

# After the Rain

Dir: Takashi Koizumi, Japan/France, 1999

## A review by Shulamit Almog, University of Haifa, Israel

*After the Rain* is Takashi Koizumi's feature film debut, made in 1999, Shoji Ueda and Takao Saito as cinematographers. Akira Kurosawa wrote the screenplay, and Takashi Koizumi, who pays the late Japanese master a tribute in this film, attempted to make a film from Kurosawa's script, as he would have wished. The tribute quality of the film manifests itself most eminently when one puts *After the Rain* alongside *Rashomon*, Kurosawa's 1950 masterpiece, that is still possibly the best known Japanese film outside Japan. On the face of it, there is not much in common between the sombre, infinitely intriguing *Rashomon* and the delightful, lighthearted and light flooded *After the Rain*. In actual fact, there is a delicate web of links and connections between those two articulations, that correspond with each other.

In both films most characters participate in several forms of judging, formal and informal, external and internal. They all judge and are being judged, cast adjudication and are subjected to it. In *Rashomon* a formal trial is depicted, alongside the internal ones. In *After the Rain* there is no formal trial, but all characters involved perform continuous ethical judgments of themselves and others.

*Rashomon* begins in rain and ends with rain. Three people, who find shelter from the rain under the Rashomon gate, engage in narration. Two crimes -- a murder of a Samurai and rape of his wife -- are presented four times, in four different ways. The people at the gate renarrate the story of the formal judgment, where the different versions were first narrated, and, while doing so, judge the narrators, the characters of the narrative, and themselves. The telling and retelling is actually judging, appealing and judging again. *Rashomon* ends with an abandoned baby adopted, which is a sort of final adjudication that represents perhaps the affirmation of humanity, or a kind of 'life is good, after all' verdict. But this verdict, in *Rashomon*, seems artificial and hardly convincing or plausible in the light of the grim, embittered narrative which precedes it.

*After the Rain* is another discussion of the same crux: is life, eventually, good? The verdict is similar to the one offered in *Rashomon*: yes; there is goodness in life. But this time the narrative validates the positive optimistic inclination, and endows it with a moral authority which *Rashomon*'s ending lacks.

As in *Rashomon*, at the beginning of *After the Rain* travelers are forced to find shelter from heavy outpours. This time they gather in a small country inn. Among them are Misawa Ihei, a poor masterless Samurai, and his wife Tayo. As in *Rashomon*, the forced gathering accentuates emotions of cruelty, alienation and hostility. Rice is being stolen from a poor woman; insults and threats are being openly made. But then goodness starts to permeate the tense atmosphere. Ihei takes it upon himself to cheer everyone up by arranging an elaborate feast. To raise money for that, he goes to the local castle and bets against the masters of fencing. This 'prize-fighting' means breaking two fundamental rules. The first is the code of

honour of the Samurai that bans this kind of 'honourless' behaviour. The other is the solemn promise he made to his wife not to engage in prize-fighting ever again. However, Ihei decides to disobey his wife and his class in order to achieve harmony in the inn.

This choice makes him subject to several kinds of adjudication. His wife deplores him. The fencing masters of the castle town pass judgments as representatives of the Samurai class, and their verdict (although motivated by their greed and envy) is to deny Ihei the position of master fencer he could otherwise obtain. But eventually, Ihei is acquitted in every meaningful sense. His wife understands the nobility of his actions, and so does Shigeaki, the local lord. However, most importantly, Ihei, who constantly judges himself and his own actions, finds the strength to acquit himself and to find satisfaction in his life. At the end of the narrative he is happy, empowered and at peace with himself and nature.

Both films manifest the human play of struggling and balancing conflicting rules, codes and norms. Personal codes of honour are set against communal and professional codes. Internal moral urges are challenged against external demands. The human condition, as portrayed in both films, is a condition of constant judging. But, as *After the Rain* aptly illustrates, if we are doomed to constantly judge ourselves and others and to be judged by them, our only hope is to approach any judgment equipped with kindness, empathy and creative imagination. This way of judging is represented in *After the Rain* by the women, especially by Tayo, Misawa's wife.

Here lies a significant modification of the standing that may be construed from *Rashomon*. The heroine of *Rashomon* is primarily subjected to the gaze, desire, whims and violence of the male. Although she fights the bandit who rapes her, her brave fight is depicted as originating from the desperate need to remain honourable in the eyes of man, and not from the awful personal damage she suffers. In *Rashomon* the feminine effort to stay honourable and 'lovely' under the male gaze is doomed to failure. In a recent reading of *Rashomon*, Orit Kamir suggests that although the woman is cruelly victimised, the film is constructed in a way that makes her a primary defendant, whose guilt is that of being seductive. The woman even judges herself harshly and severely, and eventually convicts herself according to masculine honour norms. (Kamir, 2000: 39)

*After the Rain* is entirely different in this context. From the start, women in *After the Rain* are far from passive and silenced. They have distinct personalities, assertiveness and presence. At the beginning we again meet a victimised woman -- an angry whore who is furious because her meagre portion of food has been stolen. But she bravely overcomes the attempts of the thief to silence her and shame her, and assertively demands her justice. She comes out as a brave and dignified character. She does not accept the derogative judgment some of the men aim to force upon her, and chooses, despite her low starting point, to judge for herself the reality she faces. Both main female characters in the film -- Ihei's wife and the Lord of the castle's wife -- share the same characterisation. They judge rather than being judged. The way they judge is admirable, because their judging is subtle, sensitive, manifold and compassionate, very different from the crude judgments we witnessed in *Rashomon*, that absolutely failed to make moral sense of reality.

The women in *After the Rain* are portrayed as the carriers of moral authority and compassion, and as capable judges because of their ability to conduct careful balances between conflicting emotions and needs. 'My heart is almost breaking', says Ihei's wife when she reacts to the words of an old man who is persuaded there is goodness in life after meeting Ihei. It is her

heart that actually motivates the action and casts the final verdict: there is indeed goodness, which is potent enough to defy poverty, cruelty and whatever else stands in its way.

To sum up this important point, if in *Rashomon* we met a passive, suffocated and highly miserable woman, in *After the Rain* women are strong, wise, self-assured and, perhaps most importantly, authoritative. They take the power to construct their own destiny and the destiny of men. They are the emotional and moral core of the narrative. It is indeed a huge shift from *Rashomon*.

To conclude, both *Rashomon* and *After the Rain* suggest that there are complex, intricate ties between several forms of judging that constitute our life. Alongside formal, legal adjudication operates social and cultural adjudication and also internal-personal processes of self-judgment. Each system of adjudication has its own paths of decision-making and sentencing, but often enough those paths reach juxtaposition and are sometimes interlaced. What characterises the adjudication in *Rashomon* is the elements of desperation, hopelessness, disillusionment, anger and fear that are embedded and must be embedded, according to the spirit of the film, in any act of judging, external or internal, legal or cultural. This is represented, among other ways, in the continuous bitter remarks of the people assembled under the Rashomon. There is only one perception about which the woodcutter, the commoner and the priest can agree, and that is the weakness and ill fate of human beings who are basically doomed to misery. As mentioned, that dire perception is hardly mitigated by the final scene.

*After the Rain* contemplates the same processes of adjudication, but offers an entirely different perspective. In the room of Ihei's master, there is a banner that says: 'Not truth -- but fact.' This paradoxical and enigmatic idiom is a sort of answer to the unsolved issues raised in *Rashomon*. Indeed, there is a possibility of reconciling between the existence of a certain 'fact' and the impossibility of labelling it as 'truth'. In *After the Rain* the judging is used not in order to inflict harsh sentencing, but rather in order to attain all sorts of pardoning. Lord Shigeaki, after listening to his internal voice, evoked by his wife, actually pardons Misawa Ihei. Tayo, Ihei's wife, pardons her husband, and thus gives Ihei the necessary tool in order to pardon himself. People are depicted here as worthy of redemption, and capable of achieving it by being strong and loyal to some guiding integrity that can always be found within our souls.

Here comes to mind an observation made by the over seventy year old Borges: 'The same few plots, I am sorry to say, have pursued me down through the years.' (Borges, 1972: 10) Bearing in mind the close links between *Rashomon* and *After the Rain*, perhaps Akira Kurosawa experienced a similar sentiment that urged him to re-work some of the themes present in one of the main stories he ever told -- *Rashomon* -- and re-tell them in a new way. In notes that Kurosawa left with his script he wrote: 'It should be a story that, when you have seen it, leaves you feeling cheered.' Takashi Koizume and the team that created *After the Rain* have succeeded in faithfully fulfilling this wish.

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# Animal Farm

Dir: John Stephenson, USA, 1999

## A review by Chris Wiley, Royal Holloway, University of London, UK

Over fifty years after the publication of *Animal Farm*, Hallmark Entertainment has finally risen to the ultimate challenge and made a live-action film, recently released on DVD, of George Orwell's celebrated fable. *Animal Farm*, a political allegory of Soviet Russia, was written in 1943/4 and brought out, with much difficulty, the following year. The intricate nexus of symbolism and correspondence that Orwell constructed within its pages is today well known. The incompetent wino, Jones (the Tsar), finds himself expelled from his farm (Russia) by the animals he habitually neglects, who have been roused to revolution by the prize boar, Old Major (a conflation of Marx and Lenin) and his doctrine of 'Animalism' (Communism). Subsequently, the pigs (Bolsheviks) of the farm assume command, and a bitter power struggle ensues between the ostensibly altruistic Snowball (Trotsky), and the scheming Napoleon (Stalin), who ultimately prevails. Enforcing his leadership with the help of persuasive propaganda expert, Squealer, and an army of vicious, intimidating dogs (the Secret Police), the autocratic Napoleon becomes increasingly more inebriated on his own power, progressively undermining the principles of Animalism until the pigs' egregious behaviour and abuse of their comrade animals rivals that of Jones and his men.

Despite the classic status of Orwell's fantastical novel, and its popularity as a study text, especially at secondary educational level, the film under present review has only one precursor, the animated *Animal Farm* (1955, dirs. Joy Batchelor and John Halas), regarded as definitive by many, and which was itself released on DVD a short time ago. Apparently, no chances were taken to ensure the triumph of the live-action adaptation, which boasted an all-star cast of voice-actors, including Kelsey Grammer as Snowball and Patrick Stewart as Napoleon, both of whom would have made totally unconvincing anti-heroes had their roles not been confined to the non-visual. But the success of such a project as this inescapably hinges not on the cast of humans but on that of the onscreen animals (in which respect *Animal Farm* followed in the wake of the *Babe* blockbusters. Indeed, only with the benefit of today's special effects could a film of Orwell's masterpiece hope to be made using a medium other than cartoon; one reason, no doubt, for the longevity of the animated version. However, unlike other animal-oriented movies, *Animal Farm* (despite Orwell's somewhat frivolous subtitle) transcends mere fairy-tale, in that its protagonists anthropomorphically assume human traits. Thus, footage of the live animal cast was spliced with that of computerised animatronic doubles (created by Jim Henson's Creature Shop) whose features could be subtly manipulated by a team of puppeteers, using an elaborate remote-control system of glove technology and joysticks, such that the animals might reflect a full range of human expressions and emotions. The results are truly spectacular, the precision of the lip-synching when the animals speak being especially notable.

The rich tradition of bringing popular works of literature to the big screen has given rise to the commonplace practice of altering the plot of the original, and this has significant

implications for such film adaptations as *Animal Farm*, the majority of whose viewers may reasonably be assumed to have studied Orwell's satire on the corrupting influence of absolute power. The very bleakness of the plot, notably the betrayal of the loyal, industrious cart-horse, Boxer (voiced by Paul Scofield), would seem to preclude possibilities for family viewing. Moreover, the present film opens with a terrifying glimpse of the extent of the disaster that befell the animals under Napoleon's totalitarian regime, thus assuming a certain pre-knowledge both of the outcome of the tale and of its allegorical significance. Fidelity to the original text would, therefore, seem to be paramount and, for the most part, the screenplay by Alan Janes and Martyn Burke preserves much of Orwell's detail -- though deviations are inevitable, and (perhaps not surprisingly) they contribute substantially to the film's most conspicuous naiveties.

The condensing of an entire novel (even one that, at just ninety pages long in some editions, is concise for a literary classic) into cinematic proportions unavoidably means both that the story has to be abridged, and that the emphasis correspondingly shifts as the essence of the meaning is conveyed via effective images at the expense of some of the prose. In the film, for example, Old Major is killed inadvertently by Jones' ineptitude -- the farmer (played by Pete Postlethwaite) trips, causing his gun to fire -- and the boar topples spectacularly to his death from the very platform on which he preached to the assembled animals; whereas in Orwell's original, Old Major died in his sleep three days afterwards. The former scenario results in much more powerful viewing, both in terms of visual impact, and of the tightened plot, since the two events (Jones' gunshot disturbing the animals, and Old Major's subsequent death) flow seamlessly, and the connection between the farmer's hopelessness and the animals' resultant uprising is made explicit. In fact, the added possibilities for explication afforded by visual media sometimes actively work to the film's credit. To mention just one particular instance, the impact of the ingenious flanking tactic that proves decisive in the animals' victory in the Battle of the Cowshed is negated in the novel by the very length of the account by which it is explained; whereas the equivalent images in the film render Snowball's inspired manoeuvre (and the ensuing chaos) with both vigour and clarity.

One of the most significant departures from the plot of Orwell's fantasy is the prominence given to the character of Jessie the sheepdog (voiced by Julia Ormond) -- one of several peripheral canines in the original book -- through whose eyes and ears the film unfolds. Jessie's individualistic nature is established from the outset, when she knocks down Jones to prevent him from harming Boxer, even before Old Major's Animalist diatribe (voiced by Sir Peter Ustinov) has incited widespread revolt among the animals. Jessie's dual role as maternal confidante of the proletariat animals and the helpless, yet all-understanding witness to tragedy matches most closely with that of Clover the horse in the novel, which does serve to redress a certain bias on Orwell's part towards equestrians and pigs as against the relative anonymity of other animals. As far as the film is concerned, the choice of a dog rather than a horse is understandable from the point of view of pragmatism, not least because the former are amongst the most trainable animals. The increased closeness to Jessie also serves to heighten the pivotal moment in the story, Snowball's expulsion from the farm, in that we are invited to share in her horror as the powerless mother of the very puppies indoctrinated by Squealer (voice of Ian Holm) and Napoleon to enforce discipline throughout the resulting reign of terror. But, in other respects, the substitution of dog for horse creates additional problems. The fact that Jessie (who is suspiciously active for an animal meant to be pregnant) is given the run of the farm positions her ideally to function as narrator, but it also grants her a special privilege over the other animals, who are kept locked up. Likewise, in her role as sheepdog, Jessie represents an agent for the enforcement of the authority of Jones, the

ultimate enemy of Animalism, over the flock she marshals. However, Jessie's uneasy hierarchical relationship to her fellow animals is sidestepped rather than resolved.

The film recognises the main allegorical thrust of Orwell's parable, which is realised with remarkable lucidity, Old Major's extensive Animalist manifesto being summarised into the 'Seven Commandments' that are then progressively emended at the hands of an increasingly insane Napoleon. The nature of the satire on Soviet Communism is ably reflected in Richard Harvey's original music, which includes some brilliant pastiches of the particular brand of traditional Russian music popularised by the Red Army Chorus. But several key points of the prosopopoeic parody are nevertheless lost. It is difficult to find credible scriptwriter Alan Janes' contention that 'George Orwell paints slightly too good a picture of Snowball as Trotsky' (DVD interview), as compared with Napoleon as Stalin. Orwell himself stated that the two pigs were as unscrupulous as one another, and the point is by no means lost in the 1955 animated film, which includes a scene in which both characters pilfer milk intended by right for the wider animal community. Contrarily, in the live-action version, Snowball appears positively glorified, with Jessie even remarking in voiceover, 'While Snowball worked towards Old Major's ideals, Napoleon made different plans', thus establishing the (erroneous) dichotomy between the former acting for the greater good, and the latter operating solely to his own ends. Likewise, both films fail to encapsulate the uncomfortable relationship between Communism and the Church in the fleeting appearances of the (marginalised) character, Moses the crow.

