, "Mr Moviefone" (the voice of a movie information phone service) bellows "DuJour's Slave Mix is the best CD ever! If I don't buy it, everyone is going to hate me!", or "You're nobody without an Abercrombie and Fitch vintage T!".

Fiona and Wyatt are expert at manipulating teenagers through their fear of being ostracised, because they operate out of the same fear themselves. Wyatt is content to manipulate the Pussycats as if they are just one more megaband to be disposed of when they become awkward or suspicious. Fiona, however, is so possessed by her fear of being alone and her jealous hatred of all things pretty and popular that she starts to seem worryingly obsessive, particularly in the context of this cartoon-based flick. Indeed, her self-obsession has morphed into galloping monomania, as we see when her plans for the foolishly named "Operation Big Concert" are revealed. No longer focusing on selling rhinestones, feathers, Snapple and Heath Ledger to her captive audience, she sells herself, elbowing aside "Mr Moviefone" and recording her own pitch: "Fiona is the most jerkin' girl in the world! Everyone loves her! She's got the best hair and the most awesome clothes! She's so thin! If I were a girl I'd want to be her best friend forever. If I were a guy I'd want to date her!". To the Pussycats, three confident, pretty musicians, who seem to exist in their own world, immune to the pressures of high school society, Fiona's behaviour is inexplicable, because for them it is irrelevant. When Fiona, or, rather, "Lithping Litha" whines "all I ever wanted was to be popular; tell me, is that so bad?", Josie wrinkles her brow in perplexity. She can't answer, because she doesn't understand, because she doesn't participate in that aspect of society.

In their desire to contrast Josie and Fiona, however, Elfont and Kaplan ignore the point that though Josie doesn't seek world domination, she does seek popularity for her band. When DuJour appear to have perished in a flaming plane crash, her reaction is "at least they had a record", a potentially selfish remark that is allowed to slide, perhaps because Josie is "pretty and popular" (as Fiona hisses at one point in the film). Partly because of the absence of characters who really *are* pretty and popular, Fiona is left without an equal opponent, and *Josie and the Pussycats* sends a profoundly mixed message about the rights of geeks to revenge themselves on the society that tortures them, because we never see the torturers in action. Nevertheless, Fiona/"Lithping Litha" isn't merely villainous because she's ruthless, amoral and monstrously egotistical. She's villainous because she can never escape her inner geek. She's not wrong to persuade teens to buy "Fiona" because she's damaged goods; she's wrong because she is worse than damaged, she's defective. Alexandra, a minor character who is only in the movie because "I was in the cartoon", is correct, then, when she says that "freaks should only date other freaks". By trying to do otherwise, Fiona assures her own destruction. The battle between evil (freaks) and good (Pussycats) is skewed: the Pussycats aren't really responsible for vanquishing Fiona: she self-destructs. The result is a movie that is oddly unbalanced.

One reason for this lack of balance in the film is that the movie covers too much territory. It constantly introduces clever conceits, then drops them as if not knowing what to do with them (DuJour's plane crash is one example). Fiona and Wyatt are oddly stranded figures, recognizable because they are teen movie standards, but placed in the wrong movie. No-one

else in the movie seems to have anything to do with high school, yet Kaplan and Elfont, whose previous credits include *Can't Hardly Wait* (1998), an ultra-traditional high school flick, are so enamoured of the idea of Fiona and Wyatt (in the DVD directors' commentary they say that the scene where Fiona pulls out her false teeth is "their favorite shot" and "the best part of the movie") that they fail to provide context or a suitable environment for them, a failure for which even the best efforts of the exquisitely oily Cumming and Posey's signature deadpan mania cannot compensate.

The result is a movie that, to me, points out the limitations of traditional teen movies, without sharing other contemporary films' dissatisfaction with the tramlines that the genre travels along. The best current high school films or television shows these days understand the stereotypes, and subvert or sideline them. Thus, the cast list of *Not Another Teen Movie* (2001) includes "The Desperate Virgin", "The Bitchy Cheerleader", "The Token Black Guy", and is subtitled as "Ten Things I Hate about Clueless Road Trips When I Can't Hardly Wait to Be Kissed", not so subtly skewering the formula of dozens of recent teen movies. *Election* (1999), a film with higher aspirations, pits Reese Witherspoon's overachiever, Tracy Flick, against Matthew Broderick's schlumpy teacher, Jim McAlister, who drafts the school's popular jock into the school election to prevent her from winning. Here, the writer, Tom Perrotta, manipulates stereotypes into a confrontation that has the inevitability of Greek tragedy. Unlike these movies, *Josie and the Pussycats* is not set at high school, and the failure of its teen-obsessed villains to survive in the real world suggests that Elfont and Kaplan needed to flesh out their characters, or render them more schematic.

Josie and the Pussycats, then, leaves me feeling slightly uneasy, as if I've been implicated in the bad faith of a movie that promotes individualism and sincerity, and officially rejects stereotyping, yet traps its most interesting characters in essentialist and stereotyped roles. For me, this is most summed up in The Pussycats' number one hit: "Pretend to Be Nice". This is a movie that wants to be nasty, but is compelled to pretend to be nice, a movie that wants to be satirical, but is trapped in a cartoon format, and suggests that freaks should not only date other freaks, they should do so only at high school.

Lara Croft Tomb Raider

Dir: Simon West, 2001

A review by Rayna Denison, University of Nottingham, UK

Over the past few years Lara Croft has enjoyed the kind of prominence and popularity that most Hollywood starlets dream of. She, along with Marilyn Monroe, has in recent years become one of the world's most widely recognised icons of femininity. As such, she has enjoyed a plethora of different incarnations ranging from her appearance in the Tomb Raider video games right through to an eponymously titled comic book series and an ever-increasing range of action figures and assorted merchandise. You too can own your very own Lara Croft lunchbox, only now it will be plastered with Angelina Jolie's face, as Jolie pouts her way into Lara's twin-holstered icon of womanhood.

The film incarnation of Lara, in *Lara Croft Tomb Raider*, by rights should have been as successful as its central icon. With an Oscar winning actress and prominent action director Simon West, the film could hardly fail. Not only that, *Lara Croft Tomb Raider* came riding in on the crest of a female-fronted action-adventure TV show tidal wave. With the likes of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997), *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995), *Nikita* (1997), *Dark Angel* (2000) (a James Cameron production) and newcomer *Alias* (2001), female protagonists are going through something of a renaissance in American television. But Lara is slightly different to Buffy and friends; the trouble with Lara is that she has always been an icon first and a character second. So, unlike the myriad of warrior princesses and double/secret government agents in the current crop of TV shows, Lara's back-story had to be invented retrospectively. And somewhere in the half dozen or so treatments produced for *Lara Croft Tomb Raider*, Lara's story was lost.

The way in which the back-story for *Lara Croft Tomb Raider* was reconceived speaks volumes about the (lack of) faith Paramount had in its icon. It also reflects Alexandra Keller's comments about the independence of the new TV and film heroines (Keller, 1999: 145). These new heroines, unlike those of the feminist 70s or backlash 80s and 90s, work solidly within the patriarchal order to bring down the bad guys (Xena being the notable exception). Where, after all, would Buffy be without her watcher; or *Dark Angel*'s Max be without her crippled crusader Logan; never mind that *Alias*'s double agent Sydney never goes anywhere without the say so of at least two men (her boss and her CIA "handler"). Lara, on the other hand, was always a loner heroine, disowned by her family and, in the first game at least, even hired by a woman to recover lost artefacts. Tellingly, in *Lara Croft Tomb Raider* Lara becomes a Daddy's girl, seeking to rectify the past mistakes of her now dead father in order to have one last moment of stolen time with him. The effect was two-fold: first, it clearly signalled appeals to the audiences of the aforementioned TV shows, audiences usually considered to be equivalent to those for Hollywood action-adventure blockbusters; but, more significantly, it undermined the independence and history of the heroine that had so intrigued gamers. In appealing to fans of Buffy *et al*, the producers ignored the strong following that Lara's story had already garnered.

Intriguingly, the re-conception of Lara for her film debut did not end there. Lara of the video games is heavily based on Indiana Jones, but West repeatedly made claims for his Lara as being like "James Bond in 1961" (Godfrey, 2001: 8). Gone too are the quest-driven narratives of the games. In *Lara Croft Tomb Raider*, Lara's only task is to find two halves of an ancient triangle and unite them. This is a far cry from the complex plots with multiple tombs, catacombs and dark, maze-like city streets that Lara has investigated in the past (albeit with the help of gamers). Moreover, no one on West's team seems to have thought the narrative through to its logical conclusions. Lara could have just destroyed the first half of the imaginatively titled Triangle of Light, retrieved from what Roger Ebert calls "Crumbly Creatures" (Ebert, 2001:), at the similarly titled Tomb of the Dancing Light (in a beautiful yet criminally underused sequence filmed in Cambodia at Angkor Wat). Then the evil Illuminati would have had no possible way to unite the halves, giving them the power to, as they melodramatically proclaim, "control time itself". Destroy the first half, and Lara could have completed her task in next to no time. But no, instead Lara trots off to the Arctic, to the "dead zone" around the ruins of an ancient civilisation to hang on for dear life from various poorly conceived props (of which the climatic set of the orrery is the worst offender). All of this for one last stolen moment with her father, played by Jon Voight (Jolie's real-life father).

The difficulties with this film, though, cannot all be laid at the door of poor conception. The icon of Lara Croft itself had begun to wane by the time the project started filming in 2000. Thus, the promotion of the film not only had to work to align Jolie as a believable Lara, it also had to reinvigorate popular interest in the character itself. The difficulties in positioning the film in the action-adventure marketplace did not end there though. West and his leading lady also worked hard to create a space for Lara in the world of film, where heroines currently remain polarised between the comedy antics of *Charlie's Angels* (2000) and their more sombre and melodramatic Hong Kong, or Hong Kong-inspired counterparts (see, for example, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) and *The Matrix* (1999)). The majority of TV's new heroines fall into this latter category, but although Lara's character is made to mimic them in certain ways, her sobriety is not allayed by either much comedy or pertinent melodrama.

Perhaps the worst offence this film commits against the action-adventure genre, though, lies in what it consistently refuses to do: put Lara in danger. Every good action hero and heroine worth their salt suffers before they triumph. Indie gets beaten up by Nazis, Bond has the good grace to look worried when lasers are aimed at tender parts of his anatomy, and Buffy has already died twice, Max once and Sydney gets captured, beaten or tortured at least once a fortnight. Life is not supposed to be easy for the action-adventure hero. That is the trouble with Lara: she is never troubled. Attacked by robots, henchmen, crumbly stone monkeys and the main bad guy, Powell (played by Iain Glenn), yes, but troubled, no. Obvious bleeding is kept to a minimum in this film, and so much time in make-up has been spent covering Jolie's tattoos that the budget does not seem to extend to showing her bruises. Suddenly, the Lara Croft that we have all seen die a hundred times in the games becomes invincible, proving once and for all that Lara remains an icon in *Lara Croft Tomb Raider*, unassailable and unbreakable, never quite attaining the flesh and blood that real action heroes are made of.

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The Man Who Wasn't There

Dir: Joel and Ethan Coen, 2001

A review by Sabine Hikel & Andrew McAllister, York University, Canada & University of London, UK

The Man Who Wasn't There, the latest offering from Joel and Ethan Coen, is a story of modern, masculine alienation set in post-war America. Nominated for an Academy Award for cinematography, this gorgeously shot black and white film is at once an homage to and a parody of 1940s film noir. The title of the film refers to barber Ed Crane, the character played by Billy Bob Thornton. Through both the dialogue and the cinematography, the film makes it clear that Ed is the model of the alienated modern man. He is easily overlooked by the other characters, he rarely speaks (paradoxically, though, he narrates the film), and he is morally ambiguous. Silent, inert, and forgettable, Ed is alienated from his labour, his sexuality, his world and himself.

The importance of Ed's job as a barber is evident in the fact that hair -- its growth, its cuts and styles -- is a thematic device used throughout the film. It serves several different functions, one of which is to highlight Ed's alienation from his own labour. Despite his refusal to identify himself in terms of his job, he is always and only ever perceived by others as being "the barber". In one of the opening lines of the film, Ed claims that he is not "really" a barber; it just happens to be what he does.

Another function served by the hair motif is in representing the themes of sexuality and masculinity. Ed's alienation from his own sexuality and the lack of sexual bond between him and his wife (Doris, sensitively played by Frances McDormand) is demonstrated through the motif of hair. For example, when Doris asks him to shave her legs, Ed consents to her request; however, the dispassion and disinterest with which he does the duty is telling. Shaving Doris' legs is fraught with meaning; for her, it is an affirmation of her femininity to have smooth legs. For Ed, the act of cutting or shaving the hair is a repetition of the same dulling, alienated work he does for pay during the day. It affirms the lack of affection and sexual chemistry between them. Indeed, by the end of the film we know that they have not had sex together in many years. (Later, there is another moment where a character's leg hair is shaved, but the meaning there is the other side of the hair symbol: in that instance, hair signifies death). When Ed begins to assume his wife is having an affair with her boss (James Gandolfini), he is neither outraged nor totally nonchalant. Instead, he seems just slightly annoyed by it. As Ed sets a plan of blackmail in motion, he almost begrudgingly admits, "Doris was two-timing me and I guess, somewhere, that pinched a little." Lines like these offer the audience an insight into Ed's ambivalent existence, cut off from a true depth of feeling.

Ed's relationship with his would-be business partner, Creighton Tolliver (played by Jon Polito), is also introduced to the audience through the transaction of hair cutting. Tolliver is a salesman, the consummate figure of modernity. He walks into Ed's barber shop, hustling the magic of dry cleaning, one of the great commodities of modern convenience. The smooth-

talking salesman takes off his toupee, and, as Ed cuts what remains of the salesman's natural hair, Tolliver begins to convince Ed to invest in a dry cleaning business. Shortly thereafter, a potential moment of homoeroticism passes between Ed and Tolliver. This moment is not only indicative of the sexuality of the salesman, but Ed's psycho-sexuality as well. Ed's wooden response to the salesman's pass is neither reciprocation nor outrage, seemingly the two polar opposite responses available to him. Rather, Ed's rejoinder to the salesman's wink is to impassively inform Tolliver that he is "way outta line, mister".

Dry cleaning is another device interwoven throughout the film to represent particular dimensions of modern life. The 1950s fascination with chemicals and their properties is an example of the modern triumph of the artificial over the natural. When Tolliver proposes that Ed put up some venture capital to finance a new-fangled dry cleaning business, Ed is hooked. Ed believes that involving himself in dry cleaning fills a gap and gives his life purpose. Dry cleaning, for Ed, is a kind of stand-in for freedom or escape. When he thinks to himself that he must be crazy for wanting to get into the dry cleaning business, he knows that it is exactly that kind of thinking that keeps him "locked up in the barber shop, nose against the exit, afraid to try turning the knob". Hence, Ed is aware of the repression of modernity.

The dry cleaning motif also makes a statement about Ed himself. Dry cleaning is the cleaning that isn't there; it doesn't touch the clothes, just as Ed doesn't touch other people. Dry cleaning is cleaning without water; it is a negative term. Ed is as arid and absent as the dry cleaning process itself.

Ed's fascination with dry cleaning is analogous to his asexual desire for a young girl, Birdy, played by Scarlett Johansson. Ed sees Birdy as sterile and clean. He's attracted to her because she's dry like him, but he wants to save her from a passionless life. Ed takes consolation in listening to Birdy play piano. She can use opportunities "before it all washes away", he says wistfully. Birdy is like a project to Ed, just as dry cleaning was a (failed) project for him. He takes her to a nearby town so that she may audition for a famous French piano teacher named Jacques. After the (failed) audition, the teacher informs Ed that the trick is to play with passion and soul, something which Birdy lacks. Ed's idea of perfection is not making mistakes. Jacques states that it's not about playing the right note, but about soul, and the teacher "cannot teach her to have soul". Mechanical perfection is not a desirable goal, but Ed cannot understand that because modernity is linked with soulless mechanisation.

Through the devices of hair and dry cleaning, the Coens offer us a story that represents the ambiguity of modern life. Truth is presented as being open to marketing and manipulation. This is most clear in the second half of the film when a murder rap falls on Doris' head, and the film turns into a court drama. When Doris' lawyer, Freddy Riedenschneider (expertly played by Tony Shalhoub), prepares her defence, a modern message becomes clear: truth isn't absolute; it's about persuasion. It's about whether the truth can be properly packaged and sold, like the dry cleaning business. When Ed confesses to the crime himself, Riedenschneider does not accept the story -- one narrative among many -- because it simply is not marketable to the jury. Riedenschneider refers to the "uncertainty principle", which holds that "the more you look, the less you know". Ed reflects on Freddy's closing remarks: "He said I was modern man, and if they voted to convict me, well, they'd be practically cinching the noose around their own necks. He told them not to look at the facts, but at the meaning of the facts. Then he said the facts had no meaning. It was a pretty good speech." An indictment of Ed, the argument goes, would be an indictment of society, because we moderns all suffer from the

lack of a fixed moral standard. Ed Crane is no different from the rest of us. His own indifference to the crime and his moral ambiguity simply reflect the modern world.

Toward the end of the film it is revealed that Ed is narrating the story of the film from prison, as he writes it down in an article for a men's magazine. The magazine is paying him for his life story, and it's when the story gets turned into a commodity (five cents per word) that it makes sense and becomes real and truthful. Ed is writing himself into existence, although he is about to be snuffed out. On one level, then, Ed Crane is truly "the man who wasn't there", an ineffectual, alienated modern man who touches no-one.

But there are three crucial moments in the film when Ed does take action: when he commits a crime, when he gets involved in the financing of the dry cleaning business, and when he takes Birdy's piano career on as a personal mission. Yet all of these actions are failures, both personal and moral. Hence, Ed occupies an unstable subject position. Ed is the writer and narrator of his own story. The audience sees the town through his eyes. The whole film is told from his perspective, his claim to truth. However, ultimately, there is no reward for identifying with Ed; his actions and desires are limited and continually frustrated.

All of these elements put together comprise a compelling story, while maintaining a sense of humour. Despite the dark undertones of the movie, there are laugh-out-loud moments. Thornton's deadpan delivery is both terribly funny and also convincingly conveys the melancholy theme of modern alienation. Strong acting, witty dialogue and beautiful cinematography come together in the Coens' best release to date.

Metropolis

Dir: Rintaro, 2001

A review by Maria Ionita, University of Western Ontario, Canada

The release of *Metropolis* by Columbia TriStar (even if it seems to be somewhat marred by a curious insecurity as to its capacity to work at the box office: the DVD was released less than two months after the film came out in theatres) seems to confirm a relatively steady trend: Japanese animation, previously confined only to the shelves of a few select video stores, is slowly penetrating mainstream theatrical distribution. Coming between Hayao Miyazaki's spectacular *Princess Mononoke* (1997) and the delightful *Spirited Away* (2002, and scheduled for release in the USA and Canada in November), *Metropolis* appears as a relatively odd choice for a mainstream cross-over. It is a difficult film that strays even further away from the Western idea of animation (cute, easy to follow, non-threatening and mostly for children) than Miyazaki's works do. Its opening credits should light a sparkle in the eye of any *anime* fan; it is directed by Rintaro (*Galaxy Express 999* (1979), *X* (1996)), written by Katsushiro Otomo (*Akira* (1988)) and adapted from a 1949 manga by the late Osamu Tezuka (*Astro Boy*). Such a genealogy should propel the film instantly towards the status of a cult classic. More interesting, however, is the type of lateral affiliations that relate *Metropolis* more to Alex Proyas' 1998 *Dark City* than to Fritz Lang's 1927 classic.