The prime victim of misinterpretation, however, is the novel's conclusion, at the postludial point when the pigs have come to resemble man to such an extent that 'it was impossible to say which was which', an impression that is straightforward to convey through the medium of cartoon, but simply not believable in a live-action film. Thus, a barely plausible epilogue was added to the 1999 version -- reflecting the fall of Stalin, and by extension Communism, in the years since Orwell's fictional volume was written -- in which the animals, led by Jessie, are supposed to have survived for years in the woods, hiding from Napoleon until his autocratic rule came to an end. The consequent propitious arrival of new human owners in the film not only trivialises the struggles faced by post-Communist Russia, but, more chillingly, functions to reinforce Western ideological hegemony, given the novel's signification of humans (Jones aside) as capitalists. Fidelity to the original text requires fidelity to its underlying philosophy, and this message is totally contrary to that intended by its far-left author, whose satire responded not to any perceived shortcomings of Communism, but to the perversion of its idealistic principles in Soviet Russia. Moreover, *Animal Farm* constitutes not merely a great literary period-piece, but also a valuable documentary record of the opinion of a committed Marxist. As such, the work is immutably positioned in history, and the person (or the film) that alters history is perhaps no better than Squealer or Napoleon.

# Bend It Like Beckham

Dir: Gurinder Chadha, USA/UK/Germany, 2002

## A review by Debnita Chakravarti, University of Reading, UK

Gurinder Chadha has always preferred cultural margins. From *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993) to *What's Cooking?* (2000), her films have primarily explored the myriad ways cultures cross over, with sometimes ludicrous and often unexpected results. Cannily timed for release just before the World Cup, with the famous English footballer's name in its title, *Bend It Like Beckham* was understandably popular with the masses. But like any good sports film, it is not about sports *per se*, with football providing Chadha with another avenue onto cultural crossroads.

In this story of an Indian family settled in Britain, margins are apparent from the very start. Jess Bhamra (Parminder K. Nagra), the younger daughter of Punjabi parents (Anupam Kher and Shaheen Khan), is passionate about football. It is a game she excels at, and she is spotted by an English girl, Jules (Keira Knightley), for a girls' team. Jess practises in secret, without the knowledge of her disapproving family. They want her to settle down with a 'suitable' boy from their community, and believe that her happiness lies in being well versed in useful home-keeping skills and 'proper' values of her culture. The only 'match' they are interested in is one that will end in a prosperous marriage, while for Jess, a 'match' denotes something very different. That she may have different aspirations never occurs to her family in their anxiety to ensure the wellbeing of their children. Jess' repeated transgressions to the playing field lead to several tearful encounters with her vexed parents, and almost break up her sister's marriage alliance, but she finds herself unable to escape the insoluble tussle between family and football.

Jules introduces Jess to the team coach, Joe (Jonathan Rhys-Meyers), who is interested in not only the player but also the woman. Jules, who fancies Joe, misinterprets his preference for her friend as usurpation on Jess' part, with Jules' alienation being paralleled by Joe's growing friendship with Jess. Jess is encouraged to appear for a match in Germany, and later at a crucial game where an American scout will be present. As luck has it, the wedding of Jess' sister coincides with Jess' big match. Finally, her father plays an improbable *deus ex machina* by allowing her a few hours in which to realise her dreams on the field. He relives his bitter memories of racial prejudice which hampered his own cricket career in England, and refuses to let his gifted daughter make the same unwilling sacrifice. The two girls also sort out their personal differences, and the film ends with them setting off to America on a football scholarship, dreaming of new beginnings.

Characterisation has always been Chadha's forte, and the Indian community settled in England is a rewarding study of life at a point of cultural confluence. The parents hold on to familiar conventions in an alien land with a desperation that can only rise from fear -- the fear of the racial and cultural 'other'. Besieged by a way of life not their own, they are forever apprehensive of losing their children to forces they do not comprehend and cannot control.

They have an urge to belong, not to the community at large but to other families like themselves, a displaced hunger for acceptance that all emigrants have. This craving sustains their closed cultural ghetto, zealously fenced off by inflexible conventions.

The children of these families encounter their own share of problems. Caught between cultures, they cannot match home and world. Outside, they feel themselves to be just like their English friends; inside, they are reminded of irreconcilable differences. Like their parents, this generation of British Asians is poised at thresholds, but without quite the same convictions in their cultural currency, for they are further removed from their roots. The plot is refracted into multiple narratives situated on a variety of different margins. Jess' story is just one of them, encapsulating the film's major concern with divisions in all their diversity.

Jess differs from her idol, Beckham, on two irreconcilable counts: she is an Asian, and she is a woman. The fact that she can bend a ball as well as the soccer superstar does not suffice in itself to guarantee her success. She finds the distance long and the hurdles many between herself and her dream, and her first task is to bend the seemingly rigid rules.

Her story is plotted against the twin axes of race and gender, against her will and desire, and other characters too share her sense of exclusion in their lives. The issue of race divided her father from his passion for cricket. It prevents her friend Tony (Ameet Chana), also, like Jess, a British Asian, from disclosing his homosexuality. The film, however, refuses to position this divide along simplistic east and west boundaries as Joe, the team coach, also struggles with his identity as an Irishman in England.

An interesting aspect of these cultural questions is also constituted by the film's study of taboos, showing how those forces which limit human behaviour are themselves limited by cultural imagination. When Jules' mother overhears a tiff between the two teenage girls, she immediately assumes them to be lesbian lovers. But Jess' family, especially her mother, cannot conceive of the notion at all; her only fear is the dishonour Jess might bring to her family by choosing a white boyfriend.

If race is one determinant of culture, another is gender. The film rightly observes how gender has its own cultural baggage. Men and women have their own spheres, and each is supposed to be contained in his or her own demarcated world. Football is still one of the exclusively male bastions, and the film reverberates with complaints on behalf of women who might happen to like and play the game themselves. In this respect, Jules is as much at a disadvantage as Jess, her Englishness notwithstanding.

This 'culture' of femaleness, this construct of femininity is propagated chiefly by the women themselves. Both mothers feel it to be their duty to inculcate feminine virtues in their daughters. If Jess' mother insists that she learn to cook a full course North Indian meal, Jules' mother tries to entice her daughter away from her tomboyish ways with pretty lingerie. The same maternal concerns speak different languages.

The ultimate message is one of acceptance, anxious but not unhappy. Both mothers achieve the difficult realisation that their daughters will not be like them, not even what they would want them to be, but their own persons. If they do not want to lose their daughters, they will have to learn about their worlds and be a part of them.

One of the most touching scenes in the film is where Jules' mother gets her husband to teach her about football at the lunch table, using sea-salt, mustard and teriyaki sauce.

The film dribbles its way adroitly between the varied veins of human happiness. The climactic scene of Jess' all-important match juxtaposed with the wild revelry of her sister's wedding shows the film's awareness of differing dreams. What makes the film memorable is its acceptance of these very different types of aspiration. It is honest in its readiness to acknowledge the dappled heterogeneity of modern cosmopolitan existence, and laudable in not attempting simplistic deductions. Its conclusion seems disappointingly easy, following on from its rich canvas of realism; ironically, in this respect, the film lends itself the same 'in-between' quality that pervades its theme, as discussed above. It stands uneasily between a clear-eyed account of diasporic dilemmas and a fairytale-like wish fulfilment conclusion, somewhat like Nagesh Kukunoor's virgin venture *Hyderabad Blues* (1998).

Jess' story is at the exact centre of this problematic of boundaries, throwing into sharp relief this Janus-like characteristic of the film. As she stands at the intersection of the two axes of race and gender, unlike other characters who are positioned along either one of the two, she finds her journey from Hounslow to Hamburg the hardest to navigate. An apt symbol for her predicament is the scar on her thigh, which makes her unwilling to show her legs in public, paralleling the mental taboo of her culture.

A scar, interestingly, is a mark on the skin, serving here as a physical manifestation of the invisible borders and limits the film holds up for scrutiny. But Jess does play, finally, in utter disregard of the scar, just as her father eventually lets his anger at discrimination dissolve and cheers his daughter towards her dreams. The film does not promise that the wounds life doles out disappear magically, but it suggests that they are absorbed again, with time and will, into its unceasing flow. Lines are crossed, rules are bent, and only then do new worlds become possible.

# Gebürtig

Dir: Lukas Stepanik and Robert Schindel, Germany/Austria/Poland, 2001

## A review by Eva Kuttentberg, Albion College, Michigan, USA

As if to create a fitting frame for the cinematographic confrontation with Austria's Nazi past, the premiere screening of *Gebürtig*, or *Gebirtig* as the subtitled version is called, in Spring 2002 coincided with the *Wehrmachtsausstellung*, which in turn provoked neo-Nazi and anti-neo-Nazi protests in Vienna. The Austrian filmmaker Axel Corti (*Where to and Back* [1985]) had planned to make this a TV film, but after his untimely death in 1993, the above-listed directors adapted Schindel's highly acclaimed novel *Gebürtig* (1992) for the big screen. Two references to the Waldheim affair from 1986 date the film, in which a panoply of Jewish and non-Jewish characters of the Holocaust and post-Holocaust generations living in Germany, Austria, and New York City try to come to terms with their respective traumas as offspring of Holocaust victims and survivors, Nazi perpetrators, and Communists.

The film opens with a modified version of the novel's epilogue, which describes the experience of forty Viennese Jews who were asked to do close-ups in Dan Curtis' reconstruction of Theresienstadt for the ABC series *War and Remembrance* (1988). The novel also alludes to the prolific Viennese filmmaker and journalist Ruth Beckermann, who actually filmed conversations among the close-up actors during breaks, and incorporated the results in *Die papierene Brücke* (1987), a stunningly poetic, mostly autobiographical film tracing her family's past. As early as 1982, Nadja Seelich's *Kieselsteine*, coincidentally also directed by Stepanik, described the relationship between Jewish Hannah and her partner Martin, who wonders whether she is with him because of or despite the fact that he is not a Jew. *Gebürtig* stages a role reversal in the array of characters from *Kieselsteine*, in which Hannah remembers the Jewish traditions and anti-Semitic offences of her childhood, focusing on Konrad Sachs (Daniel Olbrychski), formerly nicknamed Prince of Poland, who remembers his childhood as the son of a high-ranking Nazi doctor who performed vivisections, and Hermann Gebirtig (Peter Simonischek), who briefly remembers his childhood in anti-Semitic Vienna. A noteworthy contrast between the two films is *Kieselsteine's* link to Israel as opposed to *Gebürtig's* connections to the United States. In light of Beckermann's, Corti's, Seelich's and Simon Wiesenthal's works, *Gebürtig* is sophisticated and undoubtedly important, but not as groundbreaking as critics have claimed.

In contradistinction to the novel's Theresienstadt, the film opens with gripping scenes from Auschwitz-Birkenau. Only after a Nazi officer helps a fallen prisoner back to his feet does the viewer become aware that he is watching a film within the film. This opening sequence poignantly alludes to the constellation of victims and perpetrators, to the challenges of coping with trauma, and to issues of authenticity and negotiating complex identities. Danny Demant (August Zirner) considers his life a charade of the murdered victim; as the son of Holocaust victims, the past continuously returns to him. Not only does he re-enact life in the Lager in front of a camera, he also rehearses this experience on the stage of his cabaret. As the perfect cue, the last word in Danny's cabaret song, 'Diaspora', conjures up scenes from New York

City, where the composer Hermann Gebirtig celebrates his Jewish heritage through fleeting encounters with Jewish-Polish women. Like a kaleidoscope, one scene blends into the next, introducing the successful journalist Konrad Sachs, who sets out to interview actors during the shoot in Auschwitz, yet is overwhelmed by delusional images of himself or his father in Nazi uniform or getting ready to perform surgery. The fourth drifter, Immanuel Katz (Samuel Finzi), amuses his friends with his preference for tall, blond girlfriends, nicknamed Valkyries.

As swiftly as the various characters are presented, the set switches from the filming at Auschwitz-Birkenau -- that, as Danny poignantly remarks, makes the dummies used to represent corpses look as unreal as the real dead looked back then -- to a cozy bar in downtown Vienna, the cabaret 'Mishpoche', where Danny deals with horror in a humorous, grotesque way by performing scenes from anti-Semitic Austria and the Holocaust. One begins to wonder about the larger meaning of the cabaret: is it a fictional construction? If not, who is the audience? Is it an aesthetic strategy of alienation or a strategy to deal with horror in the style of Roberto Benigni's fable *Life is Beautiful* (1997)? Or is it a homage to the Gebirtig character from the novel, the writer of comedies? Is Jewish life in Vienna only feasible if enacted on the stage of the cabaret? Whatever the answers may be, the cabaret is a site where survivor guilt converges with coming to terms with individual identity, and where discussions of victimhood take place. With irony and self-irony, parody and self-parody, laughter and disguise, the cabaret stages identity as performance and functions as Danny's therapy, reminiscent of George Tabori's dramatic strategies when he prescribes simulation games to Jewish characters to cure 'Hebrew Paranoia'.

Visual and linguistic puns are by no means limited to the cabaret. They surface in Konrad's favourite fairytale, *Kannitverstan*, which evokes memories of his father coupled with nosebleeds. Tormented by inner voices, Konrad mumbles 'Uwaga' in his dreams, which makes his wife wonder what may be going through his mind. Calmly she suggests that perhaps he keeps secrets, not only from her but above all from himself. His delirious attacks intensify and amount to a nervous breakdown after he confides to a prostitute his father's past and the fact that he was hanged as a war criminal. Similar to Konrad, Danny has a second life during his sleep and talks to someone called 'Tanja Ehrenreich'.

The trauma continues with Immanuel's mother, who is hospitalised with pneumonia. Whereas the narrator suggests that she relives the trauma of Birkenau as Amalia Katz with typhoid in block 12, terrified of the phenol injection, blond Dr Christiana Kalteisen (Katja Weitzenböck), nicknamed Christkindl, takes the place of the imaginary Nazi doctor and stands for the present.

The four drifters, Danny, Konrad, Hermann and Immanuel, share traumatic experiences that challenge their abilities to build long-lasting relationships. Danny no longer finds comfort in Susan Ressel (Ruth Rieser), the daughter of a Communist and resistance fighter, and falls in love with Christiana. Konrad married Else (Corinna Harfouch) for her unquestioning love, whereas Hermann, despite his home in New York City, has Vienna encapsulated within himself, and falls in love with Susan.

The circumstances that bring Susan and Hermann together go back to a hiking trip on the Rax, where her father recognises the voice of a Nazi war criminal. Unwilling to let his legacy as a resistance fighter simply vanish, especially after he has suffered a heart attack and is no longer able to testify, Susan, with the help of Konrad, is determined to locate witnesses and bring the so-called skull cracker from Ebensee to trial. As a former Ebensee prisoner,

Hermann is the only witness, yet he refuses to return to the lions' den. Only after Susan's personal plea in New York does he agree to testify. His stay in Vienna becomes an emotional tour de force when he visits his former home and a nearby newspaper store where he used to stop in daily with his father. Lost in memories, he meets his former neighbour and Nazi party member Horsti, and after they briefly catch up, he even hesitatingly shakes hands with him. As in Simon Wiesenthal's *The Sun Flower* (1976), the handshake stands for personal -- but not for collective -- forgiveness. That very same day, Hermann encourages Konrad to write his story: 'I. Son of a Murderer'. Any efforts at reconnecting suddenly cease once the jury issues a not guilty verdict. As shocking as this may seem, it is perhaps less surprising for those familiar with Wiesenthal's *The Art of Remembrance* (1995) or with studies on Nazi war crime trials in Austria. Immediately after the skull cracker is acquitted, Hermann flees back to New York. In keeping with *Gebürtig's* intriguing open structure when mapping the Jewish-Austrian-German-American dialogue, the open end invites speculation as Susan also rushes to New York City.

Essentially, *Gebürtig* blends traumatic and nostalgic memories and maps the present haunted by the past. At the same time, it conveys subtle optimism about creating a dialogue in the post-Holocaust generation, and for that purpose draws on universal gestures such as handshakes and social elements that played a role before, during and after the Nazi period, such as medicine, psychoanalysis and, most importantly, personal relationships between Jews and non-Jews. Cinematographically, visual effects continuously link past and present as well as film set and reality: for instance, Susan's father's fatal collapse is followed by a scene of a prisoner getting back on his feet. The film's visual intensity, however, is rivaled by its linguistic intensity. The novel's poetic, ironic language is beautifully recaptured in witty dialogues when characters fall in love. A gripping tone prevails in the cabaret scenes as well as on the shoots; when Danny wears the prisoner uniform and is asked how it fits, he quickly responds: 'Like a glove. Is it an artifact or original?'

A successful screen adaptation with slight modifications (of Hermann's professional life from author of comedies to composer, and Danny's from editor to cabaret artist and ultimately also narrator), *Gebürtig*, more strongly than the book, stands in the Freudian tradition of the talking cure. The son of a Nazi perpetrator is desperate to talk, to come out of the closet, whereas Danny, the son of Holocaust victims, is always operating openly within this identity; he admits that not a day goes by that he does not think of Auschwitz. Paradoxically, *Gebürtig's* aspiration for political complexity is at the same time its pitfall. It is somewhat disappointing that the film falls behind Austria's political reality, and that the politically engaged characters do not participate in protests against the Austrian government, the so-called *Wandertage*, or comment on the *Wehrmachtsausstellung* in the style of Beckermann's *East of War* (1997).

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# The Lawless Heart

Dir: Tom Hunsinger and Neil Hunter, UK, 2001

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

My cinephile heart leapt when Ryan Gilbey proclaimed a period of rejuvenation for British film in *Sight and Sound*, citing the releases of 2001 and 2002 as his evidence. Sadly, the temptation to groan in cynical despair trailed only two steps behind. Ignoring the always fractious matter of what constitutes any national film style, it is the miserable sense of déjà vu inevitably accompanying the fanfares that generates my emotional ambivalence. Every few years, against the odds, the critical press notices some quality product sneaking through. Praise, awards, and sometimes even audiences, are found for intelligent filmmaking across a range of genres, and we grin like Colin Welland as we say 'the British are coming', even if we actually only whisper it and have our fingers crossed behind our backs as we do. British cinema is not unique in feeling this way about its national product, but we do seem peculiarly prone to excesses of joy and despair. Moreover, the explanations for these emotions are almost as legion as the various incarnations that British film funding has been subjected to over the last decade.

Amidst this, you marvel that *The Lawless Heart* got made at all. Yet co-writer/directors Neil Hunter and Tom Hunsinger present one of the most assured and well constructed movies of recent years: warm, witty and humane, by any national standards. On one level it is a beautifully crafted piece of work with stunning cinematography by Sean Bobbitt, who brought such life to Michael Winterbottom's *Wonderland* (1999). The landscape of Malden, Essex -- hardly an overused cinematic setting -- is used to great effect throughout, and whether we are watching the 'home-movie' footage that opens and closes the film, or are being drawn into the three very different protagonists' stories, the camerawork never draws unnecessary attention to itself. But the film's heart is its script, and narrative plotting, character and performances are so entwined with the screenplay that any attempt to praise these aspects in isolation proves impractical.

It is worth summarising how the script was developed, if only to demonstrate how unlikely it is that others will (or could) replicate this approach to filmmaking. After Hunter and Hunsinger completed their first feature *Boyfriends* (1996), they immediately began working on *The Lawless Heart*, not by developing the story arc but by sketching out characters. Actors then worked via improvisation sessions to construct the narrative. (Hunter and Hunsinger, 2002) Four years of collaborative work, including a cast reading under the aegis of 'The Script Factory' (Kemp, 2002: 11), produced the provisional shooting script. Although several of the original actors were unavailable when filming finally started in 2000 -- an inevitable, if disappointing consequence of the long pre-production scripting period -- latecomers to the casting were able to take the detailed characterisations and add their own colour and tone.

This considered and astonishingly laborious scripting process proves absolutely central to the narrative conviction of *The Lawless Heart*. A melancholic tale of grief and love, it is also supremely funny without being obviously a comedy. The catalyst is dead before the film

starts: Stuart, a restaurant owner, died in a boating accident. From the opening scenes at his funeral, we then follow the lives of three men: brother-in-law Dan (Bill Nighy); lover Nick (Tom Hollander), with whom he ran a restaurant, and cousin Tim (Douglas Henshall), returning to his home town for the first time in eight years. The structure, inspired by Eric Rohmer's *Les Rendezvous de Paris* (1994), moves over the same period of time from the three different perspectives, revealing how the paths of personal relationships can converge. Although not an original approach, it is handled with supreme confidence borne of a cast and crew totally conversant with the characters' motivations. Individuals of seemingly peripheral importance suddenly become central, and our perception of gestures and objects changes as the film progresses. For example, Leah (Josephine Butler) appears several times before we find out her name or that she will prove a pivotal character in Tim's return to his hometown. A hideous orange patterned scarf, a corkscrew and a coconut, all take star-turns in the three narratives, and become invested with emotional meaning as the layers of the plot fall into focus.

The first and lightest of the three narratives concentrates on Dan, a reluctant, middle-aged farmer, only in the business by accident of marriage to Judy (Ellie Haddington). Entranced by a French woman he meets at the wake, Corinne (Clémentine Célerié), who warms to him despite his stumbling and self-deprecating manner, he edges towards the possibilities of an affair. Emotionally introverted, Dan's tentative and often crass attempts to communicate could easily alienate audiences tired of male mid-life crises. But Nighy, a largely underrated actor with the project from the start, constructs a truly engaging and humorous portrait of a figure temporarily seduced by possibilities beyond the mundane financial concerns of rural life. He visits the bar at the wake, but only for matches, not to buy a drink; sent out for shopping, he is found looking paralysed and bewildered by Corinne as he attempts to differentiate between two soap powders. Nighy perfectly captures the hesitant verbalisation that life may be passing him by: 'I never really understood what the word meant'. 'Depressed?' 'No, happy.' He also makes us wince with toe-curling laughter rather than disgust at Dan's homophobic comments about 'your lot' when he talks to Nick about the question of fidelity (really a consideration of Dan's own fracturing morality). Over a chance encounter at the pub, Nick and Dan awkwardly drink together, and Dan muses aloud about the question of straying in a serious relationship; for him, Nick and Stuart's relationship was neither as valid nor as serious as his marriage with Judy. Nick can barely contain his fury -- 'consideration for what would be jeopardised' should dictate moral decisions -- but Dan simply absent-mindedly reiterates Corinne's belief that 'courage' is the key. The word echoes Stuart's oft-quoted motto of 'go for it', and, despite the ironic manner in which it is cited by Dan, the phrase is key to all three strands of the movie.

The middle story centres on Nick, and the filmmakers' reluctant decision to place its raw and wounded portrayal of grief after rather than before Nighy's bleak wit proves wise. (Kemp, 2002: 11) Here we trace Nick's quiet despair and desperate attempt to re-establish emotional feeling after Stuart's unexpected death. By a series of accidental encounters, Charlie (Suki Smith), a dizzy checkout girl, befriends Nick, and the unlikely couple begin hanging out together. Surprised by her openness and vivacious outlook on life, Nick searches for some kind of solace in her offer of friendship, revealing the darkest, destabilising effects death can have on your emotional perspective. Nick repeatedly tries to shut himself into the darkness, breathing in the remnants of Stuart's presence -- his diaries, the answerphone tape, his clothes. Charlie seems to offer him a way into the light, but ultimately, despite his muttered exhortation to 'go for it', their sexual encounter in Stuart's old beachhut -- one of the most

loveless and non-erotic sex scenes committed to film -- only confirms that Nick must move on.

Approached with cool logic, the story of Tim, the feckless cousin (Douglas Henshall), should be the weakest of the three sections. The last of the three male leads on the project -- Jason Flemyng originally developed the role -- his narrative carries the additional weight of rounding up the other two strands. Nevertheless, Henshall matches these demands by using his raffish charm to transform Tim from a careless adventurer, taking Stuart's advice of 'go for it' completely to heart, into a complexly needy figure recognising his desire to be loved. Wilfully inattentive to those around him, we write him off as insensitive, only out for casual sexual affairs. He quickly makes off with Stuart's favourite jacket, ignoring the resonance it has for Nick, and casually overstays his welcome at Nick's house, organising a riotous party there and coming home loudly drunk early in the morning. But Henshall captures the inner shyness and repressed desire for something more meaningful as Tim courts, falls for and eventually -- reluctantly -- surrenders Leah to the man she had long since loved. The scenes of Tim's failed proposal and his fighting back the tears when he admits to an answering machine that, despite his own longing, Leah cannot be his are profoundly moving. That he can also shift gear to Tim's residual 'chancer' instincts is testament to this actor's ability to convey multi-dimensional characters on even a minimum of preparation when a script is this good.

One could quibble that the women's roles are underwritten, that they are only foils for the personal revelations the men make of their lives, but such a harsh assessment unfairly detracts from appreciating the overall beauty of the film. If you have an appreciation for fine acting and subtle narratives made possible by thoughtful scriptwriting, *The Lawless Heart* is worth seeking out. But be warned: despite four awards at its August 2001 Locarno Film Festival premiere, it was late June 2002 before independent specialists Optimum Releasing obtained even a limited UK release on the BFI art-house circuit. Hopefully, winning Best Screenplay at the 2002 British Independent Film Awards, and plans for US screenings and a video/DVD release will generate the breadth of audience this richly textured film deserves. However, as long as the major players in film distribution maintain their hypocritical stance on the 'art-house' film -- supporting it, whilst simultaneously blanching at the material it would mean exhibiting (Bradshaw, 2002: 18) -- it seems that audiences must count themselves lucky to stumble across such a gem.

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# Monsters, Inc.

Dir: Peter Docter, David Silverman and Lee Unkrich, USA, 2001  
Ice Age

## Ice Age

**Dirs. Carlos Saldanha and Chris Wedge, USA, 2002.**

## A review by Rebecca Farley, Cardiff University, UK

It's perhaps short-sighted of me, but I rarely trouble with the narratives of animated films. They've always seemed the least interesting aspect of animation; a vehicle, nothing more. After *Tarzan* (1999), for example, I got into a mighty row with a friend who wanted to ponder at cigarette-and-booze-fuelled length, about why Disney films always kill off the father. Irrelevant, I said. If anything, the pathos of the silverback's death was merely a misplaced glitch in the action, spoiling the rollicking dynamics of what was otherwise Disney's best traditional film in years. The narrative could provide few clues as to why *Tarzan* worked as well as it did. After all, Disney features have for sixty-odd years followed well defined conventions: fantasies or fairytales, or stories where anthropomorphised animals motivate fantastic content. Trained, as we are, by Hollywood and Film Studies courses to see the narrative as the motive force, we sometimes forget that the treatment -- *how* it's told -- is as crucial to a movie's success as the narrative. In animated films, in fact, what matters is precisely that they are *animated*; that they can do things which live-action cannot. The narrative provides opportunities to exploit animation's unique formal capabilities. What captures our attention depends on how enthusiastically the creators take advantage of that opportunity.

My friend was greatly scandalised by this wilful superficiality on my part. Because of their extended capacity for representation, however, animated films provide the greatest scope for cinematic novelty and invention, without having to resort to shock or (necessarily) violence. At its best, animation provides the opportunity to playfully explore the frontiers of cinematic representation, particularly in terms of introducing new technologies. It specialises in the new, in representations that mainstream live-action cannot (yet) manage. It was animation, after all, that resuscitated computer-generated imagery (CGI) after its disastrous debuts in *TRON* (1982) and *The Last Starfighter* (1984). (Hilf, 1996) Much of *Tarzan*'s appeal derived from the latest evolution of that technology, stunning new software that allowed spectacular movement along the z-axis (the 'depth' axis, extending 'into' and 'out of' the screen). *Tarzan*'s tree-surfing, camp-trashing and tiger-wrestling sequences were as dazzling a display of the magic and power of the cinematic machine as one could hope for, imbued with an exuberant sense of fun, of what play theorists call *Funktionslust* -- the joy of performing at the height of one's abilities. Edgar Rice Burroughs' story simply provided the arena and the spotlight for the animators to stretch the medium's muscles.

In this sense, *Tarzan* demonstrates how animation works within the Hollywood system. As Kristin Thompson (1980) has so cogently argued, in order to contain its disruptive play, the classical Hollywood system has positioned animation to continually 'make a spectacle' of itself, thereby endlessly refreshing the allure of the cinematic apparatus. Hence, the conventional narrative genres. Fantasy and fairy-tales provide the most scope for this spectacularisation; they motivate fantastic representations. Mundane realities can be depicted perfectly well in live-action, but to flaunt cinema's technical magic requires an extraordinary form. Because it must fulfil this spectacularising function, mainstream animation must be investigated in terms of its 'animatedness'. What does it do that is spectacular or new, that live-action cannot? How successfully does it rekindle the magic of cinema?

In this light, *Monsters, Inc.* works, and works spectacularly. It is boosted by the most original premise yet to emerge from Hollywood's animated feature industry. Whereas, historically, even the most fantastic features have been told from a recognisable 'real-world' (earth-bound) perspective, *Monsters, Inc.* reverses this convention, occurring entirely within the monsters' fanciful world. This brilliant foundation provides enormous scope for imaginative play, and Disney/Pixar exploit that potential to the fullest. Along with their weird and wonderful colleagues, Mike (the little green one) and Sulley (the big blue one) constitute the most creative big screen character design since *Toy Story's* (1995) mutant toys, shrewdly turning computer animation's limitations to strengths by eschewing anthropods. Even the medium's remaining weakness -- no matter how refined the software, 'human' faces still look oddly doll-like -- is ingeniously disguised, here, by hiding Boo (the kid) in a mocked-up monster suit. Presto! Within the movie's own verisimilitude, visual continuity was restored and the illusion complete, the device itself motivating further gags.

What the finely-crafted Monsters world demonstrates, wonderfully, is the extent to which a truly imaginative premise motivates further creativity. It's as though the designers and animators are themselves captivated by the idea, inspired to realising that world as fully as possible. Lavishly rendered, the *mise-en-scene* ripples with texture and a wealth of petty gags, from the restaurant menus to Sulley's range of deodorants, not to mention Pixar's trademark in-jokes. Besides the sly references to their previous films, Pixar's 'out-takes' are perhaps the most thoroughly gratuitous piece of reflexivity on the big screen. Not only do they afford the gleeful *schadenfreude* of all 'bloopers', but they point knowingly to the film's construction: these bloopers are fun because audiences know they were deliberately generated, suggesting the animators' indulgence for our mutual delight. In terms of the spectacularising function discussed previously, these tongue-in-cheek 'out-takes' are hard to beat.

However, the gags are not the form's only spectacularising tricks. As ever in a Pixar production, the animation itself is eye-catchingly expressive, from Boo's bouncy little scamper to Sulley's fur, rippling in the snowstorm. The standout treat, however, was the vertiginous 'door-coaster' sequence. Extending and improving *Tarzan's* tree-surfing software, the door-coaster was as close as you'll get to flying in the cinema, z-axis animation at its most breathtaking. The delight the sequence induces suggests we are not so far from those audiences fleeing the screen locomotive in 1895 as we sometimes think, nor are we much more sophisticated viewers. Such sequences make the cinema magic again. *Monsters, Inc.* will repay second and third viewings, being packed so full of detail that, on first viewing, you inevitably miss some. It cries out for a sequel, if only because ninety minutes is too brief a foray in the monsters' world.