Metropolis is the story of a multi-layered city; the top levels are occupied by the few and the privileged, while a disenfranchised humanity lives in the squalor of the labyrinthine lower levels. Between the rich and the extremely poor lie the armies of robots that maintain the city, making the working-class all but obsolete. On the upper level, the evil Duke Red is about to finish the construction of the gigantic Ziggurat, a tower that should supposedly represent the triumph of science, but which is in fact a machine built to subjugate the city. Beneath, the Marduks, a Fascist paramilitary force opposed to technology, are destroying the robots. The Marduks are led by Rock, the Duke's foster-son. The proletarians, too, are about to rise. Marxist-type guerrillas are putting the finishing touches on a revolt meant to do away, once and for all, with the same robots. The ensuing battle is used by Duke Red to assassinate the President, destroy the guerrillas and take power over the city, all with the help of the Marduks. In the middle of all these power struggles are caught Shunsaku Ban, a Japanese detective, and his wide-eyed nephew, Ken-ichi, who are trying to arrest the evil Dr Laughton, as well as a mysterious, opalescent young girl named Tima. Tima is, in fact, Duke Red's secret weapon, an android created to resemble the Duke's dead daughter and, once installed on the throne of the Ziggurat, to serve as the ultimate weapon of mass destruction. Ken-ichi rescues Tima after Dr Laughton's lab explodes. But Tima has woken up too early; she does not know who or what she is. Pursued by Rock, she and Ken-ichi climb from the city's underground to the top of the Ziggurat, where Duke Red's attempt to place her on the throne causes the destruction of the city and the death of all but Shunshaku Ban, Ken-ichi and the robots.

Apparently Osamu Tezuka was inspired to create his manga by a single still from *Metropolis*, without having actually seen the entire film. And indeed, even at the level of the plot, Rintaro's film displays relatively few similarities with Fritz Lang's classic. They stop, in fact, at a vague Biblical rhetoric and the conception of the vertical city. Lang's simple, almost didactic structure based on dual oppositions (up/down, rich/poor, exploiter/exploited) is replaced by a proliferation of plot lines and characters, but also of quotations and influences. The triangle Ken-ichi - Tima - Rock is reminiscent of *Blade Runner* (1982), as is the social structure of the city, where the robots, although essential, are despised and feared by humans, rich and poor alike. If the innocent Ken-ichi has nothing in common with the more enterprising Dekkard, Tima's identity crisis brings her very close to Rachael. At the same time, the revelation of her true function, her fusion with the throne of the Ziggurat and the subsequent destruction of the city (unfolding *Dr Strangelove*-style (1964), while Ray Charles' "I Can't Stop Loving You" is playing in the background) are treated in the violent and quasi-teratological key of *Akira*. After the failed proletarian revolt, the dead bodies lying in the snow are an echo from *Doctor Zhivago* (1965). The final moments when Tima's half-shattered body reveals its mechanical structures owe a lot to the melancholy physicality of machines found in Mamoru Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell* (1995).

Such references abound because *Metropolis* is first and foremost a nostalgic sci-fi, and it is here that it comes closest to the equally bizarre *Dark City*. Like Proyas' film, which articulated the imagery of *Nosferatu* (1922) and elements of film noir over a *Matrix*-type (1999) science fiction plot, *Metropolis* draws its force mainly from its combinatory ability. Fusion is the *mot d'ordre* here, from the purely technical level (CGI backgrounds, hence tri-dimensional and bi-dimensional cel animation for the characters) to the soundtrack which combines Dixieland with grim-sounding symphonic moments, to the overall look of the city, whose oppressive structures (even in the underground levels) are coloured in brilliant pastels.

All this makes the film at times off-putting, so much so, in fact, that when I saw it at the cinema the audience let out some sporadic chuckles and yawns. To be sure, even within the genre, it is a much more difficult film to swallow than, say, the equally baroque but more tightly structured *Spirited Away* by Miyazaki. The characters closely retain Tezuka's rounded lines and wide-eyed expressions, to the extent that, with the exception of Duke Red and Shunshaku Ban, they all basically look like little children. Thus, Rock's violence and Ken-ichi's sporadically valiant outbursts have something highly artificial and sometimes even unconvincing about them, while some of the more comical episodes, such as Ken-ichi's friendship with an obnoxiously cute waste disposal unit named Fifi, are downright out of place. It might be the fault of the English subtitles, but the social rhetoric often sounds tired and dated, which is why it is sometimes wisely obscured by extravagant details that shift the focus away from the discourse: while the Chief of Police is on a rant about the dangers that the robots cause, a gigantic holographic fish slowly "swims" in the window behind him, dwarfing both the office and the people in it.

Melodrama is an integral part of all *animes* (take a look at *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988) by Isao Takahata, but also at *Princess Mononoke* or even *Akira* for that matter), and *Metropolis* is no exception. In fact, Rintaro is more successful at building heart wrenching moments, such as a scene where, blasted to pieces by the Marduks, a robot dies while a bunch of balloons flies away from his hand. As a character, almost mute Tima, with her shimmering white skin and wide innocent eyes is built almost exclusively out of such emotional touches. Her hair grows each time she it is touched by sunlight, and when she learns that she cannot feel with her mechanical heart, she cries a tear of oil. Emotion does not exclude subtle

psychology, and here the award must go to Rock. He hates the robots, but not because they threaten to make the humans obsolete, but rather because he thinks that his stepfather has been corrupted by the power they offer. Despite the fact that Duke Red is obviously using him, Rock sincerely loves him, and is deeply hurt by his obsession with Tima, so much so, in fact, that he spends most of the film trying to hunt her down in a desperate attempt to sway the Duke's affections. He is easily the most convincing character of the film, and it is a real shame that after the first half an hour of the film he only shows up at key moments in order to drive the action further.

Walter Benjamin mentions one of Flaubert's confessions about the writing of his novel, *Salammbô*: "Personne ne s'imagine combien il a fallu être triste pour reinventer Carthage." (Zohn, 1988: 256) *Metropolis* is essentially a melancholic film. It is anchored in Tezuka's manga which dates from 1949 and in a conception about the future which is even older. For all its brilliant colours, the film cannot resist the drive towards destruction: the shining apocalypse at the end is made even more painful by the innocent faces of most of the characters it destroys. As a result, Rintaro's film is a beautiful farewell to a brave new world that will never come to be.

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Ocean's Eleven

Dir: Lewis Milestone, 1960
Ocean's Eleven

Ocean's Eleven

(Dir. Steven Soderbergh, 2001)

A review by Karen McNally, University of Nottingham, UK

When reviews appeared following the release of the 2001 version of *Ocean's Eleven*, the consensus of opinion among critics was that Steven Soderbergh had succeeded where many a director of a re-make had failed. His 21st century re-working of the first and best of the Rat Pack caper films was deemed by most to have improved significantly upon its 1960 counterpart. One *Washington Post* critic, for example, contrasted Soderbergh's "fun-loving, carefully crafted romp" with what she described as "the Rat Pack's misogynistic, amateurish crap-shoot". (Kempley, 2001) In choosing a commercially successful film which today is nevertheless given a cool reception by most critics, Soderbergh was, of course, ahead of the game. By steering clear of any classic cinema originals, he avoided the inevitability of unfavourable comparisons, and instead was able to aim for an update which could conceivably raise the cinematic level, a goal expressed by the actors as paramount on the film's release. Although the re-make fails to reach the heights of film crafting claimed by *The Washington Post*, it undeniably succeeds in its attempt to move away from what is often considered to be the home movie feel of the Rat Pack adventure. Films, however, earn their place in cultural history by adding something more to their social environment than the efficient telling of a tale. The original *Ocean's Eleven* is therefore in little danger of being usurped by its ultimately vacuous successor.

Ocean's Eleven (2001) takes on the basic premise of the original's male only heist in Las Vegas, but thereafter abandons most of what preceded it. The film follows Danny Ocean (George Clooney), this time newly liberated from prison, as his plan to relieve three Las Vegas casinos of their takings is hatched, set up and brought to fruition, with an accompanying sub-plot built around Danny's attempts to reignite his relationship with ex-wife Tess (Julia Roberts). The film performs its task ably enough as a slick star vehicle for Clooney, who takes centre stage throughout the film. Clooney has an air of old school Hollywood which means he appears particularly comfortable in a role which requires him to carry the mantle of pseudo-cool with an ease not always apparent in the rest of the cast. Soderbergh takes full advantage of his location, peppering the film with impressive night-time shots of the neon-lighted strip, which add to the high stakes atmosphere necessary for the tension of the heist. The recruitment process arguably provides the most entertaining section of the film as Danny signs up his team of petty crooks for his assault on Vegas. The

audience gets to see co-stars Brad Pitt (Rusty Ryan) and Matt Damon (Linus Caldwell) engaging in a little larceny as their card shark and pick-pocketing skills serve as qualifications for their inclusion in Danny's ambitious scheme. However, such scenes additionally signal the major failing of the film in that the narrative reveals little more about the peripheral characters' desires and motivations that have led them to this point, and which would engage the audience to root for them in their endeavour. It's clear that Danny stages the heist as a pretext for reopening the lines of communication with Tess and at the same time exacting revenge on the man with whom she's currently involved, the owner of The Bellagio, The Mirage and The MGM Grand, Terry Benedict (Andy Garcia) -- a fact of which Rusty becomes aware only by chance. The remaining characters continue under-developed almost to the point of non-existence. Rusty's friendship with Danny is the singular feature which sets him apart from the other characters, and the two actors' scenes together work well in adding humour to the script. However, even allowing for the generic concentration upon narrative conclusion above character development, the film offers little to hold the audience's interest beyond following the turn of events until the final reel. To be fair, Soderbergh has clearly set out to produce nothing more than an efficient, amusing and classy cinema experience. The underlying thematic concern of Lewis Milestone's original, however, provides an appealing extra layer which distinguishes it from its imitator.

In *Ocean's Eleven* (1960) the plan devised by Frank Sinatra's Danny Ocean to lift the New Year's Eve takings from The Sands, The Flamingo, The Desert Inn, The Riviera and The Sahara is ostensibly a means of reuniting the army buddies with whom he served during World War II. As each member of the special combat team of the Eighty-second Airborne comes on board, the approach taken by Danny to convince one of his men to join up highlights the significance of each participant's sense of masculine identity to what ensues. With Danny, Jimmy (Peter Lawford) and Vince (Buddy Lester) looking on as Vince's wife performs a striptease on a nightclub stage to a vamped up version of "The Tender Trap" -- a pointer to Sinatra's parodying of his playboy persona in the film -- Danny poses the question, "Why waste all those cute little tricks that the army taught us, just because it's sorta peaceful now?" By setting up a peace-time "military operation", Danny provides the circumstances in which his war buddies are able to temporarily rediscover a sense of strength and control through their male identities.

Such action is necessary since each of the characters is floundering in the post-war world. Josh (Sammy Davis Jr.) is a failed baseball player, now reduced to clearing the city's trash; Sam (Dean Martin) is whiling away his time as a lounge singer preoccupied with the attentions of his female admirers, and Jimmy cuts an emasculated figure, wholly reliant on his wealthy mother's generosity for the maintenance of his extravagant lifestyle. Heading this group is Danny, whose marriage to wife Bea (Angie Dickinson) has stalled, having, as she puts it, "drowned in champagne". For these characters, women serve their purpose as diversions from the serious business of business, providing massages on demand or making themselves available for a pick-up in a bar. These unashamedly negative attitudes towards women have led many, like *The Washington Post*'s Rita Kempley, to understandably level charges of misogyny against the film: Sam's plan to take the vote away from women and make slaves of them is particularly to the point! Yet, such male posturing serves only to reinforce the feeling of unstable masculinity as the men partition women on the sidelines of their lives. Instead, the characters take comfort in the safety of their male environments, as preparations for the heist take place not in the neutral warehouse facility preferred by Clooney and company, but in a bowling alley and around a pool table where male companionship becomes as much the focus as the heist itself. This is not to argue that the

theme of a post-war crisis of masculine identity was not addressed in more complex terms in films like *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1945), or by Sinatra himself in, for example, *Some Came Running* (1958). However, it is a theme which underlies the main narrative of the original *Ocean's Eleven* and releases it from the label of pure escapist caper.

The additional factor which separates the two versions of *Ocean's Eleven* centres around the original tale's projection of a notion of glamour which defines it in cultural terms. The mythology surrounding the film was created instantaneously on its release, the *Los Angeles Examiner*, for example, labelling it "something you should keep your children away from". (Tosches, 1992: 330) The image of danger and excess drew as much, if not more, from the bad boy antics of the stars involved as from the characters they portrayed on screen. The glamorous lifestyle of the Rat Pack represented a kind of wish fulfilment for the middle-aged war generation before they were to be over-run by the earnest pleadings of a youth based counter-culture. The epitome of such glamour for middle America was the Vegas experience, which the first *Ocean's Eleven* amply displays for the audience, and which its successor, forty or more years after the town's heyday, can only poorly imitate. The use of Milestone's original as the basis for what would become essentially a standard heist movie was undoubtedly an attempt to cash in on the current vogue for all things Rat Pack. As Rat Pack biographer Shawn Levy suggests, the associations upon which Soderbergh's re-make leaned enabled the project to draw cool cachet from its predecessor; in other words, "they called it *Ocean's Eleven*, and voila: instant groovy". (Levy, 2002: 4) At the same time, Clooney and his co-stars were quick to stress their inadequacies in measuring up to the cool credentials of Sinatra, Martin and Davis. Tales of off-set pranks during filming would tend to back up such assertions, with the extent of misbehaviour reportedly stretching to Clooney plaguing veteran producer Jerry Weintraub with early morning wake-up calls. In contrast, the shooting of the original film was a famously loose affair, having to be arranged around a heavy schedule of nightclub performances at The Sands and legendary partying. Soderbergh's re-make intermittently tips its hat to the stars of the original as if aware it requires a reinforcement of these connections to boost its glamour quota. Pitt therefore appears in a shot which has as its background the Capitol Records tower in Los Angeles, the site of Sinatra's most famous recordings, and Angie Dickinson and Henry Silva can be seen scattered among the audience at The MGM Grand's big money fight between Lennox Lewis and Vladimir Klitschko. The extent to which such touches fail to significantly affect the atmosphere of the film, however, indicates the futile nature of attempts to transport cool into a new era, as the re-make itself suggests through its representation of the Las Vegas of the 21st Century.

One of Danny's maxims is to "rob only who deserves it". With Benedict portrayed as a ruthless businessman ready to use violence to achieve his ends, the contrast is made with the sharp suited, emotionally driven Danny. Through such differences, the film sets up an opposition between the Vegas of old and its new counterpart. Through Clooney's attempts to duplicate the style of Sinatra et al who bedecked the screen in Sy Devore suits, the re-make suggests a nostalgia for the golden days of Las Vegas. The transparency of a Mob controlled town which pushed Hollywood stars front-of-house has been replaced by a steely commercialism buried beneath a veneer of respectability. The new image of Vegas is as a mix of Disney-type theming and Andrew Lloyd Webber musical productions. A 1994 cover story in *Time* magazine revealed plans afoot to transform the Rat Pack's unofficial Vegas base, The Sands, by having it "remodeled to within an inch of its life". (Andersen, 1994) Survivors of the '50s and '60s were no doubt relieved that the hotel was instead razed to the ground in 1996 to make way for The Venetian, since the Vegas presented in Soderbergh's film whiffs of nothing if not calculating opportunism. While Benedict utilises strong arm

tactics to dissuade Danny from crossing him, the art gallery in which he employs Tess represents a cynical pretension to cultural credibility. (*Time* reported that the most prized artwork in the Caesar's Palace gallery was the work of Anthony Quinn.) Even Danny Ocean now introduces himself around town via a business card. Despite some scenes being filmed on the floor of the actual Bellagio, much of the action takes place behind the closed doors of white-walled offices, the centre of the modern business empire. The clinical air of the film is epitomised by the scenes depicting the robbery itself carried out by a Chinese acrobat in an underground vault housing the hotel's takings. In contrast, viewers of the original are given a taste of casino life as Sinatra's Danny keeps tabs on the operation on the various floors of The Sands, and Martin performs on the stage of The Sahara. As the characters lead us around the Vegas landscape, this allows additionally for a number of cameo performances which reinforce the feeling of West Coast glamour in the film which its successor necessarily lacks. Sinatra, for example, looks on as Red Skelton is refused further credit at the Sands' cashier's desk, and Dean Martin copes with an inebriated Shirley MacLaine in the parking lot of The Sahara.

This sense of the film being framed around a top drawer fraternity of stars is a feature which ultimately distinguishes the original version of the film from the re-make in a finale which both appeals in its originality and assures the film's place in cultural history. In 2001 the robbery concludes with a short prison term for Danny while most of the crew go their separate ways. On his release Danny is greeted by the faithful Rusty, and by Tess who effects the desired reconciliation as part of a somewhat trite happy ending. In contrast, the lack of resolution in Milestone's original and its more inventive narrative twist provides for a far more satisfying final reel. The death of the terminally ill Tony (Richard Conte), the film's most sympathetic character, who takes part in the heist in order to secure his son's future, kicks off a chain of events which culminates in the failure of the special combat boys' operation. Though they successfully complete the raid, the decision to temporarily bury the stolen takings with their deceased buddy for safe-keeping sends their plans awry when they learn of Tony's imminent cremation. The camera's pan along the church pew as the repercussions dawn on each character makes for a memorable scene and reintroduces the film's central thematic concern. Little has changed for the would-be master criminals. Despite briefly reasserting their masculine selves through the male bonding which occurs and through the empowering process of the heist itself, the characters remain in search of a successful route to a permanently secure identity. As they depart Las Vegas on foot, having failed in their mission to alter the course of their lives, the black-suited males who clash with the harsh light of day create an image devoid of hope. At the same time the potency of this iconographic imagery, the inspiration behind Tarantino's exercise in cultural referencing in *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), is a reminder that the significance of this film lies in the task it performs in preserving the cumulative power of these stars on screen. With the characters passing by the sign promoting the five stars' appearances at The Sands -- The Summit, as Sinatra labelled it -- it's clear why a film representing a unique moment in cultural history will never fail to surpass its imitators.

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Panic Room

Dir: David Fincher, 2002

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

Jodie Foster's by now familiar portrayal of the uncompromising and independent woman has often drawn the attention of critics and audiences alike. But these performances have often generated such attention over and above that paid to the films themselves, and, indeed, her portrayal of Meg Altman in David Fincher's new film, *Panic Room*, may offer much to sustain this trend. Writing in *Sight and Sound*, and with the release of *Panic Room* in mind, Linda Ruth Williams chooses to all but ignore the film itself in favour of a consideration of Foster's screen persona and career to date, only briefly touching on her performance in what she refers to as Fincher's "routine thriller". (Williams, 2002: 12)

But, while Foster's career may undoubtedly warrant such attention, *Panic Room*'s aesthetic (and success) would seem to owe less to the presence of its star (here limited to a two-dimensional plot point) than its visual design and treatment of the material with which it deals. To this extent, and while it may, thematically and narratively, be far removed from the striking originality of Fincher's previous film, *Fight Club* (1999), it nonetheless shares that film's inventiveness in terms of its visual design. As a straight ahead "woman-in-peril movie", to use Williams' term (Williams, 2002: 13), *Panic Room*'s success lies in its underpinning of its own sparse narrative and the conventions of this genre (which *Panic Room* rather unapologetically deploys) with a virtuoso visual style: the film is laden with what Andrew O'Hehir terms "doses of Fincher's trademark microphotography" (O'Hehir, 2002: 51) which affords the viewer a fairground ride that delights in impossible flights around the house that Meg and daughter Sarah (Kirsten Stewart) occupy. Exhilarating as this is, however, it is also a device that Fincher may be in danger of exhausting, and one that may run the risk of joining a number of other self-conscious (and often gratuitous) camera movements utilised over the last decade or so by the younger generation of filmmakers on both sides of the Atlantic. But while Fincher's camera may occasionally foreground its capacity for agility rather too keenly, the space it records offers a refreshing take on what so often passes as the norm where the privileged Manhattan home is concerned. Rather than, for example, the cosy sprawl of Woody Allen, or the brash sheen of television's *Sex and the City* (1998), *Panic Room* opts for a version of an Upper West Side brownstone whose environments are always far from certain and often suggestive of a kind of limbo-hell. As David Thomson suggests, Fincher's camera "is wild about the space, and the quietly sinister shadows that grow there". (Thomson, 2002). Fincher washes his film in muted greens and browns, and, with the exception of two short sequences that bookend the film (although these too are realised in such a way as to respectively prefigure and echo the film's sense of unease), its action takes place entirely in the dimly lit Altman house.