*Ice Age* begins with similar promise. The first five minutes form a classic short film. They star the Scrat, a funny looking, nervous little rodent frustratedly searching for somewhere to bury his nut for the winter. As in the best Coyote cartoons of the 1940s, this incredibly simple idea goes an impossible distance on the strength of absolutely classic animation. The Scrat's impeccably timed twitches, squeaks and grunts punctuate bursts of activity so expressive that dialogue is unnecessary. This opening segues nicely into the titles, and thence into the main story, throughout which the Scrat reappears at the most inopportune moments. The main protagonists, Sid the sloth and Manny the mammoth are nicely realised, if conventional comedy characters: it's a Shrek and Donkey or, for that matter, early Riggs and Murtagh relationship. All the animation remains expressive rather than naturalistic, especially in vitals such as the characters' gormless gaits. It suits the visual style, which mimics the 'buckshee' look so common to TV (*Angry Beavers* [1997], *Cow and Chicken* [1997]) and independent animation. Design-wise, this is something of a cinematic breakthrough. Usually, computer generated features are stylistically fairly sterile, being almost relentlessly smooth, symmetrical and geometrically precise. Given that tradition, *Ice Age's* bulging eyeballs, buck teeth, lopsided heads and generally misshapen bodies are, therefore, a welcome break from tradition.

A startling new visual style, however, is not sufficient to carry a whole feature film, unless it works to invoke animation's license to play (where style often signifies that a text is embarking on a playful plundering of its own formal features). In *Ice Age*, however, quite the opposite applies. Early in the story, a Kodak moment -- parents celebrating baby's first steps - - introduces human characters. Not only do the ruggedly bestubbed dad and Revlon mum interrupt the film's comedy-ugly verisimilitude, but this moment also signals a retreat towards a live-action sensibility. Human characters are not as representationally plastic as, say, toys or monsters, or even anthropomorphised animals, so the opportunities to exploit the film's animatedness are curtailed. With the story now motivated and framed by the herd's relationship to the humans, we are back in the everyday, familiar world. Firmly grounded by the earthbound verisimilitude, *Ice Age* would require the frenzied genius of a Tex Avery (or his deranged descendants, John Kricfalusi or Matt Parker and Trey Stone) to propel it over the hurdle of the mundane.

This it fails to achieve. Within minutes, mum is killed off and the film turns into *Three Men and a Baby* (1987). The narrative arc is set; the scope of the jokes firmly circumscribed. This narrative has no call for magic, no riveting displays of animabatics, so there is little more to say about the animation. Its one showing off sequence -- the ice tunnel slide -- is fun, but no great advance on *Alice in Wonderland's* tumble back in 1953. The ice world, while aesthetically pleasant, simply does not contain enough material to sustain the visual play or flights of fancy that distinguish cinema animation. Instead, like television animation, the fun is confined to some minor slapstick in the action and witty one-liners. To be fair, it is well scripted. Like *Three Men and a Baby* -- or perhaps more like *Full House* (1987) -- *Ice Age* jokes about men's incompetence (but ultimate superiority) in looking after a baby, merging male bonding with the obligatory nappy gag. As a film, *Ice Age* is not without merit. As an *animated* film, however, it fails to fulfil any spectacularising function. It doesn't do anything that hasn't been done before, and as such, it may as well have been done in live-action.

However, an intriguing problem emerges from watching these two films together, and it recalls the problem of the animation narrative. *Monsters, Inc.* and *Ice Age* have precisely the same plot. Both movies -- released within weeks of each other -- feature a couple of odd-fellow bachelors who are lumbered with caring for a human child which has (or will have)

the power to harm them. Instead of abandoning or even destroying it themselves, they protect and care for the child, despite the threat it poses. Both movies feature schmaltzy 'cute baby' sequences, slightly tedious Bambi eyes, and end on a soppy note when the child must leave their world and return to its proper family. They even both feature 'Production Babies' in the credits -- lists of children born to the crew during the making of the film. The similarities are striking; the only difference is the gloss. The last time two animated features had such similar plots (Disney-Pixar's *A Bug's Life* and Dreamworks' *AntZ*, in 1998), there was intense industrial gossip about the 'coincidence'. This time, the similarities, though no less obvious, attracted less notice, probably because the treatments were so different, and because Fox isn't really a competitor with Disney-Pixar or Dreamworks-PDI. However, it is so intriguing when two films from antagonistic studios tell identical stories, that the plot itself bears further investigation.

Such an investigation raises the question of suitable analytic tools. Clearly, the dubious *auteurist* approach so often applied to Disney films will not account for a narrative shared by another studio. Nor is it particularly insightful to examine the films' treatment of women. Though they both exclude females -- and *Ice Age's* execution of the mother in particular is teeth-grittingly clumsy -- sidelining women in animation is practically compulsory (both in the text and in the studio). Indeed, it would be far more remarkable if an animated feature were *not* overtly misogynist. Besides, both these critical positions rely on the assumption and evidence of live-action, and don't reveal why, at this particular moment, the industry bred two re-tellings of this hackneyed tale. What needs to be said so urgently?

Central to any answer must be an investigation of the re-working associated with *animating* an established live-action narrative. Animation's position in the Hollywood apparatus means that the form is always already self-reflexive; the very fact that a film is animated is a strategic evasion of live-action's naturalist hegemony. Its spectacularising function, moreover, plays on and reinforces that reflexivity. Given this over-determined reflexivity, it is plausible to read the narrative as referring to the cinematic apparatus itself, and, indeed, some animation scholars have moved in precisely that direction. (George, 1990; Klein 1997) Further, if the modality of mainstream animated features is always already reflexive, its characters function somewhat idiosyncratically as well. In fact, in an under appreciated, but tremendously useful piece, Russell George suggests that the animated figure 'exemplifies issues of representation and the relation of cartoons to live-action film'. (George, 1990: 319) That is, if live-action characters represent 'bundles of traits' that play out social issues, animated characters, by contrast, embody purely representational issues.

Implementing this suggestion provides an illuminating reading of the *Monsters, Inc.* and *Ice Age* joint narrative. Both films' lead characters -- the monsters and the herd respectively -- represent, rather more literally than usual, the 'Other'. But, whereas in live-action this Other would stand for some social (racial, sexual or cultural) Other, in George's view, the monsters and the herd would represent animation, ever the Other to live-action's implicit norm. The child, perhaps, represents the technology: if no longer still quite in its infancy, computer generated animation (CGA) is certainly not much more than toddling, so to speak, though growing fast and learning new tricks every day. The Others foster the child for a while, protecting it from harm. In *Monsters* she even, briefly, 'becomes' one of them. Then, just when the Others are getting the knack of it, they must return the child to its parents, parents who (explicitly, in *Ice Age*) threaten the Others.

Is this not uncannily like the narrative being played out in the industry even now? Computer animation's first forays into the cinema were so poorly handled and received that it nearly perished. (Hilf, 1996) Animators, however, persisted with the technology, nurturing it, until suddenly in 1995 it could do *Toy Story*. Now *everybody* wants it. If live-action is reclaiming its prerogative rights over computer generated animation, however, it is also effectively neutralising the form. In live-action films, CGA's mighty resources are put to the most mundane of tasks: crowd enhancement in *Forrest Gump* (1994) or *The Phantom Menace* (1999); aliens for *Men in Black* (1997). Although technically chock-full of it, these films are not animation. With the exception of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* (2001), they do not use the form to generate wondrous new worlds, or to tell incredible new stories. Instead, we are stuck with *Jurassic Park 1993* -- rather than *Dinotopia* -- because at the end of the movie, the fantastic animated creations can be safely blasted back to outer space or abandoned on the tropic isle where they won't threaten the naturalist hegemony of live-action. Live-action's use of CGA thus serves to contain, neutralise, and marginalise it. The technological baby that animation nurtured for the better part of three decades is being snatched away; the brief glimpse of the *Monsters* world may be all we get of its awesome capacity to realise fantastic alternatives.

From animation's perspective, this recuperation by live-action seriously erodes animation's function within the cinematic apparatus. An analogy might be found in the way chain-store appropriation of street style robs the vernacular of its counter-hegemonic power. In using CGA merely to enhance the mundane, live-action not only steals for itself the spectacularising capacity of the new medium, but, in so doing, robs animation of the authority to explore the wider range of sophisticated fantasy. This is necessary to maintain the status quo. Animation's freedom from photoreal verisimilitude and absolute sovereignty over content is disruptive of live-action convention and, potentially, of mainstream cinema's power. It could *represent* anything, but it must not. Having been let out to bask briefly in the achievements of CGA, therefore, Hollywood animation is re-marginalised, constrained once again to kiddies' flicks, slick advertisements and SFX. The Monsters are shoved back behind the closet door.

This is, of course, a wilfully perverse reading, pushing George's account of animated characters perhaps much further than he intended, and stretching the idea of reflexivity to its limit. The hypothesised CGA narrative does, however, precisely mirror the trajectory of Technicolor (Neupert, 1994) and syncopated sound (Farley, 1999). In both cases, classical Hollywood's naturalist aesthetic was disrupted by the intrusion of new technology. Syncopated sound, for example, was seen to destroy film's 'visual language' until animators at Disney and Fleischer studios brought the sound-image relationship into the grammar of cinema and live-action directors followed their lead. (Bendazzi, 1994: 66) Likewise, the introduction of colour film raised similar problems: 'if the color was unnatural, the audience noticed it (and that was bad); if the color was good, the audience forgot about it (thus it was not worth the cost). (Bordwell and Staiger, 1988: 354) Once again, animation's ability to explore colour's expressive -- rather than naturalist -- capacity guided live-action's conventional management of the technology (particularly in Westerns and musicals). In all three cases, animation's freedom to create its own verisimilitude -- its functional reflexivity and fantastic content -- enables it to encompass, explore and conventionalise new technologies before they are recuperated into live-action's hegemony.

So, eccentric as my reading may seem, it nonetheless describes a familiar industrial trajectory. It would be too far-fetched to suggest that, somehow, the films' creators were

aware of this history and articulated it deliberately. It might be less of a stretch to indulge in predicting where this story will lead. Lacking Pixar's cutting-edge taste for innovation, the majority of studios will probably continue to produce fairytales or anthropomorphised animal quests; more monsters or dinosaurs if we're lucky. Disney being deeply conservative, despite their collaboration with Pixar, will ingratiatingly demonstrate how their technology can enhance (but never threaten the hegemony of) material readily accommodated by live-action. I would wager good money that instead of continued adventures in the Monsters' world, the *Monsters, Inc.* sequel will find Mike and Sulley trapped in Boo's -- human -- world. The respective endings of the two movies suggest as much. *Monsters, Inc.* ends with the Monsters finding a new, less threatening way of getting our attention (in future, they will collect laughs instead of screams). Disney-Pixar, that is, adapts and continues to profit. *Ice Age*, on the other hand, ends with the Herd wandering into the sunset, awaiting the big thaw and their next brief moment in the sun.

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# Resident Evil

Dir: Paul Anderson, UK/Germany/France, 2002

## A review by Bob Rehak, Indiana University, USA

The obvious way to start a review of *Resident Evil* would be to address the relationship between video games and cinema, studying the problems that the film seems to pose by its very existence at the multiplex. For example, how scandalised should we be at the no-longer-debatable mingling of games and movies? Is this hybridisation occurring at the level of form, aesthetics, marketing, or all three? Is the marriage productive or debased? What kinds of offspring can we expect, and how might they look and act?

What undergirds such lofty questions, of course, is an anxiety over the passing of living magic from one medium to its successor; once again, the litany of high versus low culture and technological succession. Have movies -- in particular, high-fat, low-nutrition visual snacks like *Resident Evil* -- become as heedlessly accelerated and vulgar as the worst Nintendo and Playstation products that gave rise to them? Or is it the case instead that video games, by infiltrating the movie theatre, are finally maturing into the narrative form they have always yearned to be, one that at present mimics cinema but will soon surpass it?

These are all important issues, and I will return to them shortly. For now, I want to sidestep some of the theoretical concerns surrounding *Resident Evil* and evaluate the film for what it is: a competent, unexceptional science-fiction/horror blend whose very unremarkability may be what makes it interesting. If it is a symptom of digital convergence, it is one of the more straightforward and easy to digest -- certainly less aware of its liminal status than a film like 2001's fascinating failure *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*.

Written and directed by Paul Anderson (a kind of post-Cameron auteur with a track record that includes the overblown and under-thought *Supernova* [2000], *Soldier* [1998], and *Event Horizon* [1997]), *Resident Evil* tells the story of Alice (Milla Jovovich), a memoryless military operative who plunges, Wonderland-fashion, into a high-tech hole in the ground. The hole in question is a corporate pharmaceutical lab, the Hive, within whose subterranean bowels a chemical spill is turning people into zombies and lab animals into ravening beasts. This crisis of biomutation prompts the complex's governing intelligence -- a malevolent computer named the Red Queen -- to seal the gates, forcing Alice and her team to fight their way first into, then out of what is essentially a basement full of monsters.

Structurally, *Resident Evil* is cleanly engineered, as though turned on a lathe, its narrative as functional (and morally evacuated) as the workings of a gun. Following the format set by any number of tech-horror films of the last few decades, it is a ten-little-Indians story in which our allegiances shift on cue among a cast of highly attractive, tough, sketchily drawn women and men. As the team dwindles -- diced by laser security systems, chomped by zombies, chased by mutant Dobermans -- Alice inevitably emerges as what Carol Clover calls the Final Girl, a lone, suffering, figuratively, if not literally, virginal figure, whose indestructibility outlasts the monster's by the most specific of margins. Generically, *Resident Evil* is just as

indebted to its forebears, and as resolutely unironic in its appropriations. Like one of the Hive's mutated hybrids, the film's cultural DNA is pieced together from *Aliens* (1986), *Night of the Living Dead* (1990), *Predator* (1987), even *Die Hard* (1988). Its moments of convenient recognition are icon-like in their intertextuality. They have a way of pointing instantly off at some well established fiction we all took in last summer or the summer before. This corresponds to a storytelling speed set high for minimum distraction and maximum impact. *Resident Evil* never pauses to explain itself or to apologise for its brazen syntheses. This may be one reason why it plays surprisingly well -- its excesses and inanities seem calculated, true, but beneath the cynical surface lurks an enthusiasm for the cheap, effective shocks of a ghost story told under the covers.

*Resident Evil* thus distinguishes itself in part by its refusal of the baroque layerings that currently dominate science-fiction and fantasy cinema. Whether in the mildewy, existential gunplay of *The Matrix* (1999), the Dungeons and Dragons writ large *Lord of The Rings* (2001), or the exasperating density of George Lucas' *Star Wars: Episode 2 Attack of the Clones* (2002), science-fiction has lately taken on an overstuffed quality, packed full of heady philosophies, invented histories, and elaborate visuals. These films are only sporadically watchable, and even more rarely enjoyable. Even when intended as undemanding thrill rides, movies like *The Mummy Returns* (2001) ultimately come off as airless, oppressive experiences, less like an escape than like being buried alive. This gigantism is due both to modes of production in a blockbuster based movie economy, and to the increasing impact of digital imaging and thinking on industrialised fantasy. Each technological advance screams for instantiation on the screen. Of every film, money says 'Make it big!', while techniques of representation say 'Make it spectacular!'.

Yet there is a third and more subtle pressure at work. Science-fiction as a genre tends to strain for respectability, nowhere more vehemently than in the movie theatres. (Literary science-fiction has less anxiety about its intellectual pedigree.) With the marriage of 'serious' science-fiction (in the vein of *Things to Come* or *The Day The Earth Stood Still*) to entities and landscapes made possible through computer generated imagery, science-fiction has, over the last twenty years, put on aesthetic weight. Prestigious films like *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Contact* (1997) make country cousins like *Species* (1995) feel bad about themselves, underdressed for the dinner party. To compensate, cinematic science-fiction as a whole seems to have seized upon digital and philosophical excess to anchor itself, to legitimise its existence. For science-fiction is the only place (outside, that is, of advertising and children's films) where the hyper-real beauty of CGI -- or the grand floating of lofty ideas about virtual reality and alternate history -- can become the centre of attention.

I do not mean by this assessment to mock or dismiss cinematic science-fiction's longing for self-transcendence, but rather to note the disparity between what one might call the new golden age of myth-making and the smaller, sleeker, more pedestrian -- and ultimately more satisfying, at least in an immediate, head-rushing sense -- pleasures of a film like *Resident Evil*. Designed more to frighten than to dazzle, *Resident Evil* ironically harkens back to a pre-digital era of filmmaking.

That said, certain issues specific to the game-movie merger deserve noting. First is the way that *Resident Evil* is forced to tinker with standard models of audience identification. Jovovich's character, stricken with amnesia for two-thirds of the film, is the ideal placeholder for a narrative that, in the video game series that spawned it, relied on user interaction rather than 'passive' spectatorship. Games, in short, are *played*; movies are *watched*. Most video

games are built around (and motivated by) lack, a central absence into which the player steps, taking up 'residence' within the story. The filmic diegesis, by contrast, is sealed and complete unto itself, a window into a world that is always already populated. *Resident Evil* gives us, in Alice, a minimal presence, a Character Degree Zero, whose knowledge of narrative events is shattered and revised as breathlessly as our own.

Overall, *Resident Evil* concretises the distinction between kinds of storytelling developed in non-interactive media (literature, television, cinema) and emerging narrative forms incubated within the personal computer, arcade cabinet, and home gaming console. The distinction is seen most clearly during those moments in video games when control is wrested from the player in order to serve up slices of backstory, or give information in 'Meanwhile...' mode from a distant part of the diegesis. At such moments, games must cue players to take their hands off the joystick or mouse, sit back, and just watch as *events* unfold independent of his or her actions. The cue? Letterboxing. Black bars move in to frame the screen at top and bottom. When the information has finished unspooling, the letterboxing disappears and control is returned to the player.

These moments within video games of observation and witnessing, rather than reaction and choice, are called 'cut scenes'. Whether performed with live actors as 'FMV' (full-motion video) sequences, or rendered by the game's graphic engine for greater visual consistency, cut scenes plainly draw on viewing competencies learned from older types of screens. Our moviegoing apprenticeship trains us to read cut scenes as non-interactive islands in a form predicated upon interactivity. One way of thinking about *Resident Evil*, then, is as a kind of movie-length cut scene, an interactive narrative from which all interaction has been stripped.

And this points us to a final irony about the dance between cinema and digitality, a twisted braid that theoreticians of coming decades will undoubtedly see as characteristic, if not symptomatic, of our time and our art. Cut scenes work because they imitate movies, using tropes of cinematic discourse -- continuity editing, shot/reverse shot constructions, zooms, pans, and crane shots -- otherwise absent from video games. (The video game 'camera' is not a camera at all, but a point of embodiment, an instrumental and present tense perspective on action rather than a trace or signature of authorial 'presence'.) *Resident Evil* makes manifest the circulation between mediums of ways of telling and understanding stories. Movies developed the code, video games incorporated the code, and now film is reappropriating the code, copying a copy of themselves (and underscoring cinema's own debt to the visual, narrative, and theatrical forms that structured it). No wonder, perhaps, that *Resident Evil* is so concerned with DNA, viruses, contamination -- and the monsters and beauties that such colliding complexities may spawn.

# Storytelling

Dir: Todd Solondz, USA, 2001

## A review by William DeGenaro, Miami University, USA

Geek-chic director Todd Solondz refuses to temper his compulsion to present audiences with grotesque, almost-pornographic images of suburban life. He shoots his subjects not so much through their bedroom and family room windows, but rather between the bars on their cages. Solondz's films can only be classified as realist inasmuch as home videos shot at the zoo fit into the genre of wildlife documentary. In *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995), Solondz represented without sentimentality the awkwardness and pain of a pre-adolescent girl. *Happiness* (1998) created an ensemble of child molesters, adulterous senior citizens, upwardly mobile obscene phone callers, and obese lonelyhearts -- all looking for interpersonal connection. In Solondz's latest offering, *Storytelling*, his geeky characters engage in a kind of meta-critique of the ethical implications of representing the depraved bourgeois.

In a way, it's productive to think of Solondz's style as a visual incarnation of the cerebral sub-genre of alternative pop music. Indeed, Michael Stipe (doing his best Morrissey impersonation) sang the title song of *Happiness* while Belle and Sebastian now provide the melodic, emotion-laden score for *Storytelling*. But Solondz's narrative voice most closely resembles so-called 'emo rockers' like Weezer or Dashboard Confessional. Whereas the former tend to emote over innocent games of Dungeons and Dragons in the garage, Solondz would likely create a Weezer persona exploring his or her sexual predilection for the ten-sided die, and then linger over the image until every audience member is squirming.

What distinguishes *Storytelling* is not merely the way the camera lingers on a disturbing event or moment, but also the ease with which Solondz creates characters to comment on those images. As a meditation on the ethics of narrative, *Storytelling* contains two unrelated and provocative stories. The first is a vignette called 'Fiction' in which Vi (Selma Blair) and Marcus (Leo Fitzpatrick) cope with angst by majoring in creative writing at an unnamed college in the U.S.. Vi devotes herself to politically correct causes, wearing a t-shirt with the image of Steve Biko and dating Marcus because his cerebral palsy compensates for his gender. Marcus gives Vi sex in return for feedback on his vapid, presumably autobiographical short stories ('CP no longer stood for cerebral palsy...now it stood for cerebral person'). An obvious criticism is that Solondz seems to be mocking these two; yet he does a remarkable job creating pathos for the couple, who yearn to create art out of their musings on an unjust world. In the world of creative writing-as-academic-discipline, Vi and Marcus commit the cardinal sin of putting ideology and sentiment over craft. As a result, both create works of fiction that come off as didactic and trite.

Judging the aforementioned sin is their teacher, Mr Scott (Robert Wisdom, in a chilling performance), who ruthlessly critiques his undergraduates for their attempts at academic fiction. Mr Scott is a renowned writer and seems to be the only person of colour on campus. Wisdom embodies amoral detachment; I found myself searching his eyes for a hint of

humanity and finding none. *Storytelling* has generated controversy for its depiction of the sadistic liaison between Mr Scott and Vi, which involves rape fantasy and the extremely disturbing repetition of a racial epithet. When faced with a dreaded NC-17 rating in the U.S., Solondz opted to block out part of the sex scene with an obtrusive red box, drawing attention to the censorship. Does Mr Scott personify the film critics who accuse Solondz of exploiting his fictitious characters in the name of art? Is Vi a stand-in for Solondz? If so, the rape fantasy certainly takes on added significance. Perhaps Solondz has created a fantasy world in which the critics have their way with his naive and waifish authorial persona in more than just a figurative sense.

Back in the classroom, Vi shares her latest story, a graphic account of her liaison with Mr Scott. This time the students in the classroom voice harsh criticisms of Vi's use of intense sentiment, rattling off the standard critiques generally levelled against Solondz himself. Vi's only defence ('But it's the truth') posits the notion that genre-based categories like 'fiction' and 'non-fiction' make little sense in terms of material and human reality. I was reminded of a similar sequence in a much lighter film, Curtis Hanson's *Wonder Boys* (2000), in which the fragile Tobey McGuire character is told his work offers a weak articulation of Catholic guilt. But the relentless *Storytelling* begs viewers to become Vi and imagine a personal attack against one's own lived experience. Whereas *Wonder Boys* wanders into the realm of screwball farce, *Storytelling* lingers (in characteristic Solondz fashion) on the wounds inflicted by 'the critics', and continues to give voice to critique (now voiced by the students in the class, implying the film-going population at large takes its cue from the critics), raising more questions than any film could presume to answer.

The longer segment of *Storytelling* is called 'Non-Fiction' and concerns a ne'er do well documentarian (Paul Giamatti) who decides to make a film about a privileged teenager named Scooby (Mark Webber) and his dysfunctional family. Scooby cannot bring himself to feign interest in his mundane, suburban existence. Mark Webber plays the uber-slacker with an appropriate look of boredom never leaving his perpetually stoned visage. 'American Scooby', the documentary-within-the-film, aims to capture the tribulations of the 'modern teenager', and the documentarian retains his genuine intentions to create a fair representation of upper-middle-class life. Solondz creates sequence after sequence of stark familial exchanges. When his mother talks about how her family fled Nazi Germany, Scooby suggests his parents (Julie Hagerty and John Goodman) would never have got together were it not for Hitler. Later, he has an inexplicable gay encounter which only seems to further his ennui. Meanwhile, little brother Mikey (Jonathan Osser) is the only family member who will speak with Salvadoran housekeeper Consuelo (Lupe Ontiveros), informing her that her refugee life lacks hobbies and interesting pursuits. Later, Mikey listens while Consuelo talks about her son's murder at the hands of a death squad, and then asks her to clean up a mess he made in the kitchen.

Hagerty and Goodman deserve recognition for their performances. Hagerty's mother-figure remains aloof and distant thanks to the subtle way Hagerty averts her eyes at the dinner table and cracks her voice ever-so-slightly while watching the dysfunction that surrounds her. Every move Hagerty makes suggests her character's perpetual state of denial. Goodman, meanwhile, further refines the ironic cluelessness he began to cultivate in *Barton Fink* (1991) and *The Big Lebowski* (1998). Through his stern countenance during those same dinner sequences, and the tyrannical way he wields his spatula while the documentarian interviews him before a family barbecue, Goodman crafts a father-figure both sublime and fascistic.

Several disasters befall the family by the end of 'American Scooby', and most are caught on tape. This time around, the documentarian is clearly the stand-in for Solondz, and, in a heavy-handed move, the 'fictional' film-maker remains good-hearted. This is the biggest misstep Solondz makes in *Storytelling*. In a film about the risky nature of narrative representation, Solondz paints himself heroic. When the documentarian's editor voices the notion that Scooby's family is being exploited, the Solondz-by-way-of-Giamatti character meekly replies, 'I'm not making fun of them. I love them.' In a shocking film, this is the most over-the-top piece of dialogue Solondz creates. He is obviously a self-aware enough director to raise these ethical issues, and yet his documentarian (not unlike Vi from 'Fiction') remains too naive to even begin to comprehend the myriad implications of his own art.

Still, despite the misstep in characterisation, *Storytelling* is a lovely and provocative piece of film-making, sure to spark conversation and debate among engaged viewers. In particular, Solondz's ability to ask important questions is truly impressive. The film's key question seems to be: *What must a story do to remain true?* Solondz posits his own categories -- 'fiction' and 'non-fiction' -- irrelevant in the quest to determine truth. What ethical guidelines should a novelist, journalist, documentarian, or feature film-maker follow? What if one's subjects are true-ly deranged? What line can be drawn between realism and exploitation? Who ought to draw that line? *Storytelling* not only effectively raises these questions, but is also a brave film, brave for giving its critics mouthpieces. Then again, perhaps Solondz has co-opted the voices of his critics and by extension silenced them?

This uncertainty ably demonstrates the back and forth nature of the debates that are sure to arise from a careful viewing of *Storytelling*.

# Sweet Sweetback's Baad Assss Song

Dir: Melvin Van Peebles, USA, 1971

## A review by Dennis Chester, California State University, USA

On Cornell West's latest album, *Sketches Of My Culture*, one of the tracks, 'Seventies Song', describes a vision of black life and culture during the 1970s in which 'the neighbourhood was not yet a hood'. West further recalls 'how loved we were', and sets all of his recollections to a seventies soul groove. West's recording is only one in a series of recent cultural products by black Americans that look to the seventies with a nostalgic eye. With the release of the major studio remake of *Shaft* (2000), the Oscar nominated biopic *Ali* (2001), and the popularity of recent neo-Blaxploitation comedies like *Undercover Brother* (2002), *The Wash* (2001) and *Barbershop* (2002), black America seems to be settling into a nostalgia groove. The seventies are back, and funkier than ever.

Now, on the one hand this kind of nostalgia is understandable and even pleasant. After the kinds of severe social and economic devastation that hit black communities in the eighties and nineties, looking to a comparably whole black community that existed before this significant decline in fortunes provides a measure of comfort. This comfort, however, is not without cost. Like all nostalgia, which softens and blunts the real zeal of its object of affection, African American nostalgia for the seventies tends to reduce the historic and political importance of the era to Afros and Black Power fists.

This reduction is regrettable. Nostalgia oversimplifies the very complex means by which a powerful and articulate model of black identity emerged. To resist this diminishing of effect, I recommend an immediate viewing of the twenty-fifth anniversary edition VHS release of Melvin Van Peebles' groundbreaking film *Sweet Sweetback's Baad Assss Song*. In contrast to the soft focus haze of the sepia seventies started in films like *The Inkwell* (1994), *Sweetback* provided a gritty, and sometimes disturbing vision of black Americans in the seventies, that nonetheless contained a significant message of hope and potential.

Released in 1996, the Anniversary edition includes the original trailers for *Sweetback* and two other films directed by Van Peebles (1971's *Don't Play Us Cheap* and 1968's *Story of a Three Day Pass*). In addition, after the primary feature, the video includes a monologue by director and star Melvin Van Peebles in which he describes the visions and goals he held when he put the film together. These additions to the film provide an important historic context; from the images found in Van Peebles' trailers and monologue, a narrative of black pride and ideological resistance emerges. In his monologue, Van Peebles declares his ambition to make a film that presented black community concerns, but that also showed that black people could make exciting and entertaining films. Within this context, the stylistic and the thematic concepts that are at the heart of *Sweetback* attain significant depth.

Even with this contextualising footage, however, some contemporary audiences may find it difficult to access some of *Sweetback's* subtleties. In a very unscientific survey of amateur

reviews and responses to the film posted to various commercial VHS/DVD websites, *Sweetback* is the subject of many unfavourable comments. At Amazon.com's VHS site, for example, *Sweetback* receives several scathing comments from viewers who refer to the film as 'pure-trash', 'one of the worst', 'anti-white', 'appalling' and an 'obscurity'. What seems clear is that while *Sweetback* has found some critical acceptance in scholarly film journals and websites like blaxploitation.com, contemporary popular audiences have been less in tune with its themes.

However, *Sweetback*'s relatively lacklustre reception among many contemporary viewers is a marked difference from the film's original reception. Though primarily advertised by word-of-mouth, and facing major difficulties in distribution, *Sweetback* found an enthusiastic audience in those black people who, to use Van Peebles' words, had 'had enough of the man'. *Sweetback*'s very simple story of a black man on the run from racist cops caught the imagination of a black population still mindful of the gains of the Civil Rights Movement, but facing the 1970s' growing economic and social instability. *Sweetback*'s success, in fact, spawned a whole genre of similar films. Blaxploitation, the name given to those films from the late sixties and seventies produced as an alternative to mainstream Hollywood representations of black life, found much of its political orientation in the outspoken message of Van Peebles' film.

Ironically, it is *Sweetback*'s immediate success that has led to its present day situation. Later blaxploitation films, inspired by *Sweetback*'s raw energy, created a slicker, simpler and more engineered product that has had more appeal for current seventies nostalgia fans unfamiliar with or uninterested in the 1970s cinematic avant-garde. Yet, because of these avant-garde qualities, *Sweetback* remains a film that rewards close viewing. *Sweetback* utilises a number of stylistic elements from a variety of influences. Most interesting is the repeated series of shots cutting between images of Sweetback on the run and shots of members of the black community, which recalls the work of the French New Wave. As Sweetback runs -- and he runs a lot -- the unusual camera angles, the psychedelic backdrops, and the unusual score by innovative funk/R&B band 'Earth, Wind and Fire' give the film an hallucinatory aspect found in other 1971 films like *A Clockwork Orange* and *Two-Lane Blacktop*. When juxtaposed with the hand-held, documentary-like images of the many black faces aiding Sweetback and resisting the police incursion into their neighbourhood, these scenes help to establish the film's primary tensions.