Williams suggests that *Panic Room* is indebted to films such as *Pacific Heights* (1990), *Unlawful Entry* (1992), and even the *Home Alone* series of films (Williams, 2002: 13), and while this may certainly be a useful way of understanding Fincher's film in terms of theme and narrative, the "quietly sinister shadows" that Thomson mentions are also indicative of a

much darker genre heritage. In fact, the space that Fincher creates is often more akin to that of the classical horror or *noir* film. While Fincher succeeds in fashioning a film that might be said to continue the legacy of a more modern form of horror, for example, *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), in its examination of a contemporary urban society derailed by malign forces, in many ways *Panic Room* has more in common with the Val Lewton production, *The Seventh Victim* (1943), than Polanski's film. While both *The Seventh Victim* and *Rosemary's Baby* are, of course, concerned with Satanists operating in New York, it is the former's "ingenious design, shadowy visuals, [and] brooding melancholy" (Auty, 1993: 633) that Fincher chooses to import into his own film, rather than any supernatural elements. (Interestingly, however, and unlike *Rosemary's Baby*, Lewton's film, although often regarded as a supernatural horror film, in fact refuses to place its supernatural aspects at the centre of its narrative; instead it marginalises these and foregrounds the criminal aspects, thus creating a more purely straightforward *noir* thriller.) Similarly, and while all three films pay great attention to production design, the bright, unequivocal colours of Polanski's film, together with its celebrated performances, are quite deliberately absent in Fincher's treatment of the urban nightmare and the decay that lies at its centre. As a result, and despite its resolutely criminal rather than supernatural narrative, *Panic Room*, like *The Seventh Victim* before it, achieves a look that is "half *noir*, half Gothic" (Auty, 1993: 633), the latter exemplified by the opaque, indefinite surfaces of the windows in the basement which recall both specific moments and the abiding tone of Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1932).

But if *Panic Room* successfully accommodates a range of genre elements, it is also, to some extent at least, a pastiche of these styles. Interestingly, Andrew O'Hehir refers to the film as a "horror-comedy" (O'Hehir, 2002: 51), and on more than a few occasions the film playfully acknowledges its obvious horror credentials. Similarly, Linda Ruth Williams notes the nod to Edgar Allen Poe in Meg's comment on the panic room and her claustrophobia. (Williams, 2002: 13). Though addressed, ostensibly, to the estate agent, whose gently mocking tone recalls Elisha Cook's concierge in *Rosemary's Baby*, her comment is clearly intended for the benefit of the audience, and, presumably, has in mind *The Black Cat* (though given the extent to which the film fetishizes technology, Meg's comment may just as equally recall *The Pit and the Pendulum*). But *Panic Room* also bears more than a passing similarity to *The Fall of the House of Usher*, not only in the crumbling physicality of the Altman house itself, but also in terms of a destructive centre: in Poe's story, catalepsy and premature burial; in Fincher's film, hidden bonds. However, a more purely comic element comes in the form of Meg's glasses. These transform her into a female Clark Kent in those scenes in which her reflective inactivity is foregrounded, while, invariably, they are removed for those in which her instinctive capacity for action and superhuman abilities takes over.

While *Panic Room*'s self awareness is quite evident, and its cinematic references prominently showcased, it also belongs to that group of films that foreground the urban landscape, and that of New York in particular. While the city's presence is invoked in genre specific terms via the line it forges back to, among others, *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Seventh Victim*, it is also invoked as a presence in itself; and though its *physical* presence is absent for much of the film -- only the first and last sections of the film choose to make it explicit -- one nonetheless *senses* its presence throughout. Indeed, its presence, along with what might be termed a "New York consciousness", informs the film's meaning in much the same way that these factors inform the Polanski and Lewton films (though, of course, one could also mention many other films here). *Panic Room*'s opening credits, for example, are realised in the form of advertising hoardings plastered across the familiar skyline, and, from this advantageous position, the camera seeks out the city's familiar streets on which the film's action begins. From the outset,

then, the viewer is told in very clear terms that this is a film *about* New York, just as it is later very clearly made aware of the film's genre-hybrid status.

But it seems that the choice of New York as a location may also be a means by which Fincher seeks to ensure the viewer's comprehension of the film as a particular type of product, a comprehension that is dependent upon a range of pre-existing notions and expectations of New York, which the viewer is likely to invoke in making sense of the film in this way. Ultimately, however, and despite the retention of Fincher's "trademark microphotography", and an often imaginative visual design and deployment of genre styles, the film seems hamstrung by the compromise that such an industrial imperative brings with it. On the one hand, the film seeks to accommodate those viewers who will want to experience the film as the work of Fincher, the *auteur*; on the other, however, it strives to accommodate the mainstay of filmgoers, those keen to experience the film's textbook narrative and characterisation, to understand the film not as the work of an individual filmmaker, but as an industrial artefact. To this extent, then, and despite its numerous merits, *Panic Room* marks a further instalment in Hollywood's (not always successful) efforts to achieve its primary objective: mass appeal.

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Pitch Black

Dir: David N. Twohy, 2000

A review by David Greven, Simmons College, USA

If eyes represent not just the windows of the soul but the most fetishistically prized features of cinematic bodies -- the locus of the cinema's self-reflexive interest in its own visual obsessions, serving as the problematic vessels of Surrealist political attack (*Un Chien Andalou*'s (1929) infamous eye-slitting), the cautionary metaphors of Hitchcock's attack on voyeurism (*Rear Window*'s (1954) blinding red flashes, Jimmy Stewart's telescopic camera), the metonym for woman's victimization in a patriarchal culture (*Peeping Tom*'s (1960) terrifying ocular close-ups, the telltale *Eyes Without a Face* (1959) of George Franju's masterpiece) -- the hard reflective surfaces of Vin Diesel's eyes in the 2000 sci-fi/action film *Pitch Black* demand critical scrutiny.

"Shined up" so that they appear silver, like luminous but scratchy coins, Diesel's eyes can't be read or decoded, and they reveal no telltale signs of his interior life. They do not allow him to see the world as others see it -- he hates and shuns the light -- but they also do not allow him to be seen, serving instead as barriers against penetration. They also allow him to see what others do not, with his infrared-like night vision enabling him to see psychedelic vistas within the darkness the other characters stumble in. Through his night vision eyes, Diesel can see some of the terrifying predatory monsters of the film: a sickly, gray-bone white, these monsters thrive in the darkness, unseen by their victims, the hapless humans who've crash landed on their desolate planet. Diesel alone stares at their triangular heads, their salivating angled mouths rowed with glittering teeth. His singular views of them catch these monsters unawares -- unsuspectingly, they are observed in repose, absently contemplating the human meal they've caught. These shots of them -- we see what only Diesel can see, the monster in the dark -- make the monsters seem curiously sympathetic, almost mournful in their unceasing, unappeasable appetites and relentless desire to glut them. As a result, the simultaneous opacity and magical sightedness of Diesel's eyes in *Pitch Black* are crucial to the film's exploration of sight, vision, appearances, and, of all things, empathy. That Diesel is one of the rare heroes of color in a mainstream blockbuster sci-fi movie makes the film's obsession with sight even more interesting.

In this era of added terror to aerial voyages, the doomed voyage of *Pitch Black*'s transport ship, carrying about forty passengers, deepens in symbolic resonance. The near-futuristic passengers are an expectedly motley crew, some hoping to settle on "New Mecca"; Diesel's anti-hero, Riddick, is a convicted murderer being led to captivity by a bounty hunter, Johns (Cole Hauser), who passes as a lawman. There's also the ship's disaster-appointed Captain, Carolyn (Radha Mitchell), who carries around the burden of nearly having ejected all of the passengers to save herself ("I'm not going to die for them!") when the transport ship crashes into the Planet Hell where the movie's action takes place. The surviving passengers include the familiar stock character of the vaguely effeminate British tippler, but also a tough brunette, Sharon (*Farscape*'s (1999) wonderfully intense Claudia Black), and, the biggest

surprise of all, a turbaned Islamic character called Imam (Keith David, campily solemn and sagacious).

At first, the planet seems scorchingly hot and bright, as if it were engulfed in perpetual day. But the unlucky band soon discover that an eclipse is rushing towards them. With the eclipse, they will be at the mercy of the seemingly barren planet's indigenous populations, the hordes of scissor-like alien birds of prey that swoop at and slice apart their victims, and those Alien-like creatures seen by Riddick alone.

For a time, it seems that Riddick, a murderer and hardened criminal-type, will be the monstrous threat the survivors must elude. Yet it is quickly revealed that he is, for the most part, their staunchest ally. Initially, Riddick disappears and, once one of the Aliens dispatches a survivor, appears to prey on the humans. Once discovered, he is kept strapped and bound, like Hannibal Lecter, and there are a few moments during which he theatrically terrifies Carolyn. But the movie never sustains its interest in Riddick (hidden behind ominous sunglasses, in a tight tank top that reveals his apparently deadly, rich musculature) as homicidal monster. His capacities as a ruthless killer lend him an air of heroic invincibility in light, so to speak, of the growing threat from the real, nocturnal monsters.

This move on the film's part -- which involves turning Johns into the genuine soulless villain -- is a bit of a cheat. The movie ends up using Riddick's status as murderer as flavoring, to up his street cred as a tough guy. Riddick -- except for one moment at the end, when he unflinchingly tells Carolyn he refuses to go back for the two survivors left -- comes to seem morally uncompromised and even selfless. The movie wants it both ways -- it wants us to fear Riddick and to love him, as if he were the wild love-child of Machiavelli and Beatrix Potter.