Among these thematic tensions, the relationship between black individuals and black communities is one that the film studies in some detail. In contemporary popular representations of the 1970s this tension frequently goes underdeveloped. Contemporary popular images of the black 1970s which rely upon nostalgia, like those in *Undercover Brother*, depict a black community fairly unified in their attitudes toward black social and political advancement. This imagined unity of vision obscures actual differences in intent, purpose and method, made most clear in the important philosophical differences between Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. In many contemporary, popular films about the seventies, there is no tension between the group and the individual because the thoughts of the group and the individual are represented as one, united against a common enemy. In more complex portrayals like *Sweetback*, however, this tension comes to the foreground.

*Sweetback* illustrates this theme through the use of explicit and shocking sexual imagery. In one of the film's most controversial scenes, a young Sweetback (played by the director's then twelve-year-old son, Mario) is made to have sex by one of the prostitutes in the brothel where

he lives. This initial sexual encounter -- Sweetback's initiation into sex as an instrument of power rather than of intimacy -- leads to a protagonist who is alienated from all other members of his community. Further evidenced in his emotionless silence in response to other characters, Sweetback's alienation is the subject of the film's major crisis. In this respect, Van Peebles' film is remarkable because it argues for a specific revolutionary perspective, while recognising many of the important variables that create a diverse black community. *Sweetback* skillfully portrays an intersection of several different community positions with compassion and complexity.

In 1971, *Sweet Sweetback's Baad Asssss Song* was a forward thinking film that recognised community strengths and failings. It is an important film, and a finely crafted one, but not perfect. Though *Sweetback's* story is an interesting one, and many of the scenes are artfully depicted, the acting in the film is sometimes distracting. The film's characters are split between those distinguished by their overt and grating histrionics and those like Mumu, the young community leader that Sweetback rescues, who should carry more of the film's attention, but who is played with a complete absence of charisma and visual style. Furthermore, though the film captures a revolutionary spirit in regards to race, its attitudes toward gender remain patriarchal. Repeatedly, women fall under the spell of Sweetback's sexual prowess, and the only positions cut out for them in Van Peebles' alternative community are subservient ones. Despite these imperfections, however, *Sweetback* is still well worth watching. Indeed, when compared with more contemporary cinematic examples, it provides an enervating antidote to nostalgia's numbing dreams.

# The Company Man

Dir: Peter Askin and Douglas McGrath, USA/UK/France, 2001

## A review by Valerie Holliday, Louisiana State University, USA

*The Company Man* is a satirical take on the US invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs in 1961. This might not be especially noteworthy, except for the fact that it is one of the only Hollywood produced films exclusively about the CIA's operation at the Bay of Pigs. The only other films which deal with the Bay of Pigs invasion in any sustained way are Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991) and *Nixon* (1995). The invasion itself is a particularly embarrassing moment in US history, with the CIA launching a secret, pseudo-military campaign using Cuban fighters to invade Cuba, and failing miserably. *The Company Man* takes a satirical look at the events surrounding the invasion, poking fun at some of the most famously embarrassing historical moments, such as when CIA agents attempted to give Castro a depilatory in order to make his hair fall out and thus lose credibility with his people. The film goes a long way toward critiquing political culture, but the satirical posturing limits how far it can go; satire is always, at the moment it looks toward, also a looking away. Nevertheless, *The Company Man* is alone in attempting to look toward the American historical event with which it deals. It is a flash of illumination, as Benjamin puts it, even if this flash then disappears. (Benjamin, 1968)

Framed by a congressional hearing, *The Company Man* stages the majority of its story on the Cuban island. There, a drug-addled oaf of an agent, played winningly by Woody Allen, has repeatedly botched CIA Cuban operations. Denis Leary plays the CIA mole who has been giving secrets to the Castro government. The lead character, Quimp, played by director Douglas McGrath, is a haphazard English teacher obsessed with the English language. Through a series of misadventures, quite consciously a parody of the CIA operation, Quimp becomes the central Cuban operative during the Bay of Pigs invasion. His wife, played by Sigourney Weaver, is a materialistic opportunist who sees Quimp's turn with the CIA as a badge of status. The film's main diegetic events are in flashback, occurring as Quimp explains to two US congressmen what happened at the Bay of Pigs. The film also satirises the US government's response to its own misdeeds in foreign policy, and is a serious attempt to critique US action from the safe distance of the satiric glance.

In spite of the parodic presentation of the invasion, the film announces its reference to actual historical events in blackscreen at the beginning of the film. By doing this, the film states its own intention to critique those historical events. The colourful slapstick imagery of the film is set against this sombre blackscreen statement in order to foreground the film's positioning as cultural and political critique. In a scene striking for its satiric resemblance to the insanely tragic truth, around ten Cubans are seen motoring from the Florida coast to the Cuban coast in boats, the longest of which is no more than about twenty feet. They are all dilapidated private small craft. This satirical representation is not entirely based on fact, as historically the CIA had at its disposal larger private boats for the operation. But *The Company Man* is accurate in its satirical portrayal of the ramshackle nature of the invasion, of the military action cobbled together like a shopping spree at a garage sale. The film ironises what it sees

as a displaced US foreign policy. Indeed, the actual Bay of Pigs invasion was not a military exercise, but a secret grass-roots initiative by the CIA to conduct a pseudo-military operation.

By staging the majority of events across the water on the island, the film is able to focus on the events in Cuba, rather than on the US government's mediated view of the invasion. The congressmen are shown deciding in the end to cover up the whole mess, and there is a familiar image of government as the invasion document is 'blacked out' with censoring marker ink. The film presents images of US action in Cuba that usually only exist in such blacked out government documents on this side of the water. The film, therefore, confronts the historical events by looking toward them, and does so more efficaciously than, say, Stone, who to a large extent mystifies the Bay of Pigs invasion. However, because of the satirising glance, the film almost as quickly looks away from the implications of its critique. bell hooks wonders whether 'irony alone can be used to promote critical consciousness. It seems to presuppose a politically conscious viewer, one who can see both what is being shown and what is not.' (hooks, 1990: 161) Similarly, I wonder if the blackscreen message, which indicates the film's reference to actual events, does not fade out of memory during the film; if it itself is not a flash of illumination that subsequently disappears.

If film is a kind of writing of history, a kind of remembering, then *The Company Man* is an attempt to write the Bay of Pigs invasion. But the film memorises the invasion satirically, as a kind of flash; it is not etched in filmic history, as are Stone's historical films. Regardless of whether Stone's films are historically accurate, they generated an enormous amount of inquiry, speculation and critique for some time after their initial release. By contrast, *The Company Man*'s opening was fairly quiet, having been released in theatres as well as on video and DVD in 2001 with little critical review or commentary. The film functions within filmic history as a flash of the past which does not persist. The film's relative obscurity may have to do with factors other than release, but certainly its position as satire sets it up to be received less seriously than Stone's films which deal with related events. Stone's historical films deal with the Bay of Pigs invasion, as he sets it up, by using the invasion only as a crystal ball through which the cause of major American domestic events may be seen. Stone uses the invasion, in other words, as a mirror through which Americans may see their own history (whether the invasion as mirror reflects an accurate image is another matter for critique). Insofar as *JFK* and *Nixon* manifest this narcissism, obsessive critical attention to them can be reasonably explained. By contrast, *The Company Man* attempts to register events from a perspective other than a narcissistic American point of view. By situating Quimp in Cuba, director McGrath places the CIA in a critical context out of which it cannot easily escape by mystification. To this degree, *The Company Man* is a success.

But it is precisely the film's positioning as satire which also determines its failure; insofar as it need not be taken seriously, it may also dissolve into relatively obscure filmic history. As Benjamin points out, the telling of history is a matter of seizing a memory before it disappears. Flashes occur all the time, as they do in Stone's films. History is made when those flashes are seized and articulated. Stone sees the flash of the Bay of Pigs invasion, but he fails to articulate it fully, leaving in the obscurity of secret government operations that are never fully represented. Similarly, although *The Company Man* represents the Bay of Pigs invasion in fully rendered images, it fails to seize hold of the full implications of it and etch the memory of a failed US foreign policy firmly in the annals of cultural consciousness and history. The safeness of the satirical glance is also its ineffectuality, and the film's failure may also be seen in its own relationship to filmic history, in the sense that it barely made a splash on the American film market, being hardly noticed critically and fairly quickly forgotten.

Nonetheless, *The Company Man* has spoken; it has become itself another memory which may at some time in the future be seized and etched when it flashes up. To that degree, it may mark a site of critical hope.

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# The Importance of Being Earnest

Dir: Oliver Parker, USA/UK/France, 2002

## A review by Irene Morra, University of Toronto, Canada

It has become an accepted cultural truth that Oscar Wilde was very clever. From emblazoned mousepads to greeting cards, the estimable witticisms of this very clever man can be borne, disseminated and declared virtually anywhere. While it is gratifying to see the celebration of the cultural legacy of a man much abused in his own time, this tendency towards an assumption of knowledge about the work of an author has rather disarming implications for that very legacy. Wilde's work does often lend itself to separation from its created narrative context. At the same time, however, it is clearly aimed at a particular society and culture; his writing is much more incisive satire than it is effete witticism.

Oliver Parker's earlier adaptation of Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* (1999) attempted to recognise the potential gravity behind all of the verbal banter, epigrams and plot contrivances. Given that history had rendered his audience immune to the sting of the original political and moral satire, Parker chose to emphasise a seriousness to particular characters (Sir Robert Chiltern and his wife) not demanded by the play. In so doing, he attempted to validate the artistic 'worth' of the original, while at the same time upholding its inherent delightfulness. Unfortunately, the characters to whom he granted a certain depth of moral conflict are deliberately the most boring and conventional in the play. This could have resulted in an unfair balance, had it not been for the unsurpassable centrality of Wilde's hero, Viscount Goring. Although Parker's attempt to translate the artistic seriousness of Wilde's play into an understandable modern dramatic context was largely unsuccessful, the film itself was saved by the play's tendency to confine the majority of its 'Wildean' statements and actions to a central character. The result was not Wilde's biting satire of honour, morality and politics, but an entertaining comic portrayal of a good-hearted decadent.

With *The Importance of Being Earnest*, writer-director Parker has not been so fortunate. All of the characters in the play speak in constant witty interchanges, many of which have helped to characterise the work as Wilde's most accomplished. Again, these statements can be easily extrapolated from narrative context: 'Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone'; 'Ah! That is clearly a metaphysical speculation, and, like most metaphysical speculations, has very little reference at all to the actual facts of real life as we know them.' These interchanges do not constitute the play, however. A series of misunderstandings, disguises and double entendres exemplify an intricate structure and plot characteristic less of modern drama than of earlier dramatic comedy. Such complication of plot and constant witticism situates the play in a genre traditionally suited to the articulation of 'dangerous' satire. By creating such expectations, Wilde allows his audience to intuit a seriousness to his satiric portrayal of the nobility and romantic expectations. The play demands, by Wilde's own admission, 'That we should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality.'

Parker's film attempts nobly to satisfy a popular taste for Wilde's pithy statements, to instil a sense of the 'World's Classics' worthiness of the play, and to make the entire matter cinematically involving. With all of these apparent goals, it is understandable that the film never seems generically comfortable. Is it a biting satire? Is it slapstick? Is all the humour to be derived from dialogue? Could it just possibly be a romantic comedy? All of these elements exist in the film, and, unlike the structurally tight play which is itself comfortably situated in a recognisable literary tradition, never reconcile to produce a consistent effect.

Despite the film's clear admiration for the play, it seems to suffer from an anxiety that the audience will be unable to appreciate Wilde's plot and dialogue unless aided by the tools of modern cinema. The film is characterised by lush photography, a frenetic (and incongruous) musical score, lavish costuming, and unnecessary 'scene' changes which grant the opportunity for amusing close-ups or prolonged stage-setting and even more musical score. The effect of this visual and musical opulence is manifestly to declare that the film is a film. There certainly are advantages to this. While Anthony Asquith's earlier version was much more faithful to the original text, it could just as easily have been viewed on the stage as on the screen. There are also distinct disadvantages. Parker excises much from the original play to leave many of the original situations and exchanges without a considerable amount of the accompanying dialogue. Such excision, some might argue, is necessary for a complete cinematic translation (rather than mere representation) of the play on film. Parker himself makes it difficult to justify, however, when he perversely emphasises the importance of those words which he has allowed to remain. Almost every pithy statement, gentle pun or amusing truth observed is accompanied by a sidelong glance or musical flourish akin to a 'laugh' cue card for the viewer. This heavy-handedness is both gaudy and heavily contradictory to the apparent attempted tone of the film itself.

Furthermore, the film bends over backwards to demonstrate how very light and amusing it is. Why else, one must ask, would Parker have Algernon (Rupert Everett) arrive in a hot-air balloon? Why else would Cecily (Reese Witherspoon) be shown literally consorting with the knight of her dreams, in full Bacchanalian setting? What in the play is briefly evoked through dialogue (Cecily's girlish romanticism, Algernon's self-indulgence) is granted an unnecessary and ultimately crude emphasis in the film. Ironically, by rendering Wilde's prose even more pithy through excision, and granting excessive attention to superfluous visual evocations, Parker slows down the action and asks the viewer to grant more attention to the plot and characters than the play could ever wish or justify. Such excessive characterisation demands some narrative explanation. The film remains perversely loyal to the original play, however, in its refusal to offer extensive original dialogue which might better recontextualise events and characters. As a result, Wilde's characters and dialogue are left to flounder within an incomprehensibly emphatic cinematic environment.

To some extent, of course, Parker is merely suffering from a case of mistaken judgement. *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a necessarily talky play which demands a complete representation in order that its structure and dialogue (wherein lie both the comedy and the satire) be appreciated. Films today, particularly comedies in costume, cannot succeed commercially with such necessary staginess. Where Parker had earlier been able to rely upon the character of Goring as his representative Wildean figure, *The Importance of Being Earnest* does not allow for such an easy isolation. The play does not contain characters so much as it does one voice, relegated to various conventional types. As such, it demands an artificiality of representation divorced as much as possible from visual realism. Everett, essentially reprising his role as Goring with a few added mannerisms, and Frances O'Connor

(as Gwendolen) seem to suffer in particular from an inability to recognise the necessity of a superficial representation of character in order to allow ideas, words and function within plot structure to take precedence. Indeed, only Colin Firth (as 'Ernest'), whose competence in light comedy had already been proved in *Relative Values* (2000), and Judi Dench (as Lady Bracknell), whose role alone allows for a more deliberate characterisation, seem to understand the lightness of comedic approach required. Ultimately, such talent is wasted, overcome by visual and musical contrivances so intent on proclaiming 'cinema' and 'comedy still funny even now' that the Wildean humour enjoyed in popular culture today is aggrandised to the point of reinvention.

# Threads

Dir: Mick Jackson, UK, 1984

## A review by Paul Binnion, University of Nottingham, UK

The first question to be addressed in reviewing *Threads* is contextual: exactly how should it be treated? There is a tendency to dismiss the film as dated and a product of the nuclear paranoia of the eighties; interesting to study, but not relevant today. However, the threat of nuclear destruction is still very real. There have been numerous close calls in the last thirty years, most famously when a new American computer system mistook the rising moon for a flotilla of Soviet warheads and suggested a full retaliatory strike. The website [www.mjwilson.demon.co.uk/crash/56/monitor.htm](http://www.mjwilson.demon.co.uk/crash/56/monitor.htm) lists many such incidents. It makes for chilling reading. Despite the end of the Cold War and improvements in relations between the US and Russia, there are still massive arsenals of nuclear weapons poised and ready to launch. Furthermore, in 2000 Russia publicly committed to shifting the emphasis of its defence policy to the nuclear option, as conventional armies are far more expensive to maintain. In the post September 11th world, the threat of terrorists or rogue states acquiring weapons of mass destruction is also of great concern. President Bush's recent study on the possibility of the United States using first strike nuclear weapons is probably an even more terrifying prospect. When the one remaining superpower advocates the use of first strike nuclear weapons, the fears of the Cold War come flooding back. It would seem that humanity is as close as ever to apocalypse. In this light, maybe *Threads* still has a relevance to the modern viewer. Certainly, its influence is still blatantly clear in films such as *Gas Attack* (2001) screened on Channel 4 in the wake of September 11th. Furthermore, recent years have seen a number of old-school nuclear melodramas being released, Roger Donaldson's *Thirteen Days* (2000) and Stephen Frears' *Fail Safe* (2000) being two examples.