Johns emerges as a potentially interesting character, given the depths of his shallowness, but the film's moral schema is too simplistic to seem radical. In other words, a more intelligent film would have forced us to question why it is that the killer and not the lawman emerges as the hero, a feat accomplished by John Carpenter's great prison-set movie, *Assault on Precinct 13* (1973). When Johns makes a threatening move against Carolyn, Riddick calmly taps a long blade against his crotch, an image both subversive and banal; we too readily accept that Riddick commands our allegiance. Carolyn is sincerely played by Australian actress Mitchell, who produces a flawless American accent (as does fellow Aussie Rachel Griffiths on *Six Feet Under* (2001) -- does anyone do a more naturalistic American accent than Australians?), and provides an interesting visual contrast to Diesel, a soft small blonde in fearless opposition to his dark, supple machismo. Nevertheless, Carolyn isn't a terribly compelling heroine, despite her moral dilemma. Had taut Claudia Black played the heroine, the film might have had more urgency and resonance.

Still, simplistic though it is, *Pitch Black* is one of the better and more memorable sci-fi/action films of recent years. Its final section, involving Riddick and Carolyn's heroic race to save survivors and the eventual escape of a few, is superbly tense, and contains one magnificent moment (please don't read further if you want to avoid spoilers). Carolyn, having raced back to save Riddick and armed only with luminescent glow-worms to deter the advance of the voracious monsters, holds Riddick, who has been badly attacked, in her arms. As they stare at each other, the sensuality of their conjoined bodies, flecked with spots of glowing glow-worm light, is overwhelming. Suddenly, a terrible, visceral stabbing sound is heard, and Carolyn, not Riddick, is snatched away to her doom by their predators. The rain-drenched

noirishness, lit from within by the scant illumination of the held glow-worms, gives this sequence a haunting, uncanny quality.

In addition to these wonderful moments, the star presence and undeniable appeal of Diesel's Riddick make this film effective. The teasing playfulness of his now-you-see-him-now-you-don't early attempts to elude the crew make him seem coyly sexy (the impudence of the editing in these effects recalls the museum sequence in De Palma's *Dressed to Kill* (1980)). His slightly sluggish, drugged voice suggests Brando on novocaine, but with an undercurrent of sexual menace. I'm not sure how good an actor Diesel is, since his line readings are often flat, and he doesn't get many opportunities here to break out of his anti-hero stud mold. But Diesel has star power, a magnetism that glows like his shined-up eyes, and it's his quirky, sexy appeal that makes *Pitch Black* a somewhat delicious experience.

Speaking of his eyes, Riddick would appear to join the ranks of sci-fi men of color whose vision is stymied, occluded, hampered, impaired, or rendered fantastic. Geordi's visor on the TV series *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987), while giving him similarly infrared vision, brutally hides LeVar Burton's face, a clunky symbol of blindness. The current Trek films have wisely discarded the visor; now Geordi's still quite alien eyes focus and expand and seize on images like a sci-fi camera. On the current hit animated series, Cartoon Network's *Justice League* (2001), the Green Lantern is an African-American man of might with liquid green eyes that match his green-ray ring. To stretch generic lines, *Suture*'s (1993) Dennis Haysbert, a prominent African-American actor, is completely facially bandaged throughout nearly the entire film. Diesel's eyes represent a similarly exoticized ocular capacity for a sci-fi man of color. What's being said about African-American men, if they are so often shown, in sci-fi films and on TV, with strangely opaque, distorted vision? It is difficult to tell if this trend represents a statement about men of color as visual subjects, about the problematic gaze of men of color, or if it acts as an intransigent defense against visual scrutiny. Whatever statements are being made, these sci-fi eyes -- far from colorblind -- pose a glaring problem that demands further illumination for the viewer.

The Royal Tenenbaums

Dir: Wes Anderson, 2001

A review by Gordon Reavley, Nottingham Trent University, UK

"All happy families are alike but an unhappy family is unusual after its own fashion." (Tolstoy, 1978: 13)

Although, on the basis of the above quotation, Tolstoy would have had a field day with the Tenenbaums, the problem with this aphorism when it is applied to films (for example, Altman's *Cookie's Fortune* (1999) or the Coens' *The Big Lebowski* (1998)) is that these dysfunctional, eccentric families exhibit marked similarities in the ways that they operate. In mainstream film, classical narrative functions on the basis of resources drawn from expressive cinematic codes that propel the narrative from its beginning to its resolution. In the construction of a credible fictional world, individual characters establish and sustain their agency in the narrative process and the causal link between each event is clear. Making films about eccentrics seems to give directors dramatic licence to ignore all the rules about character and narrative development, and any illogical flaw in the passage from the disruption of any pre-existing equilibrium through to its resolution can thus be excused by the notion that these are eccentrics and, well, that's just the way they are.

The other problem is that entire films devoted to eccentrics (geniuses or not) can become very tiresome. The first half of Wes Anderson's latest film, *The Royal Tenenbaums*, does indeed display many of the worst traits of this type of film, and it is difficult to empathise with characters that include a writer (Owen Wilson, also the co-writer of the film) on mescaline; an ice maiden (Gwyneth Paltrow) who seems to have based her life on the Velvet Underground's late singer, Nico (who appears on the soundtrack too); a failed tennis pro (Luke Wilson) whose sartorial role model is mid-period Borg; a psychiatrist (Bill Murray) desperately in need of therapy himself, and so on. Unlike the Simpsons, whose love for each other is evident, the Tenenbaums clearly despise each other and give us no reason to like them either.

Halfway through, though, the film softens; indeed, it becomes suffused by a sort of melancholia (albeit tinged with a mordant wit). Many of the characters become more believable and, perhaps more importantly, more likeable and genuinely affecting too. Gene Hackman was, perhaps, an obvious choice for the main character, Royal Tenenbaum. Hackman seems to have been born to play cheesy lowlifes, and his reputation, unlike that of his contemporaries, Jack Nicholson and Marlon Brando, is still on some upward parabola. However, the danger with softening anything is that it can become flaccid: Hackman's character is sentimentalised and the ending (Royal buys a stray dog to replace the late family mutt) is fatally compromised by this slide into mawkishness. Anderson would have perhaps been better to have continued on the acerbic trajectory established earlier. Before this, though, there are some beautiful vignettes.

Effectively, the film posits a fictional (in every sense) world where logic and real time play very little part. Fictional, because it is an invented New York where Gypsy Cabs and Green Line buses populate the streets, where there are invented hotels and non-existent streets, and where Anderson shifts time around almost arbitrarily: the tennis match is probably set in the late 1970s (but we are told that the event is only six years back), and the library book that was first checked out in 2001 covers events that take place in that year. So what? Well, perhaps this is a device that the director uses to prevent the fictional world from becoming too 'realistic'.

Independent cinema functions rather like the speck of dirt in the oyster of mainstream cinema. Without it, the industry would never produce any pearls. Although Anderson's previous full-length film, *Rushmore* (1998), might have led us to expect something a little more left of centre, and while *The Royal Tenenbaums* differs wildly from most current Hollywood product, it is still essentially mainstream and there are plenty more subversive films emerging these days. This is not to suggest that it is not innovative, though. Other directors may have used the same strategies before, but Anderson's use of the main motifs is highly original. The first is literary: almost everything about the film relates to literature. Like those 1940s films in which an old volume is taken down from the shelf and the story unfolds, the film begins with a book being stamped in a lending library (one almost expects that other hoary old plot device, pages being torn off a calendar). The film is interlaced with chapter headings, while Royal's estranged wife (played, as usual, with consummate ease by Angelica Huston) has written *Family of Geniuses* about their prodigiously talented children, and characters are often seen reading, say Chekhov or reference works.

The film has a certain look too -- the whole has been designed. The architecturally gothic look of the brownstones echoes the residence of Charles Addams' eponymous family, and the overall feel is that of an animated *New Yorker* magazine, circa 1940. Anderson has even created a typeface (sans serif, Bauhaus-plain) with which flashbacks are denoted and a case history is captioned; it appears on building façades and even on the hood of the pet falcon. The screen is always full of almost forensic detail, planned with extraordinary care and often (like *American Beauty* (1999)) symmetrical in form. Characters might appear framed in windows or on either side of a dining table.

Although *The Royal Tenenbaums* resembles other, not necessarily similar films (Anderson himself has observed that there are parallels with Welles' *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), Renoir's *La Règle du Jeu* (1939) and Truffaut's *Jules et Jim* (1962)), in his desire to fill the screen, Anderson has created a film that more closely resembles Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Amelie* (2001) or the earlier *Delicatessen* (1991). Both the former and *The Royal Tenenbaums* begin with a voice-over that establishes and reinforces a hermetic, fictional world. Both use every square inch of screen, so saturated with detail and used in such a *designed* manner that not even a single shot is left to chance. This sense of contrivance and artifice can distract the viewer from the pleasure of simply *watching* a film; indeed, both repay further viewings, but much of Anderson's can be watched on one level, that of pure enjoyment.

One resoundingly successful aspect of *The Royal Tenenbaums* is Anderson's and his music supervisor Randy Poster's choice of music for the soundtrack. Soundtracks can be cheap gimmicks; an easy, lazy strategy used unthinkingly to imply a sense of time and place. Scorsese usually gets it right, as did George Lucas in *American Graffiti* (1973). In a film so lacking any sense of real time, Anderson obviously had a difficult task in the choice of music. As in *Rushmore*, his solution was to use quirky and little-known songs such as Elliot Smith's

'Needle in the Hay', Nico's cover of Jackson Browne's poignant 'These Days' and Nick Drake's 'Fly'.

Overall, then, a curate's egg of a film. Had Anderson avoided the irritating tics of the first part of the film and concentrated on developing the more vitriolic side of Royal, instead of ending with such an apparently arbitrary and unctuous resolution, the film could have been so much better.

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Taxi Driver

Dir: Martin Scorsese, 1976

A review by Steve Shoemaker, Harvard University, USA

On a bad day, the phrase "independent cinema" can seem to have about the same status and relevance as the tag "alternative rock". That is, it sounds like meaningless corporate-speak for yet another marketing niche in the endlessly subdividing and proliferating capitalist phantasmagoria (a friend mulling over the phrase recently arrived at the question "independent of *what*?"). Venturing down to the multiplex to watch a supposedly "indie" film, we too often encounter the same tired genre moves and slick pieties Hollywood has already produced *ad nauseum* (but on a somewhat bigger budget). Revisiting the best films of the seventies, then, it can come as a shock to remind ourselves of just how far a generation of young filmmakers had pushed the limits of the Hollywood film, driving it toward edgy, personal explorations of difficult truths and unresolved dilemmas. Certainly, the DVD reissue of Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* provides the occasion for such a shock, along with a welcome opportunity to begin to reconsider just what one of the best of these "best films of the seventies" achieved (the larger list would include *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *The Godfather* (1972), *Chinatown* (1974), *Nashville* (1975), and *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971), to name a few).

Even before I gnawed through the shrink wrap on my copy of the DVD (I was a little impatient), I found my mind grappling with a jumbled string of images that had always stayed with me, even though I hadn't seen the film in years: a bright yellow taxi seeming to float eerily through the night; the downward plunge of the camera into a roiling glass of Alka Seltzer; a post-frenzy, glassy-eyed Travis Bickle putting a bloody finger to his Mohawked skull and miming the pulling of a trigger (and so on). Upon rewatching the film, one is struck by the way these images become memorable, not only because of their admittedly striking visual content, but also because they arise from a powerfully realized underlying structure. Further, the DVD format invites us to see the rich, collaborative artistic process that produced that structure. A "making of" documentary features interviews with Scorsese, the screenwriter Paul Schrader, the director of photography Michael Chapman, and all the main actors of a tremendous cast (Robert DeNiro, Harvey Keitel, Cybill Shepherd, Jodie Foster, Albert Brooks, Peter Boyle). Even better, the DVD includes Schrader's original screenplay in its entirety (with a useful feature allowing one to toggle back and forth between the screenplay and the actual scenes) and Scorsese's rough, energetic storyboards for the film. For someone like myself who has always thought of this picture as fundamentally "Scorsese" in look and feel, it's a revelation to see that many (but by no means all) of the film's most striking shots are anticipated in Schrader's screenplay. That floating taxi, for example, is already evoked in Schrader's description of the way the taxis "glide effortlessly" through the night. But what is truly remarkable is the way Scorsese (with help from Michael Chapman) finds a whole repertoire of visual techniques for literalizing this kind of description, for making us *see* what Schrader had *imagined*.

It's clear, too, what a wealth of material was available to DeNiro as he worked to craft his shattering, tormented portrait of Travis. Leaving aside the monologues that give us Travis's interior voice (already familiar to us from the film), the script articulates things we've seen in DeNiro's performance without ever quite putting our fingers on, as in Schrader's description of how Travis "speaks as if his mind doesn't know what his mouth is saying", or of how he "has the smell of sex about him; sick sex, repressed sex, lonely sex, but sex nonetheless". But if DeNiro was able to build on that wonderfully suggestive script, he also has Travis literally drawn out of him by Scorsese's restless, original camera work, still challenging and fresh more than twenty-five years later. As Scorsese points out in his interview, one of the film's premises is that as many shots as possible are an expression of Travis's own point of view, with the result that the viewer is drawn deeply, and disturbingly, into Travis's world. Scorsese's subtle use of slight slow-motion in many of the street scenes, for example, pulls us right into the heart of the contradictory mix of fascination and repulsion these scenes excite in Travis. The camera's weird plunge into that glass of Alka Seltzer (pure Scorsese -- not in the script) is not arbitrary, but takes us into the strange null zone where Travis's attention, his unfocused intensity, narrows to a point, only to diffuse fizzily in an utter "pointlessness". In a single shot, if we look hard enough, we have the whole drama of Travis's attempt to "get organized" (or "organizized", as his sole, rather pathetic, attempt at a joke has it).

The lure of Travis's subjectivity is strong, but there is an important tension here precisely because his character is so diffuse -- intense, yes, but also susceptible, malleable. If Travis lacks direction and clarity, the seedy under-life of the city that makes up his milieu is vivid, gripping, utterly sure of its own imperatives. In another of Scorsese's quirky, seemingly disjunctive shots, the camera pans away from Travis as he talks on a pay phone. Impassively, it gazes down a long corridor, blank except for the doorway at the end, which opens onto a view of the incessant flow of street life, the passing cars and pedestrians among which Travis sleeplessly roams. The city is waiting, beckoning, exerting an attraction even more powerful, and certainly more real, than the angelic vision-in-white Travis has made of Betsy, the girl to whom he is talking on the phone. The shot points us to one of the film's most profound paradoxes: is its depiction of the city a reflection of Travis's point of view, or is Travis himself merely a reflection -- or disturbing symptom -- of the life of the city? After all, as Michael Chapman points out, even that gliding taxi is itself a character, with, as it were, its own needs, its own impetus (and at least one shot in the film seems to be from *its* point of view!). Schrader's screenplay describes Travis as a "raw male force driving forward", but in his DVD interview Schrader also describes him as an example of "drifting male loneliness". Is Travis driving or adrift?

Unlike most examples of current cinema, *Taxi Driver* is impressive for the way it opens up questions like that one, and then *leaves* them open. Indeed, the film's ending notoriously entangles us in a whole thicket of such questions. How could a psychopath like Travis come to be taken for a hero? How was the child prostitute, Iris (the object of Travis's "rescue"), affected by the death of her pimp, Sport, and, more generally, by the orgy of violence that secured her release from "the life"? Is the scene where Travis gives Betsy a ride in his cab real or a delusion? What is Travis's state of mind at the end of the film? Is his violent spree supposed to have conferred any kind of purgation for the soul-sickness that has tormented him? Space is short, so I'll try to address only those last two questions. Some critics have posited "peace of mind", or perhaps even "redemption", for Travis. Tellingly, the strongest evidence against such a reading comes from another of Scorsese's odd, angular shots. A (physically) rehabilitated Travis is out of the hospital and back on the streets, able once again to flash his disconcertingly plausible smile. But as he drives along in his cab, Scorsese shows

us, out of nowhere, one freaked-out, paranoid glance in the rear-view mirror, followed by a flash-quick close-up of Travis's still-haunted eyes in that same mirror. The shot is jarring, cutting sharply against the smooth saxophone on the soundtrack, and it's difficult to know how to read it in the first instant of visceral perception. As it happens, the DVD documentary gives us the authoritative interpretation: Scorsese tells us he meant the shot to imply that Travis was "a ticking time bomb that's going to go off again". But if we've been paying attention, this is an instance where we don't need the commentary. We've already grasped this truth in the pits of our stomachs, fleeting and unsettling though it is, because Scorsese has painstakingly taught us how to see it over the whole preceding course of the film. "Cultural history" is a much more fashionable mode of film criticism than old-school "shot analysis" right now, but *Taxi Driver* -- which certainly *does* comment profoundly on its cultural moment -- is a film that will not reveal the secrets of its world unless we appreciate the distinctive vocabulary and syntax through which that world is constructed.

Waking Life

Dir: Richard Linklater, 2001

A review by Jamie Sexton, University of London, UK

Since his first major experimental feature, *Slacker* (1991), Richard Linklater has dabbled with the mainstream in films such as *Dazed and Confused* (1993) and *The Newton Boys* (1998). With *Waking Life*, Linklater returns to a less conventional dramatic structure, which itself recalls *Slacker*. As in that film, *Waking Life* does not follow a linear narrative structure but instead focuses on a number of fragmented conversations and philosophical monologues. However, there are two main differences between the films. Firstly, *Waking Life* follows a central character throughout the film (an anonymous character played by Wiley Wiggins) and is concerned with a central theme: dream life. Secondly, *Waking Life* merges animation and photographed imagery through an innovative technique entitled "rotovision".

The look of *Waking Life*, which was attained by shooting live footage and then animating the results, is the most impressive aspect of the film. The texture of the images changes throughout; at times, real footage almost seems to peep through the animated overlays, at others the animation is less life-like. These changing textures create continually shifting landscapes, perfectly symbolising the slippery nature of perception, a theme that the film explores. Reality and dream life become intermixed in the film, leading to the main character becoming confused as to which realm he is actually inhabiting. The delicate nature of reality is underscored by the animated techniques, which create shifting objects that defy gravity and often delicately float around in the background. The film probes different levels of perception in relation to "reality", questioning whether waking life is any more "real" than dream life. The two states interweave to create our perceptual existence and, to underscore this notion, superimposed levels of reality appear to float in and out of each other.

At the beginning of *Waking Life*, we see the Wiggins character board a "boat car", in which the driver obsessively discusses how this peculiar vehicle is a manifestation of his personality. His fellow passenger (played by Linklater) at one stage tells the driver to go down a certain route and drop off Wiggins, a chance happening that will affect the course of his life. After being dropped off, Wiggins is eventually run over, an event that raises a question as to whether he is actually dead, a question that is never answered but is often referred to. Wiggins then seems to drift through the film, his vague and minimal interventions reinforcing the impression that he may actually be dead. He encounters a number of different people who incessantly philosophise to him about many different subjects, all relating to several core themes: the nature of being, perception, evolution, and different modes of reality. Wiggins plays the part of listener for most of the film, an empty vessel into which diverse characters pour ideas. Occasionally, the focus is deflected from Wiggins' encounters and we are presented with different people spouting ideas, such as the group of anti-establishment men who are "all theory and no action", or the conspiratorial mouthpiece who delivers advice through a megaphone (played by the anti-UN evangelist Alex Jones). These fragments may not be directly related to the subjective experiences of the main character, but they very much fit into the ideas-driven logic of the film.