Although now seventeen years old, *Threads* has lost none of its impact. The film was commissioned by the BBC when Director General Alisdair Milne watched the then still banned Peter Watkins film, *The War Game* (1968). Produced by the BBC, *The War Game* portrayed the effects of a single missile detonating in Kent. However, it was shelved by the BBC, fearing it would lead 'old people to go out and throw themselves under a bus'. (Crace, 1985: 3) Prior to its initial broadcast there was much speculation in the press that *Threads* would suffer a similar fate. (*The Sunday Mirror*, 1984; *The Times*, 1984) This was not the case and the film was screened uncut in September 1984. Unfortunately, there are reports of a man who, after watching the film, murdered his family before committing suicide. (Jenkins, 1992: 64)

Dealing with a conflict in the Middle East which escalates into full-blown nuclear war, the film pulls no punches in its portrayal of the attack, its aftermath and its effects on an ensemble cast of mostly non-professional actors in Sheffield. Shot with a budget of £250,000-350,000, depending on which source you believe, *Threads* eschews expensive special effects in favour of a focus on character and narrative. Scripted by novelist Barry Hines and directed by documentary-maker Mick Jackson, it combines the BBC *Play For Today* approach to social issues with an emotionless voiceover and captions detailing the

truly devastating effects of nuclear war: numbers of unburied corpses, likely epidemics, statistics on the effects of radiation. This documentary evidence is juxtaposed with everyday scenes showing characters shopping, watching TV and drinking in the pub.

Initially, the narrative focuses on a couple who are marrying because of an unplanned pregnancy, but, over time, this shifts to a concentration on the impending nuclear conflict. As a result, these domestic scenes are contrasted with both the captions and the civil defence procedures which are being instigated once the threat of war becomes significant. What is frightening is how thorough these preparations are, and how there seems to be no real attempt by government to avert the war. (Duncan Cambell's book *War Plan UK* [1982] is a chilling examination of these plans. For instance, those civilians with terminal radiation sickness are designated 'zombies', and it is made clear that the authorities would leave them to die, with no attempt being made to help or alleviate their suffering.) The build-up to the conflict itself is initially seen in the background on TV, radio and in newspaper headlines. The characters seem unaware of events, and this, of course, gives *Threads* a frighteningly believable tone. This approach gives further verisimilitude to the second half of the film after the bomb has been dropped. For the most part, the post-attack sequences are convincing and believable.

Although the cinematography was undoubtedly influenced by the budget available, it is nevertheless one of the film's strengths. When the bomb drops, the emphasis is on small groups of people; one family cowering in their cellar, another desperately trying to construct a shelter in their council house by following 'Protect and Survive' leaflet instructions. This unpleasant intimacy throughout the portrayal of the attack and the few days following it is claustrophobic, with few cutaways to provide relief. When the Becketts hear footsteps on the floor above their cellar, the viewer is kept (literally) in the dark about who is in their house. Similarly, the actual dropping of the bomb is an effective mix of spectacle and detail. Alongside some stock footage of buildings being obliterated in the blast, there are shots of milk bottles melting, a close-up of a woman urinating in fear, and a particularly effective silent shot of the blast ripping through a window, blinding a woman and setting fire to the room before the audible shock wave hits a second or two later. Clearly, author Barry Hines and director Mick Jackson want the viewer to feel that this could be real; this is how it could be for anyone watching.

Looking at reviews of the DVD reissue, the general consensus of opinion was that *Threads* had dated badly and was no longer politically relevant. Significantly, magazines such as *What DVD* and others appeared to be more interested (by modern standards) in grainy picture and mono soundtrack, focusing on how the film had been transferred to the new digital format as opposed to its effectiveness as a text. Given the generally high quality of BBC DVD reissues, the average transfer (with no supplementary material) suggests that the BBC did not see *Threads* as a prestige release, perhaps also feeling that the film has dated and is a relic of the Cold War. (Significantly, the DVD reissue was outsourced to Revelation Films Ltd.) The film had long been deleted on video until its reissue, and it has been repeated only once in 1985 since its initial broadcast. When asked in 1999 if he was still questioned about the film, author Barry Hines replied, 'No, not since it was first shown. It was an event, but people soon forgot about it.' (Hines, 1999) However, despite this, the film still appears, in some quarters, to have maintained its ability to shock and fascinate. The comments on [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com), [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) and websites devoted to the film such as [www.btinternet.com/~pdbean/threads.html](http://www.btinternet.com/~pdbean/threads.html) and [www.the-snu.co.uk](http://www.the-snu.co.uk) reflect how the film is being rediscovered by those who saw it the first time around. The bulk of comments on these sites focus on the vivid memories that the film has created, and the fact that many viewers

have rediscovered the film fifteen years after first seeing it. Perversely, the tone of many of these comments is almost nostalgic. Indeed, the film was heavily featured in last year's BBC retrospective *I Love 1981*, suggesting that it is very much a film which was both high profile and relevant at the time (although, interestingly, the BBC chose to include it in the 1981 programme as opposed to its year of broadcast, 1984). Its inclusion in the programme, along with the continuing fan discussions on websites goes some way to reflecting the interest and relevance the film still has today.

*Threads* still works so well because of its ability to force the audience to empathise and identify with the protagonists. It is difficult to watch the film without continually situating oneself within the narrative. One is compelled to ask, 'What would I do if this happened to me?'. Although two characters butchering an irradiated sheep and eating it raw may seem sensationalist and designed to shock, given the characters' circumstances -- starving, cold, exhausted, emotionally numb -- it can be seen as purely a depiction of a survival measure. Like the Kemps envying their dead son, the viewer is likely to think it would better if everything ended in the initial blast. Some of the contemporary reviews were sceptical about the psychological numbness and lack of compassion the characters showed after the attack. There are no heroes in the film, and little to be optimistic about. Characters cling to life, but there is little prospect of improvement in the post-attack world. Indeed, the final scene of a girl giving birth to a still-born baby is overwhelmingly pessimistic. In the interviews accompanying the film's broadcast, Barry Hines and Mick Jackson were at pains to point out that this emotional numbness was based very much on past evidence, in particular on studies of Hiroshima survivors. (*The Radio Times*, 1984: 96) In *Threads* there is no Mad Maxesque hero to provide hope; instead the viewer is presented with ordinary, unprepared people trying to survive in the ruins of modern civilisation. The lack of emotion, affection and community are all too believable.

*Threads* remains a shocking piece of television. Although it is clearly dated, it still has an enormous emotional impact. Its focus on everyday and ordinary people in an extraordinary situation forces audiences to confront their own feelings about nuclear war. It is hard to believe that this could be watched as a nuclear thriller. Similarly, it provides none of the post-apocalyptic thrills of *Mad Max* (1979) and its many imitators. At times unrelenting in its pessimism, *Threads* remains a difficult film to watch. Of course, to an extent, interest in the film may be confined to those who lived through and remember the Cold War tensions of the eighties. A GCSE student on the website [www.the-snu.co.uk/threads.html](http://www.the-snu.co.uk/threads.html) describes the film as 'one of the most boring things I've ever seen'. It is difficult to imagine many viewers over the age of twenty-five having this reaction. To quote one viewer: 'It scared the shit out of me then and it scares the shit out of me now.'

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# The 49th Sydney Film Festival, 7-21 June 2002

**A review by Maria San Filippo, University of California, Los Angeles, USA**

Just shy of the half-century milestone, the 49th Sydney Film Festival promoted this year's program with an appeal to international alliance-making that the spirit of film has traditionally represented. Many festival entries dealt with issues of nationality and ethnicity on such varying themes as immigration, asylum, patriotism, tolerance and warfare, and always with the shadow of the past year's violent political discord hovering. Not all films had something profound to say, and fewer still managed profundity alongside engaging style and content, but a genuine social conscience seemed present throughout.

Two of the better features presented along these themes were Mostefa Djadjam's *Borders* (France, 2001) and Nino Jacusso's *Escape to Paradise* (Switzerland, 2001). In the former, a group of Senegalese strike out on the perilous journey to France, always one breath away from detection, and pitifully dependent on the smugglers willing to help them, for a hefty price. The directorial debut of Djadjam, *Borders* features beautiful photography by Pascal Lagriffoul and natural but regal performances from its ensemble cast.

Duzgun Ayhan, a Kurdish refugee who sought political asylum in Switzerland, brought his real-life experiences to his role as the father of a family of Kurdish refugees fleeing their native Turkey in *Escape to Paradise*. Faced with the rigid regulations governing asylum eligibility (only one in ten refugees is granted asylum), Ayhan's character is forced to come up with a story more plausible than the real facts: that he was imprisoned and tortured at the hands of a brutal regime.

This phenomenon of 'real-acting' (people who have experience of similar life events acting in a dramatised story) was a trend successfully exploited in several of the festival's most superb offerings. One of my favourites of this year's films (and an audience favourite as well), Annette K Olesen's debut feature *Minor Mishaps* (Denmark, 2002) brings Mike Leigh's improvisational method to the engrossing story of a middle-class family thrown into turmoil by their beloved mother's sudden death. More subtle, but just as shocking in its revelations of familial dysfunction as Thomas Vinterberg's *The Celebration* (Denmark, 1998), Olesen's film, whose actors conjured up their characters based on people they had known in real life, is another triumph of naturalism in acting and directing from the Danes.

From veteran filmmaker Ken Loach (*Land and Freedom* [1995], *Bread and Roses* [2000]) came another feat of naturalism as well as another audience favourite with *The Navigators* (UK, 2001), a fictionalised take on the devastating effects of Britain's recent rail service privatisation on the ordinary working people who are responsible, literally, for making the trains run on time (and safely). For five decades Loach has given us engaging stories and intimate characterisations infused with his unique brand of social conscience, and with *The Navigators* he proves himself to be still at the top of his form.

These and other standouts from the Contemporary World Cinema category relied on a formula of realism, simplicity, and intimacy to tell their exceptional stories. Hur Jin-Ho's *One Fine Spring Day* (South Korea, 2001) was, for me, the pinnacle of the festival experience in its sensitive rendering of a sombre, hesitant love affair between a twenty-something recording engineer (Korean pinup, Yoo Ji-Tae) and the provincial radio announcer (Lee Young-Ae) whom he meets while on a sound shoot. The elusive nature of love is poetically limned from the similarly elusive beauty of the physical world, as the young couple discover love deep in a bamboo forest and amidst a rural snowfall, while attempting to capture the subtle sounds of nature.

Two other favourite features explored love and relationships from the hindsight of middle-age and all the regrets and disappointments it can bring. Ann Hui's *July Rhapsody* (Hong Kong/China, 2001) presents a melodic, delicate family epic along the lines of Edward Yang's breakthrough Taiwanese drama *Yi-Yi* (Taiwan, 2000). Married couple Lam and Ching (portrayed with subtle but heartfelt grace by veteran actors Jacky Cheung and Anita Mui) have careers and children, but cannot quite escape the memories -- and mysteries -- of their youth.

*Lovely and Amazing* (USA, 2001), the writer-director Nicole Holofcener's highly anticipated follow-up to her 1996 debut *Walking and Talking*, is not as warm-hearted or slyly amusing as that earlier film, but is nevertheless affecting in its tale of a middle-aged single mother and her three neurotic daughters. With a strong ensemble cast and swiftly paced screenplay, Holofcener admirably takes on bigger issues this time around, from interracial families to the high standards (and costs) of female beauty, though regrettably these themes remain disjointed and never sufficiently explored.

Another worthwhile offering from America was twin filmmakers Alex and Andrew Smith's debut feature, *The Slaughter Rule* (USA, 2002). In a breakout performance, newcomer Ryan Gosling (*The Believer* [2001]) plays Roy, a high school athlete who is recruited by the down-and-out, sexually ambiguous Gideon (veteran character actor David Morse) to lead a start-up team in the gruelling game of six-man football. The powerful performances, rousing story line, and majestic Cinemascope shots of the harsh Montana winter setting prevent this occasionally over-the-top film from sliding too far into sentimentality.

Disappointments in the World Cinema arena were often departures from realism that alternately failed to find their desired voice, or that relied on controversial images to (unsuccessfully) keep their stories afloat. Christian Petzold's *Something to Remind Me* (Germany, 2001) is a pseudo-Hitchcockian thriller that, despite an intriguing set-up and able performance from lead André Hennicke, never manages to reach the level of taut suspense to which it aspires. Similarly, Hideo Nakata's *Dark Water* (Japan, 2001) starts out promisingly as a sort of feminist take on *The Shining* (1980), but unfortunately soon descends into symbolism-heavy horror schlock that concludes ludicrously.

Two of the festival's most talked-about films, Kim Ki-Duk's *Bad Guy* (South Korea, 2002) and Ulrich Seidl's *Dog Days* (Austria, 2001), exploited their own sensationalist plot lines to the very breaking point. Writer-director Kim has forged a career on exhibiting social misfits and the deviance of which they are capable, but *Bad Guy's* story of an innocent young girl (Seo Won) coerced into prostitution by a sadistic, obsessive sociopath (Cho Jae-Hyun) who is to become her lover rings false at nearly every turn. Similarly, *Dog Days* begins with a provocation of shocking incredulity as it introduces the bizarre sexual preoccupations

amongst the inhabitants of a dull suburban community. Tragically, however, the David Lynch-by-way-of-Diane Arbus tone and look of the film gradually peters out into a bleak, shallow characterisation of the very people it is supposedly humanising.

Perhaps the most controversial element to Miike Takashi's newest offering is its lack of controversy. *The Happiness of the Katakuris* (Japan, 2001) blessedly spares us the excruciating consternation for which Takashi's most recent films (*Dead or Alive* [1999], *Audition* [1999]) have become notorious. Instead, the film portrays a modern-day Japanese Von Trapp family in a ribald hybrid of musical and horror flick with some karaoke and claymation thrown in for good measure. As grateful as I was for the absence of any slow anatomical dismemberment this time around, the Katakuris' mad antics and endless parodying quickly become as tiring and self-satisfied as the director's typical shock-a-thons.

With its emphasis on global politics and the plight of human suffering, it came as no surprise that the documentary field was full of top contenders in Sydney this year. Veteran documentarian Frederick Wiseman (*Titicut Follies* [1967], *Public Housing* [1997]) employs his traditional brand of observation sans agenda with *Domestic Violence* (USA, 2001), a look into daily life at The Spring, a domestic violence shelter in Tampa, Florida. Sherine Salama's *A Wedding in Ramallah* (Australia, 2002) reveals through its subjects' unflinching frankness and Salama's own dogged inquisition the travails of a Palestinian couple's arranged marriage and subsequent immigration to America during the last summer of peace in the Palestinian Territories.

Other highlights in the documentary category included Douglas Wolfspurger's *Bellaria -- As Long as we Live!* (Germany/Austria, 2001), a wistful account of a small coterie of senior citizens who daily attend screenings at Vienna's oldest repertory cinema, the Bellaria. Initially pathetic and often comical, these nostalgic aficionados of the films of yesteryear gradually reveal their strength and resolve in facing the brutal fact of old age.

Another trip down memory lane that played to a full house at Sydney's main venue, the glorious Art Deco-arrayed State Theatre, was *My Voyage to Italy* (USA/Italy, 2001), the legendary filmmaker Martin Scorsese's four-hours-plus valentine to the timeless masterpieces of Italian cinema. At another festival, and undoubtedly at the multiplex, this grand ode to a great epoch would only intensify the glare of contrast between filmmaking then and now. In Sydney, where the selections were refreshingly redeemable and frequently inspiring, it merely made me wonder which films of today could become the classics of tomorrow.