The strength of the film lies in the way it directly affects the senses of the viewer: it drew me into a strange, dream-like world through its perceptually disorientating effects. On emerging from the cinema, I felt slightly out-of-kilter with the world around me and took time to adjust to its rhythms. The strong visual look of the film lures one into its hallucinogenic universe and lengthy monologues. The dialogue-led nature of the film is offset by detailed visual transformations, which breathe life into static conversational scenes. Atoms and cogs appear and come to life when a person speaks about determinism, whilst details of faces often change in detail during a talking head sequence. After a while, however, the novelty of the visuals wears off, and the weaker elements of the script become more evident. Parts of the script -- full of earnest meditations on life -- are dull and self-important. In *Slacker*, endless small incidents and philosophical ramblings remained fascinating; but in *Waking Life* a familiar structural template feels slightly lacklustre. *Slacker* wove its small incidents into a cleverly structured web, and the pervasive atmosphere was both hypnotic and slightly foreboding. In *Waking Life*, the small incidents appear and disappear without building up a resonant cumulative momentum. The film's pretensions are not adequately served; the monologues are sometimes dry and self-righteous. The tactic of incessantly returning to the comforts of dialogue reins in the more interesting and complex visuals.

Despite Linklater's intention to construct a profound film on a number of important themes, it becomes clear that he is on safest ground when reflecting his twin obsessions: film and philosophy. *Waking Life* manages to summarise a few philosophical ideas, such as existentialism and determinism, and to reference filmmaking on a number of occasions. These include Linklater quoting his own *oeuvre* by letting Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy recall their roles in *Before Sunrise* (1995), or having two men talk on a cinema screen about the ontology of film and its relation to holiness. For Linklater, however, film and philosophy seem to be hermetically sealed off from many aspects of life, interesting for what they are and not for what they relate to. Film and philosophy, it seems, are interrelated phenomena that do not so much relate to life as provide a spiritual refuge from it. What they can be used for beyond their own internal fascinations remains unanswered. This is the main problem of *Waking Life*; the fact that it posits film and philosophy as providing pleasurable aesthetic experiences, rather than using them to probe into more difficult, unsettling questions. Likewise, *Waking Life* is pleasing on an aesthetic level but is ultimately too mild and polite in tone to leave a longer, lasting impression. It is a film that delves into multiple questions without leaving the viewer to ponder much for her or himself.

Despite these drawbacks, Linklater should be commended on his willingness to tackle 'serious' themes and move away from the mainstream into more marginal territory. *Waking Life* may not be an entirely successful experiment, but it nevertheless attempts to try something new with filmmaking. On the level of script, it doesn't manage to rise above the predictable, but it does create a rich visual aesthetic, marked by both skill and imagination. It has set the standard by which the method of rotoscoping will be measured. Whether anyone will use this method more fruitfully remains to be seen.

Werckmeister Harmonies

Dir: Bela Tarr, 2000

A review by Zoran Samardzija, University of Wisconsin, USA

Werckmeister Harmonies, the brilliant and austere new film from acclaimed Hungarian director Bela Tarr, is his first feature length film since his internationally renowned seven hour epic, *Satantango* (1994). Like *Satantango* and the earlier *Damnation* (1988), *Werckmeister Harmonies* marks another collaboration between Tarr and Hungarian writer Laszlo Krasznahorkai, who has adapted his own novels into screenplays for each of the three films.

As might be expected given such a collaboration, stylistically the three films are similar. Shot entirely in black and white like *Satantango* and *Damnation*, *Werckmeister Harmonies* continues Tarr's fascination with shadows and negative space. He also further explores his long take aesthetic. Yet, unlike the previous films, *Werckmeister Harmonies* -- which derives its title from Andreas Werckmeister, an obscure but important eighteenth century musician, whose tonal theory came to dominate Western music-- diverges radically from its source material, Krasznahorkai's 1989 novel, *The Melancholy of Resistance*.

I wish to use some of these divergences as a departure for discussing and developing the film's critical tropes of modernity and mass violence to analyze the film. Significantly, Tarr limits the narrative perspective in *Werckmeister Harmonies* to the point of view of the main character, Janos Valuska, which forces viewers to piece together elements of the plot without the guidance of traditional filmic cues. For instance, as Janos, a newspaper delivery man, wanders through his small, unnamed Hungarian town, the inhabitants become increasingly paranoid and fearful due to the appearance of a bizarre carnival display -- a gigantic, stuffed whale and a mysterious Prince who advocates nihilism and violence. Throughout the film Janos, who returns numerous times to the town square to see the giant whale, encounters groups of men who begin to congregate, in swarm-like patterns, waiting for the Prince to speak. Eventually, in an extended sequence toward the end of the film, Janos witnesses the men destroy the town square and storm a hospital where they beat the sick.

The climactic storming of the hospital, and the formation of the mob, is given more significance in the film than the novel. And although such an alteration suggests that Tarr intends *Werckmeister Harmonies* to be read as an allegory of fascist violence, the film does not offer any specific political causes for the violence. Rather, Tarr situates the violence as a function of modernity and industrialization, and, more abstractly, as having a cosmological basis.

In his landmark study on the birth of the railroad -- a significant image for *Werckmeister Harmonies* -- Wolfgang Schivelbusch writes that the "'annihilation of space and time' was the early nineteenth century characterization of the effect of railroad travel". (Schivelbusch, 1986: 33) Schivelbusch's description of the "annihilation of space and time" can help us

understand the intersection between mass violence, industrialization and cosmology that Tarr presents in *Werckmeister Harmonies*. For example, the film's astonishing opening ten minute sequence begins with a close-up of a small wood burning furnace, a shot repeated several times in the film. This emphasizes that the village in the film's diegesis, like many Eastern European villages, remains frozen at the crossroads of Pre-Industrialization and Post-Industrialization. Tarr explores this contradiction through the images of technology. The wood burning stove, tractor, printing press, railroads, helicopter, etc. in the film's diegesis suggest a village that is both technologically modern and pre-modern: a split further emphasized through Janos, who lives with an old-fashioned shoemaker, twice shown chopping wood, and also works for a newspaper whose printing machinery clangs into the night.

It is at this technological crossroad -- the space between making shoes by hand and the repetitive sounds of machinery -- that Tarr presents us with cosmological riddles and mass violence. In the opening sequence, after the bar owner spills beer into the fire of the wood burning stove, he signals the bar is closed, and the patrons respond by asking Janos, who is obsessed with cosmology, to explain the Earth's and Moon's rotation around each other and the Sun. Apparently, a ritual repeated most nights before closing, the patrons clear away tables and chairs as Janos chooses people to represent the Sun, the Moon, and the Earth. Both formally and thematically -- especially through the lighting and the construction of camera space -- the opening sequence enacts the "annihilation of space and time" that Schivelbusch describes. For example, as Janos orchestrates the chaotic movements of the men, he narrates the effects of a lunar eclipse on earth: "Everything that lives is still. Are the hills going to march off? Will Heaven fall upon us? Will the earth open under us? We don't know. We don't know, for a total eclipse has come upon us." With Janos's narration Tarr makes startling use of the eclipse motif to invoke the nightmarish extreme of the annihilation of spatial relations on two levels. Not only does Janos, through performance, recontextualize the vast space of the solar system within a local bar in a small village; the very ritual he performs envisions a world where even the hills may "march off", or where Heaven falls upon the Earth. Yet, an eclipse only proves temporary in Janos's ritual, which he concludes by showing the re-emergence of the Sun. However, the motif of encroaching shadows, of "annihilating space and time", repeats throughout the film with the arrival of the Prince and the violence that erupts.

The Prince appears in *Werckmeister Harmonies* through the shadows, and yet may be only a shadow himself. Indeed, the Prince and the whale carnival display arrives in the middle of the night in a large freight trailer pulled by a tractor. In an extended shot, Janos sees the tractor slowly drive down one of the small village streets, as the trailer casts its large shadow over the houses. Finally, toward the end of the film we hear the Prince speak. Once again Janos walks to the town square to see the whale. This time the town square is nearly full with men waiting to hear the Prince. Janos finds the exhibit closed and sneaks in. He witnesses an argument between the Prince, appearing only as a shadow projected on the wall, the Prince's assistant, and the Director of the "circus", who is too fearful to let the Prince speak to the public. The Prince, translated by his assistant, furthers his demand to speak by advocating cosmic nihilism: "The Prince alone sees the whole. And the whole is nothing. Completely in ruins. . .Under construction everything is only half complete. In ruins all is complete." His nihilism suggests a nightmarish version of modernity and industrialization. Instead of building railroads and planes to fulfil our utopian ideals of mass liberation, he deduces that only through destruction can all things be liberated.

Next, in the most startling sequence of the film, a mass of men marches in unison. For several minutes all we see are the men marching, with grim determination on their faces, as they proceed through the shadows. Finally, they arrive at the hospital and begin to destroy it and beat the sick. As they make their way through the halls and toward a back room, several men arrive at a shower with a curtain closed. As they pull back the curtain, an emaciated old man quivers in the shower. The men stop, frozen for a moment, and walk away expressionless, either indifferent to the man already so close to death, or shocked that some vestige of humanity remains within them.

The only solution to the dilemma suggested by *Werckmeister Harmonies* lies in silence. After the night of violence that occurs, someone warns Janos that the military, which has now intervened, is looking for several men of the village. Janos is amongst them. He tries to leave town by running along the train tracks that lead out of town. But there is nowhere to run. As Schivelbusch reminds us, the railroad tracks are the symbol *par excellence* for the processes of modernity and industrialization. Its tracks can lead only to modernity and not away from it. To emphasize the impossible nature of Janos's escape, as he continues to run, a sleek, ominous helicopter appears in the distance. It begins to circle Janos, who can only stand alongside the tracks. Janos remains trapped in his place in the cosmos, between the intersection of technology and the annihilating effects of modernity. He offers the only form of resistance he knows. In the last scenes of the film, we see him seated on a hospital bed, with his Uncle Estzer by his side, as he mumbles incoherently. But for Tarr, quoted in an interview as saying, "I just think about the quality of human life and when I say 'shit', I think I'm very close to it" (Fergus and Le Cain, 2001), Janos's condition at least offers some hope -- hope that the Sun will return from the terrible eclipse that envelops the world of *Werckmeister Harmonies*.

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