# Videodrome

Dir: David Cronenberg, USA/Canada, 1983

## A review by Polona Petek, University of Melbourne, Australia

In 1981 the Canadian filmmaker David Cronenberg made his sixth feature film, *Videodrome*. When released in 1983, reviewers and cinema scholars (Wood, 1983; Beard & Handling, 1983) almost unanimously interpreted it as yet another instance of misogyny, often recognised as the recurrent problem if not even the defining element of the sci-fi horror genre (Creed, 1987), from which Cronenberg is not exempt. Those more favourably disposed towards the filmmaker (who was also known as 'the Baron of Blood' but would soon gain a reputation as a controversial art-house director) greeted the film as a successful cinematic representation of McLuhan's theories (McLuhan, 1994) of mass media in the age of electronic communication (Laing, 2000); or they attempted to offer a praising account of the film by ignoring, or even manifestly refusing any psychoanalytic interpretation. (Boss, 1986; Shaviro, 1993: 138-144) My reading of the film is, in a sense, an attempt to bridge these diametrically opposed positions. I believe it is possible to view *Videodrome* as a subversive, though indeed pessimistic meditation on gender as a cultural construct, enforced, perpetuated and manipulated by mass media (among other factors), without ignoring those aspects of the film that are usually singled out and reproached by psychoanalytically informed film critics.

In this review I will be using three forms of the word videodrome: *Videodrome* refers to Cronenberg's film, 'Videodrome' to the TV show within the film, and videodrome to the signal. *Videodrome* features the story of Max Renn (James Woods), one of the owners and program managers of Civic TV, a local channel broadcasting all varieties of pornography. When searching for new viewing thrills, Max comes across a pirate copy of 'Videodrome', a provoking sado-masochistic show, eventually revealed as a videotape planted on Max by his technician-cum-friend Harlan (Peter Dvorsky) and Barry Convex (Les Carlson), the owner of Spectacular Optical. The tape emits videodrome, a fatal signal produced by Spectacular Optical, which can be used to manipulate subjects exposed to it. Convex wants to gain power over Max to secure access to his TV station, which could broadcast videodrome and thus serve Convex's purpose: public manipulation. Videodrome was invented by Professor O'Blivion (Jack Creley), who also became its first victim and is now kept 'alive' by his daughter Bianca (Sonja Smits) through a collection of pre-recorded videotapes. Aware of the signal's capacity, Bianca too plans to use Max. She wants to fight Convex and induce the next stage of (human?) development, the 'new flesh'.

At first glance, the plot of *Videodrome* seems rather shallow: the good (Bianca) pitted against the bad (Convex), with Max figuring as a dummy in their combat, and videodrome, the quintessential representative of the mass media, as the deadly weapon. However, if we view the film as the story of Max's subjection to the gaze, his pursuit, investigation and finally his attempt to take possession of it, *Videodrome* turns out to be a far more complex film with quite a radical ideological stance. Indeed, the film features a full range of identities available to women and their representations in a misogynist phallogocentric culture. *Videodrome*

undeniably aligns woman with the Other, and designates its exemplary human subject male, but it also shows that any such generalisations are intolerable cultural constructs.

Lacan's distinction between the gaze and the eye (developed in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* [1978]) is extremely useful for interpreting Cronenberg's film. (Kaja Silverman (1992: 145 *et passim*) pointed out its wider implications as well as its misappropriation in cinema studies.) The gaze is the partial manifestation of the unattainable object of human desire (*objet petit a*) in the scopic field. It belongs to the Other, whereas the eye, the scopic erogenous zone, pertains to the subject. For Lacan, the gaze has no specular image. Cronenberg, however, manages to give it a rather determinate -- yet, still compatible, that is, somewhat elusive and intangible -- representation by matching it with videodrome. The signal is the example *par excellence* of the Lacanian gaze: it is clearly emitted from 'outside', yet not from another subject or from a clearly distinguished point in space; it is rather diffuse, dispersed everywhere, issuing from every TV set.

*Videodrome* (not so Max) initially sharply distinguishes between the omnipotent gaze (videodrome) and the limited eye (belonging to the film's human characters, most consistently to Max). Then, as the film proceeds and Max's videodrome-induced hallucinations escalate, Max and videodrome become increasingly entwined, almost indistinguishable, as the blurred distinction between Max's reality and hallucinations aptly indicates. Lacan (op cit) argued that the subject, which is constituted through the intervention of external agency (the Other, the gaze) and thus always split and decentred, tends to cover up this alterity at its core by eliding the gaze, or confusing it with the eye and attempting to take possession of it. Cronenberg's film, however, does not pretend to have achieved interchangeability or a fusion of the gaze and the eye, nor does it conceal their inescapable division; quite the contrary. The relationship between Max and the signal is anything but reciprocal; there is hardly any evidence of exchange, only the forceful and evidently malign impact of videodrome upon Max. The changes in Max's 'reality' are not a result of fusion but merely a consequence of this impact.

Thus far, *Videodrome* could only be accused of being pessimistic. But the real problem with *Videodrome* lies elsewhere. Cronenberg's designation of the 'new flesh' (as a way out of alienated, externally-determined human existence) poses problems, not because it is pessimistic, but because the path leading towards it is articulated excessively through categories of gender and sexuality. When the audience first sees Max, he is no doubt a carefully and consistently constructed stereotype of a white heterosexual male: active, dominant and in sufficient supply of phallic attributes and substitutes. Not until after his encounter with women -- portrayed as seductive, threatening, passive, masochist, or maternal figures -- does his apparently stable identity start disintegrating, which renders him even more vulnerable to videodrome. The latter -- to be quite precise, video and television in general -- is related almost exclusively to women. Even before his exposure to the signal, Max's relation to visual media occurs predominantly through women. His first viewing of 'Videodrome' and meeting Nicki (Deborah Harry) occur almost simultaneously, and shortly after that Nicki's appearances become completely tangled with Max's videodrome-stimulated hallucinations. Even more: videodrome itself, for Max, increasingly takes on attributes of a voracious and ferocious female body. At the same time, as the signal's impact on Max escalates, Max himself is becoming more and more feminised (for instance, he develops the widely-observed 'vaginal' opening on his stomach), subjugated and exploited alternately by Convex and Bianca, and also threatening to men (Max's killing of Harlan quite overtly equates Max's abdominal slit with *vagina dentata*).

The problem with *Videodrome* is not that it is complicit with patriarchy, but that it does not go much further than laying it bare. The final sequence of the film is particularly informative in this view. It shows Max approaching the 'next phase' beyond the split between the eye and the gaze. As it happens, Max is about to commit suicide. He (though Max can hardly still be considered male) comes to a desolate industrial site and enters a deserted ship, conspicuously labelled 'condemned vessel'. Here, the image of Nicki on a giant TV screen tells him that videodrome, the tool of exploitation, still exists, and she pleads with him to undergo 'a total transformation into the new flesh'. Nicki shows him how. Max watches himself shooting himself within the (diegetic) screen, and then indeed shoots himself.

Of course, one might suggest that *Videodrome's* end is ambiguous: is Max's act a result of resignation, disenchantment, revolt or (woman's) seduction? It can also be argued that the final sequence is a climax of the patriarchal attitude to women. Videodrome (television?, mass media in general?) is now completely aligned with the demanding, seductive, yet also threatening image of woman. Max, no longer indisputably male, is simultaneously the victim and the monster. However, I believe the film's end sheds different light on the preceding representations and employment of woman's body. Like one of the twins in Cronenberg's confrontational film *Dead Ringers* (1988), Max 'can see the image of himself looking back as both subject and object at the same time'. (Russo, 1994: 120) He is given one last taste of what possessing the gaze might be like, but what he sees means giving up human existence. Nevertheless, Max follows the suggestion and carries out his ultimate, yet also his first truly subversive act: having experienced existence in a male as well as a female/feminised body, and having gained insight into the workings of the gaze, he decides not only to annihilate himself as the subject but also to abolish the gaze.

*Videodrome* is a disturbing and multifaceted film. It attempts to deal with human existence in general as alienated, shaped by culture and finite. It does so from within its cultural context and the context of the sci-fi horror genre. *Videodrome* manifestly mobilises conventions of the genre and cultural stereotypes regarding gender and sexuality, precisely to expose them as die-hard conventions and all-pervading stereotypes. The film's end is saturated with this air of entrapment. What might seem as a flaw to some viewers, however, is the film's refusal or inability to offer a positive alternative. Ultimately, *Videodrome* merely states that the current condition is intolerable.

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# Windtalkers

Dir: John Woo, USA, 2002

## A review by Elizabeth Abele, Temple University, Philadelphia, USA

The early 1990s saw a major change in the depiction of American Indians on screen. From background shamans or animalistic warriors played by Italian or Jewish actors, they became major supporting characters actually played by Native Americans: Graham Greene in *Dances with Wolves* (1990); Russell Banks in *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992), and Wes Studi in *Geronimo* (1993). Even the characters in the animated *Pocahontas* (1995) were voiced by American Indians. In these films, Indians on screen became a dimensional part of America's past, providing lessons of community and responsibility to their white friends. Native American culture and people achieved a new respect on screen, yet they remained precious and frozen in time, still in service to white American culture.

This summer saw the release of three films featuring Native Americans as leading characters: *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron* (2002); *Lilo and Stitch* (2002), and John Woo's *Windtalkers*. As significant as the gains made in the 1990s, this trio shows Hollywood taking the next step in its understanding of Native American culture. John Woo's *Windtalkers* is particularly significant in casting a Native American in a leading role, removing itself from the legends and geography of the American West, and portraying a chapter in American history that has been doubly neglected. Before discussing the goals and achievements of *Windtalkers*, it is interesting to note similar shifts in the two animated features. In both films, the Native American characters move beyond being defined by stereotypical views of their culture. *Spirit's* Little Eagle is voiced by Daniel Studi, a second-generation American Indian actor. Though he treats the land and horses with more respect than the US cavalry, animals do not speak to him, nor does Little Eagle call on the 'colours of the wind' to protect him. As a Hawaiian character, Lilo is as influenced by Elvis Presley as by island culture, and the final 'family' that she creates is made up of her sister, her African American social worker, and aliens. Little Eagle and Lilo live within their cultures, but they are no longer defined by them or 'unknowable' because of them.

*Windtalkers* extends this portrayal of Native Americans, specifically presenting them ably serving their country -- whether it deserves their loyalty or not. Ironically, their language, to which white America has shown aggressive disrespect, has been revalued as the basis for a radio code that the Japanese cannot break. Woo manages to create American Indian characters, specifically these Navajo marines, who naturally express their culture -- no differently than any other hyphenated American might. Instead of stoic shamans, these code-talkers feel free to include humour and warmth in their radio messages to each other. *Windtalkers* opens with loving camera shots of the Southwest -- a landscape for which Woo showed his fondness in *Broken Arrow* (1996). The construction of the film is notable in that it begins and ends with the Navajo, their land and their community. Ben Yahzee (Adam Beach) bids goodbye to his traditional Navajo family, yet he is dressed in 1940s American attire. The marine recruits on the bus joke around with each other in Navajo, with occasional English

thrown in. Thus, it is clear that these are men who are comfortable with themselves and their double identity.

Woo's film brings attention not only to the Navajos' unique contribution to World War II, but also to the War in the Pacific. Some critics have complained that Woo's depiction of the brutality of war is a pale imitation of Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). *Ryan*, with its Normandy landing sequence, may have marked a new way to portray World War II, as no longer the noble war fought over there, but a horrific war fought by young men who had never been away from home. Chinese director John Woo brings this awareness to the less celebrated War in the Pacific, a conflict less known or understood by most Americans: they may have a concept of the evil of the Nazis and Hitler, but are less certain about what the war in Japan was about or the kind of enemy that the Japanese were. Michael Bay's *Pearl Harbor* (2001) may portray the beginning of the conflict, but the Japanese are unidentifiable pilots in the air, dropping bombs on the hapless sailors below. In *Windtalkers*, Woo dramatizes the fiercely fought ground and naval war that followed, where brutality was committed on both sides, close-up and eye-to-eye, without the deniability of air-dropped bombs or machine-gun turrets. The first battle sequence is such a scene in which Joe Enders (Nicolas Cage) emerges as the only survivor of a unit fighting desperately to hold a small hill, against an enemy equally committed to taking it. The killing in this film is, therefore, not anonymous, but deeply personal and requiring ruthlessness to survive.

This is not to say that this film is primarily concerned with correcting history. Woo is first and foremost a storyteller. Though the battle scenes are brilliantly choreographed with grand pyrotechnics amidst the destruction, this may be his most emotionally compelling film, without the gimmickry of *Face/Off* (1997) (which is not to say that I didn't enjoy *Face/Off*'s gimmicks). The narrative thrust of the film is the intersection of Joe Enders' second chance as a marine -- which coincides with Ben's initiation as an American soldier -- with his specific identity issues and duty as a Navajo code-talker. Joe has been assigned to protect Ben, but more specifically and ominously to protect the code.

Despite Cage's star status, Woo works to keep Ben Yahzee's story on an equal level. As a family man and a future teacher, the lessons that Ben learns have the potential to affect his entire life, and the lives of those whom his life will touch. This is Joe's final act: his only desire is to pay penance and wreak revenge for the massacre of his former squadron. He cannot conceive of a life after the war, despite the attentions of a nurse (Frances O'Connor) who stubbornly refuses to give up on him. Though Joe tries to keep Ben at arm's length, Ben insists on sharing with Joe and forcing him to share his experiences. Catholicism is revealed as a bridge between the two men's cultures, a bridge that also connects them to director John Woo. Both men are looking for their appropriate faith and position as soldiers and Americans; Joe's cultural identity has also been negotiated, as Ellis Island officials simplified his family's Italian name to Enders. By interweaving the story of the Navajo code-talker and his guardian, Woo presents American Indians as sharing many beliefs and issues with other Americans, as being a living part of America rather than being an isolated artifact. Woo contrasts the pairing of Ben and Joe with that of Ben's friend and mentor, White Horse (Roger Willie), and Ox Anderson (Christian Slater). While the younger Ben is looking for a life that mixes American and Navajo traditions, White Horse has a more developed commitment and knowledge of Navajo traditions and the ways of a warrior. Not coincidentally, Roger Willie is a full-blooded Navajo and a US Army veteran. White Horse's protector does not have Joe's emotional scars. Like Ben, Ox is interested in the potential of

the mingling of cultures, as demonstrated in the film by his suggestion of duets between his harmonica and White Horse's Navajo flute.

Beach develops the charisma that he brought to the screen in *Smoke Signals* (1998), demonstrating his ability to hold his own with a major star and an ensemble with considerable screen experience. While his sullen character in *Smoke Signals* may have been slightly limited, this role allows him to display more of this range. His emerging career is particularly of note since it has been built on performances as a twentieth-century American Indian, as a representative of people who are still a vital part of the American landscape, not simply people and heroes of legend. As the haunted yet determined Joe Enders, Cage gives his most honest performance since he started making action films.

The army unit is rounded out with a strong supporting cast, that brings other ethnic backgrounds into the mix, including the quietly charismatic Peter Stormare (*Fargo* [1996]) as Sergeant Hjelmstad and Noah Emmerich in the thankless role of the company bigot. Mark Ruffalo (*You Can Count on Me* [2000]) is particularly interesting as the uncertain Nicolas Pappas. It may be part of the war movie formula to have a unit made up of soldiers of different backgrounds. However, here it extends the overall message that American identity is individually negotiated and varied.

*Windtalkers* is an enjoyable, often formulaic, rollercoaster of a Hollywood event movie. However, Woo's commitment as a filmmaker to making the formula fresh and complex, together with this movie's particular success in bringing Navajos and the War in the Pacific into the event movie, make this a film worth enjoying and emulating.